essence & critique

# *Journal of Literature, & Drama Studies*

**VOLUME 5 · ISSUE 2**

June 2026

E-ISSN: 2791-6553
journalofcritique.com

essence & critique

*Journal of Literature, & Drama Studies*

Essence & Critique:
Journal of Literature & Drama Studies
Vol. 5, No. 2, June 2026
ISSN: 2791-6553
journalofcritique.com

# Editor's Preface

On behalf of our contributors, reviewers, editorial board, and editorial team—we warmly welcome you to the latest issue of *Essence & Critique: Journal of Literature and Drama Studies*.

*Essence & Critique* publishes academic articles and book reviews written by leading academics, early career researchers, and independent scholars who specialize in cultural studies and/or have a background in performance, theatre, and drama studies.

The work published is intended to be accessible to everyone and at the same time reflect upon key issues and emerging trends in literature and literary criticism while extending existing conversation.

Each work that is filtered from the theoretical and practical knowledge of the authors and passed through the filter of field expert referees and editors will be included in the scope of this journal, which aims to close a gap in the world of literature and drama studies.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the issue writers, our associate editors, our book review editors, our international advisory board, and especially our editorial assistants for their contribution in delivering this issue.

This issue consists of an intellectually dynamic range of materials, discussing works of writing that are not widely represented within our received canon.

We are excited about the breadth of illuminating scholarship in this issue, and we would like to invite new writers to join us as we offer a platform for them to present their groundbreaking academic work.

**Önder Çakırtaş**
*Essence & Critique*
June 2026

essence & critique

*Journal of Literature, & Drama Studies*

Essence & Critique:
Journal of Literature & Drama Studies
Vol. 5, No. 2, June 2026
ISSN: 2791-6553
journalofcritique.com

# EDITORIAL TEAM



**Contact:**
Bingöl Üniversitesi, Fen Edebiyat Fakültesi
12200, Bingöl/Türkiye
essencecritiquejournal@gmail.com

essence & critique

Essence & Critique:
Journal of Literature & Drama Studies
Vol. 5, No. 2, June 2026
ISSN: 2791-6553
journalofcritique.com

*Journal of Literature, & Drama Studies*

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

essence & critique
*Journal of Literature, & Drama Studies*

Yavuz, Baturalp Ali. "An Examination of Henrik Ibsen's The Wild Duck in the Context of Ecodramaturgy" *Essence & Critique: Journal of Literature & Drama Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2026, pp. 1–22.

# An Examination of Henrik Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* in the Context of Ecodramaturgy

**Baturalp Ali Yavuz**[1], Res. Asst., Yeni Yüzyıl University, ali.yavuz@yeniyuzyil.edu.tr

**Received**: 10.05.2026
**Accepted**: 20.06.2026

[1]**ORCID:** 0009-0005-9460-3703

This study examines Henrik Ibsen's "*The Wild Duck*" within the framework of ecodramaturgy. Beginning with an inquiry into how anthropocentric thought took root in Western philosophy and culture, the study traces the development of ecocriticism as a literary and cultural strategy for destabilizing the centrality of the dominant subject, and subsequently addresses the convergence of ecological narrative with performance art and the emergence of ecodramaturgy as a theoretical and practical framework for theatre. Drawing on the theoretical contributions of scholars including Theresa J. May, Timothy Morton, Graham Harman, Rosi Braidotti, and Una Chaudhuri, the study proposes that the Wild Duck in Ibsen's play functions as a hyperobject in Morton's sense, in that its shadow and viscosity extend across nearly every character in the play, weaving them into an interobjective network. The study further argues that the attic constructed within the play can be read as an aestheticized, picturesque reproduction of wildlife shaped by anthropocentric and Capitalocentric impulses, concealing the destruction wrought by industrial capitalism upon nature. The hierarchical value system attributed to the animals in the attic is examined as a reflection of anthropomorphism and speciesism. Through this ecodramaturgical reading of The Wild Duck, the study aims to demonstrate the breadth of interpretive and narrative possibilities that ecodramaturgy opens up when applied to canonical dramatic texts, and to contribute to the broader project of constructing a non-hierarchical, egalitarian, and ecologically just theatrical language.

**Keywords:** Ecodramaturgy, ecocriticism, The Wild Duck, Henrik Ibsen, hyperobject, ecological narrative.

## 1. Introduction

> "It is there at the very beginning of everything: considered 'the measure of all things' by Pythagoras, later renewed as a universal model during the Italian Renaissance, and Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian (…) ideal of 'Male-Man' (...)" (Braidotti, 25; translation belongs to the author).

Rosi Braidotti, in her renowned book The Posthuman, identifies the Vitruvian Man as depicted above as the foundation of anthropocentric (particularly white male human) thought. This image, alongside the ideal of bodily perfection, also drives humanity toward a pursuit of individual and collective excellence. Accordingly, this image is simultaneously "the emblem of humanism" as it teleologically organizes human faculties in biological, discursive, and moral terms, and carries within it the doctrine of rational progress (Braidotti, 25). By the 17th century, it is an undeniable fact that Descartes's famous dictum "I think, therefore I am" reinforced an anthropocentric, logocentric approach. With Descartes, the modern age and modern philosophy began to construct and assert their own identity (Bumin, 9). Then, in the 18th century, with the Industrial Revolution, the anthropocentric humanist discourse laid its "shaky foundations" upon the widening chasm between society and nature (Chaudhuri, 23). This parabolically growing chasm opened the way for and nourished humanity's war against nature, speciesist and sexist discourses and as will be elaborated further, the destructions wrought by the Anthropocene and Capitalocene. For Modernism came into existence through numerous contradictions and tensions. Perhaps the most prominent of these contradictions lies in the fact that Humanism, while sweeping across all of Europe, simultaneously brought into existence people enslaved in factories. On one hand, Humanism advances with the principle of unification regardless of religion, language, or race, while on the other hand it nourishes nationalist nation-states and thereby contributes to the rise of racism. Similarly, the system that created powerful patrons also brought into existence a people suffering from poverty and hunger (Sanioğlu, 202). Within this entire framework, Classical Humanism elevated the "male-human" to the position of dominant subject over all Others, including women, indigenous peoples, animals, the earth, and nature, giving rise to discourses built on "being different from" and "being lesser than" (Braidotti, 42-43), leading to the denigration of the Other in the face of the dominant subject and the transformation of the Other into an element that sustains the dominant subject.

From the day of its birth to the present, theatre has been an art form directly engaged with society, shaped by and shaping society's ideological structure, always following the needs of its own time and era, and accepting structural changes in order to meet those needs. Therefore, even in times when the "male-man" discourse grew this powerful, the collective

nature of theatre would not permit silence in the face of the dominant subject. Theatre would naturally develop its own strategies to give voice to the Other against the dominant subject, to destabilize the dominance of that subject, and to produce a non-hierarchical structure. Theresa J. May, who introduced the concept of "ecodramaturgy" one of these strategies which this study will also examine in detail, states that "theatre, which is always an immediate, social, and material encounter between embodied performer, audience, and place, is ecological as well as representational" (May, 86). To unpack this statement, it will be illuminating to turn to ecologist and activist Barry Commoner. In his book *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, Technology* (1971), in the chapter titled "*The First Law of Ecology: Everything Is Connected to Everything Else*", commoner offers an allegorical account through the word "cybernetics" derived from the Greek word for "helmsman" using the relationship between a ship's course, compass needle, rudder, and helmsman. If the compass needle deviates even slightly from the course, the ship will follow a different route. He then illustrates this through a decade of trap records and population fluctuations in Canada, examining the relationship between hares and lynxes. As the lynx population increases, the number of hares will decrease, and the lynxes will begin to die of starvation (Commoner, 18-21). From this it can be read that, even if the compass appears to be a subject unto itself, there is a ship with which it is in interaction. Though lynxes are predators, their very existence is directly linked to the population of the hares they hunt. Within this framework, May's assertion that "theatre is ecological as well as representational" demonstrates that theatre, whether it stands alongside or in opposition to its environment, nature, the dominant subject, and the Other, is in relation with all of them, both within itself and with society. For this reason, theatre is, as May also suggests, somewhat "ecological" as well.

Moreover, nature, by virtue of its constant internal interaction, its absence of othering, and its refusal to accommodate a dominant subject, can truly be a "creator/poet" for theatre. Rueckert states that plants, by halting entropy-bound energy that would otherwise be wasted from the sun through "negentropy" and thereby helping to elevate matter from lower to higher states (as they use energy for a productive purpose) and to form a self-developing and self-sustaining energy network, may be considered "the poets of natüre" owing to their capacity for creativity, their ability to build community, and their capacity to transfer energy to others (Fromm and Glotfelty, 111).

Having briefly introduced how the idea of the dominant subject (male-man) took root, the discussion will now turn to the strategies developed within the field of theatre, using an ecological and non-hierarchical ground in which everything is related to everything else, in

order to destabilize the centrality of this dominant subject that others women, nature, animals, and indigenous peoples. To this end, the study will first examine the nature of ecocriticism, then its evolution alongside performance art, and finally the strategy of ecodramaturgy for destabilizing the power of the dominant subject within theatre, through the lens of Henrik Ibsen's play The Wild Duck.

## 2. The Foundations of EcoDramaturgy: Eco-Criticism and Performance Art

### 2.1. Eco-Criticism

The way we define a problem is related to what we compare it against in identifying it as a problem. Our way of thinking, which is directly shaped by the culture we inhabit and other factors, reveals itself in the process through which we problematize an issue. For instance, Garrard states that “To define an issue as an ecological problem is to make a normative claim about how we want things to be” (Garrard, 18) and elaborates on the subject through the example of weeds. A “weed” is not actually a definition but simply a plant growing where it should not, in a place where it ought not to grow, and it is precisely for this reason that the growth of weeds is not only a gardening problem but also something that can only be defined as such through cultural rather than agronomic inquiry. In this context, “pollution” is not an environmental but an ecological problem (Garrard, 18-19). For if we regard the presence or emergence of substances or things in places where they do not belong as a problem, it is because we take the normative as a point of comparison and define whatever falls outside it as a problem. What needs to be discussed at this point, as in the weed example, is not the weed growing where it should not, but rather the normative mindset itself that defines its presence there as a problem.

The first of the strategies that emerged to destabilize the foundations of this “normative” mindset within fiction is ecocriticism, which has been influential in the field of literature. Ecocriticism is the only movement that examines texts from an environmentalist perspective within the framework of literary theories and criticism, addresses the relationship between literature and environment as well as ecology and culture, investigates the causes of ecological imbalance in a socio-cultural context, and examines the resonance of the relationships between animate and inanimate matter in literary texts while also taking into account language use and modes of expression (Oppermann, 13). Ecocriticism charts a holistic perspective that does not view humans and nature as separate, approaches social and biological systems with equal attention through an ecocentric lens, and, drawing on a holistic vision of the universe, acknowledges that every subject within nature is in interaction with every other (Oppermann,

18-20). It is precisely because of this approach that ecocriticism destabilizes the authority of the normative and seeks ways to construct a non-hierarchical narrative, to create language, and to make the other visible in the face of the dominant subject.

Although the development of ecocriticism within academia and its emergence as a movement in the field of literature became primarily visible in the 1990s, the roots of the theory date back to the 1960s and 1970s. Garrard, in his book Ecocriticism, identifies Rachel Carson's Silent Spring (1962) as the starting point of modern environmentalism (Güzel, 5). The “deep ecology” movement, advanced by Arno Naess in 1973, gave momentum to the development of ecocriticism by arguing that the ecological movement, which focused solely on pollution and resource consumption, was “shallow” and by rejecting the anthropocentric approach with a counter-ideology (Güzel, 7). The contributions of figures such as Bill Devall, George Session, and Warwick Fox, alongside Naess, in the development of deep ecology, which can be described as the philosophical wing of ecology, and in emphasizing that nature is not merely of instrumental value and that deeper meanings must be attributed to it, are too significant to be dismissed (Oppermann, 107-108).

In contrast to the shallow view that prioritizes the conservation of natural resources for human benefit, deep ecology demands recognition of the intrinsic value of nature, attributes the human-nature dualism embedded in Western philosophy and culture as the root of the environmental crisis, and in doing so presents a nature-centered approach in place of an anthropocentric one, adopting a radical stance against Western philosophy and religion (Garrard, 42).

Ecocriticism, having strengthened its theoretical and philosophical foundations through deep ecology, revisits the relationship between culture and nature. By problematizing the centrality of the human/culture-centered approach, ecocriticism seeks to construct new modes of expression and language. Operating with the mission of strengthening the relationship between science and literature and fostering ecological consciousness, ecocriticism seeks to free nature from being a romantic and idealized object placed at the service of humanity, and therefore refuses to regard nature as a secondary auxiliary object serving the human at the center (Oppermann, 104-105).

As previously noted, the designation of the weed as the Other is a subject of socio-cultural rather than agronomic inquiry, and ecocriticism has taken on precisely this responsibility. Ecocriticism is therefore, as Garrard puts it, “an avowedly political mode of

analysis" (Garrard, 16), since the position of the entity designated as the center, and the reasons why other "auxiliary" entities occupy the position of the Other, open the door to a sociological, cultural, philosophical, moral, and political discussion.

While ecocriticism aims to create a discourse that will transform the world we inhabit by examining and critiquing the human-nature binary, it enters this pursuit by examining the concept of "human" itself, seeking not so much a more authentic or illuminating discourse on nature but rather an effective transformation and a conciliatory discourse. According to Garrard, ecocriticism in its broadest definition is "the study of the relationship between the human and the non-human throughout human cultural history and, crucially, a critical scrutiny of the term 'human' itself" (Garrard, 17, 107).

Having offered a definition of the nature and mission of ecocriticism, it will now be helpful to consider how ecological narrative took shape from literary to performative expression, as this will aid in understanding the emergence and stance of ecodramaturgy.

### 2.1. Ecological Narrative in Performance Art

> "Ecology considered materially (rather than metaphorically) gives rise to new ways of looking and reading (ecocriticism) as well as creating (ecodrama/performance)." (May, 86).

The transformative mission of ecocriticism, as previously discussed, reached new expressive opportunities regarding the representation of nature and ecological understanding through the mimetic quality of performance, and through the experience of ecological performance, was able to conduct intrinsic investigations and critical inquiries on the subject (Arons and May, 213-214) at a deeper level. The ecological narrative, having carved out a space for itself within literature and art through ecocriticism, directed itself toward seeking new strategies to destabilize the authority of the anthropocentric structure. Performance art is, in this sense, a perfectly fitting medium. As will be elaborated shortly, performance art inherently contains within it an act of resistance. This is its ontological nature.

While performance, in the process of emerging as an art form, carries within it a rebellion, in the process of its social emergence it is grounded in protest, which means it can be read as an entirely oppositional art form (Ulusoy, 637) owing to its critique of war, racism, sexism, and inequality. In this context, it is evident that it constitutes a stance against the normative (which we may again call the dominant subject) and that the aim of destabilizing its centrality is present. Performance artists of the 1960s and 1970s accordingly demanded the violation of socially oppressive norms through the experience of pain and danger (Lehmann,

140). One of the most striking examples of this is the Rhythm 5 (Marina Abramovic, Rhythm 5) performance carried out in Belgrade in 1974 by Marina Abramovic, known as the grandmother of performance art. Abramovic's act of lying inside a star, a symbol of communism, as if in a sacrificial ceremony, can be read as a representation of the younger generation crushed beneath the socialist ideals of the older generation (Özinan, 18). This performance, involving the burning of the benzine-drawn star and Abramovic fainting inside it due to oxygen deprivation, as well as the burning of her eyebrows, nails, and numerous parts of her body, makes an unambiguous demand for the violation of socially oppressive norms through the experience of pain and danger.

The radical, rebellious, and critical character of performance art creates and offers fertile and richly varied narrative possibilities for the oppositional nature of ecological narrative.

Together with the body as the primary channel of meaning in performance art, the transformation of the body into a medium between both material and metaphorical worlds, and the interaction between performance and audience, allow new ways of thinking about the other, the self, and the environment to emerge (May, 100). With the growth of the environmental movement in the early 1960s and 1970s, eco-performance became a domain utilized by numerous activist groups, political theatre companies, and performance artists. Alongside activist groups such as *Greenpeace and Earth First!* drawing on the strategies of performance art, the renowned US-based theatre collective *Bread and Puppet* also began to incorporate ecological themes into its area of interest (Woynarski B, 17). Over time, the engagement with ecological crisis continued to grow cumulatively within the broad framework of performance art. By the 1980s and 1990s, several notable theatre and performance collectives, particularly in the United States and the South Pacific, engaged with ecological activism through performance and children's performance, employing strategies such as audience participation, resistance, and new alternative modes of expression for enacting ecological thought (Woynarski B, 18).

The convergence of the inclusive and non-hierarchical structure of ecological narrative with the possibilities of performative expression has also created a space for queer theory. While the mass slaughter of animals in plain sight has been normalized as part of food production and consumption, the fact that what is designated as criminal and immoral consists of certain sexual acts standing in opposition to "normative" behavior has brought queer theory and ecocriticism together within the same framework, making performance necessary for queer theory in the face of the nature-culture binary (Barad, 122).

To summarize, the process initiated by ecocriticism has literally taken bodily form through the inclusion of performance art. With eco-performance, the new dramaturgy that would later come to be known as ecodramaturgy began to take shape gradually. Ecodramaturgy, shaped along these foundations, is expected to employ ecological practices and, if it creates a discourse, to direct participants or audiences toward a practical space (Akgül, 831), with a structure that carries within it a motivation for action.

### 3. The Conquest of the Stage by Ecological Narrative and Ecodramaturgy

In the *introduction* to *Readings in Performance and Ecology* (2012), co-written by Wendy Arons and Theresa J. May, the process through which ecological narrative came to be seen in the field of theatre is described as follows:

> "The growth of interest in ecocriticism among literary scholars has only just begun to spark a similar interest in the subject among their colleagues in theater departments. This may be due to the fact that the ecocritical wave coincided chronologically with the explosive growth of performance studies as a central area of interest among theater scholars." (Arons and May, 4).

For a story to generate meaning, it need not focus solely on relationships between humans. In a story where the connection between people and place is established, it is possible to read the traces (May, 94) of the community one belongs to, the land and the stories of the ancestors it holds, the rocks, trees, rivers, and animals of that place.

The humanist and realist sensibility of traditional theatre, particularly Western theatre, caused it to stand in opposition to the environmental movement, and the pairing of this deeply rooted humanist tradition with ecology reveals the ways in which the human can become part of the living world (Woynarski A, 3, 5). Especially toward the end of the 20th century, with the rise of posthumanism, Humanism, which forms the foundation of the Western-centered intellectual tradition, and the image of the Vitruvian Man that gained strength within the Enlightenment, began to lose their centrality as the representation of the white, Western, Christian "male" (Şahin, 879). Alongside this, the need arose for new dramaturgies and strategies to destabilize the aforementioned humanist foundations of traditional theatre and to broaden its perspective. Part of the gap created by this need is what ecodramaturgy will attempt to fill.

In line with community-based environmental concerns and the pursuit of environmental justice, theatre has been regarded as a tool capable of responding to needs, with the aim of initiating and encouraging change, creating dialogue, and protesting the status quo (May, 93). The purpose here is not so much to point directly to a target, but rather to reflect on the nature

of change and to seek alternative ways of thinking through causality, origin, and relationality (Barad, 124).

The concept of "ecodramaturgy" put forward by Theresa J. May, not only calls for new frameworks and approaches to thinking about theatre but also places ecological opposition at the thematic center of theatre or performance (Arons and May, 4). Ecodramaturgy focuses on how and what the animal, the plant, and other Others within them represent on stage, and invites us to think about how we can narrate and discuss with audiences the irreducible otherness of a living or non-living being in the position of the Other, and how we can present and discuss the responsibilities of audiences toward the Other, thereby allowing us to revisit and reopen for discussion the anthropocentric and ecologically hostile attitude normalized by historical theatre texts and performances (Arons and May, 5-6). The important point to note here is that ecodramaturgy, within all of this practice of revisiting, rethinking, and questioning, must not carry within it a purely prescriptive imposition. Ecological theatre and performance, while taking environmental issues as their foundation and pressing for change and transformation, issuing warnings, and opening discussions, must also awaken the senses and offer an experience of ecological intimacy (Woynarski A, 4). In this way, ecodramaturgy plays an active and constructive role in the process of reshaping the relationships established between the human and the more-than-human, and in the effort to attain ecologically just modes of existence, thereby displacing the deeply rooted structure of anthropocentric thinking (Woynarski B, 64) and creating a strategy for new and alternative modes of thinking. It would of course be unfair to place the entire responsibility here on the author alone. In the process of developing and applying these strategies, the staging and dramaturgical working phases of theatre and performance must also play an active role. With a holistic understanding of ecodramaturgy processed in this way, reductive anthropocentrism, despite the power relations and socio-political forces that shape our relationships with air, climate, and land (Woynarski B, 68), will give way to a more holistic, egalitarian, anti-speciesist, and more inclusive narrative.

The irrational prejudice that causes us to treat the Other differently, namely the mistreatment of women and Africans (with animals and plants also included in this group) by the normatively accepted subject on the basis of physiological differences despite the absence of any moral grounds, is referred to as "speciesism" (Garrard, 191). Within this framework, the effort of ecocriticism and ecodramaturgy to counter and neutralize the discourse produced by the normatively accepted dominant subject against the auxiliary subjects in the position of the

Other who support it, through the development of an anti-speciesist discourse, must not be overlooked.

We previously discussed how things, Others, and subjects are defined in relation to the dominant subject or, to speak in ecological terms, in relation to anthropocentric thinking. It will be useful here to briefly recall the "weed" example once more. Things construct their existence and definitions in accordance with the meaning we attribute to them. Heidegger will guide us at this point in understanding the framework within which we define and thus bring into existence things and Others.

According to Heidegger, "to be" is, beyond mere existence, "to be disclosed" that is, to be revealed (Garrard, 54). Heidegger notes that things can only exist at the point where they demonstrate usefulness, that is, at the point where they can enter into interaction with other things. For instance, when you pick up a hammer to drive a nail into a wall, the hammer fulfills its role of being ready-to-hand and reveals its existence because it will interact with the nail or be used toward a purpose. However, if the hammer becomes broken or unusable for any reason, it will then become useless, much like how Heidegger dismisses everyday speech by noting that our daily conversations are filled with words that are used and discarded, that is, with insignificant tools. In this context, if things that are interrelated can exist by being disclosed and revealed, then animals, plants, and every living or non-living entity within nature must be in interaction with one another in order to become visible by lifting the veil over their meanings.

According to this view, although stones, plants, and animals do not possess a world of their own, they can bring themselves into existence by being included in the crowd of the environment they inhabit (Garrard, 54). Therefore, at a certain point, the existence, meaning, or thingness of a tree or an animal is related to its usefulness and readiness-to-hand in the relationship we establish with it. It is, in fact, related to how we disclose it. Accordingly, things can be disclosed by becoming objects awaiting use, such as a forest being disclosed as a timber "inventory" (Garrard, 55). According to Heidegger, the world is a holistic network of meanings, and just as with the hammer example, in the same way that one understands how a hammer ought to be used, the scattered stones in a desert are not simply left lying there in an unrelated manner but are understood and used as a whole (Ünaldı, 171). Defined on a broader scale, things come into existence as a result of their functionality within the whole and their relationality with the whole. When this relationality is considered in an ecological context, it directly recalls the first principle of ecology. In a place where everything is in interaction with everything else,

everything gains usefulness together with everything else, is disclosed, and comes into existence.

If, at this final stage, we attempt to define ecodramaturgy within a broad framework, we may describe it as a theatre and performance dramaturgy that carries within it feminist, anti-racist, anti-speciesist, inclusive, queer-affirming, non-anthropocentric, and non-colonial (Woynarski B, 179) qualities, and in accordance with these, seeks to establish a new language and explore new possibilities of narrative, producing and employing strategies to destabilize the power of the male-human, the powerful image of Western humanism.

### 4. An Ecodramaturgical Approach to The Wild Duck

The existence of performance art as a rebellion against the system and its strategy of making oppressive structures visible through the body can be directly followed through Rhythm 5, as discussed above, where the pressure of the system is carried on the body through the image of a sacrificial ceremony. In Ibsen's The Wild Duck, both the characters and the animal whose name the play bears carry the marks of the pressure created by the anthropocentric and capitalist system directly upon themselves. In this context, the strategy of performance art for making oppression visible and destabilizing the normative offers a strong foundation for examining this particular play from an ecodramaturgical perspective. Building upon this foundation, the possibilities that Ibsen's text offers in terms of ecological narrative will now be examined.

The rupture between the human and nature can be felt in many post-Romantic works, including those of major writers such as Ibsen and Chekhov (Chaudhuri, 26). In her well-known article " *'There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake': Toward an Ecological Theater*" (1994), Chaudhuri notes that the theoretical sources of ecological theatre can be found in the archive of theatre history, and that The Wild Duck in particular, with its artificially constructed indoor wildlife, is fertile ground for revisiting in the context of ecological theatre (Chaudhuri, 28).

Our aim in this study is likewise to examine and open for discussion Ibsen's play The Wild Duck in light of the information provided thus far, to determine what meanings this text, which is fertile ground for ecodramaturgical analysis, carries in relation to or against ecological narrative, and to demonstrate once more, through this text, the breadth of meaning and narrative possibilities that ecodramaturgy generates when approaching a dramatic text.

#### 4.1. The Hyperobject in The Wild Duck: The Wild Duck

Timothy Morton defines hyperobjects in his book Hyperobjects (2013) as follows:

> "In The Ecological Thought I coined the term hyperobjects to refer to things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans. A hyperobject could be a black hole. A hyperobject could be the Lago Agrio oil field in Ecuador, or the Florida Everglades. A hyperobject could be the biosphere, or the Solar System. A hyperobject could be the sum total of all the nuclear materials on Earth; or just the plutonium, or the uranium. A hyperobject could be the very long-lasting product of direct human manufacture, such as Styrofoam or plastic bags, or the sum of all the whirring machinery of capitalism. Hyperobjects, then, are "hyper" in relation to some other entity, whether they are directly manufactured by humans or not. Hyperobjects have numerous properties in common. They are viscous, which means that they "stick" to beings that are involved with them." (Morton, 1).

Hyperobjects exist whether or not we think about them. If we attempt to ground this in relation to Heidegger's thinking, hyperobjects are, beyond being objects in their own right, in constant interaction with things and therefore exist by virtue of their sticky quality, that is, their expansion by incorporating into their own field of meaning the thing related to them or to which they are related, and their inseparability from it. Therefore, even when we are not thinking about them, they continue to exist, and as singular objects unto themselves, they disclose the implicit meanings of things by relating to them, thereby expanding their own ontological structure.

Thinking in somewhat greater detail about the ontology of objects will help us understand the nature of hyperobjects and, later in the study, to analyze the objects or objectified elements used in The Wild Duck. For this reason, turning to Harman at this precise point will be illuminating. In his book Art and Objects, Harman discusses "Object-Oriented Ontology" (OOO). Through OOO, it is emphasized that while speaking positively of objects in the field of art predominantly brings to mind sculpture, painting, and glasswork, the visibility of performance, temporary installation, and conceptual works is also highlighted by noting that "objects" carry a far broader meaning than merely material things (Harman, 20). According to Harman, anything, including events and performances, can be considered an object to the extent that it satisfies one or both of the following two criteria:

**1-** Downward irreducibility toward its parts. (Its counterpart in OOO is "undermining". To define what a thing is by stating what it is made of.)

**2-** Upward irreducibility toward its effects. (Its counterpart in OOO is "overmining". To define what a thing is by stating what it does.)

*The combination of both, "duomining" encompasses both of the above (Harman, 21).

In this context, OOO, by addressing what objects are made of and what they do, actually contains within it an interobjectivity. Hyperobjects offer fine examples of interobjectivity precisely because they cannot be directly experienced, meaning they can only be understood

through the mediation of other entities within the sensory field (Morton, 86). According to Morton, all beings are connected to one another within an interobjective system he calls a "mesh" and this connectedness does not fundamentally cause any change in objects themselves, but rather brings to light the interobjective effects of what are called subjects (Morton, 83-84), thereby underlining the entanglement among objects or what Morton calls the "viscosity" of hyperobjects.

In light of Morton's definition of the hyperobject, we can now open for discussion whether the Wild Duck in the play The Wild Duck can be read as a hyperobject.

The Wild Duck was once shot by Werle (a major businessman and industrialist) (Ibsen, 4) during a hunt and later came into the possession of Old Ekdal through Pettersen. The Wild Duck, wounded by the pellets fired from the rifle of an industrialist and businessman, and destined to carry that wound for the rest of its life, has now moved beyond being merely a wild creature and, together with the mud and bullet of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene that have splattered upon it, has begun to exist as a singular object unto itself. The positioning of the Wild Duck within the play and its relationality with the other characters has caused its shadow and, in Morton's terms, its "viscosity" to fall upon and stick to nearly every character. Consequently, nearly every character carries within them, at some point, a quality of the Wild Duck.

*Table 1. Characters's Relations to the Wild Duck*

| | **Characteristics That Can Be Considered Directly Related to the Wild Duck** |
|---|---|
| **OLD EKDAL** | Being a hunter (p. 40), having spent part of his life in nature (p. 41), having returned from the brink of death (p. 63), being an accident victim (p. 63) |
| **GREGERS** | Adjusting to a new place (p. 46), being a dog and retrieving wild ducks from the depths (p. 47) |
| **HEDVIG** | Having a physiological impairment (p. 38), not going outside (p. 57), being completely alone (p. 98), being at the "sea floor" (p. 58 and p. 120) |
| **HJALMAR** | Being defined as wounded (p. 65), sinking to the bottom (p. 65), being a victim of Werle (p. 84), living inside an artificial world (a life built on Werle's support) |
| **WERLE** | Having a physiological impairment (p. 89) |
| **GINA** | Being a victim of Werle (p. 80) |
| | **Characteristics That Can Be Considered Indirectly Related to the Wild Duck** |
| **RELLING** | Enabling people to live within lies without confronting reality through the treatment of "life-lies". The Wild Duck also lives in a place that does not belong to it, inside a lie. |

In accordance with the table above, it can be interpreted that the Wild Duck sticks to many of the characters in the play. The fact that characters such as Werle and Mrs. Sorby may or may not be aware of the Wild Duck's existence does not mean they have no relationality with it, and this brings back to the fore Morton's previously noted statement that "hyperobjects exist whether or not we know about them". The extent to which the shadow of the Wild Duck falls upon and sticks to so many characters in the play, along with the relationality of everything with everything else, opens up the possibilities of reading the Wild Duck as a hyperobject. Furthermore, when we question "what it does" in accordance with the "overmining" action discussed above, it can be seen that the Wild Duck also possesses an interobjective quality that weaves the characters in the play into a network, enabling each of them to be related to one another. This is the object-oriented ontological position of the Wild Duck.

Catherine Diamond, emphasizing that the incessant rain in the play *When the Rain Stops Falling*, written by Andrew Bovell, is symbolized as a hyperobject, states that the meaning of the rain stopping with the revelation of the secrets in the play, namely the hyperobject's merging with the human sphere of redemption for a world restored to order, amplifies the deep meaning of the event through a simple gesture (Diamond, 107). Drawing from this, the fact that Hedvig, with whom the Wild Duck is identified by everyone throughout the play, shoots herself rather than the Wild Duck at the end, generates the possibility of being read as an indication that the Wild Duck continues to exist with all its viscosity and vast shadow, and that this web of distorted and hierarchical relationships will persist. The softening of Hjalmar's attitude toward Werle's offer of regular financial support toward the end of the play is also one of the signals that this hierarchical structure will continue.

### 4.2. The Echo of the Anthropocene/Capitalocene in The Wild Duck and the Attic

The term Anthropocene was introduced in the first half of the 1980s by Eugene Stoermer, a University of Michigan ecologist specializing in freshwater diatoms, to refer to the destructive and transformative impact of human activity on the earth (Moore, 48-49). However, the full conceptualization and popularization of the term came about in 2000, when Nobel Prize-winning chemist Paul Crutzen put it forward, drawing on the Ancient Greek word "anthropos" meaning human, to emphasize that sudden climate changes are not solely geological or ecological but that the fundamental actor behind them is the human (Antroposen Araştırma Grubu).

There are some differences of opinion regarding the beginning of the Anthropocene. Some views argue that the Anthropocene may have begun in the Neolithic Period, approximately ten thousand years ago, when the first animals and plants were domesticated, while others hold that it began with the invention of the steam engine (1784), the symbol of the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century (Antroposen Araştırma Grubu), and can be associated with the acceleration of economic growth and population increase in the period following the Second World War, in line with the Great Acceleration hypothesis, and with postwar consumer capitalism and the Cold War era (Bekaroğlu, 1142).

Regardless of which starting point we accept, it is an undeniable fact that the acceleration of logocentric thinking, together with the Industrial Revolution, parabolically strengthened and continues to strengthen the authority of the anthropocentric approach.

Logocentric, in Heideggerian terminology, Western metaphysics has strengthened its own centrality by othering all forms of knowledge and ways of knowing that fall outside the framework of its rational definition, pushing modern Western knowledge against traditional knowledge, man against woman, the wealthy against the poor, and the white-skinned against the dark-skinned into the position of the Other (Erdoğan, 16-17). As discussed in the introduction to this study, from the 18th and 19th centuries onward, logocentric understanding began to entrench its obsessive foundations in the gap opening between these binaries. When we consider the aforementioned binaries and all the other binaries formed by Western metaphysics that have not been listed here within a dialectical framework, Western metaphysics, despite being dialectically dependent on the opposite of its own existence, places itself at the center by creating a hierarchy between opposites in accordance with its own tradition, and others its opposite by rendering it secondary (Erdoğan, 21-22).

We previously discussed how strategies such as ecodramaturgy and eco-performance emerged in the fields of theatre and performance to destabilize the logocentric centrality of Western metaphysics, and how they propose new reading practices. As the hierarchy between species and the standard “male-human” as the measure of all things are being displaced through post-anthropocentric modes of thought, the ontological void opened by the destabilization of centrality will be filled by other species (Braidotti, 90-91) and Others.

We are speaking of a “male-human” who has been active in the creation of all these forms of otherness and in the construction of centrality. Another important subject arises here that needs to be opened for discussion, namely which “human” we are referring to. Since the

climate crisis and ecological destruction do not affect every human and every society to the same degree, and since not everyone bears an equal share of responsibility for this destruction, Donna Haraway found the prefix “anthropos” insufficient on the grounds that it cannot directly define the subject responsible for ecological destruction, and preferred to use the term “Capitalocene” in place of “Anthropocene”, since the subject responsible for ecological destruction is the industrialized human, the fossil-fuel-consuming human (Güzel, 63-64). In this context, the term Capitalocene points to a more precise target compared to the Anthropocene, making it easier to identify the focus of the problem. Just as an African country and a European country or the United States cannot be held equally responsible for ecological destruction, neither are all humans equally responsible for this destruction.

We can now return to the discussion opened at the beginning of this section. Since the Anthropocene, which carries connotations of development, progress, and advancement for humanity (Gündoğdu, 229), is insufficient due to its inability to define the subject responsible for ecological destruction, it will be more useful and focused, for the sake of making the problem definable, to situate the beginning of the Anthropocene not within a historical interval starting with the Industrial Revolution of the 18th century and extending to the nuclear tests of the 20th century, but rather with the transition to agrarian society, and to use the Anthropocene as an umbrella concept while giving it concrete form specifically through the concept of the Capitalocene (Gündoğdu, 230).

If we examine The Wild Duck in accordance with these definitions, the most fertile site where an Anthropocene or Capitalocene narrative can be read will be the attic, in which an attempt is made to construct an artificial wildlife within the play. In the play, the attic assumes the role of representing a wildlife, yet in place of the bears, wolves, and other predatory animals found in actual wildlife, this attic is home to chickens, tumbler pigeons, rabbits, and one Wild Duck. In this respect, it would not be far wrong to describe the attic as a space aestheticized through an anthropocentric sensibility and created through the human's exercise of power over nature. At a certain point, looking at the attic through the lens of the picturesque movement that emerged in England toward the end of the 18th century will assist us in examining it in line with anthropocentrism.

Since wilderness implies the absence of humans, and wild nature gains meaning alongside the civilization that defines it by standing as its opposite, the only way to experience wild nature without altering its living status is to avoid its reality and construct an aesthetic image (Fromm and Glotfelty, 54). What is displayed within the picturesque movement is not so

much nature itself but rather an aestheticized landscape effect, aimed at transforming the environment into an artistic vista (Kern, 16). Since the picturesque movement is grounded in an elitist representation of the environment and nature, it is based on principles derived from painting rather than from nature itself (Fromm and Glotfelty, 53).

Chaudhuri relates this attic to the 19th century glass houses, stating that these glass houses masked the reality of nature's fragmentation as a reflection of industrialization's transformation of nature into a commodity (Chaudhuri, 29). Indeed, when Ekdal asks how the forest is doing, Gregers replies: "Not as magnificent as in your time. It has thinned out considerably; the light gets in more easily now." (Ibsen, 41). This reply makes it clear to us that the condition of the forest is not improving, and the aestheticized artificial wildlife constructed in the attic is, as just described, a life-lie for Ekdal that masks the fragmentation of nature commodified by Werle's company. The attic is a world that Ekdal has created for himself, in which the forced separation from and dispossession (Chaudhuri, 28) of free life in nature, among birds and animals, is called into question, and even addressed through a self-constructed alternative. For wildlife is a space of liberation where, as the innocent antithesis of a civilization that has lost its soul and strayed from the natural, one might find the self lost through the artificial lives we lead within civilization (Garrard, 104). As someone who spent years defining himself within a company, losing his nature and his sense of self, Ekdal has created an artificial wildlife where he can rediscover himself and find liberation. Yet it must be noted once more that the attic Ekdal has created in order to rediscover his own self, however legitimate it may appear when viewed from an anthropocentric perspective, conceals beneath it the human desire to control nature, the drive to satisfy one's own need for gratification by aestheticizing it through the picturesque, and the desire to conceal the destruction caused by the Capitalocene. Viewed in this light, the constructed wildlife occupies an illegitimate position within an ecological perspective, as a thoroughly anthropocentric stance.

What can initially be read as an innocent and sentimental act, Ekdal's attic, in fact harbors beneath it the controlling force of an extremely aggressive capitalism, both casting a shadow over reality and serving for Ekdal not as a symbolic but as a symptomatic space where this aggressive instinct can be satisfied (Chaudhuri, 29-30). To elaborate somewhat further on this symptomatic attitude, it will be useful to examine the animals in the attic and their representations.

Braidotti, drawing on Louis Borges's classification of animals while discussing human-animal interaction, refers to three groups: those we watch television with, those we eat, and

those we fear (Braidotti, 92). The culture we inhabit not only shapes how we interact with animals and how we read them, but also leads us to create a diminishing, reductive, and demeaning anthropomorphism (Garrard, 200-201) by attributing human emotions and characteristics to them. This anthropomorphism is achieved not only through the projection of human emotions and characteristics onto animals, but also through the commodification of animals just as humans themselves are commodified. While livestock support in the European Union amounts to 803 dollars per cow, this figure stands at 1,057 dollars per cow in the United States, 2,555 in Japan, 120 in Ethiopia, and 360 in Bangladesh (Braidotti, 19-20). This picture is an indication that, despite our knowledge that there is no class distinction between one cow and another within nature, we are drawing cows into a classification of our own attribution among themselves.

This hierarchical structure can also be read in the attic through the Wild Duck. When Ekdal describes the attic and the animals inside to Gregers, he says of the Wild Duck, “Now, here comes the most important thing of all” (Ibsen, 43) thereby creating a pyramid of status and importance between the Wild Duck and the other animals there. Unlike the other animals in that space, the Wild Duck is too valuable to be shot. Within this atmosphere, the Wild Duck belongs to the class of those we watch television with and domesticate, those we compel to be removed from their natural habitat and adapted to our own way of life, while the rabbits in the attic are positioned within the class of those we eat, those we raise in order to kill and hunt. From this it follows that the Wild Duck, at a point where individualism and the anthropocentric view reach their peak within the framework of anthropocentrism, has been transformed into an object of pleasure domesticated for personal gratification and adapted to an artificial space in place of its natural habitat, while the rabbits, representing the animal production chain that the Capitalocene structure compels to reproduce for the purpose of consumption and slaughter, breed in this attic and are hunted and eaten by Ekdal.

There is no member of the group of animals we fear present in this attic. For, as previously discussed, this attic is an aestheticized reproduction of real wildlife within an anthropocentric framework.

**5. Conclusion**

The study first attempted to address the nature of ecocriticism, which emerged in literature to draw attention to the fact that the environment and nature, devastated by anthropocentric understanding, are being driven toward a crisis, or are indeed already in one,

and to trigger an ecological consciousness, as well as to examine the strategies it employs in the face of the anthropocentric structure. Subsequently, the study attempted to address how performance art, emerging as an act of opposition and rebellion, converged with ecological narrative in offering new narrative possibilities for dismantling the binaries created by the male-human (dominant subject) and destabilizing the centrality of the dominant subject, as well as the aims behind the emergence of eco-performance. The embodiment of the search, begun in the text, for an ecology-oriented, non-hierarchical, and egalitarian language and narrative possibilities through performance art led to the development of this narrative within the art of theatre and to its theorization under the concept of "ecodramaturgy".

Within this framework, Henrik Ibsen's play The Wild Duck was taken up for examination. Proceeding from the anticipation that the Wild Duck in the play may correspond to Morton's definition of the hyperobject, an analysis was conducted in this direction. It was observed that the Wild Duck demonstrates an interobjective relationship with many of the characters in the play, that it transforms into an object independent of time and space by carrying the meaning of a nature wounded by the Capitalocene, and that it sticks to many characters in the play through some of its own qualities, thus fitting Morton's definition of a hyperobject. It was further seen that, read from this perspective, the anthropocentric and Capitalocene structure embedded within the play can be deciphered and exposed.

By addressing the differences between the concepts of the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene, it was seen that the concept of the Anthropocene, as a definition of the anthropocentric approach toward the destruction of nature and the environment, serves as an umbrella concept beginning with the domestication of the first animals and plants, while the concept of the Capitalocene, by directly pointing to which human it is that destroys and harms nature, offers a more focused target directed at the creator of the problem and thus concretizes the subject of the problem in a more specific manner.

In the continuation of the study, it was observed that the attic in The Wild Duck can be read as an indicator of the dominance that capitalist humanity has established over nature. It was further inferred that this space, carrying a picturesque narrative, is a space of personal pleasure constructed through aestheticization in order to conceal the true destruction of nature. Anthropomorphism is also encountered in this artificially constructed wildlife built through anthropocentric thinking. In this world constructed through anthropocentric thought, a hierarchical value system has been attributed to the animals. While the Wild Duck is the most valued living creature in the attic, the rabbits exist there to be hunted and eaten. Accordingly,

the Wild Duck, as an echo of individualistic pleasure and carrying the domestication of a wild animal, represents an outcome of anthropocentric thinking, while the rabbits, bred for hunting, carry the representation of a Capitalocentric mode of thought insofar as they represent the merciless animal production of the capitalist system.

It should also be remembered that ecodramaturgy, grounded in a political and philosophical stance, must not remain solely a mode of analysis but should, drawing strength from its theoretical foundation, transform into a practical strategy. In this context, taking into account the examinations carried out on The Wild Duck, the analyses invite us to read the Wild Duck as a subject that almost determines and shapes the play, and to conceive of a staging in this manner. For instance, the Wild Duck, which is never seen on stage yet whose influence is felt throughout, could be attributed to light, and transformed into an active element that takes hold of the relevant spaces on stage, revealing and concealing what is visible. Considered in this way, the transformation of the "objects" within the play, in other words the living creatures in the attic, into authoritative and determining subjects, could produce an important reference regarding the formative power of nature as an active force, and open the ground for generating the practical counterpart of the theoretical analysis conducted.

In light of all these readings, an attempt has been made to expose and decipher the anthropocentric, hierarchical, speciesist, anthropocentrist, and Capitalocentric structure embedded in the text. The deciphering of these structures will open up the possibilities of dismantling and transforming them and of creating a more egalitarian, non-hierarchical, decentered, queer, that is to say, ecological narrative. Ecological narrative strategies are needed in order to dismantle and transform this male-human-centered mode of thinking. As Chaudhuri states in her well-known article, "*Ecological triumph will require a transformation of values so profound that it is now almost unimaginable. And in that process, the arts and humanities, including theater, must play a role.*" (Chaudhuri, 25).

**Works Cited**


Akgül, Ozan Ö. "Eko-Estetik ve Eko-Dramaturjik Yaklaşımlar Üzerine Düşünmek". RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi 35 (2023): 828-836.

Arons, Wendy and Theresa J. May, (eds.) Readings in Performance and Ecology. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Barad, Karen. "Nature's Queer Performativity". Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences 19.2 (2011): 121-158.

Bekaroglu, Erdem. "Antroposen: Küresel Değişimin Politiği". Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi Dergisi 62.2 (2022): 1130-1149.

Braidotti, Rosi. İnsan Sonrası. Translated by Öznur Karakaş, Kolektif Kitap, 2021.

Bumin, Tülin. Tartışılan Modernlik: Descartes ve Spinoza. Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2010.

Chaudhuri, Una. " 'There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake': Toward an Ecological Theater". Theater 25.1 (1994): 23-31.

Commoner, Barry. The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology. Alfred A. Knopf, 2020.

Diamond, Catherine. "Staging Global Warming, the Genre-Bending Hyperobject". Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism 30.2 (2016): 101-123.

Erdoğan, Umut. Nietzsche, Heidegger ve Derrida'da Yapısökümün Meselesi. Nobel Bilimsel, 2024.

Fromm, Harold and Cheryll Glotfelty, eds. The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology. University of Georgia Press, 1996.

Garrard, Greg. Ekoeleştiri. Translated by Ertuğrul Genç, Kolektif Kitap, 2020.

Gündoğdu, Sedat. "Antroposen, Kapitalosen, Plastosen: Cehaletin Evrimi". Doğu-Batı Dergisi 24.97 (2021): 227-235.

Güzel, Gamze. "Ekolojik Bir Tiyatroya Doğru: Ekoeleştirinin Tiyatrodaki Yankıları ve Örnek Çözümlemeler". Master's thesis, İstanbul Üniversitesi, 2023.

Harman, Graham. Sanat ve Nesneler. Translated by Oğuz Karayemiş, Ayrıntı Yayınları, 2022.

Ibsen, Henrik. Yaban Ördeği. Translated by T. Yılmaz Öğüt, Mitos Boyut, 2015.

Kern, Robert. "Ecocriticism: What Is It Good For?" Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (2000): 9-32.

Lehmann, Hans-Thies. Postdramatic Theatre. Translated by Karen Jürs-Munby, Routledge, 2006.

May, Theresa J. "Greening the Theater: Taking Ecocriticism from Page to Stage". Interdisciplinary Literary Studies 7.1 (2005): 84-103.

Moore, Jason W., ed. Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism. Pm Press, 2016.

Morton, Timothy. Hyperobjects. University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

Oppermann, Serpil, ed. Ekoeleştiri: Çevre ve Edebiyat. Phoenix Yayınları, 2012.

Özinan, Ece. “Erika Fischer-Lichte’nin Performans Anlayışı ile Marina Abramović’in Rhythm Serisine Bakmak”. Uluslararası Müzik ve Sahne Sanatları Dergisi 1.1 (2017): 11-26.

Sanioğlu, Nesli Meriç. “Gerçekçi ve Karşı Gerçekçi Tiyatro Yönelimleri Bağlamında Ali Ömür Ulusoy’un Yollu Adlı Oyununun 2010 ve 2020 Sahnelemelerinin Reji Karşılaştırması”. Uluslararası Toplumsal Bilimler Dergisi, vol. 9, no. 3, October 2025, pp. 200-219, https://izlik.org/JA67GZ73DS.

Şahin, Ülkü. “Samuel Beckett’in ‘Oyun Sonu’ adlı Oyununda ‘Yokluk’lar: Eksilen Bedenler, Çorak Dünyalar”. Akademik Tarih ve Düşünce Dergisi, vol. 12, no. 1, April 2025, pp. 873-92, doi:10.46868/atdd.2025.875.

Ulusoy, Ali Ömür. “Biyopolitik Bir Kavram Olarak ‘Kadın Bedeni’ ve Protest Bir Tavır Olarak Performans Sanatında Çıplaklık”. Konservatoryum 11.2 (2024): 631-644. https://doi.org/10.26650/CONS2024-1532501

Ünaldı, Nilüfer U. Martin Heidegger Düşüncesinde Zaman-Hakikat İlişkisi. DBY Yayınları, 2022.

Woynarski (A), Lisa. “A Brief Introduction to the Field of Performance and Ecology”. Academia, 2015.

---------- (B). Ecodramaturgies: Theatre, Performance and Climate Change. Springer Nature, 2020.

Online Sources

“Antroposen Araştırma Grubu”. Ege Üniversitesi Antroposen Araştırma Grubu. Accessed December 31, 2024. https://www.antrog.net/antroposenveantrog

“Marina Abramović: Rhythm 5”. Guggenheim Museum. Accessed December 27, 2024. https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/5190

essence & critique
*Journal of Literature, & Drama Studies*

Lawal, Hameed Olutoba, and Gbenga Emmanuel Adeboye. "Malleability of Hagher's Plays to Styles in Performance." *Essence & Critique: Journal of Literature & Drama Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2025, pp. 23–40.

# Malleability of Hagher's Plays to Styles in Performance

**Hameed Olutoba Lawal**[1], PhD, Lecturer, Obafemi Awolowo University, holawal@oauife.edu.ng
**Gbenga Emmanuel Adeboye**[2], Obafemi Awolowo University, geadeboye@oauife.edu.ng
**Received**: 21.03.2026
**Accepted**: 14.05.2026
**ORCID**[1]: 0009-0007-2798-3202
**ORCID**[2]: 0009-0007-6324-0035

This study examines the malleability of Iyorwuese Hagher's plays to varied styles in performance, using *Mulkin Mata*, *Aishatu*, and *Anti-People* as staged at the Department of Theatre Arts, Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo, between 2002 and 2012. The problem addressed is the limited scholarly attention given to the relationship between Hagher's dramaturgy and the interpretive possibilities it offers directors, actors, and designers in performance. Although Hagher's plays have attracted literary attention, insufficient study has been devoted to their pliability in stage realisation. This study addresses that gap. Its aim is to establish how Hagher's dramaturgy permits diverse performance choices, while its objectives are to identify the stylistic features of the selected plays, examine their stage interpretation, and assess their adaptability beyond the stage. The study is anchored in Patrice Pavis's theory of mise en scène, which explains performance as the organised transformation of dramatic text into stage expression through acting, design, movement, and visual composition. Adopting a qualitative, practice-based analytical method, the study draws on selected productions and textual evidence. Findings show that Hagher's use of narration, role reversal, audience involvement, satire, episodic structure, and flashback expands directorial and design options. The study concludes that the formal elasticity of these plays strengthens their stage vitality, pedagogic value, and screen adaptability, thereby extending their relevance within theatre practice and performance scholarship.

**Keywords:** Hagher, malleability, mise en scène, performance styles, dramaturgy

## Introduction

Playwriting emerges from lived social experience; however, its artistic distinction is determined by the playwright's control of language, structure, and dramaturgy. Dramatic texts differ not merely in subject matter but in their modes of representation, ranging from direct exposition to satiric and symbolic expression. These differences are realised through character formation, dialogue, and spectacle, including music, dance, setting, and costume, which together constitute the aesthetic identity of a play (Brockett and Ball 59). The dramatic text, therefore, provides a structured yet open framework for theatrical realisation. Notwithstanding the centrality of the written script, a play attains full meaning only in performance. The movement from page to stage requires the collaborative intervention of the director, actors, and designers, whose interpretive decisions determine the acting style, visual composition, and rhythm of the production. As Pavis maintains, mise en scène refers to the organisation of all stage elements into a coherent system through which the dramatic text is translated into performance (24). This process affirms that theatrical meaning is produced through arrangement and interpretation rather than mechanical reproduction of the script. Performance, therefore, operates as a site where dramaturgical structures are tested, modified, and made perceptible to an audience.

The variability of performance is further shaped by differing directorial approaches. Some productions adhere closely to the playwright's prescriptions, while others introduce conceptual adjustments or substantial reworking of the text in line with specific artistic objectives. Brockett and Ball identify these approaches as interpretive, adaptive, and concept-driven modes of production (322–23). Meyerhold's position that the director may treat the script as material for creative reconstruction reinforces the view that dramatic texts permit a range of performance possibilities (452). Such positions establish that performance style is not fixed but contingent upon interpretive strategies, production conditions, and audience orientation.

Within this framework, the concept of malleability becomes central to the evaluation of dramatic texts. Malleability refers to the capacity of a play to sustain varied modes of staging without compromising its thematic coherence or structural integrity. Plays that exhibit this quality allow for flexibility in acting conventions, scenographic design, and audience engagement. This capacity is often linked to dramaturgical features such as episodic construction, narrative mediation, symbolic characterisation, and openness in stage directions. Brecht's epic theatre demonstrates this principle through its use of narration, interruption, and separation of theatrical elements, which enable directors to reorganise performance components in diverse ways (Brecht

37). Such dramaturgy does not impose a singular mode of representation; rather, it supports multiple interpretive outcomes.

However, critical engagement with African drama has largely concentrated on thematic and ideological concerns, including politics, gender relations, and cultural representation, with limited attention to performance realisation. This orientation has resulted in insufficient examination of how dramatic texts function within rehearsal and production, particularly in institutional theatre settings where material conditions, training objectives, and audience composition necessitate adaptive staging strategies. A focus on malleability provides a means of addressing this limitation by foregrounding the relationship between dramaturgy and performance practice. The plays of Iyorwuese Hagher offer a suitable basis for such examination. His works, notably *Mulkin Mata*, *Aishatu*, and *Anti-People*, combine social critique with dramaturgical structures that permit varied performance interpretations. These plays employ devices such as episodic progression, narrative intervention, role reversal, and temporal shifts, all of which expand the range of directorial and performance choices available in production. While existing studies have addressed their thematic concerns, particularly in relation to governance, gender, and social justice (Akoh 1–5), limited attention has been given to their adaptability in performance.

This study therefore examines the malleability of Hagher's plays to styles in performance, using selected productions staged at the Department of Theatre Arts, Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo, between 2002 and 2012. The aim is to establish how the dramaturgical structure of these plays supports flexibility in acting, directing, and design. The objectives are to identify key stylistic features within the texts, analyse their interpretation in performance, and assess their implications for theatre practice and adaptation. The study adopts a qualitative analytical method, drawing on performance observation, production documentation, and textual analysis. By situating Hagher's dramaturgy within the framework of mise en scène and performance interpretation, this study demonstrates that the adaptability of these plays enhances their relevance in theatre training, production, and potential translation to screen media. It further establishes that the enduring value of a dramatic text lies not only in its thematic concerns but in its capacity to accommodate varied forms of stage realisation.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored in Patrice Pavis's theory of *mise en scène*, which conceives theatrical performance as the organised transformation of dramatic text into stage expression through the

coordinated arrangement of acting, scenography, movement, sound, and visual composition. The term *mise en scène*, originally derived from nineteenth-century French theatre practice, referred to the placement of actors and elements on stage under the direction of the *metteur en scène*. Its conceptual expansion in modern theatre theory, particularly in the twentieth century, repositioned it as a critical framework for analysing how meaning is constructed in performance rather than merely executed (Pavis 24). Patrice Pavis, a French theatre theorist and semiotician, advanced this concept through his engagement with theatre semiotics and intercultural performance studies from the late twentieth century. His formulation draws on earlier contributions by scholars such as Roland Barthes and Keir Elam, who approached theatre as a system of signs, as well as on developments in European directing traditions associated with figures like Stanislavski, Meyerhold, and Brecht, who redefined staging as an interpretive act. Pavis systematises these developments by proposing that performance is constituted through a network of signifying systems—gestural, visual, spatial, and auditory—which are organised in the process of staging to produce meaning for the audience (Pavis 29; Elam 2).

The central postulation of Pavis's theory is that the dramatic text does not determine performance in a fixed manner; rather, it serves as a matrix that is transformed through *mise en scène*. This transformation involves selection, arrangement, and emphasis. Acting translates character and dialogue into embodied action; design elements such as costume, lighting, and set establish visual and symbolic environments; movement and spatial organisation regulate rhythm and focus; and sound structures the auditory dimension of the performance. The interaction of these elements produces a unified theatrical event that may differ across productions of the same text. Consequently, performance is not a duplication of the script but an interpretive reconstruction.

The development of *mise en scène* as a theoretical framework corresponds with shifts in modern theatre from text-centred practice to performance-centred analysis. In contemporary theatre discourse, emphasis is placed on staging as a site of meaning production, where directors and performers exercise creative agency in shaping the theatrical event (Fischer-Lichte 38; McAuley 27). This perspective underscores the variability of performance and the possibility of multiple valid interpretations of a single dramatic text. The applicability of Pavis's theory to this study lies in its capacity to account for the flexibility of dramatic works in performance. The selected plays of Iyorwuese Hagher, *Mulkin Mata*, *Aishatu*, and *Anti-People*, exhibit dramaturgical features that permit varied staging choices, including episodic structure, narrative intervention, and

symbolic representation. Through the lens of *mise en scène*, these features are examined in relation to how directors, actors, and designers organise performance elements to realise the plays on stage.

In anchoring this study, Pavis's framework provides the analytical basis for identifying how dramaturgical structures enable diverse performance styles. It clarifies what constitutes performance transformation, which elements are involved in staging, and how interpretive decisions shape the final theatrical product. The result of this application is the demonstration that Hagher's plays possess structural qualities that support flexibility in acting, directing, and design, thereby enhancing their adaptability within institutional theatre and their potential for translation to other performance media.

**Hybridism of Styles in Character Interpretation**

Acting styles in performance is grounded in the unity of vision achieved through the convergence of the playwright's dramaturgy and the interpretive contributions of the director, actors, and designers. Although the play originates as a written construct, theatre is realised through rehearsal and performance, where literary intention is translated into embodied action, visual arrangement, and spatial organisation. The designation "playwright" signifies this dual function, as the dramatist composes not only for reading but for staging. Umukoro describes this process as an arduous engagement that combines literary craft with the imaginative work of production (99). Consequently, the playwright functions within the sphere of performance creation, while the director, actors, and designers operate as collaborators who extend and realise the script in practice.

The dramatic text provides the initial framework for performance; however, it does not determine a fixed mode of enactment. Directors and production teams interpret the script in relation to genre, period, medium, audience, and available resources. This interpretive activity transforms the written text into performance through decisions concerning acting style, scenography, rhythm, and visual composition. Pavis conceptualises this transformation as *mise en scène*, the organised arrangement of stage elements through which the text is realised as performance (24–29). Acting style, therefore, emerges from the interaction between dramaturgical structure and staging decisions rather than from the text alone. Approaches to interpretation and production style may be distinguished along three lines. The first is the interpretive approach, in which the director seeks to realise the playwright's intentions with a high degree of fidelity. Downs, Wright, and Ramsey state that interpretive directors aim to translate the play from page to stage as accurately as possible, maintaining consistency with the script's language and action (188). In this mode, characterisation

is guided by textual discipline, and design elements support the established dramatic world without substantial deviation.

The second approach permits controlled deviation from the script. Here, the director functions as an interpreter who translates the dramatic text into a performance language that may incorporate additional concepts or emphases. Brockett and Ball describe this approach as one in which the director extends the playwright's vision through selective reinterpretation while retaining the central thematic orientation of the play (322). Character interpretation under this method reflects a balance between textual guidance and creative intervention. The third approach places greater emphasis on the director's authority in shaping the production. In this case, the script serves as material for reconstruction during rehearsal, with alterations in movement, staging, and visual composition. Brockett and Ball identify this mode as one in which the director may significantly reshape the text to achieve a distinct production concept (323). Meyerhold's assertion that the director is the primary creative force in theatre and that the script may be moulded according to artistic intention further affirms this position (Brockett and Ball 452). Character interpretation within this framework becomes hybrid, as it is informed by dramaturgical cues and reconfigured through staging practices.

Contemporary writing on rehearsal and directing reinforces the collaborative basis of performance formation. Schmidt identifies rehearsal as a structured process in which theatre practitioners coordinate speech, gesture, movement, and spatial relations to produce performance outcomes (122–24). Glikpoe and Horsu observe that the director's task involves translating the script into visual and performative elements through interpretive decisions and actor guidance (15–18). Gllavica further maintains that the relationship between director, playwright, and actor remains central to the achievement of artistic objectives in theatre (67–70). These positions indicate that acting style is produced through coordinated artistic processes rather than individual effort. The interaction of these approaches results in hybridism of styles in character interpretation. In practice, productions do not adhere exclusively to a single method but combine fidelity to the script with interpretive adjustment and structural reorganisation. This is particularly evident in institutional theatre, where performance serves artistic and pedagogical functions. Characterisation in such settings reflects the convergence of textual structure, directorial interpretation, and design realisation. In the plays under consideration, this convergence produces varied acting styles that derive from the playwright's dramaturgy and are shaped through collaborative staging processes.

**Characterisation of Women Revolutionary Government (WRG) in *Mulkin Mata***

The clamour for active participation of women in politics was enacted at the multi-purpose hall of the Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo by the 200 level students of the Department of Theatre Arts in June, 2002. In the revolutionary play, directed by Rufus Kehinde, strive to upstage the domineering role of men at the home and political fronts in acting styles that could be described as an hybrid of the realistic and cominal in the reversal role of women taken over traditional duties of men was dramatised.

This was characterised in an amusing situation in African politics where women seized power by force and try to emasculate the men by enacting and enforcing absurd laws in the dramatic universe. The imposition of the draconian laws led to bickerings in the ruling cabinet. Subsequently, one of the women leaders, Hassana Diakite confronted the Head of State, Hajiya Usmanu on the justification of their laws and oppression of men. The rebellion eventually led to the fall of Hajiya Usmanus'regime as the women lost control and support of the people.

The thematic thrust of the play is much more than the search for identify or equality, it is a revolt against, and total overthrow of patriarchy. This is implied in the title of the play, *Mulkin Mata* which means women's regime or women's rule, exclusively. Female centred nature of the play was achieved from the beginning with the playwright's dramatic technique of achieving a near reality through box office in his stage direction. The usual roles of issuing tickets and ushering people into the theatres reserved for pretty young ladies must be taken by young men who are as pleasant as possible. Akoh (2).

While the women revolution led by Hajiya (Kehinde Kayode) recorded some achievements in the political and economic spheres as acted out in their boldness and assertiveness in governance, decree three on sex prohibition exposed their weakness. It was aimed at given the women the freedom and more opportunity to work without distraction from their husbands. It forbids outright any form of sexual intercourse "any man caught attempting to break this decree will be castrated". *Mulkin Mata* (2). Ironically, this only helps to promote prostitution as boys and men take to visiting brothers, and clandestine sexual arrangements between husbands and wives, leading to the waning of the revolutionary ideals.


**Fig. 1** Hajiya Usmanu and her aid announcing the mission of Women Revolutionary Government (WRG)

This in ability to control libido played out with some of the revolutionary soldiers succumbing to sexual desire of their husbands in secrecy and sexual appeal of the prostitutes in facial expression, gesture and posture to entice men in the brothel. Similarly, enchanting was the comic relief and play within a play of the shoe mender and his girl friend and the true to life poise of Alhaji Saleh's white girl friend acted by Ikumapayi Lateefat in the foreign scene. What further enhanced the humanisation of the women revolution on stage by the students was the simplicity of plot and language in the blend of satiric and comic characterisation. There was no dull moment, character interpretation in each scene was with precision and accuracy apart from few cases of weak articulation and projection. Hajiya Usmanu (Kehinde Kayode) stood out in her confidence, composure and good projection. This characterisation was balanced up in Hassana Diakite, acted by Dupe Popoola in action and voicing out with these words.

You are all hypocrites; the men are a necessary evil. Let us call them to a dialogue, and let us, together with them, stabilise the country. It is not enough to be economically sound. People in this country need the liberty to associate fully with one another without discrimination. We have proved the equality of our sexes in leadership. Let us also pursue happiness (*Mulkin Mata* 2).

**Dramatisation of Abuse of Womanhood in *Aishatu***

The staging of Iyorwuese Hagher's *Aishatu* at the New Hall of the Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo, on 27 and 28 April 2005, presents a compelling instance of how dramaturgy, performance training, and social commentary converge within educational theatre. The production, directed by Hameed Lawal as part of the 2004/2005 pre-NCE workshop, demonstrates the capacity of emerging performers to engage meaningfully with demanding thematic material. Although the performers were at an early stage of training, the interpretive effort evident in their vocal delivery, physical expression, and stage interaction suggests a level of artistic commitment that exceeds routine classroom exercise. The production affirms the pedagogic function of theatre as a space where technical training and social consciousness are developed simultaneously.

Character interpretation in the production is marked by a sustained attempt to humanise the dramatic figures and render their experiences intelligible to the audience. The performances of Tola (Rodah Olayinka), Aishatu (Onyesom Ruth and Sadiku Bisi), Rekiya (Agboola Opeyemi and Seun Mohammed), Inuwa (Ogundiji Kayode), and Udeng (James God's Time) demonstrate a clear engagement with the psychological and social dimensions of their roles. Rather than presenting abstract types, the actors embody recognisable individuals whose actions reflect conditions of economic hardship, moral compromise, and social pressure. This approach aligns with the functional requirement of acting within such a dramaturgical structure, where clarity of intention and communicative precision take precedence over elaborate stylisation.

The visual and material elements of the production further reinforce its thematic direction. Costume, properties, and set design are deployed with sufficient clarity to establish environment, social status, and situational context. These elements do not operate as decorative additions but as integral components of meaning construction, enabling the audience to recognise the relevance of the dramatic action to familiar social conditions. Through this coordination of acting and design, the production sustains coherence in its representation of contemporary social concerns. Nonetheless, certain limitations in performance execution are evident. Instances of uncertainty in entrances and exits, along with occasional recitation of lines without full emotional integration, indicate the developmental stage of the performers. In addition, the portrayal of culturally specific speech patterns, particularly in the characters of Alhaji Wadi (Olotu Oladapo) and Dr. Apeh (Jide Oludiran), lacks sufficient precision in accent and vocal modulation. These weaknesses, however,

do not undermine the overall communicative effect of the production; rather, they point to areas requiring further technical refinement within the training process.

Despite these limitations, the production succeeds in conveying the central concerns of the play. Through a combination of dialogue, gesture, and pictorial staging, the actors communicate the consequences of drug addiction, trafficking, and prostitution with clarity. The use of pantomime and visual representation proves effective in illustrating actions that might otherwise be difficult to stage directly, thereby sustaining audience engagement and comprehension. The director's selection of the play is thus justified by its relevance to prevailing social conditions, particularly the persistence of these vices among young people. At the centre of the dramatic action is the character of Aishatu, whose trajectory reflects the intersection of poverty, aspiration, and moral dislocation. As a teenager confronted with the inability to continue her education due to financial constraint, she turns to alternative means of survival and advancement. Her movement from the domestic space to the sphere of illicit activity is neither abrupt nor arbitrary; it is presented as a progression shaped by material necessity and social influence. Her encounter with Rekiya, already immersed in drug-related activities, marks a decisive moment in this progression, as it introduces her to a network of practices that promise immediate gain but carry long-term consequences.

The dramatisation of Aishatu's experience extends beyond individual misfortune to address the condition of womanhood within a socio-economic structure that limits access to legitimate opportunities. The play presents the female body as a site of exploitation within systems of exchange governed by wealth and power. In doing so, it does not merely depict moral failure but exposes the conditions that produce such outcomes. The contrast between Aishatu and Tola, who persists in her educational pursuit despite similar constraints, introduces a counterpoint that underscores the possibility of alternative responses to adversity. Through this interplay of character, action, and staging, the production demonstrates the adaptability of Hagher's dramaturgy to performance. The thematic focus on social deviance is articulated through performance choices that prioritise clarity, immediacy, and audience recognition. The result is a theatrical realisation that not only communicates the narrative of the play but also invites reflection on the social conditions it represents.

**Fig. 2** Aishatu (Ruth Onyeson) sniffing cocaine

The progression of Aishatu's character from a vulnerable schoolgirl to a participant in illicit networks constitutes the structural and moral centre of the play. Her transformation is neither abrupt nor exaggerated; it unfolds through a sequence of choices shaped by economic deprivation, social influence, and the lure of material advancement. The initial attraction to wealth, facilitated through association with drug barons and other exploitative figures, produces a gradual detachment from formal education and ethical restraint. This trajectory culminates in psychological disintegration, thereby establishing a causal relationship between social conditions and personal collapse. The representation aligns with sociological positions that identify economic pressure and peer influence as determining factors in youth involvement in deviant activities (Alemika and Chukwuma 214; UNODC 67). The stage realisation of this transformation reinforces the didactic function of the play, presenting consequences not as abstract warnings but as embodied outcomes.

The contrast between Aishatu and Tola introduces a structural counterpoint that strengthens the dramatic argument. While both characters are subjected to similar conditions of financial constraint, their responses diverge significantly. Tola's persistence in education functions as a stabilising moral axis within the play, demonstrating that adversity does not necessitate moral compromise. This duality reflects a dramaturgical strategy in which opposing character arcs are

used to foreground choice and consequence. Adeoti observes that such character contrasts in African drama often serve as instruments for ethical evaluation, directing audience attention to the implications of individual decisions within social systems (97). The stage interpretation of these roles, therefore, extends beyond narrative function to pedagogic articulation. The deployment of Brechtian devices in the play contributes significantly to its performance structure. The use of narration, episodic construction, and the selection of actors from the audience operates to interrupt emotional absorption and direct attention to the social issues under examination. Brecht's principle of distancing (*Verfremdungseffekt*) seeks to prevent passive identification and instead promote reflective observation (Brecht 91). In *Aishatu*, this is achieved through simplified dialogue, direct address, and the reorganisation of performance space, all of which facilitate clarity of communication. The effectiveness of such devices within educational theatre has been noted in applied performance research, where detachment is considered essential for engaging audiences with social problems without reducing them to spectacle (Boal 122; Prentki and Preston 45).

The modification of the driving scene to a hotel bar setting further illustrates the adaptive capacity of the production. This adjustment is not merely a practical decision but a directorial strategy aimed at enhancing intelligibility and maintaining audience engagement. Within performance practice, such alterations are consistent with the principle that staging must respond to the competence of performers and the expectations of the audience. McAuley argues that performance space and scenographic choices must be organised in relation to the conditions of production and reception, as these factors determine how meaning is perceived (31). The relocation of the scene from mimed driving to a recognisable social environment therefore strengthens the communicative clarity of the production. The thematic focus on drug addiction, trafficking, and prostitution situates the play within discourse on youth vulnerability and gendered exploitation. Empirical studies indicate that young women in economically constrained environments are disproportionately exposed to networks that commodify the body in exchange for financial security (UN Women 54; Nwoye 138). The dramatisation of Aishatu's experience reflects this condition, presenting womanhood as subject to systemic pressures that extend beyond individual morality. At the same time, the play avoids reduction to social determinism by presenting alternative pathways through characters such as Tola. This balance between structural critique and individual agency strengthens the interpretive depth of the performance.

The reception of the production confirms its relevance within educational and community theatre. The audience response, particularly the suggestion that the play be taken to schools,

indicates recognition of its capacity to function as a tool for social sensitisation. Applied theatre practitioners have emphasised the role of performance in addressing public concerns, especially in contexts where formal education may not sufficiently engage with issues such as drug abuse and exploitation (Nicholson 78; Thompson 64). In this regard, *Aishatu* operates not only as a dramatic text but as an instrument of social instruction, capable of extending its impact beyond the theatre space. The cumulative effect of these elements, character construction, performance technique, directorial adaptation, and thematic clarity, demonstrates the strength of Hagher's dramaturgy in accommodating varied performance conditions. The play sustains interpretive flexibility while maintaining coherence in its representation of social problems. Its realisation in performance confirms that the abuse of womanhood is not presented as isolated misconduct but as a condition produced by identifiable socio-economic forces. Through this approach, the production achieves clarity of purpose, coherence of style, and effectiveness of communication.

**Satiric Portrayal of Societal Foibles in Hagher's Anti-People**

Set in Northern Nigeria, stagibility of the plays lies in simplicity of the plot and language. Segmented into five happenings with action centred on Alhaji Nakoni's house, Sarkin Rigons palace and the court. Play begins at Alhaji Nakomi's gate with a flashback to events that transformed Musa Rigon, a retired and poor soldier to a gate man to heighten suspense and sustain the interest of the audience. In defence of his style of dramaturgy and language, the playwright contends in the preface to his collection of plays that;

I have avoided the pitfalls of dramatists that merely flaunt the supernatural and the traditional (antiquities) in content and style. Our man-made problems can do without a *deus ex machina*, and our traditional rituals find better accommodation in our museums (*Comrade and Voltage*, Preface iv).

Directed by Hameed Lawal and Ibrahim Auta, in character interpretation of the play; the simplicity of the language and setting was fully explored by the directors to bring out the best of the up-coming actors and actresses. Mostly outstanding in speech and movements are: Ashamu Opeyemi (Alhaji Nakomi), Olukunle Tolulope (Sarkin Rigon), Akinade Opeyemi (Judge), Otukoya Taiwo (Jumai), Ilesanmi Lukman (Aboki), Oladapo Oluwadamilare (Musa Rigon), Ajisope Odunola (Lawyer) and Adedokun Yemisi (Lawyer).

The good interpretation of these major actors in speech, movement, facial expression, posture and gesture makeup for the inadequacies of other elements of production. This went a long way to

sustain the tempo of the play in speech and action from Happenings one to five. Among these captivating scenes were the court scenes. While the argumentative and logical presentation of the lawyers were quite edifying and entertaining, Aboki (Ilesanmi Luquman's pidgin English and disregard for court ethics created comic relief. A similar scene was re-enacted in Sarkin Rigon's palace, when Jumai's celebration of freedom from her drunkard husbands was cut short with forceful marriage to Sarkin Rigon. The dance and musical interlude to cool nerves and ease tension after the court session of Sarkin Rigon was well choreographed. This dramatic action in speech and action were strengthened with appropriate contemporary costume and set as exemplified in costuming of the judge, lawyers and, the court room, Sarkin Rigon and Bank manager.

Staged on 30th August, 2012, *Anti-People* is a dramatisation of how the rich and the powerful in the society who normally use their influence and affluence to oppress the poor. Musa Rigon, a retired and poor soldier lost the land he inherited from his great grandfather to Alhaji Nakomi who connived with the traditional ruler to acquire the land. Attempts by Rigon to reclaim his landed property through the customary and civil courts failed because of the vested interest of the traditional ruler in the customary court and the legal technicalities in the civil court.

**Fig. 3** Court Scene in Anti-People

After losing the legal battle, the retired soldier resigned to fate by becoming a gateman in the house of the man who deprives him of his land. It is in the same pathetic situation that his friend Aboki, lost his wife to Sarkin Rigon after separating the couple in his customary court. Relevance of the play to our social reality lies in the fact that, there are many Alhaji Nakomis in our society who oppress and to exploit the masses through forceful acquisition of landed property to seek favour from the powers that be, for self-aggrandisement. This is exemplified in Nigerian politicians and business men who, with backing of self-centred traditional rulers, can always acquire land at choice locations. In the same vein, Musa Rigon epitomised the less priviledged in the society who have lost their rights to legal technicalities and manipulations of the powers that be. The production was a sensitisation on the oppressive tendencies of those in power at all levels of governance.

**Conclusion**

This study has examined the production of the selected plays with particular attention to the relationship between the playwright's dramaturgical structure and the resulting production styles

in acting and scenographic realisation. The analysis establishes that Hagher's dramaturgy provides a flexible framework that supports varied interpretive choices in performance. Central to this relationship is the consistent deployment of Brechtian techniques, which regulate audience response through controlled detachment and reflective engagement rather than emotional immersion. These techniques are evident across the productions considered. In *Mulkin Mata*, the use of a large television screen to announce the revolutionary programme of Hajiya Usmanu introduces a mediated form of communication that interrupts conventional stage illusion. In *Aishatu*, narration and the selection of performers from the audience serve to restructure the boundary between performer and spectator, thereby directing attention to the social implications of the action. In *Anti-People*, the use of flashback as a structural device enables the reconstruction of past events in order to foreground the systematic dispossession and dehumanisation of Musa Rigon. The opening image of the gate, which situates Rigon within the compound of his oppressor, establishes the material and symbolic conditions of his subjugation and frames the dramatic action that follows.

The cumulative effect of these staging strategies is the generation of sustained audience attention through clarity of presentation and controlled progression of events. Suspense is achieved through the orderly unfolding of cause and consequence, which guides the audience towards an understanding of the social conditions represented. Within this framework, the director, actors, and designers engage with the text as material for structured interpretation, exploring varied performance possibilities while maintaining coherence in thematic communication. A significant outcome of the productions examined is the demonstration of the malleability of Hagher's plays. The simplicity of language and clarity of dramaturgical construction enable adaptation across different performance conditions without loss of meaning. This quality extends the relevance of the plays beyond stage performance to potential translation into screen media. At a time when screen production exerts increasing influence on modes of performance consumption, the adaptability of these plays presents practical opportunities for further development. The study therefore concludes that Hagher's dramaturgy sustains interpretive flexibility, supports effective stage realisation, and offers viable prospects for adaptation within contemporary performance practice.

**Works Cited**


Adeoti, Gbemisola. *African Theatre and Social Change*. Routledge, 2019.

Akoh, Ameh Dennis. "Feminism or Total Revolution? Ideological Reading of Iyorwuese Hagher's *Mulkin Mata*." *International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–5.

Alemika, Etannibi E. O., and Innocent Chukwuma. *Crime and Policing in Nigeria*. CLEEN Foundation, 2020.

Boal, Augusto. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Translated by Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride, Pluto Press, 2008.

Brecht, Bertolt. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Edited and translated by John Willett, Methuen, 1964.

Brockett, Oscar G., and Robert J. Ball. *The Essential Theatre*. 10th ed., Wadsworth, 2014.

Downs, William M., Lou Anne Wright, and Erik Ramsey. *The Art of Theatre: Then and Now*. 3rd ed., Wadsworth, 2013.

Elam, Keir. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2002.

Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*. Translated by Saskya Iris Jain, Routledge, 2008.

Glikpoe, Noble Jesse, and Isaac Horsu. "From Page to Stage: The Director's Interpretation and Picturization of a Script." *Advanced Journal of Theatre and Film Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2023, pp. 36–42.

Gllavica, Fiona. "Director-Dramaturg and Director-Actor Relationship in Theatre." *International Journal of Business and Technology*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2024.

Hagher, Iyorwuese Harry. *Aishatu and Other Plays*. Sam Bookman Educational and Communication Services, 1987.

Hagher, Iyorwuese Harry. *Comrade and Voltage*. Caltop Publications (Nigeria) Ltd., 1996.

Hagher, Iyorwuese Harry. *Mulkin Mata*. Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) Plc, 1991.

McAuley, Gay. *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*. U of Michigan P, 2000.

Nicholson, Helen. *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre*. 2nd ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Nwoye, Augustine. "Gender, Poverty and Youth Vulnerability in Africa." *African Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2021, pp. 130–42.

Pavis, Patrice. *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*. Translated by Loren Kruger, Routledge, 1992.

Prentki, Tim, and Sheila Preston, editors. *The Applied Theatre Reader*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2020.

Schmidt, Axel, and Arnulf Deppermann. “Editorial: Social Interaction and the Theater Rehearsal.” *Human Studies*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2023, pp. 191–97.

Thompson, James. *Performance Affects: Applied Theatre and the End of Effect*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Umukoro, Mathew. “The Playwright and the New Media.” *A Handbook for Nigerian Creative Writers*, edited by Dan Izevbaye, Festus Adesanoye, and Dele Layiwola, Nigeria Academy of Letters, 2013, p. 99.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. *World Drug Report 2023*. United Nations, 2023.

UN Women. *Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in Africa*. United Nations, 2022.

essence & critique
*Journal of Literature, & Drama Studies*

Lodi, Fabiano. "Training as an Apparatus: Revisions on the Modern Directing under the Concept of Directing Training through Composition Practice" *Essence & Critique: Journal of Literature & Drama Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2026, pp. 41–54.

# Training as an Apparatus: Revisions on the Modern Directing under the Concept of Directing Training through Composition Practice

**Fabiano Lodi**[1], PhD., University of São Paulo, fabiano.lodi@usp.br

**Received**: 10.05.2026
**Accepted**: 20.06.2026

[1]**ORCID:** 0000-0003-3882-7022

In this article, I reflect on Directing Training by articulating the concept of training in relation to the role of directing and by investigating its occurrence within the context of Composition practices developed by the American theater SITI Company. These practices are based on the procedures that its director Anne Bogart learned while taking classes with Aileen Passloff in the 1970s. Composition emerged from the Judson Dance Theater movement (1962–1964), which following other movements broadly understood within the counterculture of the 1960s, favored a deep revision of the nomenclature and categories instituted by modernity. Drawing on a bibliographic review and access to primary sources, I draw upon the concept of the end of art (Danto, 2006) to discuss the impact of this process on the decline of the modern theater director and the manner in which Composition, as an apparatus (Agamben, 2009), reflects the characteristics of a postmodern theater director.

**Keywords:** Directing, Training, Apparatus, Composition.

## Introduction

Throughout this article, I propose approaches that relate the influence of the development of the concept of training to the revisions that shaped the modern notion of directing. As a well-established and consolidated concept within the theoretical scope of the performing arts, especially throughout the 20th century, training has provided essential foundations for actresses, actors, and performers to investigate pertinent aspects to their craft, known as actor training. Based on this, would it be possible to consider a training approach focused on directing? How could the directors train themselves? What impacts could the practice of training have on the renewal of the conception of what it means to be a director? Although the idea of directing training is still less widespread than actor training, it has already been developed in publications by artists and researchers such as Sidiropoulou *et al.* (2003), Kozma (2022), and Bogart (2017), in which they articulate theoretical analyses and methodologies that could support this approach. Interested in contributing to the topic, I have divided this article into three parts to present brief historical notes on modern directing, its deconstruction in the postmodern context, and its relationship with training.

In the first part, I propose to debate to what extent actor training has effected the production of a subjectivity that has shaped the characteristics of the modern directing throughout the 20th century. I refer to the concept of apparatus, developed by Agamben (2009), to elucidate a proposition that actor training constitutes a directing apparatus. In the second part, I add reflections on the intense process of revising and deconstructing the directing role, based on the paradigm of modern directing. I refer to this process as the end of directing, inspired by the studies of Danto (2006), which investigate the end of art as a historical process in which the characteristics of postmodern art challenge categorizations and designations established as art within modernity. I highlight the Judson Dance Theater movement, which took place in the United States in the 1960s, and the various experiences of collective creation observed in Latin America during the same period, to exemplify the process of the end of directing in different contexts. I conclude this historical and conceptual journey in the third part by addressing the practice of Composition, developed by the American choreographer and professor Aileen Passloff (1931-2020) within the Judson movement and refined by the American director Anne Bogart (1951-). I present the characteristics of the propositions seen in Composition that differentiate them from the context of

training in modern directing, such as the decentralization of authorship in staging and the dilution of artistic hierarchy. In this regard, I emphasize its relevance as an apparatus that promotes important revisions of the understanding of the role of directing in the postmodern context.

The publication of this study aims not only to expand debates on the development of directing practices but also to disseminate nascent studies analyzing the impacts of Composition in training practice. And, in turn, to the relationships between training and directing, as already mentioned, which have been increasingly attracting interest within the field of directing studies. The versatility with which Composition has been articulated across the most diverse fields relevant to theatrical practice demonstrates that the artistic and pedagogical legacy of Passloff and Bogart mobilizes a fertile field of investigation. I hope that this movement contributes to the ongoing reflective processes that the art of directing claims.

**Actor Training as Modern Directing's apparatus**

> The 20th century was the director's century, who claimed it was the actor's century.
> Fátima Costa de Lima

Actor training is an unequivocal phenomenon linked to the poetic praxis of directing. It was established during the early decades of the 20th century (Hodge, 2010), in the wake of the so-called modern attributes of directing, which are inseparable from the refinement of its artistic procedures. As a legacy of the association of theater as a literary subgenre, until the mid-19th century, their function was to enhance the literary quality of the text, highlighting, through staging, the author's words and ideas. Directors were also required to establish this relationship of benefiting the literary material through staging, with the aim of maintaining a tradition of sacrality around the text (Pavis, 1999; Torres Neto, 2021). The modernity of directing refers to the process that qualifies directors as *auteurs* (the authors of the staging), considering the autonomy of their activity in relation to the text, allowing them the right to stage it according to their unique perspective, unsubmitted to the conditions imposed by the text's author, and adding layers of reflection on the literary work through the resources inherent in staging. This configuration affected the agents involved in staging, especially performing artists (actresses, actors, performers), who underwent profound changes in the fundamentals of theatrical performance. For example, the mastery of oratory for reciting the text, the stars system and recurring showgirls fell

into disuse or became insufficient (Roubine, 1998). Given the above, training emerged as an apparatus that shaped not only the technical approach to acting but also the ethics of the actor's craft – their conduct, responsibilities, and social and political role as artists – thereby establishing the necessary requirements for working with a particular director.

I will return to the issue of training as a guiding apparatus device. However, before that, I will complement the points made in the previous paragraph by adding that some training goals may include the acquisition of skills regimen (Watson, 1995), which is often employed throughout a career. Also called formation, this process can occur in both informal contexts (groups, companies, artistic collectives, community spaces) and in formal institutions or settings (schools, universities, conservatories), and includes various methodologies that develop aspects of physical practice, vocal work, acting, singing, improvisation, etc. Watson (2011) refers to this process as indirect training, solely to differentiate it from direct training, which is aimed at learning fixed forms necessarily required for its execution (such as Commedia Dell'arte, Circus-Theatre, Noh, etc.), whose knowledge is generally transmitted outside institutional contexts by more experienced individuals to the less experienced. It is also important to highlight a third relevant approach to training: the one developed autonomously by the actors themselves, in which the fundamental principles considered important for their personal improvement are continuously revisited. In this case, training occurs as a way of being for the artist, a perpetual investigation of oneself, independent of institutional formative processes, as a means of maintaining relationships of continuity, improvement, and engagement through non-utilitarian procedures from the perspective of artistic production.

It is important to note that condensed propositions are embedded in these examples and trace back to the discourses of Euro-American directing canons, which, as the authors of these creative processes, fostered the production of a subjectivity for actors and performers through training, widely disseminated across different contexts and territories of the world. This process often identifies two emerging aesthetic subjects in the modern historiography of 20th-century Western theatre that remain relevant to contemporary practices in the performing arts: the actor-creator and the director-pedagogue. This dynamic has contributed significantly to the consolidation of the modern directing role and reinforced key aspects of the art of acting and performance, promoting a range of approaches that support their autonomy and preserve their creative role. It is therefore one of the most successful propositions regarding creative strategies for directing.

These characteristics enable an understanding of actor training as an apparatus, in the terms formulated by Agamben (2009, p. 11) for this concept, among which I highlight the "implication in a process of subjectification, that is to say, they [the apparatus] must produce their subject". However, as emphasized by Kozma (2022, p. 41), "the term 'actor training' might be misleading because, while actors are the training's subject, it is ultimately a director's method of operation". In agreement with Kozma, training could be understood as an apparatus within modern directing that fosters the experiences of the actor-creator and the director-pedagogue. Added to this are the investigative and ongoing research character, facilitated by training, which led to the emergence of multiple interests around the art of acting and performance, consolidating it as a central activity of 20th-century theatrical practice. However, it does not seem possible to assert that training has produced a similar effect on the role of directing. Identifying the fundamental aspects of the work carried out by directing, to which the training apparatus has contributed, in relation to the art of acting and performance, remains a challenge in the contemporary context of directing. After all, what exactly do directors do? How do directing artists continually refine the techniques necessary for their craft? How do directors train themselves? What training apparatus would be suitable to produce the aesthetic subject of contemporary directing, and how can this repertoire be disseminated?

Compared to the art of acting and performance, directing still has few references that investigate the processes themselves and the methodologies that address questions such as these. This situation has been mobilizing interest in propositions related to training and directing. Below, I will mention examples of practices that emerged within artistic movements that problematized the role of directing, impacting the modern conception of the term and reconfiguring its premises – a history whose rewriting continues to reach us to this day, amidst ends and new beginnings.

**On the end of directing: a frontier between the modern and the postmodern**

It was in the broad period between the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century that modern directing was consolidated and, in parallel, the concept of training linked to the practices of the actress, actor, and performer also took root (Hodge, 2010). Historical conditions, initiated or intensified within this same timeframe contributed to its widespread dissemination, among which we can mention: the facilitation of access to technical knowledge produced in the field of performing arts through publishing; the growth of institutional spaces for

artistic training; greater availability of means for the circulation of performances, expanding the reach of aesthetic innovations; cultural exchanges between different territories; the maintenance of processes of cultural colonization, especially in Africa and Latin America, among other effects of the globalization process. Without an alternative proposal of similar scope until then, the artistic identity of directing was strongly shaped by adherence to the premises of modern directing, which had become hegemonic.

However, from the 1960s onwards, a succession of propositions, notably provoking and transgressive, plunged artistic practices into a period of profound revision of the models established by modernity. One of these is historically associated with the Judson Dance Theater movement, which took place in New York between 1962 and 1964. Broadly speaking, its main characteristic was the strong opposition to the various conventions operating in the performing arts, exemplified by an emphasis on processes developed collaboratively, rather than led by individual authority; interdisciplinary practices in which different artistic languages blended, blurring boundaries of definition and categories; the creative process viewed more as an ongoing experience which was never done than a means to achieve a final result; and the highly performative aspect of the investigations, which ranged from juxtaposing elements of daily life with codified techniques to involving people with diverse artistic backgrounds, or even those with no experience at all, performing different roles (Moura, 2004; Lax, 2018; Javeski, 2018). Although the legacy of Judson is often more associated with dance art and has sparked processes of contestation and reinvention of its artistic roles, especially those of dancers and choreographers, the identity of modern directing and the concept of training were also affected by this process. Aspects that revealed potential alternatives included: the hierarchy of power exercised by directing within training regimes, which would be inappropriate in artistic contexts as it reproduces practices of objectification and control over bodies; the restriction on access to authorship; and the individual exercise of the directing role.

According to Banes (1983), the Judson movement revealed a transition from modernity to postmodernity in American art. This argument is often used to support the idea that artistic movements displaying characteristics similar to those of the Judson are widely associated with counterculture. These cultural movements serve as historical references to a transitional period in which the crisis of category identification and artistic classification became more pronounced. When listing terminological propositions, such as contemporary art and postmodern art, and

referring to the characteristics of artistic creation at that time, Danto (2006, p. 15) highlights the complexity involved in this process by observing there is "[...] the lack of stylistic unity, or at least of the kind of stylistic unity that can be elevated to the status of a criterion and used as a basis for developing the ability to recognize it" (author's translation)[1]. It is worth noting that the author makes this observation in the context of fine arts, which I approximate to the field of performing arts, to refer to the decrease of modern directing. Although there has not necessarily been a cessation of its existence or operation within the imagery of the theatrical universe, there has been the emergence of alternative modalities in response to the emblematic figure of directing conceived under the concept of modern directing. The Latin American experience of theater groups from the 1960s onwards, for instance, suggests the imminence of other writings, formulations, and existences for directing.

The advent of collective creation in Latin America had a profound impact on the stability of modern directing as a singular art form. This movement is characterized by a clear engagement with collective creation, the promotion of coexistence, and the adoption of a shared model for managing artistic projects. The strategic aim of this approach is to mitigate colonial-imperialist references, particularly the reproduction of hierarchical role valuation, and to outrightly refute the concept of function as a means of distinguishing and categorizing subjects. It is precisely because it was forged with sovereign decision-making power that modern directing encounters resistance to its expression in contexts where such premises are established. Latin America experienced a surge in collective creation processes close to the time of the Judson movement, and, as reported by Araújo (2008), it was not uncommon for theater groups to credit directing collectively, even when modern directing attributes were evident. In other words, there was emerging evidence of incompatibility between these ways of creation, which manifested in a movement of rejection of the modern directing canon, in search of alternative organizational forms of creation, through networks of affection, the recovery of community bonds, the validation of knowledge woven into the fabric of life, and so on. By exercising these strategies, artists from that context sought to claim authorship not only of their creations but also of their destinies as historical and political subjects, betting on the creation of more collaborative environments and the pursuit of solutions achieved through shared responsibility, rather than tutored guidance from a single point of view.

[1] [...] a falta de uma unidade estilística, ou pelo menos do tipo de unidade estilística que pode ser alçada à condição de critério e utilizada como base para o desenvolvimento de uma capacidade de reconhecimento.

Familiar elements in these are found in Alschitz's (2012) reflections, in which he discusses the experience of *Grupo Galpão*, a Brazilian theater group that does not include a director as part of its unique formation, thus providing an example related to the end of directing. This is relevant in the case of *Galpão* because, as it is well known, the group works by balancing aspects that show traces of collective creation and with directors' partnerships – a system that, in turn, encompasses the reality of a significant part of contemporary group theatre experiences in Brazil. However, they represent a disruptive formation within the theatrical project, highlighting the decline of a generation of groups associated with their directors' "visions". The present reflections also resonate with the critical approach to directing training developed by Sidiropoulou *et al.* (2003), which contends that this process is often overlooked. According to the author, there is a gap in systematic practices that provide structure and technical repertoire, creating conditions to demystify the imperative of personal style and mere instinct as attributes that are unique or enough to be a director. In this way, directing training can foster a pursuit of changes in the role of directing, impacting its formative process and its relationship to the craft's multiple complexities.

The propositions above outline a set of conditions under which directors can appropriate themselves to training, enabling them to make discoveries that expand, reconfigure, and reinvent their prerogatives. In the following section, I offer reflections on Composition, noting its key grounds and related aspects of Anne Bogart´s experience as director at SITI Company. I will therefore recover the mention of the Judson movement to set Composition as a practice that emerged in that context and to demonstrate how it can be integrated into the theoretical scope proposed by the concept of the end of art.

**Composition – is there a training apparatus that produces the subject of directing?**

Developed and named by the American dancer, choreographer, and professor Aileen Passloff, the Composition practice became more widely known through Anne Bogart, an American director and professor whose work gained international recognition from 1992 onwards. After successive awards and distinctions as an independent director in New York, the partnership between Bogart and the Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki (1939-) led to the creation of SITI (an acronym for Saratoga International Theater Institute), or SITI Company, a theater group that, during its 30 years of existence, from 1992 to 2022, maintained a continuous artistic practice combining three distinct training techniques. In addition to the Suzuki Method of Actor Training

(SMAT), created by Tadashi Suzuki, and Viewpoints, a recreation by Anne Bogart and director Tina Landau (1962-) for the Six Viewpoints technique developed originally by Mary Overlie (1946-2020), the SITI Company worked with an approach to Composition, which Bogart learned in the early 1970s through classes taught by Passloff at Bard College. The content traces its influences to the Judson movement, of which Passloff was one of the founders and among its most prominent members. Based on these references, the SITI Company legitimized a unique training proposition that impacted the creation of their performances and periodically offered a renowned training program in which these techniques were taught.

Bogart recognizes Passloff's influence on her creative and formative processes as a director. This is exemplified by the interview she gave in 2007 to Scott Proudfit (*in* Syssoyeva, 2013, p. 148), in which she stated: "I completely stole Composition from Aileen Passloff; every bit of that is from her." Since at least 1974, when she graduated from Bard College, Bogart has been strengthening her relationship with Composition. I highlight her engagement in projects that expand beyond her role as a director, such as publishing books, either authored by her or by her publishing organization, focusing on reflections and practical guidance for directing, as well as her long-standing teaching practice at Columbia University, where she has taught since 1993 and coordinates the MFA program in Directing.[2] Alongside the international recognition of the SITI Company's work, it could be argued that Bogart has played a pivotal role in disseminating Composition, with her name becoming more closely associated with this practice than that of its creator's.

The main focus of Composition practice is to structure random ideas in a way that organizes them into short theatrical pieces– the so-called compositions. This process should be developed by addressing the challenge of performing many tasks in a short time, so that it is better utilized to collectively articulate proposals on stage rather than debating or analyzing in advance what could be done without actually doing it. Stagnation often arises from distrust and insecurities, which generate blockages that prevent reaching agreements to overcome this state of affairs and to test doubts and uncertainties. Composition functions precisely as an apparatus for collective leveling, by fostering an equitable attitude of not-knowing among all those involved in the creation, in which

[2] In a publication dated September 2025, available on Columbia's website, the university announced that Bogart will step down from her teaching role in 2026 upon her retirement. For more information, visit: https://arts.columbia.edu/news/over-30-years-anne-bogart.

expectations and frustrations are negotiated and developed throughout the process of preparing the compositions. In this sense, it is advisable to embrace, without distinction, the most immediate elements suggested by the team, even if they seem contradictory, of dubious quality, out of context, or exhibit any other characteristics that trigger preconceptions or conflict with the individual conception of anyone involved. A stance is adopted whereby creative outbursts and all kinds of insights, evoked as initial impulses in response to a nascent desire to create, are received with "yes, and..." — indicating that the collective accepts the suggestion with interest, rather than with "no, but..." – which creates obstacles to experimentation (Bogart and Landau, 2005). In this way, each person involved in the process exercises their individual non-knowledge, cultivating a collective non-knowledge regarding proposals to sustain the pursuit of a condition in which everyone feels minimally covered.

According to Olsberg (1994), in Bogart's work as a director at the SITI Company, Composition was developed in a later phase, after the Suzuki Method and Viewpoints training, to explore embryonic interests. Its main ethical and aesthetic procedures consisted of embracing the random characteristics of materials that emerged spontaneously during artistic training dynamics, especially concerning the improvisational practices inherent to Viewpoints, while seeking to arrange them within a structure that could be repeated and analyzed as a rudimentary sample, a prototype. In this way, Composition no longer encompassed absolute aspects of deliberate experimentation, such as free improvisation regarding Viewpoints, nor did it provide a sufficient degree of refinement to the materials to be considered "done" in the strict sense. It combined both characteristics without being exactly either, referring to modes of creation that emerged within the Judson movement. When developing an analysis of the impacts of Bogart's work as director at the SITI Company, Cummings (2006) highlights the artistic and pedagogical Composition scope, in which there is an interest in improving the relationship with the craft itself, and alludes to this practice as training for artists and directing students' approach. Landau (1995, p. 26) corroborates this premise by stating that "Composition is to the creator (whether director, writer, performer, designer, etc.) what the Viewpoints are to the actor: a method for practicing her art." In light of the above, it is possible to consider that Composition encompasses the following aspects: a pedagogical approach to teach directing, whose practices focus on an initial stage where the first sketches emerge from a glimpse manifested in theatrical creation; a directing methodology committed to experimenting with theatrical materialities that erupt from immediate affective

bonds, dreams, and artistic reveries, whose own excitement at the beginning must be intensely nurtured; an extension of actor training that requires a psychophysical commitment from directing artists.

Bogart and Landau (2005, p. 138) had published at *The Viewpoints Book – a practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition* a suggestive repertoire of activities[3] that indicate different structures for experimenting with the most important Composition principles, exemplifying recommendations for directing practice, among which is that "[directors] not to spend their time sitting and discussing and planning. From the start they should get up on their feet and begin." This is a significant aspect of the tension within the modern directing, which dissolves hierarchy in an environment of artistic collaboration and challenges, for example, the established understanding of directing as an outsider as well as sovereignty in decisions and staging authorship. A dynamic is established in which directing exercises its "insider" way, whose body-mind gains relevance as a vehicle of creation by interacting with partners through activities in which they move through space, explaining ideas while moving and paying quality attention to the flow of pulsations expressed by the body itself during the creation of compositions, which can provide more sophisticated clues than those captured while remaining "outside", usually seated in a chair. In practice, this also impacted other functions by attributing to them aspects considered inherent to directing. In other words, creating compositions also meant that activities such as conducting exercises, articulating a singular point of view on some aspect of creation, designing the blockings[4], engaging in dialogue between creative areas, managing time, and negotiating interests could be performed not only by the directors but also by any other individuals involved in the process, individually or collectively.

This entire repertoire, linked to Composition, reveals the extent of Bogart's interests in this practice, encompassing research, creation, publication, and teaching. This process has made significant contributions to the study of the performing arts by intertwining challenging and stimulating approaches to training and directing. However, it seems to intensify questions raising regarding authorship. Since the roles are organized within a collaborative system in which they

[3] For more detailed information, see the content available between Chapters 11 and 16 in: Bogart, Anne and Landau, Tina. *The Viewpoints Book – A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition*. Theatre Communications Group, 2005.

[4] Refers to a process in which directors arrange the ensemble's physical movement on stage, as well as shifting a bunch of material elements through.

often interact with each other, what measures would be fair for determining credit for the creation? Are we facing a historical process that leads to the end of authorship as we know it? This is an intriguing question for future investigations.

**Conclusion**

With this article, I hope to contribute to reflections on the creative processes of directing, as well as to the study of the artistic and pedagogical perspectives that influence the role of directing. I aimed to bring closer important concepts within the scope of artistic studies, such as *apparatus* and the *end of art*, to discuss the relationships between training and directing. I have presented a brief history of the transformations to which Western theater direction in the twentieth century was subjected, weaving references to the Judson Dance Theater movement to underscore the reverberations at the boundaries between modern and postmodern. Through this, it was possible to anchor the reviews of the role of directing to the paradigm shifts that have affected it.

In discussing the Composition practice, I argued for its relevance as directing training and as a formative approach for directors, drawing on the practices developed by Aileen Passloff and Anne Bogart. This context, in which the work of Composition is situated, results in a set of procedures that are richly stimulating, conducive to the mobilization of artistic, pedagogical, and research processes in directing – an area whose materials are still in their infancy, especially when compared to the availability of references on acting, for example. Publishing this article represents a significant step in contributing to this process. I hope this work inspires many other studies and practices that provide material to the universe of directing.

## Works Cited


Agamben, Giorgio. *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*. Translated by David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella, Stanford University Press, 2009.

Alschitz, Jurij. *Teatro sem diretor: um grande diretor-pedagogo explica as suas ideias sobre o teatro*. Edições CPMT, 2012.

Araújo, Antônio. *A encenação no coletivo: desterritorializações da função do diretor no processo colaborativo*. Tese de Doutorado, Universidade de São Paulo, 2008.

Banes, Sally. *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theater 1962-1964*. University of Michigan Press, 1983.

Bogart, Anne, and Tina Landau. *The Viewpoints Book – a practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition*. Theatre Communications Group, 2005.

Cummings, Scott T. *Remaking American Theater: Charles Mee, Anne Bogart and the SITI Company*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Danto, Arthur C. *Após o fim da arte: a arte contemporânea e os limites da história*. Odysseus Editora, 2006.

Hodge, Alison, editor. *Actor Training*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2010.

Janevski, Ana, and Thomas J. Lax. *Judson Dance Theater: The Work Is Never Done*. Museum of Modern Art, 2018.

Kozma, Gábor Viktor. "Actor Training as a Method of Directors. Training in Context of the Odin Teatret's Creative Work and Higher Education." *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai - Dramatica*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2022, pp. 29-45, www.dramatica.ro/index.php/j/article/view/252. Accessed 24 July 2025.

Lampe, Eelka Franziska. "From the Battle to the Gift: The Directing of Anne Bogart." *The Drama Review*, vol. 36, no. 1, Spring 1992, pp. 14-47.

Olsberg, Dagne. *Freedom, Structure, Freedom: Anne Bogart's Directing Philosophy*. Tese de Doutorado, Texas Tech University, 1994.

Pavis, Patrice. *Dicionário de Teatro*. Perspectiva, 1999.

Roubine, Jean-Jacques. *A linguagem da encenação teatral*. Translated by Yan Michalski, Jorge Zahar Editor, 1998.

Sidiropoulou, Avra, et al. "Contemporary Directions in Director Training." *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, vol. 14, no. 3, Sept. 2023. *Crossref*, doi:10.1080/19443927.2023.2243180.

Syssoyeva, Kathryn, and Scott Proudfit, editors. *Creation in Contemporary Performance*. St. Martin's Press LCC, 2013.

Torres Neto, Walter Lima. *Introdução à direção teatral*. Editora da Unicamp, 2021.

Watson, Ian, editor. *Performer Training – Development Across Cultures*. Routledge, 2001.

_____. *Towards a Third Theatre: Eugenio Barba and the Odin Teatret*. Routledge, 1995.

essence & critique
Journal of Literature, & Drama Studies

Baysal, Yasemin. "Before the Wound: Anticipatory Trauma and Affective Materiality in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*" *Essence & Critique: Journal of Literature & Drama Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2026, pp. 55–65.

# Before the Wound: Anticipatory Trauma and Affective Materiality in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*

**Yasemin Baysal**[1], Asst. Prof. Dr.,Bingöl University, ybaysal@bingol.edu.tr

**Received**: 10.04.2026
**Accepted**: 19.06.2026

[1]**ORCID:** 0000-0002-4292-0169

This study investigates Virginia Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts* (1941), through the theoretical intersection of affect, materiality, and anticipatory trauma. Drawing on non-representational theory of affect and trauma scholarship, this article argues that the affective materials of the novel such as the gramophone, mirrors, the barn, and the pageant itself function at once as figures of impending catastrophe and as active producers of anticipatory trauma materially: the felt weight of a war not yet fully arrived. Set on a single June day, *Between the Acts* incorporates its objects and landscapes with a pre-traumatic affect that circulates through bodies, surfaces, and sounds before it can be articulated in language. Within this frame, the study reveals how Woolf's materiality of language, manifested through syntactic fragmentation and deliberate silences, performs the collapse of meaning at the limits of representation. By positioning the text at the junction of the material turn, affective turn and trauma studies, this analysis provides a new theoretical perspective for Woolf studies as well as modernist affect scholarship.

**Keywords:** Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*, anticipatory trauma, affective materiality .

## Introduction

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) completed *Between the Acts* (1941), weeks before her death, and the novel bears the undeniable pressure of a world already at war. Set at Pointz Hall in rural England on a warm day in June 1939, it describes the Oliver family as they host the annual village pageant, a theatrical portrayal of English history that has always been interrupted, incomplete, and unstable. The novel has long been evaluated by critics as an elegy, an exploration on fragmentation or a critique with the form of the novel itself. However, less attention has been paid to the way the novel's material world such as its objects, sounds, surfaces, and organic matter serves as a field of feeling, an interconnected network of affect that registers the weight of a catastrophe not yet fully experienced.

This study draws on recent discussions of anticipatory traumatic response and affective materiality and utilises the term anticipatory trauma to define a physical as well as psychological condition in which bodies and material surfaces absorb the perceived weight of catastrophe before its ultimate material arrival. Traditional trauma theory, as pioneered by Sigmund Freud and later developed by Cathy Caruth, has posited trauma as a strictly retrospective phenomenon. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth argues that trauma is not fully comprehended at the moment of its occurrence but returns "belatedly" through haunting repetition and deferred experience (92). In *Tense Future*, Paul K. Saint-Amour explains, "the traumatic event" is experienced "belatedly," usually after a "latency" period, through symptoms that may involve the "return of repressed memories" and the "compulsive repetition of behavior," gestures, nightmares, and fantasies connected with the traumatic event. These symptoms and the condition that they represent are "exclusively post-traumatic" (14). However, he challenges this backward trajectory regarding the relationship between anticipation, injury and future, and states that anticipation "has become a new medium for delivering injury" (8). He maintains that living under the constant threat of an imminent total war is to experience a trauma in advance of the event. When applied to the interwar literary landscape, this framework uncovers "a proleptic mass traumatization, a pre-traumatic stress syndrome whose symptoms arose in response to a potentially oncoming rather than an already realized catastrophe" (7-8). Within this frame, this study proposes that Woolf's writing during the interwar years registers a shift from a retrospective trauma framework to a proleptic one. This shift is best understood through Brian Massumi's "The Future Birth of the Affective Fact" concerning political ontology of threat as he suggests, "[f]ear is the anticipatory reality in the present of a threatening future. It is the felt reality of the nonexistent, loomingly present as the affective fact of the matter" (54). In *Between the Acts* this "affective fact" turns the material environment into a space where the weight of an unfulfilled war is felt as an immediate, physical presence before an actual eruption of violence. Thus, this anticipatory or proleptic trauma is not only an intellectual anxiety but also an affective force that pervades the material environment before the real outbreak of global violence.

Following this framework, this article contends that *Between the Acts* transforms the atmosphere of impending war into a materially distributed affective condition, revealing trauma not as a purely retrospective experience but as an anticipatory state circulating across objects, bodies, sounds, and spaces. The novel's gramophone, mirrors, fragmented theatrical performance, and language are the indicators of the dread of the pre-war time, and they are parts of the circulation of a pre-traumatic intensity which is beyond conscious articulation. Woolf develops a textual landscape of catastrophe encountered prior to its historical actualisation through grammatical fragmentation, interrupted speech, and the recurring failure of representation. Ultimately, it reveals how *Between the Acts* reconsiders trauma as an atmospheric and material state of living toward disaster, rather than a retrospective return to the wound, by integrating affect theory, materiality, and anticipatory trauma.

**Material Affect vs. Affective Materiality: Materializing Anticipatory Trauma in Between the Acts**

In its most generative configurations, affect theory imposes a distinction between affect and emotion that is theoretically significant. For Massumi (2002), affect is a pre-personal, non-conscious intensity, a bodily capacity to act and be acted upon, which comes before its capture in the identified emotions of cultural discourse. Massumi states, "affect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is" (xxxv). This autonomy is not the absence of the social but a residue that exceeds it such as the vibration in the room after the music has stopped, the sense of approaching significance before its content is known.

Based on affect theory and material criticism, this study proposes a distinction between material affect and affective materiality. Material affect denotes the transmission of affect via material entities, wherein objects and surroundings serve primarily as channels for the circulation of human feeling. In contrast, affective materiality highlights autonomous affective agency of matter: the potential of objects, sounds, surfaces, and spaces to produce intensities that surpass human intention or conscious emotional expression. In *Between the Acts*, Woolf progressively moves from depicting affect through materiality to portraying materiality as affectively productive. The architectural spaces, the gramophone, mirrors, and fragmented theatrical forms reflect collective anxiety about the impending war while actively engaging in the creation and circulation of anticipatory trauma as a material and sensory phenomenon. This distinction is critical because the two notions imply different ontologies of matter. Material affect assumes that objects mediate or transmit emotion from human individuals, while affective materiality assumes that affective agency is inherent to matter itself, and that objects and environments are active participants in the production of affect. The analyses that follow use this distinction to show how Woolf repeatedly shifts from representing objects as mediators of affect to presenting them as active participants in the production of affective intensity.

Material affect theory extends this account by claiming that affect is both a quality of human bodies and matter itself. Jane Bennett's notion of "vibrant matter" questions the strong ontological boundary between animate and inanimate; non-human things like food, electricity, metal, trash own a type of "vitality," which means "a capacity," participating in the composition of events (Bennett viii). Objects are not merely passive containers of human-generated meaning but active participants in affective "assemblages" as "an actant" that "is a source of action" (viii). As Derek Ryan argues, "Woolf's writing offers new conceptualisations of the material world where the immanent and intimate entanglements of human and nonhuman agencies are brought to the fore" (4). In *Between the Acts*, the gramophone, mirrors, swallows, and even the material textures of Pointz Hall function as vibrant forms of matter through which anticipatory trauma circulates before it can be consciously articulated, which will be analysed below.

The non-human circulation of pre-traumatic intensity is readily apparent when analysing the architectural and natural landscapes of Pointz Hall, which transforms from a passive architectural space into the most significant macro-level affective assemblage of the novel. For Bennett, an assemblage is not a singular object but an "ad hoc grouping of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts" whose agentic capacities emerge through the relational interactions of heterogeneous human and nonhuman actants (23). Following Saint-Amour, anticipatory trauma is generated through the experience of living toward an expected catastrophe rather than through its retrospective aftermath (95). Within Bennett's framework of assemblages, Pointz Hall materialises this temporal suspension by participating in the circulation of affect before war becomes historical reality. Thus, Pointz Hall is a heterogeneous assemblage of historical objects, architectural spaces, surrounding landscapes, human bodies, and the material atmosphere of an impending war. In other words, the house is both a physical structure and an affective environment, representing the burden of war to come, connecting the English historical past to the looming future of aerial bombardment. The house's materiality with its echoing hallways, shifty shadows and silent areas emerges as an environmental catalyst for collective anxiety, establishing a core level of sensory tension which has not been expressed. In *Between the Acts*, Woolf effectively displays such an autonomous materiality in the gap at the heart of Pointz Hall, stating that "the room was empty. Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. The room was a shell, singing of what was before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence" (Woolf 46-47). The narrative entirely separates affect from human presence by presenting the domestic interior as an "essence of emptiness." The space becomes an affective object, a hollow vessel that physically contains and holds the collective dread of a historical moment on the brink of catastrophe. Pointz Hall exceeds the logic of material affect. The house reflects the emotional state of its residents and actively engenders the atmosphere of expectancy by its architecture, silence, and spatial organization. Instead of the transmission proposed by material affect, Woolf moves affective agency away from human subjects and onto the material environment itself, illustrating affective materiality. Pointz Hall is also a geographically exposed building and a landmark of historical significance. Its wide

terrace and exposed position are a sign of the distant vibrations of aircraft approaching. In terms of its vacant halls and clean landscapes, Woolf indicates that Pointz Hall does not passively wait for history; instead, its very stones and essence of silence are actively participating in the affective endeavour of absorbing a crisis before it materialises. Therefore, the displacement of affect from human interiority into material space is not merely an aesthetic strategy but an ontological reconfiguration of agency. Rather than locating affect within individual consciousness, Woolf redistributes it across a network of human and nonhuman actants. The anticipatory atmosphere surrounding Pointz Hall belongs to the assemblage itself. As Melba Cuddy-Keane asserts, Woolf's experimental language functions as a form of cultural and political "intervention" that seeks "to insert the values of literary language into the public issues of the day" (121). In this sense, the "essence of emptiness" permeating Pointz Hall becomes more than atmospheric description; it materialises the collective unease of a society living under the pressure of an imminent catastrophe.

Woolf redirects this pre-traumatic absorption into a micro-level force field with the ancient barn. It serves as an affective assemblage where the past and an ominous future converge through tangible textures. Inside its confines, the communal apprehension of the village is both articulated and experienced through the "vibrant matter" of the surroundings. By detaching affect from human interiority, Woolf enables the physical realm of the novel to bear the materialist burden of upcoming war, revealing that the landscape is anticipatorily traumatised before the historical occurrence:

> Mice slid in and out of holes or stood upright, nibbling. Swallows were busy with straw in pockets of earth in the rafters. Countless beetles and insects of various sorts burrowed in the dry wood. A stray bitch had made the dark corner where the sacks stood a lying-in ground for her puppies. All these eyes, expanding and narrowing, some adapted to light, others to darkness, looked from different angles and edges. (Woolf 119-120)

Within this frame, the ancient barn presents a "vibrant materiality" where the human psychological burden of the coming war is distributed across a non-human "assemblage" (Bennett 23). The creatures including mice, swallows, beetles, insects and stray bitch in the barn represent "actant" defined as "a source of action … which has the efficacy … to produce effects" (Bennett viii). It can also be interpreted that Woolf removes affect from human interiority to various animals in accordance with material agency. The barn's "vibrant matter" including the "corn," "sacks," and "rafters" functions as a physical site that sustains the perceived weight of catastrophe prior to actual occurrence. In other words, the barn serves as the micro-level evidence of the affective assemblage. Unlike material affect, where objects primarily mediate pre-existing emotions, the barn generates affective intensity through the interaction of animal, architectural, and organic matter. The heterogeneous assemblage does not simply express human anxiety; it actively produces the sensory conditions through which anticipatory trauma becomes materially perceptible. These non-human elements and the barn's architectural structure function as

affective agents, converting an imminent historical catastrophe from mere human cognitive dread into a material reality profoundly embedded in the "thing-power" of the world (Bennett 3).

From spatial materiality to acoustic materiality, the gramophone serves as the novel's most persistent material actant. Prior to being perceived as a symbol of failure, it operates as an agent for pre-personal affect: an instrument that produces atmospheric intensities that the gathered audience assimilates without understanding how to respond to them. At the beginning of the pageant, the gramophone's output anticipates and surpasses the theatrical content it is intended to complement:

> Chuff, chuff, chuff sounded from the bushes. It was the noise a machine makes when something has gone wrong. Some sat down hastily, others stopped talking guiltily. All looked at the bushes. For the stage was empty. Chuff, chuff, chuff the machine buzzed in the bushes. (Woolf 93-4)

Unlike Caruth's model of belated trauma, where the wound returns only after the event, the gramophone embodies Saint-Amour's theory of anticipatory trauma. Its repetitive mechanical sound does not reactivate a past catastrophe but gives sensory form to a future one. The audience experiences the war as an affective certainty before it becomes a historical reality, demonstrating how anticipation itself functions as a mode of injury.

Woolf depicts the gramophone as surpassing its role as a household object to emerge as a principal actant that dictates the rhythmic power of the village pageant. The machine's repetitive "chuff, chuff, chuff" and the insistent "tick of the gramophone needle" (Woolf 100) exemplify a significant manifestation of thing-power as Bennett defines it as "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (6). If the gramophone merely transmitted the characters' anxiety, it would function as an instance of material affect, serving only as a vehicle for already existing emotions. Instead, Woolf grants the machine its own agentic efficacy. In this sense, the mechanical stuttering of the gramophone not only interrupts the performance but also generates a somatised condition of suspension in the audience. By emphasizing this mechanical noise, Woolf interferes with the collective psychological state of the community; as Michele Pridmore-Brown highlights, she exploits the "noise or static inherent in communications technology" to "short-circuit the herd impulse" of the audience (408). The machine becomes an auditory foreshadowing of the forthcoming historical catastrophe. The constant "chuff, chuff" becomes as an acoustic representation of impending mass traumatisation, with the needle's ticking echoing a countdown to a disaster that the assembled community perceives physically, despite their inability to express it verbally. Thus, this is a matter of ontology and a change from material affect to affective materiality. Material affect suggests that matter is a passive vehicle for human feelings to pass through. However, affective materiality reaffirms the autonomous power of the object itself. In *Between the Acts* the gramophone both carries the concerns of the characters and creates an atmospheric intensity which anticipates and influences human response

with its materiality, particularly its own mechanical stuttering. Considering affective materiality, it becomes noticeable that the coming horror of 1939 is a mental concept for the Oliver family as well as a material force imposed by the thing-power of the mechanical and architectural surroundings they live within. While the gramophone circulates anticipatory trauma through the instability of sound, Woolf's mirrors expand this fragmentation to visual and social surfaces, turning perception into an affective centre of pre-war unease.

Mirrors in *Between the Acts* are unstable devices of reflection and affective surfaces that transmit fragmentation, uncertainty, and emotional turmoil through bodies and objects. Where the gramophone creates anticipatory trauma through the interruption of sound, the mirrors convert this instability to the visual, rendering vision a broken and disturbed experience. Woolf recurrently distorts the idea of unified self-recognition, portraying reflection as multiple, unstable and materially mediated. At the beginning, Isa Oliver is in front of a "three-folded mirror," and she sees "three separate versions of her rather heavy, yet handsome, face" in it, while observing "outside the glass, a slip of terrace, lawn and tree tops" (Woolf 19). The mirror does not unify identity into a single image; it multiplies perception and dissolves the border between internal consciousness and the external environment. In the reflections on surfaces, the self is fragmented, implying that subjectivity in the novel is already unstable before the calamity of war fully arises. This instability obtains an affective dimension through Woolf's emphasis on vibration, circulation, and sensory overflow. Isa's feelings cannot be safely placed in the hidden interiority of the self. Rather, feeling emerges as scattered among objects, movements, and material environments. Woolf proposes, words and bodily presence "attach themselves to a certain spot in her; and thus, lie between them like a wire, tingling, tangling, vibrating" (20). Within this frame, Massumi's conceptualisation of affect as an "autonomous" intensity that escapes rigid "emotive identification" (38, 43) resonates with the language of vibration and circulation in *Between the Acts*. Isa's emotions are not clearly delineated psychological states but unstable intensities moving between bodies and material surfaces. The mirror is both a symbolic item and an affective medium that gives sensory form to anticipatory anxiety. This instability also reconfigures trauma temporality. Rather than reflecting a fractured memory of past violence, the mirror materialises the uncertainty of a catastrophe that remains imminent. The fractured image functions as an affective anticipation of historical rupture, allowing the future to reorganise perception before violence has taken place. The mirrors move beyond material affect. Rather than functioning as passive reflective surfaces onto which characters project their emotions, they actively reorganise perception and distribute affect across fragmented images and material surfaces. Their agency resides not in symbolic representation alone but in their capacity to participate in the production of affective intensity.

Woolf challenges the conventional relationship of mirrors and true self-knowledge. The narrative often depicts reflection as distorted and incomplete. When the narrative speaks of books as "mirrors of the soul", the metaphor is revised: "A tarnished soul, a spotted one in this case" (Woolf 22). Reflection is no longer transparent but fractured and blurry. The spotted mirror stands for a larger crisis of

representation in the pre-war atmosphere of novel, as neither literature nor historical memory can totally stabilise collective identity. Woolf's depiction anticipates the fragmentation that is later realised in the pageant itself, which presents English history as discontinuous and insecure, rather than united. This distribution of affect across reflecting surfaces can also be associated with the circulation of emotions across bodies, signals and objects through recurrent contact and proximity. In this context, material objects serve as an affective archive, where fear and anticipation attach to surfaces like mirrors, so creating what Sara Ahmed calls the "stickiness" as "an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs" (90). The "stickiness" aligns with the broader definition of affect: "affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds" (Seigworth and Gregg 1). In *Between the Acts*, dread sticks to mirrors, books, gestures, surfaces of vision, and the material environment becomes an affective archive of approaching catastrophe. Therefore, the mirror scenes depict anticipatory trauma not as a fully conscious fear of war but as an atmospheric condition that pervades everyday perception before historical violence has fully materialised. Woolf builds a universe where calamity arrives as sensation in fractured reflection. The mirror's capacity to retain and circulate affect also resonates with Bennett's understanding of vibrant matter and thing-power (Bennett 3, 6). Its affective force does not derive solely from symbolic meaning but from its participation as a material actant within a broader assemblage of bodies, surfaces, and sensations (Bennett 23). Woolf thus presents reflection as an event produced collaboratively by human perception and material agency.

The most crucial mirror scene of the novel comes in the final moments of the pageant, when Miss La Trobe turns mirrors toward the audience itself. Rather than presenting the viewers a unified sense of national identity, the mirrors provide fractured, unstable images that undermine the idea of historical continuity that the pageant aims to depict. Here, Woolf changes the mirror from a reflective object into an affective surface that spreads dread through the collective body of the audience: "Look at ourselves, ladies and gentlemen! Then at the wall; and ask how's this wall, the great wall, which we call, perhaps miscall, civilization, to be built by (here the mirrors flicked and flashed) orts, scraps and fragments like ourselves" (Woolf 219)? Mirrors are a symbol of social dread, and they help to transmit it, forcing the audience to face the chaotic atmosphere of a society that anticipates a catastrophe. In other words, this scene signals the collapse of stable spectatorship. The spectators are no longer distant witnesses to national history, but they are materially involved in the affective uncertainty surrounding the upcoming war. The sonic fragmentation linked to the gramophone evolves into a visual fragmentation in the novel's affective atmosphere, which is articulated through mirrors, extending anticipatory trauma beyond sound to fragmented collective perception.

The fragmentation shown in the mirrors necessarily converges in the composition of the pageant itself. The performance seeks to construct a cohesive narrative of English history, yet it always devolves into interruptions, discontinuities and formal instability. Aylin Atilla states, "the pageant seems to attempt to define the prevailing sense of fragmentation and isolation in the modern world and its

historical basis" (80). The formal instability of the pageant is not merely a theatrical failure but a direct consequence of the affective materiality of its physical environment. The pageant transcends material affect. Its interruptions convey societal dread and deliberately produce anticipatory trauma through the dynamic interaction of theatrical performance, sound, material objects, weather, animals, and audience. Affective intensity originates from the assemblage itself, rather than from individual psychological reactions. The collapse of theatrical coherence also reflects Saint-Amour's reconfiguration of trauma temporality, in which the anticipated future becomes a source of present injury rather than merely a deferred historical event (Saint-Amour 7–8). Rather than representing the aftermath of catastrophe, the interruptions stage the instability generated by an anticipated future. The pageant therefore performs anticipatory trauma formally, allowing the future war to reshape the present before its historical arrival. While Miss La Trobe endeavours to sustain a coherent narrative of English history, non-human actants disrupt the performance, exerting their own "thing-power" over the human script. As Jane Goldman remarks, Woolf's technique "extends beyond the individual lyric impulse to include other voices and incidental objects" (85). In this context, Woolf portrays that "cows annihilated the gap; bridged the distance; filled the emptiness" (165-66), implying that the landscape is an active participant in the composition of the pageant. These environmental disruptions serve as anticipatory indicators of the impending disaster; they embody the "the interminable geopolitical suspense" that Saint-Amour associates with the pre-war state, particularly Woolf skilfully uses in her fiction (Saint-Amour 96), wherein the stability of historical representation is physically undermined by the vibrant, uncontrollable forces of the material world. Moreover, the inherent frailty of the pageant's costumes including "cardboard crowns, swords made of silver paper, turbans that were sixpenny dish cloths" (Woolf 77) embodies the fragile nature of European civilisation. By highlighting the improvised quality of these historical garments, Woolf demonstrates that the shelter of national heritage is as unstable as the physical textures of the stage, shaking under the material burden of a world on the edge of catastrophe.

Beyond the materiality of objects and spaces, Woolf ultimately inscribes anticipatory trauma into the texture of language itself. Repetition, interruption, ellipsis, and linguistic fragmentation turn language from a transparent medium of representation into an affective structure that enacts unease and suspension. With the repetitions of the phrases like "empty, empty, empty" and "silent, silent, silent" (Woolf 47), the rhythmic intensities of the expressions exceed semantic meaning to circulate affectively throughout the text. Hence, war emerges not only as a thematic catastrophe but also through the instability of linguistic form itself. Woolf's disjointed sentence structures and broken speech patterns show a world where language is no longer capable of stabilising perception, history, and collective experience within an affective atmosphere of an approaching catastrophe.

## Conclusion

*Between the Acts* represents catastrophe not as a fully realised historical event, but as an affective condition already circulating through material environments, bodily experience, and fragmented acts of perception. This article reveals that Woolf turns the atmosphere of imminent warfare into a pervasive sensory experience distributed across objects, sounds, architectural spaces, and visual surfaces, through a combination of affect theory, material studies, and anticipatory trauma. The mechanical stutter of the gramophone, the shattered reflections of mirrors, the unstable textures of Pointz Hall, and the interruptions of the pageant both serve as symbolic representations of crisis and as affective agents that materialise the felt pressure of a forthcoming disaster. In this way, the novel opens up the possibility of understanding trauma not solely as a retrospective experience but also as an affective condition shaped by anticipation and impending catastrophe.

Woolf locates trauma in memory and psychic aftermath as well as in a pre-traumatic universe in which matter itself absorbs and distributes collective anxiety. The instability of language, the collapse of coherent spectatorship and the fragmentation of historical narrative all create an affective atmosphere where representation collapses repeatedly in terms of the looming threat of war. This interwar cultural moment is defined by a "proleptic" preoccupation with ruins and fragments, which establishes Woolf's modernist aesthetic as an "active form" of response to political crisis (Snaith 2). Therefore, her modernist experimentation is a formal innovation as well as a response to the sensory and historical conditions of late-1930s England. As Ryan suggests, this form of modernist ethics is "embedded in material relations between human and nonhuman, culture and nature, and that gains its force through experiments in both content and form" (300). Through this experimentation, *Between the Acts* marks how ordinary existence is transformed into a state of suspended anticipation through its affective materiality, where disaster exists not yet as an actual occurrence but as vibration, interruption, and atmospheric intensity. In doing so, the novel shifts from material affect, in which objects merely mediate human emotion, to affective materiality, in which matter itself participates in producing affective intensity. Consequently, trauma emerges not as an exclusively human psychological condition but as an ontological event distributed across material environments and nonhuman actants. This study explores the novel via the integration of materiality, affect and anticipatory trauma, arguing that Woolf reconceptualises trauma as a state of living toward disaster, showing how the future may already be in the textures, objects, and silences of the present.

## Works Cited


Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh UP, 2004.

Atilla, Aylin. "Between the Acts: A Step Beyond the Traditional Historical Novel." *Brno Studies in English*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2009, pp. 77-85. *Digital Library of Masaryk University*. Accessed 15 May 2026.

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke UP, 2010.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

Cuddy-Keane, Melba. *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge UP, 2003.

Goldman, Jane. *The Cambridge Introduction to Virginia Woolf*. Cambridge UP, 2006.

Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Duke UP, 2002.

---. "The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat." *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, Duke UP, 2010, pp. 52-70.

Pridmore-Brown, Michele. "1939-40: Of Virginia Woolf, Gramophones, and Fascism." *PMLA*, vol. 113, no. 3, 1998, pp. 408-421. *JSTOR*. Accessed 15 May 2026.

Ryan, Derek. *Virginia Woolf and the Materiality of Theory: Sex, Animal, Life*. Edinburgh UP, 2013.

---. "Following Snakes and Moths: Modernist Ethics and Posthumanism." *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 61, no. 3, 2015, pp. 287-304.

Saint-Amour, Paul K. *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form*. Oxford UP, 2015.

Seigworth, Gregory J., and Melissa Gregg. "An Inventory of Shimmers." *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, Duke UP, 2010, pp. 1-28.

Snaith, Anna. "Late Virginia Woolf." *Oxford Handbooks Online*, Oxford UP, 2015. Accessed 14 May 2026.

Woolf, Virginia. *Between the Acts*. Harvest, 1941.

essence & critique
*Journal of Literature, & Drama Studies*

Utku, Cansu. "Eco-Collapse in Everyday Spaces: Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* and Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children*" *Essence & Critique: Journal of Literature & Drama Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2026, pp. 66–80.

# Eco-Collapse in Everyday Spaces: Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* and Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children*

**Cansu Utku**[1], Res. Asst., Yeni Yüzyıl University, cansu.utku@yeniyuzyil.edu.tr

**Received**: 14.05.2026
**Accepted**: 19.06.2026

[1]**ORCID:** 0000-0002-3436-0448

From nature writing to ecological anxiety, theatre, as a visionary medium, portrays not only how ecological catastrophe permeates life but also how humans and non-humans witness this spectacle. Set in a garden and a cottage, Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016) and Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* (2016) portray the apocalypse through the practices of everyday life. The former is fragmented, mirroring the mental and environmental decline throughout, whereas the latter differs in its natural flow of dialogue and the traces of trauma. However, the characters, or the survivors, live in both comfort and demolition, using domestic space as a base for recalling and sharing the reasons for and remedies of the catastrophe. Therefore, both plays present environmental trauma through the practices of daily life in the intimate spaces, where characters' anxieties are exposed. Considering related works and articles, this paper offers a comparative analysis of *Escaped Alone* and *The Children*, showing how everyday life mediates between disaster and remembrance.

**Keywords:** *Escaped Alone*, *The Children*, Apocalypse, Environment, Memory, Trauma, Language.

## Introduction

This article draws on spatial, ecological, and trauma-based theories to examine how *Escaped Alone* and *The Children* portray environmental catastrophe through domestic spaces and the everyday rituals practised within them. When ecological disaster threatens the home, which should be free of it, symbolic significance is primarily attributed to domestic settings, as is the case with the characters' psychology. Una Chaudhuri's ideas on how both plays turn familiar settings into houses of environmental and psychological dread suggest that place itself can become a site of trauma. Additionally, Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* highlights that such spaces, as well as their rooms within, are emotionally charged, preserving and passing down memories and fears. Furthermore, Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, as presented in her work *Unclaimed Experience*, particularly the idea that trauma reveals itself belatedly through fragmented speech and language, as well as awkward silences, can be seen in both plays. These perspectives indicate that catastrophe is not only represented on stage or in texts but also actively performed through characters' language, speech, and intimate spaces, as the home is where ecological trauma quietly and decisively permeates.

Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016) and Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* (2016) are two contemporary plays that present environmental catastrophe not as a backdrop, but as a familiar occurrence embedded in everyday spaces. In a sunny backyard, where four older women are together for tea and conversation, *Escaped Alone* unfolds through fragmented dialogues and Mrs Jarrett's monologues, revealing horrifying visions of social, cultural, economic, and ecological ruin, sometimes with a sarcastic touch. Similarly, *The Children* unfolds in a seaside cottage where retired nuclear scientists get together after a nuclear disaster. Throughout an afternoon of Rose's visit to his retired scientist friends, Hazel and Robin, they recall, question, and answer, through everyday practices of cooking and setting the table, juxtaposing ignorance with the acknowledgement of environmental damage.

Premiered in 2016, *Escaped Alone* and *The Children* are products of a time when climate anxiety was prominent in British theatre. These two plays employ different dramaturgical strategies for presenting the issues in the text or on stage: Churchill with a fragmented structure of overlapping group conversation, Kirkwood with a naturalistic, realistic flow of dialogue. Such a difference then enables a comparative analysis of the styles used in both plays, enriching the aesthetic and emotional, in other words, spatial and trauma-based, explorations of the ecological disasters. By situating disasters in the garden, kitchen or a problematic bathroom,

these two plays demonstrate that the apocalypse is a progressing condition intertwined with daily life. Set in a backyard and a seaside house, Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* and Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* focus on ecological disasters not as an unexpected event but as slow permeating condition encircling the intimate space which is a base for recalling, sharing, and puzzling over the reasons and remedies of the catastrophe by the characters who live in both comfort through engaging in conversations, preparing food and practising yoga, and demolition through being traumatized and anxious.

## Knock, Knock. Who's There? Apocalypse!

In the era of ecological disasters such as global warming and toxic and nuclear pollution, the environment is the stage for developing dramas following the catastrophic occurrences. In *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*, Chaudhuri examines the relationship between the character and setting in the context of the crisis, foregrounding the idea that "the figure of home and ideal of belonging are shot through with otherness" and "[t]he initial mode of this paradoxical coexistence … is conspicuous enough to warrant its own label, which I provide, coining the term geopathology to refer to the double-edged problem of place and place as problem…" (*Staging Place* 53). Such geopathic settings, where disasters outside the home yet slowly become one with the place, manifest as distress for the characters, who carry them as devastating memories in their psyches. Since the crisis cannot be avoided even in everyday places, such as the garden and the cottage, and in the characters' thoughts, there is nothing left for them but to face and accept or endure the reality. The world is full of crises that manifest in the characters' minds at home; thus, they cannot step back from intrusions. Overall, they are living amid environmental destruction, with ruined memories, struggling to return to their previous interior spaces rather than settling for geopathic settings.

Characters in Churchill's or Kirkwood's plays are not only enclosed by their everyday physical surroundings but also by the global consequences of ecological problems. Away from the toxicity of the outside world until the moment the disasters are recalled, the "topography of our intimate being" is full of thoughts and memories of the previous world (Bachelard xxxvi). According to Bachelard, the inside is intimate and includes protection, while the outside is cruel and sometimes unknown. As the storm far away can be witnessed within "the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind" (6), the sense of safety is reinforced. However, permeation of the developing environmental catastrophe into the house turns such an ideal setting into a site of anxiety and unsafety. Therefore, closed spaces within the plays are not entirely safe shelters as the toxicity of the outside leads to the mental state of

the characters, causing them psychological distress. Churchill and Kirkwood, in their plays, use the safe interior space in the Bachelardian sense but to stage the opposite. The debris is not just outside; radiation and the chemical atmosphere also penetrate the home and the characters' psyches. Therefore, the wreckage is not just ecological; it is also psychological within the walls of an ordinary cottage and a backyard garden.

Since the traumatic incident cannot be fully comprehended at the moment of its happening due to the overwhelming consequences, it comes back later to haunt the survivor "in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (Caruth 91). Such *Nachträglichkeit* in the Freudian sense is significant for the slow environmental change that is unrecognised in the moment and later grasped through delayed effects. The belated aftermath of human decisions made up to the moment the characters face hardships in *Escaped Alone,* and *The Children* is now being understood in the present. Plans for nuclear power plants, carbon emissions, or the misuse of industrialisation in general have slowly brought their effects into homes. Through the unfinished recallings, overlapping dialogues, and disastrous monologues in *Escaped Alone,* and through the silences, responsibilities to be acknowledged, and harsh discussions in *The Children*, the works precisely present this pervasive destruction and the disruptive narrative arising from trauma.

Lastly, referencing Walter Benjamin's idea that progress is seen through the concept of catastrophe, the "imperceptible process of doom" (7), in Horn's words, rather than an abrupt occurrence, is in the latency of past decisions made by humanity. Overall, such decisions lead the characters into slow suffering, even within Bachelardian shelters. These spatial and traumatic perspectives show that the in *Escaped Alone* and *The Children* do not function as safe spaces, but rather as sites of environmental problems both within the walls and fences and in the psyche. Therefore, the inevitability of the consequences is accepted by the characters as they chat with friends, prepare dinner, drink tea, and practise yoga in their daily lives. By reframing such settings through the perspectives of "geopathology" or "catastrophe without event," and by examining the latency of trauma in the psyche and everyday life, the following chapters of this work will focus on these plays, demonstrating that the collapse is not an abrupt explosion but a pervasive horror.

### Horror in the Garden of *Escaped Alone*

Caryl Churchill's play *Escaped Alone* explores environmental catastrophe in Sally's backyard, transforming the ordinary into a site of apocalypse through Mrs Jarrett's surreal monologues describing horrific scenes. The entire play takes place after Mrs J's "walking down

the street" and seeing "a door in the fence open" (Churchill 7), and there are three women she has seen before. Vi, Lena, and Sally question the woman who has entered the garden and continue speaking. Sometimes they complete each other: "Rosie locked out in the rain," says Sally, and Vi adds, "forgot her key." Sally continues adding: "climbed over." Then the process of adding to the same situation is not completed. Mrs J suddenly exclaims that she has a son named Frank and "he suffers insomnia" (7). At the end of such crowded thought processes, sometimes absurd, but mostly horrific monologues about the condition they have gone through and continue to live with, interrupt the mundane garden time. After sessions of overlapping dialogue, the narrative then shifts to sections of harsh realities disguised in everyday language. Therefore, the destruction is not far off; it is already permeating the home and backyard, as evidenced by the shift. At the end of the first part, Mrs J begins her monologue:

> Four hundred thousand tons of rock paid for by senior executives split off the hillside to smash through the roofs, each fragment onto the designated child's head. Villages were buried and new communities of survivors underground developed skills of feeding off the dead where possible and communicating with taps and groans. Instant celebrities rose on ropes to the light of flashes. Time passed. Rats were eaten by those who still had digestive systems, and mushrooms were traded for urine. Babies were born and quickly became blind…Torrential rain leaked through cracks and flooded the tunnels enabling screams at last before drownings. Survivors were now solitary and went insane at different rates (Churchill 9).

As the ordinary garden is transformed into a stage where only Mrs J is explaining "[t]he uncannily absurd narration of catastrophe," such a section "most accurately understood not as the projection into an apocalyptic future but rather as a critique of our current ecological situation" (115), Wakefield suggests. Then, by changing the safe garden into a scene of destruction, Churchill shows the collapse of the exploitation of both the environment and private lives. The terror lies within this violent aftermath: the injured children's heads, eaten Rats, and blind babies are no longer problems of a distant place, but disturbing facts that are present in the intimate spaces. Four women who "are all at least seventy" (Churchill 6), then, cannot completely isolate themselves in their domestic comfort. Within such a threatened condition, the entire play evolves into an overlapping of voices about the ordinary lives of women in the garden, blending with harsh realities.

As Gobert states about Churchill's style, she "has lately veered further into minimalism, producing text whose lack of stage directions, identified speakers, and even plot forces us to find its dramatic meaning elsewhere: in the interaction between the script … and spectators…" (Gobert 166). The structure of Churchill's play keeps the reader or the audience alert and makes everyone a witness to both the cacophony and the silence. Similarly, the conversation among women in the garden is filled with blanks, unresolved thoughts, abrupt changes in tone or topic, and ellipses that stand for unspoken concerns. "Words or echoing fragments cover silences but are riddled with holes, an emptiness of speaking but not saying," remarks Templeton and goes on, "[o]r rather saying matters of life and death is not different to parroting trivia" (Templeton 40). From time to time, they start a chain of memories, even if it is about a small corner shop from the old days. At the beginning of the second part, Sally starts the chain; then the others continue adding what they remember of their old experiences in the garden, "SALLY. corner shop / LENA. don't like the / VI. mini Tesco / LENA. bit far / MRS J. used to be the fish and chip shop / VI. that other one's gone / SALLY. the old grocer" (Churchill 10). Recalling the old world by completing each other's unfinished sentences or thoughts leaves the audience perplexed and raises questions about what kind of life they have had, what they are missing in a world of disaster, or whether everything is a metaphor. "In terms of linguistics, even though the language used in the play is fluent and conforms within a modernist framework, Churchill does not allow her characters to speak in a coherent sense of order" (632), points out Bağırlar. That is why everything can be read without understanding, just as the characters in the play utter words. They lack information about their current situation, which is not mentioned anywhere except in the final monologues. Moreover, they hardly recall what happened before. Therefore, Vi and Sally confess, Vi says, "there must be quite a few things I missed," and Sally goes on, "not really, it all goes by, I can't remember those years especially" (Churchill 11). Except for Mrs J's monologues, neither the memories nor the current understanding of their world appears throughout the play.

As Templeton gives an example from poetry, "…space on the page is used in many ways but also reminds us that the time of making includes what is not written" (40), so the conversation in *Escaped Alone* invites reading the trauma, considering the victim's delayed and fragmented behaviour and speech. Such belatedness in conveying the terrible scenarios shapes the play's overall tone, so Mrs Jarrett's horrific and sometimes sarcastic accounts of the catastrophe come at the end of other women's conversations, creating an image of both societal and environmental ruin. From surreal to horror, the overall tone shifts as sentences are altered and meaning is dissolved. Also, the characters have their own histories, such as Vi's uncertainty about whether

killing someone was murder or not and being sentenced to prison and Sally's fear of cats. Such fragmented memories create disorientation and present how their lives are fractured in the middle of the disaster; "hence their fragmented conversations, which offer impressionistic reflections on their lives, are contextualised in a post-traumatic universe that rather refracts, like a broken mirror, recognisable figments of the quotidian" (Casado-Gual 237). Rather than demonstrating a coherent flow of what is happening around, and slowly breaking into the garden, trauma comes to light in dialogue and as a big brick of soliloquies that overflows across the pages.

The garden, which provides a fake sense of safety within its fences and door, along with the afternoon tea, highlights the play's juxtaposition. The disruptive moments show that the crisis outside is not a future event but a regular way of life in such a society. Through everyday conversation and abrupt, horrific scenes, their existence hangs between the external war of toxicity and the internal battle of survival. Such descriptions are not metaphors for the human condition, but the horrific ecological realities already present outside the text or the theatre walls. As Horn points out, "[i]t may have many different forms of 'outbreak,' but it essentially (and paradoxically) consists in the sheer perpetuation of current policies, lifestyles, and modes of managing the future" (8-9). Unlike a classical work, the play lacks a proper beginning or a single climax; rather, the catastrophe hangs over, highlighting its ordinariness and its tendency to go unnoticed amid the normality of daily life.

In the face of the climate catastrophe, Mrs J, Sally, Vi, and Lena present their collective defence through afternoon tea and conversation, sometimes with gossip. Repeating such a daily routine, then, is to preserve normalcy, or at least to soothe their minds within the limits of the garden. Despite the peaceful intimacy, Churchill's play always presents an opposition between the aforementioned routine and safety and apocalyptic anxiety. That is why, while the four women are talking about their daily lives or memories lightly, though fragmented, Mrs Jarrett's traumatic descriptions create a contrast after them. In Bachelardian terms, the garden, as the shelter of familiarity and comfort, is sometimes shadowed by traumatic recallings and horrific monologues; it is also a ritualised act of balancing the two. According to Chaudhuri, any place, be it home, neighbourhood, or environment, is burdened by historical violence, which complicates the sense of safety (*Staging Place* 55). Therefore, the peace provided by tea and conversation is fragile and sensitive amid environmental tensions. Wakefield's "artificial safety" (116), this potential illusory, then, is also under the control of the same industrial systems that caused their traumas, yet upon completing her mission of recalling and reminding, Mrs J. says, "thanks for the tea" (Churchill 33) and goes home at the end of the play.

**Tilted End in Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children***

Lucy Kirkwood examines the human psyche through the lens of the end of the world in a small seaside cottage. Aside from a few nuances, the audience sees only the aftermath, not the event itself. The disaster in *The Children* is an ecological one "modelled on the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi plant in Japan in 2011" (Hoydis 85). The nuclear meltdown occurs, and it slowly contaminates the daily life of people, including the retired scientists. Since the radioactive zone touched the seaside cottage where they live, the toxicity affects not only the intimate space but also the characters' psyches. Therefore, the cottage's protection is disrupted, and both the inside and the outside are gradually overtaken by the catastrophe. As a result of the nuclear disaster and its aftermath, "a one-in-ten-million-years fault sequence" (Kirkwood 22), the dialectic of outside and inside (Bachelard 211) is abolished. Because of the insidious cause and sinister toxicity, the characters check the Geiger counter every time they enter the cottage. Robin, for instance, "takes out a small Geiger counter and runs it over the trike," and he "gives HAZEL a thumbs up, puts down the Geiger counter" (Kirkwood 26) when there is nothing to worry about. The unsafe external storm, in the Bachelardian sense, is a threat that can imperil both the body and the cottage's safety, as it did in the earlier play. In this environment, even basic activities such as going for a number two, since "it will cause it to overflow, which is, it's a very messy / business" (40), become problematic, and natural resources are, of course, depicted as inadequate and inconvenient. Consequently, the characters, now in their sixties, are unable to enjoy a peaceful retirement and instead must prepare to confront the ongoing crisis.

Hoydis points out that "…involving both the sudden destructive and unpredictable accident and the slow violence of its aftermath," the fault sequence then "literally refers to the particular scenario of building a nuclear plant near the sea and storing the cooling equipment in the basement." However, she continues, "it is also a metaphor for the destructive impact of the bundle of developments of modernity…unfolding over time in sudden freak accidents as well as slowly building damage" (Hoydis 86). Therefore, the nuclear power station triggers a chain of disasters, as the characters experience throughout *The Children*. Since this is a result of human activity and the characters experience what they did not expect, trauma and anxiety manifest themselves in emotional hesitations and quiet questioning; thus, in everyday dialogues, reminding of Caruth's ideas on the manifestation of trauma. Again, conversation serves as an expository tool for the suppression of traumas, as in the case of Churchill's play.

Beginning with Rose's nosebleed in a slightly tilted room, Hazel tries to help Rose and confesses hearsay about the possibility of Rose's being dead the whole time. She confesses, "[y] es so it was bit of a shock," and continues, "[l]ovely you're not of course" (Kirkwood 6). During

these mundane conversations after years of not seeing each other in the domestic kitchen, Hazel mentions the disaster and tries to recall the details about how it first started: “Yes I was… making banana bread, for the children and, because it was the eggs, they started shaking in the box and – this sound stupid, but I thought, they’re hatching…” (10). Comma interruptions within the play indicate “a beat” that is “shorter than a pause.” They “can also denote a shift in thought or energy” (3) as it is stated in the Key part in Nick Hern Books’ edition of the play. Therefore, after mentioning the first clues, there comes a comma, and Hazel recalls what she did during it, then shifts to the current moment with Rose in the kitchen in the following scene:

HAZEL. …that’s when I realised the whole kitchen was shaking, the plates started falling and the lights went out and the ground was sort of rolling and

I thought this must be what it’s like on a ship in a storm and then I thought, what are you doing you stupid woman, geet out, just get out, so I did, I just ran outside in my apron, and I saw the road cracked down the middle and then… and then it just stopped.

*Pause.*

ROSE. God. You must have / been

HAZEL. Yes so then I wanted to call Robin so I walked, I ran down to the beach, because the reception – and that’s when

I saw the tide had gone out. I mean it wasn’t miles but it looked like miles, and then I saw the wave, only it didn’t look like a wave, it looked like the sea was boiling milk and it just kept boiling and boiling and boiling and.

,

And then everyone was running, so I ran too.

,

I’m so sorry, did you say you wanted tea / or (11)

Pausing from time to time, she goes on describing the first moments through homely details. Caruth’s theories on trauma come into play in the latency of comprehension at first, later the acceptance of the horrific aftermath of the nuclear disaster, leaping into the house by the retired scientists, as will be seen through the end of this chapter.

Hazel is fixed on her routines. As an attempt to have control over the reality and sometimes Robin’s mockery, she keeps living healthy and makes her defence against Rose’s claim, “…I find salad deeply depressing,” by answering as follows: “Well, you just become aware of the risks, don’t you. Osteoporosis strokes diabetes blood pressure all the usual suspects” Rose adds, “Cancer” to Hazel’s list. However, she has precautions against such a list, “I do yoga you

know." She explains her philosophy: "You have a choice, don't you, exactly, at our age, which is that you slow down…or you make a committed choice to keep moving…This is not the end of our lives but a new and exciting chapter" (Kirkwood 16). Therefore, she begins preparing the salad for dinner. Throughout the get-together, she "produces salad leaves, tomatoes, pre-hard-boiled eggs…" and assembles everything while talking about the disaster and wreckage (19). Rose tries to understand the setting, asks about the farm, "[b]ut, so the farm is… inside the exclusion zone?- Isn't that / quite –" upon stating Robin's attachment to the cows, which silently perished due to the permeating radiation. Hazel adds, "I'm deeply attached to them too." Moreover, she is "more attached to not getting cancer" (20). The repetitive preparation of the salad and concerns with eating habits and not getting cancer, Hazel's obsessions become a ritualised habit in the face of radiation. This insistence on health, which is the symbolic displacement of the initial trauma, exemplifies Caruth's trauma theory once again. Also, such a "geopathic" (*Staging Place* 15) relationship creates an illusion of safety within the cottage, which is supposed to be a shelter rather than a place slowly being contaminated with radiation. Maybe as a form of resistance to the disaster, or a silent denial, Hazel's act of preparing the salad and her obsession with certain things demonstrate the psychological struggle within the home through everyday acts.

Since Hazel's healthy routines are questioned by Rose and ridiculed by her husband Robin, their attitude in the face of Hazel's ways of resisting recalls and refers to the "destructive wave which cannot be stopped," and it "functions as commentary on Hazel's behaviour as being futile risk management but also foreshadows the play's ending" (Hoydis 88). No matter how dedicated Hazel is to coping with old age and nuclear reality, the so-called cottage safety only allows her to live with the illusion of order. In the middle of the slow destruction of the world, the seaside cottage, which has served as a sanctuary before, has now become a contaminated place. Moreover, Rose has a purpose in being at the tilted house, and this brings realities that contradict the daily rituals, so "Rose's presence challenges the fragile stability that Hazel has constructed" (Maya 6). Her arrival is driven by a significant moral responsibility. Rose is serious and determined about going to the mission because the current situation is getting worse, as she explains: "This morning, there was a radiation spike. They should be pulling them all out, but they can't, there are major leaks in unit two, somehow there's contaminated water flooding into the discharge channel" (Kirkwood 51). As retired scientists, Hazel and Robin are invited to the mission at the nuclear plant, which means sacrificing for future generations by replacing the young engineers with "whole lives ahead" (48) with themselves. Since Robin knows the conditions they live in, from digging graves for dead cows every day, he shows his care for both

the animals and Rose by keeping anything that could ruin her routines to himself. As a result of this responsibility, he listens to and carefully considers Rose's invitation. Since Rose and Robin have already faced the truth and decided to proceed with the task, Hazel is also confronted with the realities she has been denying. The everyday realism they live in, then, becomes the most disturbing quality; thus, ongoing ecological occurrences affect the very safety of the isolated cottage. No longer a shelter from the radioactive zone, the room, as a reminder of their geopathic condition, becomes a site of difficult decisions.

The disruption, through the Geiger counter's appearance, Rose's nosebleed, practising yoga, dancing, and the house's tilted setting, demonstrates the challenging "fault sequence" as a latent force from the past that disturbs the present. In such a present, the cottage transforms the disaster into a controllable space where conversations about yoga routines, preparing dinner, or just salads are initially evident. However, through the end, layered silences and commas reveal the suppressed and ongoing emotional restlessness. As Hoydis summarizes, "[t]he play is small in scale, but raises large issues, asking what price we will pay in the future for the past and the present" and continues, "[i]t manages to illustrate environmental destruction not as a commonly known disaster-movie scenario (Marvel), but, literally, as a 'kitchen sink' drama – or, considering the ending, juxtaposing the two modes" (95). Addressing significant points, especially regarding humanity's future actions, *The Children* portrays ecological destruction through confused and traumatised characters who gradually come to understand the critical power they hold and, in the end, accept their responsibilities. Since Hazel's decision on joining the research team is uncertain, "the play prolongs the audience's engagement with the dilemmas presented, emphasising the ongoing nature of the crisis" (11), as Maya suggests. Along with the sound of waves, the play then does not show the result, indicating the ongoing ecological crisis and keeping the audience awake to real-life problems.

**Post-Apocalyptic Domesticity in Both Plays**

In the same year, 2016, Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* and Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* offered striking explorations of apocalyptic themes, along with different structures and perspectives for understanding and approaching destruction. One of the differences explored in this paper is the plays' approaches to dialogue. Churchill's *Escaped Alone* adopts a non-linear, fragmented narrative that challenges the structure of typical conversations. Repeatedly interrupted by the remembrances of the old world and horrific scenarios of environmental destruction delivered by Mrs J., the play consists of absurd sequences. Through this, Churchill seeks to present environmental catastrophe in economic terms, reflecting various global problems. In contrast, in *The Children*, Kirkwood uses the natural flow of dialogue to ground

the nuclear crisis in personal relationships and the slow unfolding of the disaster's harsh reality, as well as the secrets: hidden diseases, past infidelities, and, lastly, why Rose visited Hazel and Robin. The structure of the play is Aristotelian, and "that means in a sense unity of time and place" (Lucak 7). Therefore, intentionally Aristotelian, Kirkwood aims to slow people's actions and portray the disaster's overwhelming consequences through real conversations.

According to Chaudhuri, in geopathology, "…the characterization of place itself as a problem, as a site of often-painful psychological impasse and as an ideological blind spot, with devastating consequences" ("The Silence" 46) implies that the places characters live in, the backyard garden, the kitchen, the farm, or the cottage as a whole, are embedded with the environmental trauma and its consequences. The new reality of the safe spaces now haunts the characters in *Escaped Alone*, as they recall phobias and personal memories while suppressing trauma, and in *The Children*, through the deaths of the cows, radiation sickness, eggs shaking in the box, and a flooded bathroom. Then, activities from the old world, such as a simple afternoon tea with conversation or dinner preparation, serve as communal activities in both plays. When the three friends, Vi, Sally, and Lena, and Mrs Jarrett begin talking in a mundane way, reflecting their fragmented memories, routines serve to recall a stable past and unify their anxieties. Moreover, as a communal act, they anchor for the stability through singing, so "[a]ll sing. SALLY, VI and LENA in harmony. MRS JARRETT joins in the melody. They are singing for themselves in the garden, not performing to the audience" (Churchill 24). In the other play, *The Children*, along with a careful usage of electricity and water, the environmental disaster and trauma it causes are embedded in Hazel and Robin's life in the cottage and farm; moreover, for Hazel, even after Robin's arrival and her purpose, the cottage continue to be where she "…finds her yoga mat and rolls it out on a dry patch of the floor" (Kirkwood 78) and salute the sun. To escape the overwhelming reality waiting for them at the doorstep, Rose also joins Hazel, and together they form a communal act of preserving the ordinary.

Churchill rejects the traditional narrative as stated in the previous paragraphs. Juxtaposing everyday backyard gossip with broken apocalyptic conversation and disregarding the linear sequence of the unravelling and surreal catastrophes, *Escaped Alone* utilises Beckettian chaos. As Keyssar highlights, "[i]n Caryl Churchill's plays, neither the sequence nor the unravelling events is central to the drama since she rejects the temptations of narrative and exploits the ability of the live stage to provoke our acknowledgement of the vulnerability and plasticity of human life" (198). Therefore, Churchill underscores the fragility of societal or cultural structures and presents this condition not as an impossible future event but as an everyday reality already permeating our lives. According to one of the interviews with Kirkwood, she

points out that she wanted “to write something that didn’t harangue or nag an audience, but was generous, honest and unsentimental about how difficult it will be to make the changes that we need to, about how overwhelming that might feel – an awakening perhaps, but a terrifying one” (Lucak 7). Inspired by the Fukushima occurence and the information about “the retired work-force returning to the plant to help with the clean up” (7), Kirkwood challenges the characters, as well as the audience, in not leaving the problem of climate change only as an intellectual topic among people. Still, she wants both the characters and the audience to deal with it emotionally. Therefore, “Kirkwood resists offering simple solutions or utopian visions and instead demonstrates the overwhelming nature of confronting issues that affect us all…” (Maya 12), and invites us to take an active role, just as Rose invites Hazel and Robin to join her at the end of the play. Therefore, through different narrative structures, Churchill and Kirkwood share the same purpose in these plays. Facing the realities through brave monologues and being active agents to go to the radioactive plant, both *Escaped Alone* and *The Children* suggest a portrayal of the condition the world is in and what kind of tomorrow, or today, is waiting for the earth.

**Conclusion**

This article offers a comparative analysis of Caryl Churchill’s *Escaped Alone* and Lucy Kirkwood’s *The Children*, focusing on environmental disasters, the transformation of domestic spaces into sites of ecological trauma, and the use of habitual practices to address and cope with these realities. In both works, everyday spaces become sites of trauma in which both anxiety and disaster collide. Through ordinary routines, then, the characters try to manage the cruel consequences. While *Escaped Alone* portrays an open-ended entrapment in the ruins, *The Children* concludes with the sacrifice of the retired scientists, who accept their mortality on behalf of future generations. In an increasingly dangerous world, Caryl Churchill’s *Escaped Alone* and Lucy Kirkwood’s *The Children* explore themes of environmental anxiety, cruel realities, and an unsustainable future, offering a warning and a call for immediate action to address ecological problems already at the doorstep.

**Works Cited**


Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Beacon Press, 1994.

Bağırlar, Belgin. The Theme of Memory in Caryl Churchill's "Far Away" and "Escaped Alone." *İdil Sanat ve Dil Dergisi*, vol. *7*, no. 46, 2018, pp. 625-637. doi:10.7816/IDIL-07-46-01.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

Casado-Gual, Núria. "Staging the 'Crisis of Aging': Old Age as the New Apocalypse in *The Children*, and *Escaped Alone.*" *Understanding the Discourse of Aging: A Multifaceted Perspective* edited by Vicent Salvador and Agnese Sampietro, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020, pp. 233-258.

Chaudhuri, Una. *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*. University of Michigan UP, 1997.

—. "The Silence of the Polar Bears: Performing (Climate) Change in the Theatre of Species." *Readings in Performance and Ecology*, edited by Wendy Arons and Theresa J. May, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 45-57. doi:10.1057/9781137011695_5.

Churchill, Caryl. *Escaped Alone*. Kindle ed., Nick Hern Books, 2016.

Gobert, R. Darren. *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill*. Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014.

Horn, Eva. *The Future as Catastrophe: Imagining Disaster in the Modern Age*. Translated by Valentine Pakis, Columbia UP, 2018. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/horn18862.

Hoydis, Julia. "A Slow Unfolding "Fault Sequence:" Risk and Responsibility in Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children.*" *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2020, pp. 83-99. doi:10.1515/jcde-2020-0007

Keyssar, Helene. "The Dramas of Caryl Churchill: The Politics of Possibility." *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1983, pp. 198–216. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25089409. Accessed 13 May 2026.

Kirkwood, Lucy. *The Children*. Nick Hern Books, 2016.

Lucak, Fiona. "The Children Study Guide." State Theatre Company South Australia. https://statetheatrecompany.com.au/wpcontent/uploads/2024/01/The-Children-Study-Resources.pdf. Accessed 20 Dec. 2025.

Maya, C. "From Fear and Anxiety to Vulnerable Collective Action: Lucy Kirkwood's The Children." *FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & The Arts*, vol. 35, 2024. doi:10.2218/forum.1.10035.

Templeton, Fiona. "Notes on the Poetics of Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone*." *PAJ: A Journal*

*of Performance and Art*, vol. 41, no. 2 (122), 2019, pp. 39–41. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/26729219. Accessed 13 May 2026.

Wakefield, Nik. "Environmental Horror and White Extinction: Scenes of Literally Ecological Theatre in *Escaped Alone*, by Caryl Churchill and *The Evening* by Richard Maxwell." *TDR: The Drama Review*, vol. 68, no. 2, 2024, pp. 112-130. *Project MUSE*, muse.jhu.edu/article/932471.

essence & critique
*Journal of Literature, & Drama Studies*

Goswami, Sinjan. "The Excremental as Ethical?: Violence in J.M.Coetzee's Waiting for the Barbarians" *Essence & Critique: Journal of Literature & Drama Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2026, pp. 81–96.

# The Excremental as Ethical?: Violence in J.M.Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

**Sinjan Goswami**[1], Asst. Prof. Dr., Mathabhanga College, goswami.sinjan@gmail.com

**Received**: 20.03.2026
**Accepted**: 19.06.2026

[1]**ORCID:** 0000-0001-9770-9638

During the 1970s and 80s the security forces of the white run apartheid government in South Africa gained international notoriety for the various obscenities committed during its interrogation of the political dissidents and revolutionaries of the country. Written and Published during these violent decades, J.M.Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barabarians* (1980) interrogates the impact of the torture chamber on the conscience of a protagonist approximating the subject position of both victim and perpetrator. Named simply the Magistrate, Coetzee's protagonist journeys from being a person obsessed with cleaning up the literal and metaphorical filth littering his imperial outpost to an experience of living through the excremental on an everyday basis. This foregrounding of the excremental, I argue, is seminal to the question of relating ethically to the 'barbarians' traumatized by the 'Empire of pain'(Coetzee 24) in the novel. While Apartheid's administrative measures related to public health—especially of the urban population—was influential in realizing the Afrikaners' dream of separate development, in Coetzee's novel the trope of the dirty, infectious, dangerous native is counterfocalized to reveal contamination of the self by the radically other as the only way of gesturing towards an ethical future. To this end, I draw upon Dominick La Capra's concept of 'empathic unsettlement' to produce a reading of Coetzee's poetics of self-cancellation: a poetics that repeatedly approaches the trauma of the truly 'obscene' other without ever being able to appropriate the same..

**Keywords:** J.M. Coetzee, excrement, ethics, counterfocalization, trauma.

## Introduction

During the 1970s and 80s, the security forces of the white-run apartheid government in South Africa gained international notoriety for the various obscenities committed during its interrogation of the political dissidents and revolutionaries in the country. Written and published during these violent decades, J.M.Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) interrogates 'the impact of the torture chamber' upon the conscience of a protagonist (Coetzee, "Into the Dark Chamber", 363) approximating the subject position of both torturer and victim. Named simply the Magistrate, Coetzee's protagonist journeys from being a person obsessed with cleaning up the literal and material filth littering his imperial outpost to an experience of living through the excremental on an everyday basis. This foregrounding of the excremental, I argue, is seminal to the question of relating ethically to the 'barbarians' traumatized by the 'Empire of pain' (Coetzee 24) in the novel. While apartheid's administrative measures related to public health—especially of the urban population—were influential in realizing the Afrikaner dream of 'separate development' in South Africa[i], in Coetzee's novel the trope of the dirty, infectious, dangerous native is counterfocalized to reveal contamination of the self by the other[ii] as the only possibility of gesturing towards an ethical future. What makes it pertinent to think the question of bearing witness in Coetzee's novel through the metaphors of contagion, contamination, and pollution are, I believe, the issues of suggestibility and transmissibility Coetzee himself identifies as germane to the thinking of apartheid architects such as Geoffrey Cronje[iii]. As the initial manifestation of the other and the first extension of the self (Pops 50), shit confounds the distinction between inside and outside in a way similar to someone experiencing trauma at one remove. As Roger Luckhurst puts it in his introduction to *The Trauma Question,* trauma is

> ...a piercing or breach of a boundary that creates an odd communication between the inside and outside is called a trauma. Trauma forcefully creates bridges between once distinct systems, creating unexpected linkages that can be upsetting or confusing. Furthermore, trauma seems to be extremely infectious: it can spread from one patient to another, between mental and physical symptoms, between patients and physicians through a mysterious process of suggestion or transference, and between victims and the people who watch or listen to them, who are frequently moved to extremes of intense empathy, sometimes even to the point of claiming secondary victimhood. ... (Luckhurst 3-4).

Luckhurst goes on to address transmissamibility as a major concern in the study of trauma, paying specific attention to the question of who has the ethical claim to bear witness - primary victim? Secondary victim? The perpetrator? -in the wake of trauma's propensity to collapse and confound distinctions (Luckhurst 3-4). And it is this difficult question we find repeatedly addressed throughout Coetzee's ouevre : whether be it in Susan Barton's reminder to the reader that the mute slave Friday's silence, punctuating the narrative of Coetzee's *Foe* , holds an ethical weight her own testimony to years on Crusoe's island lacks, or in the dying professor Mrs,. Curren's address to her absent daugther in *Age of Iron* that bears witness to the township violence in apartheid south africa in the years 1986-89 while remaining self-reflexively aware of the impossibility of speaking for the black victims dying all around her. As evidenced in the anxieties induced in the Australian novelist Elizabeth Costello, the damning possibility of identifying with Hitler's hangmen while reading Paul West's *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg* drives one to the age of sanity. The same problem dominates David Lurie's mind as he tries to imagine himself in the scene of his daughter Lucy's gang rape, and finds only the possibility of identifying with the rapist male figure. A way out of this conundrum, Luckhurst suggests, may lie through Dominick La Capra's proposed distinction between empathy, which maintains distance, and identification, which falls into this dangerous confusion (La Capra, quoted by Luckhurst 3-4).

**Trauma and Transmissibility**

While the question of trauma's transmissibility and suggestibility is never made as explicit in *Waiting for the Barbarians* as it is in "The Problem of Evil" lesson in *Elizabeth Costello*(2003)—a lesson in which Costello, the Australian alter-ego of Coetzee himself, castigates the American novelist Paul West for bringing Hitler's hangman back to life in a novel[iv]—it is nevertheless present as a threat to the self's limits of reason in Coetzee's depiction of the ways in which the Magistrate relates to the torture of the native fisherfolks and aboriginals populating the edges of his imperial outpost. Roger Luckhurst, in a recent article, has pertinently raised the question as to whether torture 'exemplif[ies] the trauma paradigm or lie[s] beyond it?'(Luckhurst, "Beyond Trauma Torturous times",13). Luckhurst argues against the tendency of trauma theory to read torture in terms of 'the language of transgressed limit or the ineffable sublime' for, as he sees it, torture, as deployed by many nation-states around the world, is a coherent and conscious policy,

backed by legal commentary and detailed operational parameters clearly stated along the chain of command' ((Luckhurst, "Beyond Trauma Torturous times", 14). Yet in expressions like '…perhaps it is the case that only that which has not been articulated has to be lived through'(Coetzee 70), the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* repeatedly foregrounds torture's tendency to effect a radical disjunction between language and lived traumatic experience that stays close to Elaine Scarry's thesis regarding the same in *Body in Pain: The Making and unmaking of the World*(1985)[v] while also substantiating Cathy Caruth's contention that the paradigmatic traumatic experience is the one that both 'defies and demands' witness (Caruth 5). Simultaneously fascinated and appalled by the 'cries coming from the granary' in which Colonel Joll, an officer of the Imperial Third Bureau, carries out his obscene acts of torture, the Magistrate repeatedly approaches the site of trauma in this novel yet fails, every time, to reveal to the reader what constitutes the kernel of the traumatic experience[vi]. While during his interrogation of the barbarian girl later in the novel, the Magistrate's shudder at being touched by the 'taint' of Joll drives home the associations between contagion and transmissibility through which trauma is troped in this novel, it is in the pervasive imagery of shit and stink that attaches to him after he is tortured for 'treasonously consorting with the enemy'(Coetzee 85) that the possibilities for relating ethically to a (seemingly) unknowable other is articulated most clclearly. It is instructive here to look at Sara Ahmad's theorization of the black body as 'body out of place'—following Mary Douglas,'s formulation of dirt as 'matter out of place'—in her study of 'racialized bodies'. Through a reading of Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*, she shows how the threat of touching constitutes and unmakes individual and social bodily space for white and black bodies, where dirt becomes a figure for both metonymic contiguity and metaphoric displacement that threaten to engulf the very possibility of differentiation through which race is constituted. She argues memorably that "the lived experience of inhabiting the black body hesitates on the question:'am I the roach?' or 'am I the dirt which forces me away'" (Ahmed 60). The Magistrate's experience of coropreal depravity after his capture in Coetzee's novel vindicatels Ahmed's argument that 'to withdraw from a relation of physical proximity to black bodies is still to be touched by those bodies, in such a way that the white subject is moved from its place'(Ahmed 60). In order to substantiate my argument, one must need to first come to a clear understanding of the intertwining of the excremental and the historical in literatures of Colonial trauma such as *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

**The Barbarian Craps where He Pleases**

Throughout history, colonized populations have been characterized as dirty bodies and associated with filth, shit, and disorder through a variety of demeaning tropes, as David Spurr has observed in *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Spurr, quoted by Esty 28). These very tropes provide the hinge for the dichotomous construction of the civilized self and barbarian other in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. 'The barbarian craps where he pleases' (Laporte 57), writes Dominique LaPorte; and surely, in the Magistrate's revulsion at the 'frank and filthy habits' (Coetzee 20) of the barbarians he holds prisoners 'incommunicado' (Coetzee 20) for Colonel Joll, we can discern the same civilizational demands for cleanliness, order and purity. This rage for cleanliness and order is, crucially, linked to the question of the Empire's weaponizing of history in the novel. After he gets the permission to free the innocent prisoners, the Magistrate's reflections on the hermeneutics of imperial history make explicit the association between cleanliness, order, and the forgetting of the trauma of imperial victims:

> Before I finish the old story, I hope it will explain to me why I thought it was worth the trouble. The new men of the Empire are the ones who believe in new beginnings, new chapters, and clean pages. Therefore, since I am now once again in charge of maintaining law and order in these parts, I give the order to feed the inmates, call the doctor for assistance, reopen the barracks, and make every effort to return the inmates to their previous lives as quickly as possible. (Coetzee, 26)

Later in the novel, a gory spectacle brings together the empire's obsession with 'fresh starts, new chapters, clean pages' and its weaponizing of history as the twelve fisherfolks caught by the imperial army are written onto and written off through a performative gesture germane to the production of imperial history:

> The Colonel advances, bending over each prisoner individually, rubs a handful of dust into his nude back, and uses a charcoal stick to write a word. I read the words, ENEMY…ENEMY…ENEMY…ENEMY backwards. He retracts a step and puts on his hands. I stand no more than twenty paces away from him as we stare at each other.

> And that's when the beating starts. The prisoners' backs and buttocks are covered in red welts as the soldiers use the sturdy green cane staves to bring them down with loud, rhythmic slapping noises akin to washing pads. Except for the prisoner who had been moaning and was now gasping with every blow, the other prisoners carefully spread their legs until they were flat on their bellies. (Coetzee 115)

Coetzee follows this description with how 'the black charcoal and ochre dust' that are the instruments of the Empire's forging of a history in its own image gets mixed with the 'sweat and blood' of the innocent fisherfolk produced through this spectacle as enemies of the state. This suggests not only how the imperial history is tainted with and underwritten by violence that itself will never become part of history. But as a 'citational practice through which discourse produces the effects it names' (Butler xii), imperial history here could be clearly seen as erasing native pasts to produce the 'fresh starts' and 'clean pages' free of the taint of the other. What makes Coetzee's grim rewriting of Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" in this passage contextually apt is the historically accurate homology between the Jew of Kafka's Bohemia and the black South African of apartheid years in terms of dirt and danger[vii]. However, the Magistrate's wish to "struggle on with the old story" is indicative of "unhealthy mourning," or melancholia as Freud defined it, which is characterized by the subject's inability to accept loss as a part of consciousness. According to Derrida, grief only becomes moral in this exact moment of integration gone wrong (Durrant 30). The magistrate's melancholic vigil over those lost to history keeps faith not only with the fisherfolks and the barbarian girl maimed by the Empire but also those soldiers of the Empire sent out in the desert to hunt the 'barbarians', only to never come back alive. Even as the meaning of his gesture eludes him, the Magistrate's insistence that the dead soldiers 'must have [their] rites' resists a particular attitude to waste matter prevalent in modernity. This is neatly summed up by Dominique Laporte in his *History of Shit* (1993):

> Corpses are just trash that is buried; they are neither more nor less. The smell of shit and corpses has long caused the Christian West to react with equal terror. To keep them both at bay, one finds striking similarities in the morbid effects attributed to their respective odors. (Laporte 60).

While the Magistrate's resolve to mourn those deemed 'matter out of place' –to remember Mary Douglas' famous formulation of dirt—registers a note of ethical commitment, his repeated attempts to return the traumatized to their past lives 'as far as possible' is troped through the

imagery of cleanliness. This is evidenced not only in his order to 'clean up the room' (Coetzee 26) in which the barbarians were held prisoners but much more tellingly in his regular, ritualistic washing of the feet of the barbarian girl whose past fascinates him as much as the indecipherable scripts he unearths from the voluntarily undertaken excavations in the sandy dunes at the borders of his outpost. In one sense, then, the excremental in Coetzee's novel serves exactly the function Joshua D. Esty ascribes it in "Excremental Postcolonialism"(1999). According to Esty, shit serves to 'diffuse guilt and shame' in excremental postcolonial literature: carrying a 'secret charge of self-implication' for the postcolonial intellectual unable to rid himself of the taint of post-independence corruption and violent abuse of humanity he detests (Esty 34). Translated to the South African context, one could substitute 'white liberal' for Esty's 'postcolonial intellectual', not least because of the former's superfluity to the cause of black freedom emphasized time and again by Black Consciousness leaders such as Steve Biko[viii]. Perhaps nowhere is this superfluity better dramatized in *Waiting for the Barbarians* than in the image of the Magistrate 'stand [ing] forgotten with [the] bucket between [his] feet' (Coetzee 116): a bucket he filled with water from the prison yard to clean up after the 'patriotic bloodlust' (Coetzee 114) presided over by Colonel Joll—leading to the production of the twelve fisherfolks as 'ENEMY'—would come to pass. The magistrate's motivation for doing this is to avoid becoming contaminated by the impending atrocity nor poison [himself] with hopeless hatred of his perpetrators. (Coetzee 114). It is telling that in the course of the novel, the Magistrate achieves neither of these objectives. Like the protagonists of Soyinka and Armah Esty reads through the trope of the excremental, Coetzee's Magistrate too is party to the civilizational discourse he condemns: a discourse neatly encapsulated by the dialectic of cleanliness and dirt in Coetzee's novel. This beholdenness of the Magistrate to the imperial conception of civilization persists to the very end and is made concrete when contemplating the imminence of a barbarian invasion, he recoils in horror at the possibility of the barbarians 'wip[ing] their backsides on the town archives' (Coetzee 157). While the image of the filthying of the archive is placed strategically by Coetzee to suggest the possibility of corrupting the tyrannical weapon called History[ix] through which empires all over the world established the supremacy of their civilization, shit operates in the novel as a figure for the abject other who survives in spite of the apartheid government's urge to dissociate itself from the corporeal as such which in South Africa has been, historically, associated with Kaffir work: perpetuating, thereby, the tradition from Greece and Rome, from Plato and Aristotle, that deemed bodily work as suitable for slaves and

political governance the prerogative of the enlightened, 'civilized' citizen (Laporte 43-44). To discern how the corporeal and the scatological come together as figures of the abject in the context of trauma's transmissibility, we need to first counterfocalize the Magistrate's cultured horror at matters out of place in the novel. To this end, Mieke Bal and Gayatri Spivak's writings on focalization in narrative art provide me with the necessary theoretical scaffolding.

**Counterfocalization and the Advent of the Ethical**

In *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (1985), Mieke Bal introduces the term focalization to 'refer to the relations between the elements presented [in a narrative] and the vision through which they are presented.'(Bal 145) Focalization, according to Bal, 'can lie with a character…or outside it.'(Bal 149). In a masterly reading of Coetzee's post-apartheid novel *Disgrace* (1999), Gayatri Spivak, following Bal's cue, argues that in that novel the chief focalizer David Lurie's 'inability to "read" [his daughter] Lucy as patient and agent'—in the wake of her gang-rape—provides the reader the spur to counter focalize: for 'no reader is content with acting out the failure of reading' (Spivak 22). It does not take much effort to see that the equation between David Lurie and his racial and gendered others in *Disgrace* is a reworking, both in terms of failure of reciprocity and failure of reading, of the one between the Magistrate and the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Both David Lurie and the Magistrate grapple with traumatic pasts that simultaneously attract and repel them. Both are warded off by bodies that doggedly guard the secrets of their trauma. And if David Lurie shudders at the thought of identifying with Lucy's rapists, then, in trying to decode the barbarian girl's inscrutable body, the Magistrate—much to his horror—finds Colonel Joll's doubled image cast back at him. Making vivid thereby the question of trauma's transmissibility, Coetzee treats the problem of identification with the victims of trauma in a nuanced way. If Lurie's attempt to envision a traumatic past that was never his present halts at the aporetic question of 'does he have it in him to be the woman?'(Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 160) Then the Magistrate's repeated attempts to decipher the soot marks left on the walls of the room in which the 'barbarians' were once tortured produces, for him, nothing but interminable frustrations. The spur to counterfocalization in *Waiting for the Barbarians* comes once the Magistrate himself undergoes torture and corporeal debasement at the hands of the Empire's 'ministers of pain'. While identification with the Magistrates' perspective[x] would produce nothing but interpretative frustration for the readers of the novel, counterfocalization of

the narrative in passages such as the following can intimate possibilities of establishing reciprocity across the traumatic divide that doesn't risk identification with and approximation of the violated, 'obscene[xi]' other's suffering:

> …I fall into a second sleep, lying quietly against the wall and covering my sore hand with my armpit for comfort. Into a jumble of pictures, from which I pick out one specific image, shoving aside the others that come flying at me like leaves. It belongs to the girl. She's kneeling in front of the sandcastle or snow castle she made, her back to me. I can see that she is working underground in the castle's basements as I get closer (Coetzee 119-120).

In this dream, the Magistrate finds the hooded figure of the girl offering him an 'amorphous lump' that could well recall for the readers the tortured, maimed. disfigured bodies of the 'barbarians' in the opening pages of the novel. What follows is the vision 'that she is holding out a loaf of bread with a coarse, steaming, broken crust that is still hot'. Gratitude overwhelms the magistrate at this offering of manna, and is significantly expressed through its entanglement with an idiom of pain as we find 'tears stinging down the cut on [his] cheek' (Coetzee 119-120). In a certain sense, this dream offers the climax to the Magistrate's seemingly fruitless quest for establishing a relationship with the traumatized barabarian girl. While previously in the novel the dreams involving the little girl remained as opaque to the readers as they were for the Magistrate, reading this particular passage, the canny reader will surely be alerted to Jesus Christ's famous injunction: 'Eat this bread in remembrance of me'. In the context of Coetzee's novel, this translates to an invitation to the Magistrate to establish a community with the tortured barbarians exclusively in terms of what Judith Butler, in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) calls our 'common corporeal vulnerability'(Butler, *Precarious life*, 42). However, the Magistrate's admitted inability to 'taste the bread that made [his] saliva run' brings back echoes of a different biblical passage. In John 6:56, Jesus says: 'Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them.' In the context of the sharability of traumatic pain in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, this translates into a refusal on Coetzee's part to allow the traumatized Other to be reduced to a version of the Same[xii]. Coetzee's Magistrate, eventually, is held in a position of what Dominick La Capra calls 'empathic unsettlement': i.e. a middle ground between 'acting out' and 'working through', identification and empathy, that allows the secondary witness to 'affectively and cognitively' relate to victims of trauma 'in compassionate ways that remain respectful of their otherness'(La Capra xxiii-xxiv).

Further, La Capra's contention that empathic unsettlement 'poses a barrier to closure in discourse' (La Capra 41) is useful for reading the ways in which the Magistrate's attempts at relating ethically to the barbarians inscrutable, traumatic past thwart the imperial desire for 'clean pages, fresh starts' that engineers amnesia regarding the native other's humanity. Shit is the figure that helps Coetzee in this enterprise as it serves to remind us of our inescapable material, embedded existence in historical time: an existence that presupposes and desires entanglement with other bodies. 'Not permitted to wash' by the torturers of the Third Bureau after he interrupts their spectacle of 'patriotic bloodlust', the Magistrate's distaste at starting to 'smell of shit' (Coetzee 127) must be counterfocalized to arrive at the idea that as a figure that marks 'the fuzzy boundary between inside and outside, between the self and the not-self' (Esty 34) the excremental in *Waiting for the Barbarians* retains a positive, enabling charge. As a reminder of our corporeal entanglement with other lives—precisely what was disavowed in apartheid's forgetting of black labor and black pain—the excremental in Coetzee's novel produces an immanent critique of the discourse of historicism as it emerged in 18th and 19th c. Europe[xiii]. Pioneered by the likes of the German historian Ranke, this discourse believed in the production of a disembodied, 'homogenous, empty time'(Benjamin 261)[xiv]—to remember Walter Benjamin's famous formulation—that leads one to experience exactly the time of crisis, anxiety and imminent catastrophe that the Magistrate rails against in Coetzee's novel. Rather than remaining beholden to this history that believes in producing knowledge of the past from a supra historical vantage point, torture in *Waiting for the Barbarians* teaches us—if not the Magistrate—that relating feelingly to the trauma of racial and gendered others demands a recognition of the corporeal as such as the voiding of history. Consequently, only an embodied, visceral response can fulfill Coetzee's avowed objective of 'writing without authority': issuing in a poetics of self-cancellation that approaches the suffering of the truly 'obscene' other without eventually being able to appropriate the same. As a symbol of both bodily excess and bodily privation, the excremental in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is the apposite figure for expressing this. Further, as Joshua D. Esty points out. Shit, 'operating counter-discursively' in excremental postcolonial literature, serves to reveal the gap between 'individual, existential time' and the 'mystified temporality of the nation' (Esty 44). If the 'jagged time of rise and fall' in Coetzee's novel crystallizes the 'mystified temporality of the nation'— i.e. the disembodied temporality of History as discourse—then, as my reading of the novel has hopefully

shown, the 'individual, existential time' in *Waiting for the Barbarians* couldn't be anything but traumatic.

**Conclusion**

This paper has sought to analyze whether the pervasive imagery of shit and stink in J.M.Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* can be read in terms of the horizontal transmissibility of trauma one finds in trauma theory formulated by the likes of Roger Luckhurst, Cathy Caruth, Dominic La Capra and the theory of torture and corporeal pain as evinced in Elaine Scarry's monumental *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. For while the question of ethical alterity in Coetzee's work has cropped up in many Derridean-Leavinasian readings of the novel—exemplified best perhaps by Derek Attridge's celebrated *J.M.Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*: *Literature in the Even*t (2004)—none of the existing scholarship has so far sought to ground the question of ethics in Coetzee in instancing of the excremental: a surprising choice considering the very real troping of the black, native other in apartheid's offical imagery in terms of dirt, danger, pollution and contamination. The only instance of Coetzee scholarship that foregrounds the excremental in a reading of any of his novels is Jennifer Rutherford's " Thinking through shit in JmM.Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* ". Rutherford masterfully reads the question of the excrement in that novel in the context of the global refugee crisis and shows how dirt and the dirty in that particular Coetzee novel –like the protagonists David and Simon at the beginning of the novel--relates to a haunting of the Descartian disembodied reason exemplified in the kind of modernity Coetzee's fictional Novilla embodies (Rutherford 66-69) . While like the migrants analyzed by Rutherford, the native other of apartheid represents a constitutive outside of capitalist modernity in *Waiting for the Barbarians,* I have sought to address the possibiliries of establishing an ethical address across what seemss incommensurable distances by thinking the (suffering other's)body as precisely that which is excreted by the time of History in *Waiting for the* Barbarians.To establish my argument, I have tried to situate Coetzee's novel in the context of apartheid South Africa by reading it through Coetzee's analysis of the apartheid artichetct Geoffrey Kronje's writings on contagion and blood-mixing and critique of the same paranoia regarding black presence in Maynard Swanson's essay on the sanitation syndrome in early twentieth century South Africa. I argue that the excremental in this particular Coetzee novel must be thought through an immanent critique of the discourse of History and 'civilization' in apartheid

South Africa: a discourse that Coetzee's protagonist, the Magistrate, finds empires of all kinds imposing upon its dead and living subjects. While the Magistrate remains party to this civilizational discourse he condemns to the very end, I argue that the Magistrate's cultured horror at 'matter out of place'—to borrow Mary Douglas's famous formulation of dirt—must be counterfocalized to arrive at the possibility of building an ethical approach to the (seemingly unknowable other) in a way that doesn't risk usurpation of the other's unrepresentable suffering in the novel. To this end Mieke Bal and Gayatri Spivak' arguments regarding narrative focalization have provided me with the necessary theoretical scaffolding as has Dominic La Capra' conception of 'empathic unsettlement': i.e. a middle ground between 'acting out' and 'working through', identification and empathy, that allows the secondary witness to 'affectively and cognitively' relate to victims of trauma 'in compassionate ways that remain respectful of their otherness'(La Capra xxiii-xxiv). I conclude my analysis by drawing upon Joshua.D Esty's "Excremental Postcolonialism" to argue that, like in the Soyinka and Armah novels analyzed by Esty, *Waiting for the Barbarians* foregrounds the void between the disembodied time of history and the experiential time of individual trauma that is hardly accounted for in triumphal narratives of imperial nationhood.

---

i. For a socio-historical and psycho-analytical reading of this problematic, see, respectively, Maynard Swanson's "The Sanitation syndrome: bubonic plague and urban native policy in the Cape colony 1900-09"(1977) and J.M.Coetzee's "The mind of apartheid: Geoffrey Cronje (1907-)"(1991).

ii. As my use of the concept of 'empathic unsettlement' later in the paper hopefully demonstrates, contamination here does not imply collapse/confusion of self and other.

[iii] See J.M.Coetzee's "The mind of apartheid: Geoffrey Cronje (1907-)"(1991) for a masterly reading of 'contagious suggestibility' at work in the writings of one of the chief architects of aparthreid. Coetzee's reading of contagious suggestibility in terms of metonymic displacement in this essay inspires me to think of trauma in his fiction in terms of a similar, horizontal transmissibility.

[iv] Bringing us 'to the verge of the insight that sanity is based on the ability to cultivate a not-knowing, even an indifference' (Hartman 274), the following passage from *Elizabeth Costello* attests exactly to the 'worrying transmissibility' Luckhurst is discussing in his theorization of the trauma-paradigm:

> "Word by word, step by step, heartbeat by heartbeat, I accompany him [West] into the darkness. *No one has been here before*, I hear him whisper, and so I whisper too; our breath is as one. *Ours is the death that will be died, ours the hand that will knot the rope* (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 174; emphasis original).

[v] As Scarry puts it, 'physical pain does not merely resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, ... '(Scarry 4)

[vi] A reading of Coetzee's 1986 essay", "Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African state" reveals that the refusal to reproduce a mimetic account of the experience of the traumatized is strategic on Coetzee's part. For this essay argues that when faced with the task of the obscenities of torture, the writer must not provide the reader with a voyeuristic experience of looking on violence with 'horrified fascination' nor should avert his gaze from the scene of violence. The choice beyond 'looking on in horrified fascination' and 'turning one's eyes away' is precisely the one that informs Coetzee's novelistic ethics in *Waiting for the Barbarians*

[vii] See Sander Gilman's *Franz Kafka, the Jewish Patient* (1995) and Linda Munk's "What Does Hegel Make Of The Jews: A Scato-logical reading of Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*"(1994) for deployment of the idea of the infectious, dirty Jew in analyses of Kafka's fiction.

[viii] See Biko's *I Write What I Like* (1978) for forceful iterations of this idea.

[ix] Shit confounds the distinction between self and other, thereby rupturing the dichotomous construction of civilized self and 'barbarian' other that helped produce and consolidate Imperial domination all over the world.

[x] Quite clearly, the Magistrate in Coetzee's novel is an example of what Bal sees as the 'character-as-focalizer' who is 'the point from which the elements [in the narrative} are viewed (Bal 149). Since the reader watches the events in the narrative through this focalizer, he 'will be inclined to accept' (Bal 150) his perspective. As I have been arguing, this alignment with the character as focalizer must be rejected so that the reader can glimpse the possibilities of the ethical in Coetzee's fiction.

[xi] I am taking a cue from Elizabeth Costello's interpretation of the obscene as *'off-stage'* (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 148-149) to describe the violation of the barbarian girl in particular, whose torture in the novel does indeed take place off-stage and thereby provides Coetzee with the opportunity of articulating and interrogating an ethics and politics of rendering the invisible visible.

[xii] Here I am loosely borrowing the vocabulary Emmanuel Levinas uses to develop his ethics of alterity in *Totality and Infinity.*

[xiii] South African historians such as Paul S. Landau has shown how this conception of history was exported to and marshalled in South Africa by colonial administrators and missionaries to bolster the ideology of work seminal for extracting black labour for the first wave of industrialization in South Africa during the late 19th century.

[xiv] For a reading of 'homogenous, empty time' as effecting a 'disembodiment of History from Memory', see Yi Wu's "The Historical and Its Discontents: Nietzsche and Benjamin Against "Historicism" "(2020).

## Works Cited


Attridge, Derek. *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event.* University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Attwell, David. *J.M.Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*. University of California Press, 1993.

Ahmed, Sara. "Racialised Bodies". *Real Bodies: A Sociological Introduction.* Ed. Marie Evans and Ellie Lee. Palgrave, 2002.

Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative.* University of Toronto Press, 1983.

Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History",*Illuminations*. Trans.Harry Zohn. Schocken Books,1968.

Biko, Steve. *I write what I like*. Heinemann,1978.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: on the Discursive limits of Sex*. Routledge Classics, 2011.

---. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence.* Verso,2004.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Coetzee, J.M. *Disgrace*. Vintage, 2000.

---. *Elizabeth Costello*. Vintage, 2003.

---. The mind of apartheid: Geoffrey Cronjé (1907-). *Social Dynamics*, vol.17, no.1, pp. 1-35, 1991.

---. "Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State". *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*. Ed. David Attwell. Harvard University Press, 1992. Print.

.---. *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Vintage, 2004.

Durrant, Sam. *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning, J.M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, and Toni Morrison*. State University of New York Press, USA: 2004.

Esty, Joshua D. "Excremental Postcolonialism."*Contemporary Literature*, no.1, University of Wisconsin Press, 1999, p.22-59.

Gilman, Sander. *Franz Kafka, The Jewish Patient*. Routledge, 1995.

Hartman, Geoffrey H. "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies". *New Literary History,* vol.26, no.3, pp.,537-563, 1995.

La Capra, Dominick, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

Landau, Paul S. "Transformations in Consciousness". *The Cambridge History of South Africa, Vol.1*, edited by Carolyn Hamilton, Bernard K. Mbenga and Robert Ross, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp.392-448.

Laporte, Dominique. *History of Shit*. The MIT Press, 1993.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979.

Luckhurst, Roger. "Beyond Trauma Torturous Times." *European Journal of English Studies*, vol.14, no.1, pp. :111-21, 2010.

---. *The Trauma Question*. Routledge, 2008.

Munk, Linda. "What Does Hegel Make of The Jews: A Scato-logical reading of Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*". *History of European Ideas*, vol.18, no. 6, pp. 913-925, 1994.

Pops, Martin. "The Metamorphosis of Shit." *Salmagundi* no. 56, 26-61, 1982.

Rutherford, Jennifer. "Thinking through shit in J.M.Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus.*" *The Childhood of Jesus: The Ethics of Ideas and Things.* Ed. Jennifer Rutherford and Anthony Uhlmann. USA: Bloomsbury, 2017.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World.* Oxford University Press, 1985.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee and Certain Scenes of Teaching." *Diacritics,* vol.32, no.3/4, pp.17-31, 2002.

Swanson, Maynard. "The Sanitation Syndrome: Bubonic Plague and Urban Native Policy in the Cape Colony, 1900-1909." *The Journal of African History*, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 387–410, 1977.

*The Bible.* Authorized King James Version, Oxford Up, 1998.

Wu, Yi. "The Historical and Its Discontents: Nietzsche and Benjamin Against "Historicism"". *Journal of Speculative Philosophy,* vol. 34, no.1, pp.49-68, 2020.

essence & critique
*Journal of Literature, & Drama Studies*

Panhoca da Silva, Pedro, and Camila Lourenço Panhoca. "A Review of the Comic Book *Maramunhã - na terra do Wanará*." Essence & Critique: Journal of Literature & Drama Studies, vol. 5, no. 2, 2025, pp 96 - 108

# A Review of the Comic Book *Maramunhã - na terra do Wanará*

**Pedro Panhoca da Silva[1],** PhD, Lecturer, FATEC/Jacareí , ppanhoca@yahoo.com.br
**Camila Lourenço Panhoca[2],**Teacher, Antares High School,,camiladopedro@gmail.com
**Received**: 22.02.2026
**Accepted**: 03.05.2026

**[1]ORCID:** 0000-0001-5674-5632
**[2]ORCID:** 0000-0001-6918-9524

This review aims to introduce the reader to the comic book *Maramunhã – In the Land of Wanará* (2024), focusing on the allegory of Brazilian colonisation it embodies. To this end, authors such as Krenak (2018), Tettamanzy (2018), Dorrico et al. (2018), Quijano (2005), Grosfoguel (2005) and Mignolo (2008) are used as a basis for the analysis of Brazilian colonisation and the idea of decoloniality present in the narrative. The aim is thus to demonstrate that this comic book possesses critical and historical potential, serving not only to comply with Law No. 11,645 of 10 March 2008, but also to function as a vehicle for promoting local indigenous culture and as a strong critique of the colonisation process.

**Keywords:** Comic book. *Maramunhã – in the land of Wanará*. Decoloniality. Colonisation

## Introduction

In Brazil, a great deal is taught about the arrival of the Portuguese colonisers in the country, but the focus is usually on the coastal regions. As well as being an excellent allegory of Portuguese colonisation, *Maramunhã – na terra do Wanará*[1] (2024) shifts the reader's gaze to the process of colonial exploitation in the Amazon region, which took place more than a century after the Portuguese invasion in 1500. According to Quijano (2005, p. 119), this was a strategic position for controlling precious metals and other goods through the enslavement of Indigenous, Black and mixed-race peoples.

Created through crowdfunding on Catarse, Brazil's largest crowdfunding platform, *Maramunhã - na terra do Wanará* is an adventure comic book set in the Brazilian Amazon region. Its characters are humans and animals that act like humans. This comic book was the result of the work of the following team:

- Evaldo Vasconcelos: comic book artist from Manaus (Semana do Quadrinho Nacional de Manaus);
- Ray Cardoso: comic book artist from Manaus (Ray);
- Malika Dahil: Moroccan artist living in Manaus, Amazonas (Quadrinhopédia 2023);
- Izabelle Regina: artist from Manaus (Quadrinhopédia 2024).

The narrator is a bird, who begins by speaking directly to the reader about the Portuguese invasion and the abduction of the heroes, which occurred in the previous narrative *Maramunhã – uma lenda de Manaus*[2] (2022). This technique transforms the entire following text into a huge flashback, told by the animal and brought to light by its memory so that the reader can visualize scenes and interactions. This device is a beautiful tribute to Mário de Andrade, one of the leading authors of Brazilian Modernism, who uses a parrot as the narrator to tell the story of *Macunaíma*: *The Hero with no Character*, in his rhapsody of the same name (Andrade 2023). It is known that Andrade was also a great scholar of Brazilian folklore, which proves that this choice was not made at random.

The choice of the word "invasion" by the narrator bird, and also adopted by the other animals in the forest, is not random: new Brazilian History books have preferred to replace the term "discovery of Brazil" with "Portuguese invasion" or other stronger names, which illustrates the

[1] Maramunhã – in the Waraná land, in free translation.
[2] Maramunhã – a legend of Manaus, in free translation.

new decolonial view that many Brazilians have embraced. An example can be found in the textbook *Araribá mais: História* (Fernandes 2018, p. 5, emphasis added):

> In Unit II, we saw that, starting in the 15th century, several European states invested in scientific studies that led to various technical innovations. The development of faster and more resistant ships and more accurate navigation instruments made it possible to explore regions previously unknown to Europeans.
>
> It was in this context that Europeans arrived in America. Most of the territories on this continent became colonies of those kingdoms. Territorial exploration involved the *domination*, *massacre*, and *enslavement* of native peoples[3].

Tied to trees are the two rival groups from the previous comic book: the Quatipurus, as well as the Jaca-Mole, Camu-Camu, Lama, and Tapioca tortoises. The Portuguese colonizers are angry and promise a great feast using the captives as food. Iaretê, wife of Jambu[4] (the tortoise leader), wants to gather the other tortoises to rescue the kidnapped members of her people, but they are all too weak to do so. Thus, she needs to propose a truce to the quatipuru Pupunha, who is being held prisoner by the tortoises. Malvarisco, the strategist tortoise, proposes that the tortoises distract the humans while the captured quatipuru frees all the prisoners. This idea is quickly accepted.

The captured quatipuru returns to his people to bring the others to join the ambush group, now formed by both species. The attack begins during a conversation between Lieutenant De Sá, who is in favor of devastating the Amazon to raise cattle in the area, and Sergeant Saraiva. This conversation clearly illustrates the difference between thinking in favor of creating a development colony versus creating an exploitation colony:

---

[3] *Na Unidade II, vimos que, a partir do século XV, vários Estados da Europa investiram em estudos científicos que propiciaram diversas inovações técnicas. O desenvolvimento de embarcações mais velozes e resistentes e de instrumentos de navegação mais precisos possibilitou a exploração de regiões até então desconhecidas pelos europeus.*
*Foi nesse contexto que os europeus chegaram à América. A maior parte dos territórios desse continente tornou-se, a partir de então, colônia daqueles reinos. A exploração territorial envolveu a* dominação*, o* massacre *e a* escravização *dos povos nativos.*

[4] At the beginning of the text, there may be some confusion about the name of the tortoise chief. This is because the tortoises refer to him as "Tuxaua", which in Tupi-Guarani means "temporary chief" or "influential person." Another jabuti, lower in rank than Jambu, will be called this later on, and due to the lack of diffusion of this word in the Portuguese language, it may cause some confusion regarding names.

> – Lieutenant de Sá! Don't you think it would be more prudent to try to learn from the natives how they survive? After all, thousands of them have been living here for centuries. They must know the forest well.
>
> – Sergeant Saraiva, are you mocking me? What could we learn from these savages, if they don't even know how to make clothes?[5] (Maramunhã 2024, p. 9).

The character of Lieutenant de Sá reinforces the stereotype of the aggressive, arrogant, overbearing colonizer who treats those who are not his people like animals. The words of the turtle leader Jambu about the Portuguese illustrate that, in fact, the despicable beings are the invaders themselves: "I have never seen such savage creatures"[6] (Maramunhã 2024, p. 6). Before plundering Brazil's riches and committing multiple genocides, the Portuguese removed the very voice of the indigenous peoples, since "the indigenous peoples were deprived of their voice because, as linguist Eni Orlandi explains based on the assumptions of discourse analysis, there is only discourse when there is interaction between speakers"[7] (Tettamanzy 2018, p. 16).

It becomes clear at this point that the preference was to colonise Brazil in order to exploit it, rather than to develop it. Although not so evident in the text, the Portuguese commercial intention is almost predictable and explicit, given that, according to Quijano (2005, p. 119):

> The privileged position gained in the Americas through control of gold, silver and other commodities produced by the unpaid labour of Indigenous peoples, Black people and people of mixed race, combined with its advantageous location on the Atlantic coast—through which these goods necessarily had to be transported to the world market—gave white people a decisive advantage in the struggle for control of world trade[8].

---

[5] *– Tenente de Sá! O senhor não acha que seria mais prudente tentarmos aprender com os nativos como eles se mantêm? Afinal, são milhares a viver aqui há séculos. Devem conhecer bem a floresta.*
*– Sargento Saraiva, estás a fazer troça de mim? O que poderíamos aprender com esses selvagens, se nem roupas sabem fazer?*

[6] *Nunca vi criaturas tão selvagens.*

[7] *Os povos originários foram destituídos de voz porque, como explica a linguista Eni Orlandi a partir dos pressupostos da análise do discurso, só há discurso quando há interação entre locutores.*

[8] *A privilegiada posição ganhada com a América pelo controle do ouro, da prata e de outras mercadorias produzidas por meio do trabalho gratuito de índios, negros e mestiços, e sua vantajosa localização na vertente do Atlântico por onde, necessariamente, tinha de ser realizado o tráfico dessas mercadorias para o mercado mundial, outorgou aos brancos uma vantagem decisiva para disputar o controle do comércio mundial.*

The animals' plan is successful, with the fire arrows of the jabutis occupying the Portuguese to extinguish the fires in their tents. Pupunha and her gang rescue the prisoners and everyone flees, with the Portuguese discovering the rescue plan too late. Upon returning to her people, Pupunha realizes that there is someone else on her throne: Ratatoskr. Pupunha demands her throne back, but Ratatoskr wants to hear about her experience in the battle against the humans. After Pupunha recounts what happened, somewhat embarrassed, Ratatoskr reveals that he knows how to defeat the humans, but this involves extending the truce between the Quatipurus and the Tortoises.

While the Quatipurus are excited and sleep well, Jambu has nightmares at night. The next day, Pupunha arrives at the tortoises' location and wants an audience with the leader, but before they can talk, Jambu uses a flashback to tell how he got there. His origins lie in the territory of the Sateré Mawé ethnic group, "[...] the people descended from Uniawasa'p and his son Anumarehi'yt[9] (Maramunhã 2024, p. 17). While still a pet of the shaman's son, in one of the oral stories passed down from generation to generation, he learns about the Purantig, "[...] a legendary artifact in the shape of a carved dark wood paddle, on which the first Sateré Mawé graphics were illustrated, telling the story of this people's journey between the past, present, and future" (Maramunhã 2024, p. 17). This artifact was used by the evil spirits of the jungle, called Ahiang Ria, and was wisely stolen by Anumarehi'yt, who later led his people in the battle between the Mawés and the Ahiang Ria, with Anumarehi'yt defeating the chief of the evil spirits, Pigni Ahiang Wato. The shaman Wasiri'pot draws the founding myths of the Sateré Mawé on the artifact, among them the myth of guaraná.

The Sateré Mawé began to cultivate guarana and use it as a bartering item with other indigenous peoples. Anumarehi'yt set out by boat to trade guarana, stopping at various locations to sell his product. Jambu loved to get off the boat and explore new lands while Anumarehi'yt traded guarana, but one time Jambu miscalculated the time and ended up being left behind by the rowers, and fate then brought him together with Iaretê.

Jambu's story ends, and the lesson that the nightmare taught him is that the Sateré Mawé are the ones who can help them. After the quatipurus and tortoises deliberate on who will travel to contact the ancestral people and who will stay behind to defend the people from a possible Portuguese attack, Iaretê finds a good solution: ask his friend Metá, a giant turtle who can carry a

[9] *O povo que descendia de Uniawasa'p e de seu filho Anumarehi'yt.*

large number of animals on her shell to their final destination, for help. So, some travel on Metá and the others stay behind. A tortoise asks a Tuxaua, a kind of leader of the tortoises, why Ratatoskr said he had a plan, which he soon abandoned after Iaretê's idea. Tuxaua, in good humor, responds to the curious tortoise in slang typical of the northern region of Brazil: "In his case, it's just exhibitionism"[10] (Maramunhã 2024, p. 24), slang that means "arrogance" for northerners.

After a long journey, Jambu and his team arrive in the lands of the Sateré Mawé. He recognizes Anumarehi'yt, who still wears a necklace of teeth, but actually discovers that it is Hywi, Anumarehi'yt's grandson, who immediately recognizes Jambu, thanks to the stories told by his grandfather. Hywi takes them to his home, where they meet Arehun, his wife, and some allies from Nusoken, the land of the Sateré Mawé: a pegasus, a gnome, and a harpy. However, Hywi reveals that the Porantig has been stolen by Portuguese spies, because "the invaders have spies who search the villages for treasures to take back to them"[11] (Maramunhã 2024, p. 33). On this subject, Ailton Krenak (2018, p. 28) adds that

> The roots of Brazil's history are founded on the war of conquest waged by the State, which consolidated its power over our territories, taking our places of wealth and abundance and reducing us to places that are called parks, reserves, villages, or indigenous lands. This is an absolute reduction of the sense of freedom, sovereignty, and quality of life that our people have always experienced and lived for generations and generations. Losing our territories, losing our tranquility, and losing our peace was the result for our people of the construction of Brazil, with many of our tribes paying with their lives for this process of building the Brazilian nation[12].

Meanwhile, Sergeant Saraiva is arrested for treason simply for having met an indigenous woman who took him to her village to meet her family.

---

[10] *No caso dele, é só pavulagem.* The word "pavulagem" is a slang for "exibicionismo", more common used in the Brazilian North Region, mainly in the state of Pará.

[11] *Os invasores têm espiões que vasculham as aldeias em busca de tesouros para levar até eles.*

[12] *As raízes da história do Brasil estão fundadas na guerra de conquista do Estado se consolidando em cima dos nossos territórios, tomando os nossos lugares de riqueza e de fartura e nos reduzindo a lugares que são chamados de parques, reservas, aldeias ou terras indígenas. Isto já é uma redução absoluta do sentido de liberdade, de soberania e de qualidade de vida que o nosso povo sempre experimentou e viveu durante gerações e gerações. Perder os territórios, perder a tranquilidade e perder o sossego foi o fruto para o nosso povo desta construção do Brasil, sendo que muitas das nossas tribos pagaram com suas vidas este processo de construção da nação brasileira*

The pegasus then begins to tell his story and how European mythological creatures moved to the Amazon. In the past, mythological beings were welcome at peasant festivals, but they were enslaved to serve the knights who dominated them. Exiled, the magical creatures crossed the ocean and were well accepted in this other region, but the invaders did too. Discouraged, all they can do is fight for the preservation of their own lands, since expelling the Portuguese now seems impossible.

Meanwhile, the Portuguese, armed with axes, cut down the tree where the quatipurus live, who manage to escape and are thirsty for revenge. They unite to throw Brazil nut gourds[13], while the tortoises launch a surprise attack riding on tapirs, which charge like battering rams into the invaders. The combined attack works and the invaders retreat.

This lack of dialogue, which foreshadows the confrontation, is not merely a display of belligerence on the part of the Portuguese colonisers, but rather an idealised depiction of an indigenous resistance that never actually took place. This is because

> There has been no respect for or recognition of indigenous forms of democracy, whether African, Islamic or other non-European forms. The liberal form of democracy is the only one accepted and legitimised. Other forms of democracy are rejected. If the non-European population does not accept the conditions of Euro-American liberal democracy, it is imposed by force in the name of civilisation and progress[14] (Grosfoguel, 2005, p. 77).

Lieutenant de Sá receives news that his troops have retreated and that the forest animals have won the battle. Outraged, he orders Sergeant Saraiva to be released, but he has already been freed by the animals and indigenous people themselves. Surrounded and visibly outnumbered, Sá must accept defeat, gather his soldiers, and return to Portugal, taking with him Ratatoskr, his faithful spy, who had been discovered by the animals. Saraiva is the only one who decides to stay, as he never agreed with the devastation caused by the Portuguese and always showed interest in learning

[13] An oilseed typical of northern Brazil and neighboring countries. Due to rivalry between states, it may also be called the Acre nut or Amazon nut. To avoid arguments about who owns this food, it is simply referred to as the Brazil nut.

[14] *Não houve respeito nem reconhecimento pelas formas de democracia indígenas, fossem elas africanas, islâmicas, ou outras não-europeias. A forma liberal da democracia é a única aceite e legitimada. As formas outras de democracia são rejeitadas. Se a população não-europeia não aceita as condições da democracia liberal euro-americana, esta é imposta pela força em nome da civilização e do progresso.*

about and respecting local cultures. The Quatipurus are given a large tree near the tortoises' village, as this would complement each other's defenses: the Quatipurus would help with aerial defense and the tortoises would assist with ground defense. In the final scene, we see several characters from Brazilian folklore, such as Boto, Iara, Boitatá, among others, happy to have completed their mission: "Didn't I say I would end the war between the tortoises and Quatipurus?[15]" (Maramunhã 2024, p. 40).

The end of the internal war here symbolises the decolonial thinking that is becoming increasingly prevalent in academic studies. This is because there has recently been a certain openness to critical thinking and, according to Mignolo (2008, p. 291), at that time,

> There has been no respect for or recognition of indigenous forms of democracy, whether African, Islamic or other non-European forms. The liberal form of democracy is the only one accepted and legitimised. Other forms of democracy are rejected. If non-European populations do not accept the conditions of Euro-American liberal democracy, it is imposed by force in the name of civilisation and progress[16].

At the end of the story, there is a kind of afterword explaining the intentions of the text: to learn about the Sateré-Mawé culture through "[...] fiction based on the historical and cultural reality of one of the most emblematic indigenous peoples of the Amazon"[17] (Maramunhã 2024, p. 41). Something that greatly helped in the immersion of this narrative was the contact between the creators of *Maramunhã – na terra do Wanará* and the Sateré-Mawé community itself, with whom they collaborated to create their comic book.

Although *Maramunhã – na terra do Wanará* also seeks to promote reflection on the Portuguese invasion, pedagogy is not the focus of the text, which is brimming with fantasy and creativity. This Brazilian comic book is a good example of what has been produced in Brazil since the end of the last century.:

---

[15] *Eu não disse que ia acabar com a guerra entre os jabutis e quatipurus?*

[16] *Não houve respeito nem reconhecimento pelas formas de democracia indígenas, fossem elas africanas, islâmicas, ou outras não-europeias. A forma liberal da democracia é a única aceite e legitimada. As formas outras de democracia são rejeitadas. Se a população não-europeia não aceita as condições da democracia liberal euro-americana, esta é imposta pela força em nome da civilização e do progresso.*

[17] [...] *da ficção com a realidade histórica e cultural de um dos povos indígenas mais emblemáticos da Amazônia.*

> Brazilian indigenous literature developed since the 1990s is one of the most important political and cultural phenomena in our public sphere and is part of this broad dynamic of activism, militancy, and engagement by minorities that have historically been marginalized and invisible in our society, which assume public, political, and cultural leadership as the core of their reaffirmation as a community group and, as a result, of confronting this situation of exclusion and violence experienced and suffered.
>
> The important thing here, for all of us who study the aesthetic-literary expressions of minorities, is precisely to perceive this correlation between self-affirmation and self-expression with and as a critique of the present, a radical politicization of the context, institutions, subjects, practices, and values in which and from which the political construction of minorities takes place[18] (Dorrico et al. 2018, p. 11).

The practical nature of this comic book is enhanced by Law No. 11,645, dated March 10, 2008, which states that "[...] the study of Afro-Brazilian and indigenous history and culture is mandatory"[19] (Lei nº 11.645 2008). More than mere compliance with the law, a teacher who decides to apply *Maramunhã – na Terra do Wanará* with proper mediation can do so in a more attractive way than simply transmitting an indigenous canon with excerpts from various literary texts.

The images are very colorful, usually with bright colors, which can represent the diversity of the fauna and flora of the space where the narrative takes place. Such diversity of colors also reflects the joy and hope of the peoples who resisted the invasion, a beautiful chromatic metaphor for the resistance of the Manauara people, despite a series of negative historical episodes. Although the characters appear to be aimed at a young audience, the critical and reflective potential of this

---

[18] *A literatura indígena brasileira desenvolvida a partir da década de 1990 é um dos fenômenos político-culturais mais importantes de nossa esfera pública e se insere nessa dinâmica ampla de ativismo, militância e engajamento de minorias historicamente marginalizadas e invisibilizadas de nossa sociedade, que assumem o protagonismo público, político e cultural enquanto núcleo de sua reafirmação como grupo-comunidade e, em consequência, de enfrentamento dessa situação de exclusão e violência vividas e sofridas.*
*O importante, aqui, para todos/as nós que estudamos as expressões estético-literárias das minorias, está exatamente em percebermos essa correlação de autoafirmação e autoexpressão identitárias com e como crítica do presente, politização radical do contexto, das instituições, dos sujeitos, das práticas e dos valores nos quais e a partir dos quais se dá a construção política das minorias*.

[19] [...] *torna-se obrigatório o estudo da história e cultura afro-brasileira e indígena*.

work is evident, which remains a challenge that comics still need to address. This is because, according to Turnes (2009, p. 5),

> The comic book is a controversial medium: it seems it is never fully accepted as art, yet at the same time it is criticised for being seen as childish, immature and even backward. With the publishing industry's attention, the concept of the medium has changed significantly, and it is this process that presents new challenges and new risks: the emergence of the graphic novel as a prestigious cultural object, yet at the same time as a radical tool for reading and constructing meanings that elude the (not so) original intention of selling books. The graphic novel is a battlefield, and reading it is an exercise that involves becoming aware of this situation, of its possibilities and limitations, not merely for the pleasure of reading, but through it[20].

Some spelling errors can be found throughout the narrative, such as "viajem"[21] and "recomendo vos"[22] (Maramunhã 2024, p. 21), which do not interfere with the flow of reading. However, a more thorough revision could remedy these grammatical errors, many of which are quite basic. Often, due to the layout of the letters in the speech bubbles, it is not possible to know whether certain words have been accented or not, leaving the reader with the task of reading them correctly.

The comic book *Maramunhã – na terra do Wanará* also serves as a starting point for readers to learn more about this and other stories that children from the project create on their Instagram page @quadrinhossatere. Another "use" of this comic book is to introduce readers, mainly in a graphic way, to elements of local culture, such as the pan flute that a Quatipuru wears around his neck on a necklace (Maramunhã 2024, p. 10) and the guarana fruit (Maramunhã 2024, p. 20), used to make the traditional indigenous drink known as sapó. Finally, *Maramunhã – na terra do Wanará*

---

[20] *La historieta es un objeto incómodo: parece ser que nunca termina de ser aceptada como arte, y al mismo tiempo se la ataca por ser algo pueril, infantil y hasta retrógrado. A partir de la atención de la industria editorial el concepto del medio ha cambiado significativamente, y es este proceso el que presenta nuevos desafíos y nuevos riesgos: la aparición de la novela gráfica como objeto cultural de prestigio, pero a su vez como herramienta radical de lectura y construcción de significados que escapan a la intención (no tan) original de vender libros. La novela gráfica es un campo de lucha, y su lectura es un ejercicio que implica la toma de conciencia de esa situación, de sus posibilidades y sus límites, no más allá del placer de la lectura, sino a partir de ella*.

[21] A very common mistake in Portuguese, since the verb "viajar" (to travel) is spelled with a J, while "viagem" (trip), the noun, is spelled with a G.

[22] In the example above, the use of pronominal enclisis requires a hyphen before the word ("recomendo-vos").

offers a creative take on important tourist attractions in the region, such as the Meeting of the Waters, "[...] the place where the great black river met the yellow river"[23] (Maramunhã 2024, p. 20).

For those who are not yet interested in Brazil's ancestral culture, *Maramunhã – na terra do Wanará* can be an interesting introduction, as it provides readers with a simple story, based on a wealth of information and research, which will certainly enrich their knowledge of one specific culture among the hundreds found in the Amazon region. Since the damage was done more than 500 years ago, "it remains [for indigenous peoples] to be listened to with the depth and respect they deserve"[24] (Tettamanzy 2018, p. 17, our additions) and to learn, through this violent intervention, not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

[23] [...] *o lugar onde o grande rio negro se encontrava com o rio amarelo*.
[24] *Resta [os povos indígenas] serem escutados com a profundidade e o respeito devidos.*

**Works Cited**


Andrade, Mário de. *Macunaíma*: The Hero with no Character. 1st ed. Trad. Katrina Dodson. New Directions, New York, 2023.

Bēhance: Ray Cardoso. https://www.behance.net/ilustraray?tracking_source=search_projects%7CDia+do+cliente. Accessed: 08 Oct. 2025.

Dorrico, J; Danner, LF; Correia; HHS; Danner, F. Considerações iniciais. In: Dorrico, J; Danner, LF; Correia; HHS; Danner, F. (ed). *Literatura indígena brasileira contemporânea*: criação, crítica e recepção. Editora Fi, Porto Alegre, 2018. pp. 11-14.

Editora Moderna. *Araribá mais*: História. 1st ed. v. 2. Moderna, São Paulo, 2018.

Grosfoguel, Ramón. "Para descolonizar os estudos de economia política e os estudos pós-coloniais: Transmodernidade, pensamento de fronteira e colonialidade global." *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, no. 80, 2008, pp. 115-147. doi.org/10.4000/rccs.697.

Krenak, A. Retomar a história, atualizar a memória, continuar a luta. In: Dorrico, J; Danner, LF; Correia; HHS; Danner, F. (ed.). *Literatura indígena brasileira contemporânea*: criação, crítica e recepção. Editora Fi, Porto Alegre, 2018. pp. 27-36.

Lei nº 11.645, de 10 março de 2008. https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_ato2007-2010/2008/lei/l11645.htm. Accessed: 11 Oct. 2025.

Maramunhã: na terra do Waraná. 1st ed. Editora Nona Arte, Manaus, 2024.

Maramunhã: uma lenda de Manaus. 1st ed. Editora Nona Arte, Manaus, 2022.

Mıgnolo, Walter D. “Desobediência epistêmica: a opção descolonial e o significado de identidade em política”. *Cadernos de Letras da UFF*, no. 34, 2008, p. 287-324.

Quıjano, Aníbal. *A colonialidade do saber: eurocentrismo e ciências sociais*. Perspectivas latino-americanas. Buenos Aires: Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales, 2005.

Quadrinhopédia: *Izzi Regina*. 2024. https://quadrinhopedia.com.br/pessoas/izzi-regina/. Accessed: 08 oct. 2025.

Quadrinhopédia: *Malika Dahil*. 2023. https://quadrinhopedia.com.br/pessoas/malika-dahil/. Accessed: 08 oct. 2025.

Semana do Quadrinho Nacional de Manaus: *Evaldo Vasconcelos*. https://semanadoquadrinhomao.com.br/evaldo-vasconcelos/. Accessed: 08 oct. 2025.

Turnes, Pablo. *La novela gráfica*: innovación narrativa como forma de intervención sobre lo real. Diálogos de la Comunicación, 2009.