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## Editor's Preface

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\* **Dr. Önder Çakırtaş**  
Founding Editor-in-Chief

I am proud and happy to meet our readers with our second issue. Even though it is not possible to put into words the pleasure of having our second issue in such a chaotic environment, which is challenging and intense, I still find it essential to express it here. The corrosive effect of the COVID-19 pandemic in academic settings has made possible the positive impact of this journal and studies like it on academia and academics.

Above all, I would like to thank everyone who contributed to this issue. I am grateful to the esteemed editorial board, referees and authors for supporting our journal with their evaluations, critical approaches and valuable articles.

As I stated in our first issue, one of the key objectives of this journal is to cover quality studies that will take the journal to a noticeable level in the international arena. One of the sure steps to raise awareness in the international community is to introduce our journal to globally accepted databases and indexes. In this context, I am honoured to announce that *Essence & Critique* has been included in the MLA International Bibliography and listed in the MLA Directory of Periodicals as of its second issue.

As in the first issue, this issue covers interesting and wide-ranging articles. In the current one, besides the subjects covering cultural studies, various different and valuable foci such as theatre studies, literary studies and comparative studies are observed.

I would also like to thank my technical team for all their efforts. While delivering this year's last issue of *Essence & Critique* to our readers, I wish a good new year to everyone and exclusively to the academy world.

Önder Çakırtaş  
Founding-Editor in Chief



## “Return Things to Nature’s Norms”: A Material Feminist Reading of the Surrogate Bodies in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ethics of surrogate bodies in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003) through the lens of material feminisms. The first section of the paper examines the exploitation of the surrogate mother, the Handmaid, by the Gilead administration and the genetic engineered nonhuman entities, the pigoons, and nature, by the authoritative scientists in the Compounds. In doing this, the author uncovers the ideologies of patriarchy, reductionism, and mechanization embedded within Gilead’s surrogate system and food distribution system and the Compound’s production of the genetically engineered pigoons ersatz food cultures. The latter part of the article highlights the parallel irony embedded within each novel, whereby the Handmaids, the pigoons, and nature resist and offer revenge through adapting and surviving throughout the stories. These reversed power relationships function as a composite material feminist counter-narrative as opposed to the patriarchal, anthropocentric, reductionist consciousnesses imposed by the Gilead administration and the Compounds. This emphasizes that the core element to “survive” in a dystopian environment is embracing material feminisms.

### KEYWORDS

non-anthropocentrism, material feminism, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, resistance, adaption, survive, surrogate bodies

## 1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood's vision of the future seems to be a dystopian one. Both *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *Oryx and Crake* (2003) depict a similar dystopian environmental background in which an uncontrolled use of chemical substances and natural resources have caused problems such as droughts, global warming, food shortages, and new diseases. Under these circumstances, the Republic of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* attempts to cope with the preservation of human life through imposing the system of surrogacy upon women who have reproductive ability. At the same time, the Compounds in *Oryx and Crake* focus on human enhancement through the production of surrogate animals and genetically modified products. This similarity between the two foregrounds the central theme of this paper: the ethics of surrogate bodies.

According to *Oxford Living Dictionaries*, "surrogate" means "substitute" or "replacement" (2019). Following this, a surrogate mother is therefore a substitute mother. More specifically, as Anton van Niekerk and Liezel van Zyl note, a surrogate mother is "a woman who, for financial and/or compassionate reasons, agrees to bear a child for another woman who is incapable or, less often, unwilling to do so herself" (345). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, all women with reproductive ability are forced to be surrogate mothers while the role of social and legal mother is taken over by women who are married to the upper-class citizens in Gilead. This brings a wealth of more complex ethical issues around gender, labor, exploitation and inequality. While in *The Handmaid's Tale* the ethical dilemmas surrounding the surrogate Handmaids become a primary concern, *Oryx and Crake* explores the unethical use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) such as the pigoons (pig-baboon hybrid), rakunk (raccoon-skunk), wolvog (wolf-dog), snat (rat-snake) for human enhancement as well as entertainment. Here I explore the parallel structure embedded within the representations of the surrogate mothers in *The Handmaid's Tale* and the surrogate animals in *Oryx and Crake*, suggesting that on the one hand, both the Handmaids (spare womb factory) and the pigoons (spare human organs factory) serve as the victims of the patriarchal, reductionist, anthropocentric surroundings. On the other hand, the surrogate bodies destabilize the male-dominant, anthropocentric power structure through their resistance against the systems.

In both novels, the patriarchal and anthropocentric norms are imposed through (i) the surrogacy project, (ii) the food distribution system, and (iii) the operating or educational systems by the upper-class and authoritarian communities such as militarists, capitalists, and scientists. Following this, the first section of the paper uncovers the ideologies of patriarchy, reductionism, and mechanization embedded within Gilead's surrogate system and food distribution system in *The Handmaid Tale* and the Compound's production of the genetically engineered pigoons and

ersatz food cultures in *Oryx and Crake*. The later part of the article highlights the parallel irony in each novel, whereby both the Handmaids and the pigeons resist the patriarchal administration and enact revenge by adapting and surviving throughout the stories. In conclusion, I argue that these reversed power relationships can be regarded as a material feminist<sup>1</sup> counter-act against the patriarchal, anthropocentric, and reductionist perception and act.

## 2. Bio-Perversity: Ethical Problems of the Surrogate Bodies for Human

### Enhancement and Consumption

#### 2.1 *The Handmaid’s Tale*

After being deprived of identity, family, and property, fertile women in Gilead are classified as the Handmaids based on their biological make-up, called “two-legs wombs” (135). This role is created in combination with Gilead’s patriarchal surrogate system, alongside its dehumanizing education and auto-cannibalized food distribution system as a way to control the Handmaids, making them reproductive machines or commodities for Gilead’s upper-class community to consume. Regarding the first aspect, Gilead’s surrogate system shows that neither the rights of the child nor the surrogate mother is taken into consideration, as the child is not told about his/her biological mother, and the Handmaid is forced to detach herself—both emotionally and physically—from the child once it is born. Furthermore, there is no post-pregnancy support but rather another enforced pregnancy as long as the Handmaid is still biologically capable. This aspect reveals itself in the story of Ofwarren. When Ofwarren delivers a seemingly healthy baby girl, it is taken immediately and named Angela by the Wife, leaving Ofwarren to suffer emotionally from the post-partum separation. When Angela turns out to be a “shredder” and does not live, Ofwarren is profoundly distressed, and without any psychiatric support, she eventually goes insane.

The forced surrogacy system in the novel is unethical in the sense that “it does not require the surrogate mother to feel in certain ways, but rather to act in certain ways” (qtd. in Anton and Liezl 346). As E. S. Anderson claims, “by requiring the surrogate mother to repress

<sup>1</sup> While postmodern feminists tend to see the concept of the real or material as a product of language having its reality only in languages, material feminists argue that “we need a way to talk about the materiality of the body as itself an active, sometimes recalcitrant, force” (*Material Feminisms* 4). In her article, Karan Barad also recognizes the problem of contemporary feminist theory, claiming that “[l]anguage has been granted too much power... it seems that at every turn lately every ‘thing’—even materiality—is turned into a matter of language, or some other form of cultural representation” (qtd. in *MF* 103). Similarly, Judith Butler notes, “[t]he self may be performative [...] but those performances are materially constrained” (*MF* 68). “Bodies matter,” Butler continues to note, “not because they cause our body, but because the living of them as material [...] is made possible only through regarding ourselves as subjects, as beings who have some recognizable, repeatable, and accountable identity”; “Our bodily relations—our components, affections, habits, perceptions—are subject, not just to an other who recognizes me, but to one who will recognize me as this or that social being” (*MF* 68). In this regard, material feminists focus on the agency of the living bodies and underline the problematic patriarchy and capitalism as central in understanding women’s oppression.



whatever parental love she feels for the child, these norms convert women's labor into a form of alienated labor" (qtd. in Anton and Liezl 346). Following Anderson, women in Gilead are dehumanized as alienable commodities, as there is no difference between women's reproductive labors and other forms of physical labor. In reality, Ofwarren's story reminds us of the case of the surrogate mothers in India. According to "Surrogacy: Ethical and Legal Issues," the poor, illiterate women in India have no right to take charge of "their own body and life" and hence often become victims of commercial surrogacy (Saxena et al., 2012). Once the surrogacy agreements are made, the surrogate mothers are isolated from the outside world for the duration of pregnancy. If the outcome of the pregnancy turns out unfavorably, they are unlikely to be paid. On top of this, there is "no provision of insurance or post-pregnancy medical and psychiatric support" for them (Saxena et al., 2012). Gilead's forced surrogacy service thus recalls India's commodified surrogacy system, which is constructed upon its hierarchal class divisions and patriarchal socio-cultural norms.

Ofwarren's uncontrollable insanity after losing her child further highlights the unethical aspect of Gilead's forced surrogacy system. Here, we have to understand that pregnancy is not only a biological process but also a "social" and "psychological" process. During the period of pregnancy, the mother develops an intimate bond with her child both psychologically and physically. This bond between the mother and her child is an integral part of her pregnancy. As Anton and Liezl note, "a woman's reproductive labor is more 'integral' to her identity than her other productive capacities" (347). Furthermore, what exactly distinguishes women's reproductive labor from other forms of labor is that "the product of their labors is not *something* but *someone*" (Anton and Liezl 347). However, in Gilead, the pregnant Ofwarren is not expected to recognize that she is expecting her child. The Gilead administration attempts to separate pregnancy from the conscious knowledge that one will give birth to *her* child. In this way, the surrogate mother becomes a mere "human incubator" for someone else's child, foregrounding the Gilead's dehumanized reproductive system.

In Gilead, the upper-class men make the surrogate mothers relinquish their ability to interpret and control the meaning or significance of their reproductive labors. "You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs," as Offred's Commander claims (211). Here, Karen Stein notes, "women become for him [men] the eggs which are broken and consumed to create a better life for the patriarchal ruling class" (67). To achieve this so-called "better life," the Handmaids are put into the category of nonhumans. As Offred claims, "I wait, washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig" (69). Here, Offred's description of herself as a farm pig reflects the problem of the anthropocentric/patriarchal ruling system imposed by the Gilead administration. According to Jim Mason, animals in the intensive farming factory are living in "a concentration camp,"

whereby a large number of animals are locked in an indoor facility and are fed “a steady diet of grain” before being turned into “meat, milk, and eggs” (qtd. in Szttybel 105). This enables one to imagine Gilead itself as a kind of concentration camp or dehumanizing factory farm, in which the Handmaids’ personal identities are being stripped away, and they are treated like intensive farm animals for surrogate reproductive service and sexual consumption by the privileged community in Gilead. The dehumanization of the surrogate mothers thus highlights Gilead’s unethical ruling system that is based on male-dominant and human-centric norms.

For the authoritarian community, another way to make a “better life” in Gilead is to force the Handmaids to adapt its unethical and self-destructive philosophy. During her time at the Red Center, Offred is taught by Aunt Lydia that “America was dying of too much [reproductive] choice” and hence no choice should be given to fertile women by Gilead that declares: *give us children, or else you die* (25). Influenced by this philosophy, Offred starts to think that she will die if she does not get pregnant: “*Give me children, or else I die*” (61). Furthermore, while having an egg for breakfast, Offred cannot stop thinking whether the life of *laying eggs* and “incubating” was the only life that she could and should pursue: “The minimalist life. Pleasure is an egg...If I have an egg, what more can I want?”(111). Offred’s destruction of self-worth and identity is, therefore, an outcome of Gilead’s self-destructive philosophy that is constructed upon the anthropocentric, patriarchal ideologies (69).

The food distribution system is another model that is based on a patriarchal, anthropocentric worldview. In Gilead, the food distribution system is based on the concept of “auto-cannibalistic consumption, “whereby the Handmaids are transformed into both “edible” and “self-eating” creatures (Christou 415, 416). This aspect reveals itself in an episode concerning Offred’s breakfast, in which Offred recalls the eggcup as “a woman’s torso in a skirt” under which one of the eggs is “being kept warm”(110). This image is parallel to the tradition of the Birth Day ceremony in Gilead, whereby the Wife will sit on top of the Handmaid during labor. Referring to this similar structure, the eggs Offred eats are no doubt associated with human ovaries, which are how Handmaids are referred to in Gilead. Offred’s eating of eggs/ovaries thus symbolizes the process of self-cannibalism or self-disembodiment; by swallowing the eggs given by Gilead, Offred is transformed into *something* (two-legs wombs) from *someone*. Gilead’s food distribution system is therefore unethical based on the fact that it is a form of self-cannibalism.

## 2.2 *Oryx and Crake*

Similar to the Handmaids in Gilead, the genetically engineered pigeons in the Compounds are treated as experimental objects or the human enhancement project. As Jimmy discovers, the goal of the pigeon project is “to grow an assortment of foolproof human-tissue

organs in a transgenic knockout pig host – organs that would transplant smoothly and avoid rejection, but would also be able to fend off attacks by opportunistic microbes and viruses” (25). Used for xenotransplantation, the young pigoons are injected with a “rapid-maturity gene” in order to grow “five or six kidneys at a time” (25). Then, their extra kidneys will be ripped away and used to grow more organs (26).

Here, a profound issue that can be found in this surrogacy project is the mechanization of nonhuman living beings, especially sentient creatures, by the scientists in the Compounds.<sup>2</sup> Sentience is a key concept. Defined by Peter Singer as “the capacity for suffering and/or enjoyment or happiness,” sentience provides a simple principle that determines whether or not one should consider a being from a moral perspective (qtd. in Peterson 45). This thinking is derived initially from Jeremy Bentham, who argues that because certain nonhuman animals are more rational than specific categories of human beings (infants, mentally disabled humans), moral status cannot be determined by rationality; instead, what should be taken into account is the capacity for suffering (Peterson 45). In the novel, this notion is emphasized through Jimmy’s sympathetic view toward sentient animals. As a child, Jimmy feels guilty for not rescuing the “suffering animals” that are being placed on top of the bonfire (20). Jimmy claims that by gazing into their heads, he can literally “feel” their suffering. This understanding of animal sentience allows Jimmy to see the pigoons “as creatures much like himself,” a sentient being (27). This recognition results in Jimmy’s refusal to eat a pigoon. As he claims, “I’m their friend” (30). This cross-species friendship that Jimmy develops toward the pigoon foregrounds the problematic mechanization of sentient beings for scientific purposes.

Another ethical problem that is linked to the pigoon project is the food distribution service in the Compounds. Secretly, the used pigoons are turned into food—pigoon bacon, pigoon pancakes, pigoon popcorn, pork pies—for sale in the Compound’s cafeteria when they are incapable of growing organs(27). As Jimmy/Snowman recalls, “Organ Inc Farms itself it was noticeable how often back bacon and ham sandwiches and pork pies turned up on the staff café menu. André’s Bistro was the official name of the café, but the regulars called it Grunts” (27). Jimmy’s/Snowman’s description leads Richard Ryder to question, “would it [eating those food] not be a partial cannibalism?” (qtd. in Warkentin 90). Ryder’s wonder is grounded in the statement that since human growth hormone genes are injected into the embryos of pigoons, eating them as food thus indicates the eating of “human genetic material” (qtd. in Warkentin 90). This partial self-cannibalism embedded within the food distribution system in the Compounds reminds the reader of the auto-cannibalistic mechanism that lies in Gilead’s food delivery

<sup>2</sup> Animal advocates point out that “the loss of a pig’s life is no less ethically troubling than the loss of a baboon’s life” because both are “sentient, cognitively complex mammals” (Orlans et al. 62).

system, highlighting the similar structure between the two ruling systems.<sup>3</sup>

Thirdly, as Ingrid-Charlotte Wolter points out, the notion of “humans playing God” embraced by the bio-scientists in the Compounds represents a problematic perspective (2010, 265). During Jimmy’s visit to the Organ Inc Farm, one scientist reveals that to “create-an-animal was so much fun... it made you feel like God” (57). Jimmy’s pet, who is a cross of a racoon and a skunk and thus called by the scientists a “rakunk,” is created as an “after-hour hobby on the part of one of the Organ Inc biolab hotshots” (57). This humans-playing-God notion offers grounds for the authoritarian scientists to ignore all the possible consequences caused by their immoral/unethical behavior which includes the exploitation of sentient animals’ bodies in violation of bioethical principles. Regarding bioethics, Traci Warkentin’s comment on the possible risks embedded within the pigoon project is worth quoting:

...xenotransplantation will allow new and unknown microorganisms harmless to their natural hosts, to cross the species barrier, causing infectious disease, spreading cancer-causing retroviruses, and potentially creating mutant viruses as deadly as HIV, Ebola, or BSE. (91)

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Besides the possible formation of mutant viruses, Warkentin further cites other resources to emphasize how genetically modified organisms (GMOs) can, in turn, affect future generations uncontrollably and unpredictably:

“unlike chemical substances, genetically engineered organisms have the capacity to mutate, migrate and multiply” and that “a genetically engineered organism once free in the environment is impossible to recall.” (92)

Jimmy’s mother, Sharon, appears as a feminist microbiologist who represents Warkentin’s viewpoint in the novel. When Jimmy’s father celebrates his success ingrowing human neocortex tissue in a pigoon, Sharon coldly responds, “[t]hat’s all we need...[m]ore people with the brains of pigs. Don’t we have enough of those already?” (64). Sharon continues to criticize her husband’s playing-God behavior as “immoral” and “sacrilegious” as he is “interfering with the building blocks of life” (64). She emphasizes how this humans-playing-God notion imposed by the Compounds, which is “a moral cesspool,” has turned her husband into a capitalist-driven,

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<sup>3</sup> According to Julian Baggini, “one of the most common ways of distinguishing civilized Westerners from ‘savages’ was to point to their practice of eating humans, even if they rarely or never did so. In the Western imagination, cannibalism represents the kind of amoral anarchy that civilization protects us from. To even consider it as a possibility is to slide back to barbarity.”

unethical scientist: “Don’t you remember the way we used to talk, everything we wanted to do? Making life better for people – not just people with money. You used to be so...you had ideals, then” (64).

Arguably, the humans-playing-God behavior is derived from the notion of “mechanomorphism,” whereby nonhuman bodies and behaviors are labeled in mechanical terms. This concept is founded upon “an overzealous faith in the technology itself” and upon “an oversimplified idea of living process and bodies” (Warkentin 93). Consequently, as Warkentin suggests, the mechanization of animal bodies will lead to the mechanization of ourselves, deteriorating not only our “capacity to relate to other animals, our bodies and other human beings” but also our “sentiments,” “moral judgments” and “belief systems”(99). In the novel, the bioengineer Crake can be seen as an ultimate product of mechanomorphism. Crake directly takes on the role of God in creating a new kind of anthropomorphic creature called “Crakers” before wiping out almost all of world humanity by distributing a hostile bio form (JUVE) through the Blyss Pluss pill, a libido-and happiness-enhancing product. Crake’s bioterrorist-like actions show his inability to relate himself to other animals, human beings, sentiments, and ethical judgements. As Warkentin notes, “with the loss of embodied sensibility, of our modes of social relatedness, we run the risk of eliminating our ability to ponder metaphysics, to question our own actions and fundamental beliefs, and with it the desire or need for ethics at all” (101). Crake’s privileging of his own beliefs over all others is a result of his embracement of mechanomorphism, which enables him to eliminate the human race without a sense of guilt.

Crake’s denaturalization of fundamental relationships and beliefs is deeply bound to the pre-apocalyptic world in the novel that focuses on producing “surrogacies of every kind, notably in the area of food” (Zwart 269). This includes: Chickie Nobs Bucket O’Nubbins, Sveltana No-Meat cocktail Susages, Soy Noy burgers, So Yummie Ice Cream, Soy O Boy sardine, to name a few. Other surrogate products which are served for human consumption involve the opening of the designer baby shop by the body-oriented Compounds: “Gender, sexual orientation, height, color of skin and eyes – it’s all on order, it can all be done or redone” (340). It is through living in an environment that is full of surrogacies that Crake, as Michael Spiegel suggests, “appears to think and identify as a commodity” (128). Spiegel continues to claim, “Crake becomes ‘a part of the capitalist machinery’ by treating both Oryx (*‘Mine, mine’*) and the ‘brain slaves’ of Madd Addam as commodities” (Spiegel 129). Hence, Crake’s preference for machinery, commodity, and surrogacy serves as a direct reflection of a neo-capitalist society that is dissociated from emotion, the integrity of living things, and the original form of things.

## Deconstructing Bio-Perversity: Material Feminist Representations of the Surrogate Bodies

### 3.1 *The Handmaid’s Tale*

While eggs represent a tool to oppress women’s fundamental rights and desires, eggs also symbolize a form of feminist resistance. “The food which is intended to control becomes a means of subverting that control,” as Emma Parker’s states (119). More specifically, eggs in *The Handmaid’s Tale* serve as a source for spiritual transformation and collective feminine resistance against the patriarchal Gilead administration. Regarding the first aspect, it is revealed in the episode of Offred’s eating breakfast. Metaphorically, the act in which she slices the top of the egg and eats the contents serves as an act of revitalization for Offred. As she claims, “the egg is glowing now, as if it had an energy of its own. To look at the egg gives me intense pleasure” (110). Furthermore, Offred links the representation of eggs to that of the moon, desert and God:

The shell of the egg is smooth but also grained; small pebbles of calcium are defined by the sunlight, like craters on the moon. It’s a barren landscape, yet perfect; it’s the sort of desert the saints went into, so their minds would not be distracted by profusion. I think that this is what God must look like: an egg. The life of the moon may not be on the surface, but inside. (110)

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This shifting of metaphors from eggs to moon, then desert, and then God, indicates Offred’s spiritual discovery of a whole different kind of universe inside the glowing egg. In other words, Offred seems to suggest that a woman’s womb is a multi-dimensional universe, in which, from period to period, it transforms from a cosmic wilderness to a tremendous warm wetland before turning into an awe-inspiring desert, whereby the spiritual purification takes place. As Glenn Deer claims, “the egg is compared to the moon; the moon becomes a desert, place of spiritual trial and of revelation” (qtd. in Sasame 94). Offred’s symbolic reconnection of her egg/womb to nature and God serves as a form of organic, spiritual resistance against Gilead’s phallogocentric oppression, which Hilde Staels confirms in the description below:

The egg is an image for the barren surface of Gilead and for the condition of the protagonist’s outer body, which is “defined by sunlight” or by the logocentrism of the rulers. Yet the egg glows red from the inside. Underground, a red, hot pulsing process of life is hidden. Red is the color of organic, free-flowing blood that reveals the existence of life energy. (462)

Staels' analysis leads to the understanding that Offred's reliance on the egg's productive (inner) life functions as a survival method as opposed to the unproductive (outer) life of Gilead. Moreover, Coral Ann Howells visualizes this contrast by referring to Offred's womb or "feminine space" as a continent of "cosmic wilderness" (137, 138). According to Howells, Offred's exploration of her feminine space functions as an "intense meditation [that] offers a kind of imaginative transcendence" (138). "It is within this territory of imagination and metaphor that Offred claims the space to write about her body, her memories, and her womanly desires, and so manages to elude the confines of Gilead" (Howells 136). In this respect, Offred's referring to her egg/womb as a wild, vital and transformative space represents an alternative way to overcome the controlling, meaningless and monotonous system of Gilead.

On top of this, Offred's narrative "doubles and multiplies to become the voices of 'women' rather than the voice of a single narrator" (Howells 133). This aspect can be seen in the episode concerning Ofwarren's Birth Day ceremony, whereby all the Handmaids in Ofwarren's room feel as though they were "transported" into the body of Ofwarren, experiencing her pain as one collective entity (127). As Offred claims, "[i]t's coming, it's coming, like a bugle, a call to arms, like a wall falling, we can feel it like a heavy stone moving down, pulled down inside us, we think we will burst. We grip each other's hands, we are no longer single" (125). This collective experience, according to Offred, is strengthened through sharing the smell of "matrix" among the Handmaids (123). Drawing on the association between the words "matrix" and "mother," "womb," "original place" in late Latin medical literature, the sharing of the smell of matrix thus reflects the sharing of motherhood, transformative femininity and diverse individuality among the Handmaids (qtd. in Aristakhova 12). This consequently leads to the suggestion that the Handmaids' sharing of the "matrix" consciousness represents a collective adaption to Gilead's patriarchal, dehumanizing and reductionist norms in order to survive.

### 3.2 *Oryx and Crake*

After Crake eliminates almost all the human race through the use of the poisoned bio form JUVE, Snowman (excluding three other people who show up at the end of the story) becomes the only human being who struggles to adapt himself to the post-apocalyptic environment. It is not only full of natural disasters such as unusual afternoon storms, heavy acid rain and skin-burning sunlight but also dangerous genetically engineered animals like wolvogs, pigeons, and bobkittens, along with pre-apocalyptic insects in the forest and polluted fish in the sea. Among those genetically-engineered creatures, Snowman sees the wolvogs as one of the most life-threatening of animals. Even though they cannot climb trees, Snowman notices that the wolvogs are "smart" and predict "very soon they'll sense his vulnerability" and "start hunting

him” by learning how to climb trees: “[w]olvogs can’t climb trees...but how long can that last?” (126). Snowman’s question indicates that genetically engineered creatures are highly unpredictable because they are capable of adapting to their surroundings according to their needs.

Furthermore, the pigoons are depicted as brilliant creatures and adapt themselves to the post-apocalyptic world. The pigoons’ “rapid-maturity genes” enable them to grow tusks and human-like abilities, which include: rapping their enemies based on teamwork and communication; retreating from perceived threats and weapons; enacting revenge on human beings (43). During his food-searching journey in the Compounds, Snowman is mortally threatened by the human-like traits exhibited by the pigoons. After recognizing their enemy, Snowman, the pigoons plan their attack by cutting off his escape route and trapping him on the top floor of a gatehouse. Through observation, the pigoons understand that Snowman needs something in the garbage bag for his escape. Hence, they use the garbage bag as bait to entice him down to the ground floor. As Snowman observes,

They were waiting for him, using the garbage bag as bait. They must have been able to tell there was something in it he’d want, that he’d come down to get. Cunning, so cunning. His legs are shaking by the time he reaches the top level again. (319)

Drawing on Snowman’s description, the pigoons are a kind of posthuman monstrosity. This might be the result of a mutation from the human-pigoon hybrid genes. As Snowman claims, some pigoons “may even have human neocortex tissue growing in their crafty, wicked heads” (276). These posthuman monstrosities scare Snowman, but at the same time, their subjectivity and agency are being recognized: “[t]hey were always escape artists, the pigoons: if they’d had fingers they’d have ruled the world” (314). Snowman’s description makes visible the pigoons’ posthuman agency and ability to disrupt the superior position of human kind through transcending the boundaries between animals and humans. This recognition recalls Warkentin’s argument that “even if a being is modified, is understood as unnatural...the organism itself still possess integrity of its own, and is neither natural nor unnatural on definition terms” (87). This perspective leads to the assumption that every living organism in this world possesses an intrinsic value, agency, and subjectivity, regardless of its species or biological construction.

In the novel, besides genetically modified animals, nonhuman Nature<sup>4</sup> also shows its high level of adaptability in a post-apocalyptic environment. For instance, while passing by the

<sup>4</sup>The use of Nature here is to emphasize Crake’s dematerialization of nature by claiming, “I don’t believe in Nature...Or not with a capital N” (OC 242).



abandoned block of buildings, Snowman notices that

The botany is thrusting itself through every crack. Given the time it will fissure the asphalt, topple the walls, push aside the roofs. Some kind of vine is growing everywhere, draping the windowsills, climbing in through the broken windows and up the bars and grillwork. Soon this district will be a thick tangle of vegetation...It won't be long before all visible traces of human habitation will be gone. (260)

The description above shows how strong nature can be when it comes to adaptation and survival. No matter how chaotic the situation is, Nature can always find ways to adapt to artificial objects like buildings, walls, windows, and roofs. Beyond that, Nature has the capability to alter a chaotic environment to create its own territory: "a thick tangle of vegetation" (260). Snowman's description of Nature thus foregrounds the subjectivity and agency of over-arching nature as opposed to the anthropocentric notion of "nature as human's object."

In the novel, the nature-as-object notion is enforced by the anthropocentric bio-scientists through their creation of a surrogate nature. This is reflected in Jimmy's observation of the Paradise module founded by Crake:

There was a large central space filled with trees and plants, above them a blue sky. (Not really a blue sky, only the curved ceiling of the bubble-dome, with a clever projection device that simulated dawn, sunlight, evening, night. There was a fake moon that went through its phases, he discovered later. There was fake rain.) (355)

The fake sky, rain, moon and other nonhuman entities in the Compounds are a final product of anthropocentrism, which is constructed using the notion of "nature as object." It is in this respect that nature is deprived of its capital "N" and specific agency by humans and is turned into "a 'storehouse of resources, a bare bones nature with no subjectivity and no personal variables at all: just stuff'" (qtd. in Lindgren and Öhman<sup>5</sup>). Snowman objects to this human-centric and false definition of nature in the post-apocalyptic world. "After everything that's happened, how can the [natural] world still be so beautiful? Because it is," he claims (429). This line foregrounds the materiality, subjectivity, and agency of Nature.

### Conclusion

The ethical dimensions of using surrogate bodies for human consumption, preservation enhancement, and entertainment services are a crucial theme to be explored in Margaret

Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*. This paper has examined both the dehumanization of the surrogate mothers (the Handmaids) and the mechanization of the surrogate animals (the genetically engineered pigoons and artificial nature). Both novels expose the patriarchal, reductionist, and anthropocentric norms imposed by the Gilead and Compound administration as unethical, biased, and oppressive. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Gilead’s surrogacy system is constructed upon the dehumanization and mechanization of the surrogate mothers in the regime. This includes the forced deprivation of the newborn children from their biological mothers, the lack of post-pregnancy support for the surrogate mothers, and the imposition of forced sex and pregnancy upon them as long as they can still reproduce. Here, the repression of maternal love and human nature convert women’s labor into a form of alienated labor, transforming women into alienable commodities. Ofwaren’s insanity in the story indicates that pregnancy accompanied by reproductive labor is beyond what we think is a mere biological process. Instead, it is also a social and psychological process, as the mother creates an intimate bond with her fetus during the pregnancy. From this respect, Gilead’s dismissal of women’s pregnancy’s social and psychological aspects is unethical, inhuman, and patriarchal.

— 15 — In Gilead, this inhuman surrogacy system is constructed upon the patriarchal norm called “you can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs.” This means that the sacrifice of women is inevitable in order to make Gilead a *better* world (for the authoritarian community). Gilead’s ultimate goal isto transform the handmaids into breeding machines or *two-legged wombs* through its patriarchal rules and systems. This includes Gilead’s self-destructive education, whereby the handmaids in the Red Center are forced to go through a brainwashing process designed to devalue their self-esteem and confidence. Moreover, Gilead’s food distribution system is built upon auto-cannibalism, leading the handmaids to view and think of themselves as “eggs” while eating their breakfasts every day. Furthermore, Gilead’s Birth Day ceremony is a practice of dehumanization. It converts the handmaid into a breeding machine by covering her upper body with the skirts of the Commander’s Wife. All these regulations and practices expose Gilead’s unethical administration.

In *Oryx and Crake*, the surrogate system is built upon the mechanization of animals and plants in the regime. In the Compound’s laboratory, there is no ethical restriction in terms of the use of animals for scientific experimental purposes. Hence, the God-like scientists can invent any form of hybrid animal according to their personal interests and hobbies. The fact that most of the scientists are funded by capitalists who only care about their profits further leads to the inhuman exploitation of sentient animals. For instance, the genetically modified pigoons are made to produce six kidneys so that they can generate more money for the investors. Another unethical aspect that can be explored in the novel lies in the food distribution system presented. Similar to

*The Handmaid's Tale*, the Compound administration runs its food distribution through an auto-cannibalistic model. As Jefferey reveals, the meat sold in the cafeteria is actually coming from the laboratory itself, with human genetic material in them. The eating of the bacon sandwiches and pork pies in the cafeteria is thus a self-cannibalistic practice.

Both the human-playing-God behavior and the auto-cannibalistic practice are derived from the notion of “mechanomorphism,” an ideology based on an unrealistic utopian faith in the technology itself and an over-simplified attitude toward the living body, whereby the agency of the body is not recognized. In *Oryx and Crake*, the bioengineer Crake embodies the representation of mechanomorphism. Crake’s killing of all humanity in the world shows that he has lost this embodied sensibility as a human, his capacity to relate himself to other living beings, and his ability to question his unethical actions. However, it is only by living in an environment full of surrogacies that one appears to think of a commodity. From this respect, Crake is only another product of a neo-capitalist society that tends to dismiss feelings, the integrity, and the authenticity of living things.

While the surrogate mothers in *The Handmaid's Tale* serve as victims of Gilead’s patriarchal ruling system, they also play a crucial role in deconstructing these oppressive systems. For instance, in the novel, Offred uses eggs as the source of her spiritual transformation. By associating the egg with the moon, desert, and God, Offred suggests that a woman’s womb is a multi-dimensional universe that constantly changes. Offred’s dependence on the productive life of the egg/womb thus serves as a feminine/feminist resistance as opposed to the unproductive life of Gilead. Furthermore, the handmaids’ holding of their hands together during the laboring process of Ofwarren accompanied by their sharing of the smell of matrix represents both collective femininity and diverse individuality among the surrogate mothers. This act indicates another feminine/feminist resistance against the Gilead administration's patriarchal, reductionist, and dehumanizing norms and ruling systems.

In *Oryx and Crake*, several characters uphold a non-anthropocentric consciousness instead of the Compound’s anthropocentric, mechanomorphic ruling systems. Jimmy’s promotion of animal sentience is one of the examples. Unlike the scientists and capitalists in the novel, Jimmy’s sympathetic view toward the suffering animals and his cross-species friendship with the pigeons foreground the problematic mechanisation of sentient beings for scientific and self-entertaining purposes. Besides that, Sharon’s criticism of her husband’s human-playing-God behavior—the implantation of human tissues into the pigeons—calls attention to the ethical boundaries in bioengineering practices. Another character that plays an essential role in destabilizing the Compound’s ruling systems is the genetically modified pigeons. After most of mankind are killed by Crake’s invented poison, JUVE, Snowman (or Jimmy) discovers that those

pigeons can adapt perfectly to the post-apocalyptic environment. Ironically, it is Snowman who has now become their food source. This reversed power position leads Snowman to realize the subjectivity and agency of the pigeons. This posthuman monstrosity of the pigeons plays a crucial role in destabilizing the ideal situation of humanity through transcending the boundaries between humans and animals.

On top of that, the natural world in the post-apocalyptic world represents an essential element in deconstructing the anthropocentric notion of “nature as object” that is upheld by the Compounds in the pre-apocalyptic world. Regardless of its biological construction, Snowman’s descriptions of the over-arching nature in the post-apocalyptic environment shows us that nature too holds subjectivity and agency in this more-than-human world. In fact, nature has always been the strongest fighter when it comes to adaptability and survival.

From a material feminist perspective, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* play an important role in challenging the persistent anthropocentric and patriarchal bias of dominant norms, proposing that our natural world is neither feminized and mechanized. Instead, nature grows, adapts, and survives. Hence, in order to build a sustainable society within this more-than-human world, we should reconceive the relationship between scientific disciplines and environmental humanities.

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**BIO**

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## Beyond Exoticism: The Gunsekera Complex in Sri Lankan Migrant Fiction

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### ABSTRACT

The article draws on a dubious cultural practice by a group of Sri Lankan migrant/diasporic writers in naming local characters using unrealistic and unlikely names. Through representational examples drawn from the fiction of Su Dharmapala (*Saree*), Romesh Gunasekera (*Reef*, *Heaven's Edge* and *Suncatcher*), Michael Ondaatje (*Anil's Ghost*), and Roma Tearne (*Mosquito*) the article establishes this malpractice to be a failure in cultural representation within the migrant/diasporic tradition. In responding to such authorship the article calls for a rigorous discussion that extends beyond the "exoticism debate": a conversation that, among others, has been developed by Graham Huggan, Elleke Boehmer, Benita Parry. In the course, the paper examines the position of migrant/diasporic writers within the global capitalist market of transnational publication and the place of the global and local (Sri Lankan) academy to collaboratively develop a critique that challenges dubious cultural representation. The discussion concludes that cultural representation comes with a responsibility and that conscious mis-directions need to be academically critiqued; and that the global and local knowledge centres need to think anew in working towards such an end.

### KEYWORDS

Sri Lankan Literature, Global South Writing, Literary Exoticism, Gunsekera Complex



This article attempts to magnify a dubious cultural practice, now of several decades, among a group of migrant/diasporic Sri Lankan English fiction writers where they use proper names that are on the whole alien and unlike names found and used in the country on Sri Lankan characters they create. These names often appear to be either misplaced or to have resulted from cultural misappropriation while, to a resident Sri Lankan audience they read as absurd and humorous. To the unaccustomed eye – including a reader in the global audience who is distant to the semantics and naming practices in Sri Lanka – these names may appear as mundane “Sri Lankan names”. While, on one hand, scholarship has established migrant/diasporic writers’ attempts to exoticize their home cultures, as I will explain in this article, the names some migrant/diasporic Sri Lankan writers use on characters call for a critique that reaches beyond the exoticism debate: one that invites a fundamental engagement with the conversation of responsibility in cultural representation and, in turn, the role of informed criticism drawing on the combined resources of the global and regional (in this case, the Sri Lankan) academies. The questionable use of names on characters is a symptom of a larger issue of cultural misappropriation. This article proposes to invite scholarship on Sri Lankan English writing to revise its own critical and academic commitments in assessing migrant/diasporic framings of local culture. I am also conscious that some of the pathologies focused on in this discussion are not endemic to Sri Lankan migrant/diasporic English writing, but are shared with literatures of other cultures. Therefore, where deemed resonant and applicable, this discussion can be incorporated with and imported to other comparable domains.

The Sri Lankan English canon has a history that runs as far back as the nineteenth century which, over the past seven decades, has emerged as a “new literary” tradition of the post-second world war universe. Its roots sprung as an outcome of British imperialism on the island from 1815 to 1948. Genres such as poetry, the proto-novel, short stories and plays emerged through the nineteenth century. In the contemporary sense, its first work of fiction is traced to 1917 when Lucien de Zilwa published *The Dice of the Gods* (de Silva; Goonetilleke 240). While post-independence (post-1948) nationalism brought on a resurgence of native Sinhalese cultural interest (especially in Sri Lanka’s “southern” literary discourses) English language creativity persisted and, between the 1950s and 1990s, expanded as a literature which engaged with – and often challenged – the changing sociopolitical and economic tides of the new country (Halpe). With the onset of globalization in the early-1990s, a decisive split appeared in the Sri Lankan English canon as a migrant/diasporic branch of Sri Lankan roots gradually emerged and eventually took over local representation in the global world. Over the next three decades, the expansion of the migrant/diasporic writer space effectively pushed its home-based resident counterpart to the obscurity of the margins. Migrant/diasporic writers being published in the

global north were often equipped with opportunities, media visibility, market reach, and other resources of multinational publication that were not available for the resident writer. The race was an unequal one, and so were its outcomes.

However, the migrant/diasporic text often demonstrated cultural and socio-political abnormalities, dissonances and hiatuses which drew criticism from resident writers, academics, and critics. The stemming point of criticism was that certain cultural representations by the migrant/diasporic writer did not resonate with the Sri Lankan experience that was accessed, felt, and seen “at home.” While the global academy has complicated and attempted to nuance the migrant person over several decades of theory and scholarship, the resident critic continued to engage in the defense of a fundamental premise: that it had opposition to concede with the complex migrant subjectivity as explained by the global theorist, but that it didn’t explain the exoticism and dehistoricized cultural misrepresentation that continued through migrant/diasporic writing. To the present time, this situation remains a central debate in Sri Lankan classrooms as a conversation that inspires several university-level dissertations every year. However, the peripheral position of Sri Lanka’s academy in the global academic map has prevented this scholarship from being effectively circulated or in being taken too seriously. Sri Lankan academic critics such as Thiru Kandiah and Walter Perera who have numerous published calling attention to the spatiotemporal alienation of the migrant/diasporic writer and the abnormalities in migrant textual framings of local culture have been neutralized as regressive “nativist critics” by scholarship produced in the global north (Salgado, *Writing Sri Lanka*). Salgado asserts that “the nativist approach [was] a direct by-product of the nationalist impulse for cultural reclamation” (Salgado, *Writing Sri Lanka* 34), even though critics like Kandiah and Perera can hardly be called “nationalists” or advocates of “cultural reclamation” as those terms are situational in Sri Lanka.

In spite of obvious demonstrations of spatiotemporal alienation to Sri Lankan culture in its “living and breathing” form, the global academy has prioritized the migrant/diasporic writer as the flag-bearer for Sri Lankan writing. This preference seems largely to be based on convenience and – in an age otherwise globalized – the global academy’s lethargy to familiarize itself with Sri Lankan English writing produced by its resident canon. This fact is indirectly let out in research that flags the unavailability of resident literature outside the country (Ranasinha 35-36). But – despite its resourcefulness and superior technology – the northern academic critic has not imagined this “problem” as a solvable one at their end: where it reaches out to explore the resident canon for the benefit of a comparative academic tradition that mediates between the centre(s) and the margin(s).

In this essay, for purposes of reference, I allude to the Sri Lankan migrant/diasporic

writers' naming of characters that are culturally dissonant and alien as the Gunesequera Complex. Situated as a pathology of a kind, the Gunesequera Complex has been named after British-resident migrant Sri Lankan writer Romesh Gunesequera, in whose novels the questionable practice is widespread. Sri Lankan authors of the global industry, as Elleke Boehmer suggests, who often "use their hybridity and alienation as a marketable 'aesthetic device'" (Boehmer239), demonstrate this complex in their work. The Gunesequera Complex is introduced and outlined through four representative examples in the section to follow. These four examples are by no means exhaustive, but merely indicative, and are chosen from the work of writers who are either literary icons or are frequently active. Alex Tickell's observation of a brand of literature that "not only dramatizes the contexts of its production but also anticipates the circumstances of its consumption" (Tickell 6) is important to understand and frame the premise where the Gunesequera Complex frequently takes place: in a class of writers considered as those who "implicitly offer themselves to a western readership" as a "guide and translator" of customs of their non-cosmopolitan home countries in global peripheries (Lau, "Re-Orientalism" 585), or alternatively, as cultural translators (Ranasinha 34). The degree of misappropriation and absurdity behind the Gunesequera Complex, at best, instructs the unaccustomed reader and unsuspecting critic to choose one's guide and translator with greater alertness.

In order to situate the Gunesequera Complex, I draw on examples from the work of Roma Tearne, Romesh Gunesequera, Su Dharmapala, and Michael Ondaatje. All four writers have either lived in Sri Lanka in the past or connect with it through family or heritage. They have migrated young, established their lives in metropolitan centres, and turned to their land of heritage as a site for creative writing. Tearne, born in 1954, had left Sri Lanka for Britain at the age of ten. Her series of novels partly or fully set in Sri Lanka published between 2007 and 2010 include *Mosquito*, *Bone China*, *Brixton Beach*, and *The Swimmer*. Similarly, Gunesequera, too, has been living in Britain since the 1970s, having left Sri Lanka as an adolescent. Prior to his settling in Britain, Gunesequera had also lived in the Philippines. Most of his major work – such as *Monkfish Moon*, *Reef*, *Heaven's Edge*, *Noontide Toll*, and *Suncatcher* – draw or reflect on Sri Lanka as a broken land devastated by political upheaval. Ondaatje, who was born in 1943, had left Sri Lanka as an adolescent, lived in Britain for four years and moved on to Canada at the age of eighteen, where all his major works were published. Three of Ondaatje's novels – *Running in the Family*, *Anil's Ghost*, and *Cat's Table* – centrally draw on Sri Lanka. Of Sri Lankan lineage, Australian-resident Su Dharmapala was born in Singapore and had lived in Sri Lanka: an experience which seems to inspire sections of her novel *Saree* set in the northern Colombo suburb of Kotahena, the coastal town of Panadura, and the central hill country town of Bandarawela.

Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* follows the story of an expatriate Sri Lankan woman

named Anil Tissera who, as a forensic specialist representing an international organization, returns to the country of her birth to carry out examinations on skeletal remains of those killed and disappeared by the military. The story is presumably set in the early-1990s: in the period immediately after the political emergency of 1987-90. The proper name of this female protagonist, however, is a male name in both its Sri Lankan and wider South Asian usage. While Anila is its corresponding female form, Anil— as found in the name of Anil Moonesinghe, the former speaker of the Sri Lankan parliament, and Anil Kumble, the former Indian cricketer — is categorically a male referent. Unlike a name such as Chapa, Deepthi, Dimuthu, Kumudu, and Sahan, nor is Anil, as a name, gender-neutral. Therefore, Ondaatje’s purpose of naming a female character in a male name is baffling while its effect is rather quixotic. The widespread violence in the prevailing political climate is characterized by killings and disappearances to which *Anil’s Ghost* draws attention. Among the victims is a working class woman referred to as Sirissa (Ondaatje, *Anil’s Ghost* 167-171), which doesn’t register as a proper Sri Lankan name. Any one of Sriya/Siriya, Srimala/Srimala, and Sheersha can be identified as proper names. Ondaatje’s odd choice of coining a name like Sirissa for a rural, working class woman requires examination as elsewhere he uses realistic names in a list of disappeared men (37),<sup>1</sup> which Ondaatje claims was partly inspired by Amnesty International reports (306).

In Roma Tearne’s *Mosquito*, the issue with names appears in relation to both primary and secondary characters, including that of the male caretaker Sugi and Jim Mendis. Set in the mid-1990s, the novel follows the relationship of an elderly writer who returns to Sri Lanka after many years in Europe and a local teenage girl who falls in love with him. Tearne names the main female character Nulani Mendis. In Sri Lanka, while names such as Nilani, Nalini and Nelani are prevalent— if there is such a name at all — Nulani is a rare name. However, it has to be admitted that the name Nulani retains a distinct “local flavor”: a flavour different from the name given to Nulani’s selfish and uncaring brother, Jim Mendis. For a southern Sinhalese male born in the 1980s, the name Jim is both out of place and out of generation. To find siblings in a family who bear such contrasting names — as Nulani and Jim — is even more unlikely for that generation. The name Sugi is equally alien and rootless to the rural Sri Lankan culture from which the character of the faithful man servant and caretaker originates. At best, Sugi can be assumed to be a shortened name of familiarity. But, this is neither established nor explained in the story, while even those who are not familiar with him, refer to Sugi by that name.

Similarly, in Su Dharmapala’s *Saree*, a study of the main character Nila’s immediate associates demonstrates the writer’s subscription to the Gunsekera Complex. Nila’s father, for

<sup>1</sup> This list consists of ten names — mainly of youth between ages 16 and 23 — which correspond with some names in a group of 48 youth and men disappeared in Embilipitiya, Sri Lanka, in the 1988-90 period.

instance, is named as Mervan Mendis. While both Mervin and Mervyn are common names in Sri Lanka, “Mervan” is quite clearly an aberration. To Nila’s brother Dharmapala gives the first name of Herath; a name which is a common surname among the Sinhalese, but hardly ever used as a first name as in the case of Nila (or their other sibling’s name, Rupani). Its unlikelihood gives the name Herath Mendis a certain absurd comic effect. Another similar instance can be found with the name Gunawardena Edirasinghe (sic)<sup>2</sup>. Like Herath Mendis, Gunawardena Edirasinghe (sic) are two common surnames. A Burgher woman who is supportive of Nilais introduced as Helma Vasha, a name that doesn’t resonate with the Sri Lankan Burgher community.

Romesh Gunsekera’s fiction, as mentioned before, displays the Gunsekera Complex quite consistently over the writer’s career of three decades. Its most recent addition is found in *Suncatcher* published in 2019: a story set in mid-1960s Colombo in which Gunsekera names the adolescent middle class Sinhalese protagonist as Kairo. This name is both unrealistic and out of place for the setting. Kairo’s story is set in a Sri Lanka in transition, threatened by negative social and political change, which is a common theme in Gunsekera’s fiction at large. Political turbulence and social breakdown is at the foreground of Gunsekera’s *Reef* – a novel noted for “dehistoricized exoticism” (Jayasuriya quoted in de Mel 3) – where a servant boy from a remote Sri Lankan village is re-baptized by his master in the unlikely name of Triton. In *Heaven’s Edge*, which is set in an environmentally-devastated island run by a repressive regime which critics identify to be based on a Sri Lankan imaginary (Lauret-Taft 47; Ranasinha 34), Gunsekera names the story’s exotic main female character as Uva. In Sri Lanka, Uva is not a woman’s name, but the 8500 square kilometer territorial region of a province in the south-eastern interior.

Taken as a symptom, the Gunsekera Complex having not been noted or sufficiently questioned in global academia is a question in itself. While, on one hand, as these misrepresentations receive the accommodating nod of an oblivious, careless, or unconcerned global academy, on the other hand, what is received and interpreted in the metropolitan literary academia as Sri Lankan culture itself is placed under suspicion. The ignorance over the names I have highlighted – to use a Sri Lankan expression – can be likened to consuming rice with stones left over by defective pre-preparatory straining, which is readily accepted as part of the recipe. In the postcolonial tradition, a body of critics – among them Huggan, Boehmer, Brennan, and Lau – has drawn attention to numerous aspects of contemporary migrant/diasporic writing that are shaped by and, in turn, respond to market demands of global capitalism: a trajectory which Huggan frames as a “marketing of the margins” (Huggan). In proposing a response to the Gunsekera Complex which I primarily identify as a case of dishonest cultural representation and

<sup>2</sup> In its more commonly used Sinhalese form - Edirisinghe, not Edirasinghe.

brokerage of poor taste, I wish to draw on the conversation on the global literary industry as a space of/for third world exoticism: a space in which the migrant/diasporic writers that come under the present reading are implicated.

Migrant/diasporic writers, at one level, have periodically been identified as creators of cultural otherness in the metropolitan global north. Each writer has a production task in a continuing chain of production-distribution-reception. As agents, they self-locate within a network which includes transnational publishers, media, critics, and academics: an interconnected “collaborative industry” within a shared economy (Brennan qtd. in Huggan 12). In this set up, migrant/diasporic writers have been noted to create cultural difference as “an exotic commodity” used to transport “palatable versions of cultural otherness” to a predominantly “western” readership (Huggan 12). Anthony Appiah identifies them as a “comprador intelligentsia” who “mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery” (qtd. In Huggan 24). Distinguishing such production further, Huggan notes that such representation “tends to pander to neo-imperialist and late-capitalist commodification and aestheticization of cultural difference” (Huggan 6-7). In characterizing Sri Lankan diasporic writers, Lisa Lau identifies “relatively privileged backgrounds” in which the writers were “already relatively westernised even before migration” (Lau, “The Sinhalese Diaspora” 49). Demonstrating “considerable powers of choice and mobility,” to Lau these writers were “remarkably free in action and agency” (49).<sup>3</sup> Lau’s assessment indicates that the Sri Lankan English diasporic writer enjoys reasonable agency and free choice within her/his enterprise. It entails that she/he has the social and intellectual capital to work as an autonomous agent and if, indeed, they are transmitters of culture, the writers have a capacity to choose between cultural translation and brokerage.

As a common preoccupation, the Sri Lankan migrant/diasporic writer is noted to work on “nostalgia,” a “sense of loss” and a “depiction of lost idylls” which he/she often regrets, and longs for “a lost innocence” and a “golden era past”(Lau, “The Sinhalese Diaspora” 51). Huggan understands the literary practice perpetuated by this class of writers in a threefold distribution: as “mystification” (of the culture under representation), “imagined access to the cultural other,” and the reification of persons, communities, and places within a culture as “exchangeable aesthetic objects” (Huggan 19). As Dimuthu Dharmapala asserts, narratives by such writers, with stories that are “unduly embellished” and “often painfully distorted,” can be “detrimental when applied to actual political events or nuanced aspects of local culture”(42). The act of writing the margins, as an economic exchange, implies mobility and acceptance to diasporic writers within their

<sup>3</sup> While Lau’s assessment is applicable overall to Sri Lankan diasporic writers composing in English, this must not be too readily applied to those writing in Sinhalese and Tamil.

metropolitan playing fields. The writer, in his/her role as a “translator of [their home] customs” is seen to court credibility as having “authentic accounts to impart” to a “western readership” (Lau, “Re-Orientalism” 585). To map such writers as a category, Lau introduces the term “Diasporic Oriental”: a classification in which migrant/diasporic writers who demonstrate the Gunesekara Complex, too, can be located.

Navigating against making generalizations, Tasneem Perry – whose research involves resident Sri Lankan writers including David Blacker, Nihal de Silva, and Vivimarie Vanderpoorten– asserts that “resident writers are more likely to be able to capture the various permutations of identities” as they are “negotiated in a day-to-day sense” (10). Novelist and critic Minoli Salgado further acknowledges this distinction when she claims “the mediation of different cultures and readerships in the reach for an audience” to be “one of the toughest things for postcolonial writers” (Salgado, “Autobiographies” 56). The difficulty of this task, however, must not permit a writer to commit cultural vandalism. How difficult is it for a writer to negotiate between his migrant status and the culture brought under his creative project as not to identify a gendered proper name, or one that is unrealistic in a Sri Lankan context? While theorizations should be meaningfully used as frameworks to understand subjectivities and subject positions, they should not be used to bail out a writer – in a manner of speaking – who cannot get a name right. Before I address the problem of the Gunesekera Complex and direct the discussion towards possible counter-measures, it is necessary to address a gaping intellectual cavity brought on by the mutual alienation between the global and Sri Lankan literary academies during the age of globalization which, in turn, has resulted in a disconnect between global knowledge and local claims regarding Sri Lankan English creativity: a pitfall from which dishonest cultural brokerage often benefits.

Till about the mid-1990s, the leading authority over Sri Lankan English writing was based in local universities and their Departments of English. Scholars of the field, among others, like D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, Ashley Halpé, Thiru Kandiah and Walter Perera (names that commonly appear in critical literature, anthologies, and editions) were “locally-bred” intellectuals. In the 1990s and 2000s, as a parallel trajectory to the centralization of the migrant/diasporic writer’s flag-bearer role in Sri Lankan English writing, the academic authority over English literature produced in the country, too, began to gravitate to the global north. It was an inevitable outcome. It reflected how global capitalism operated and of its knowledge production – a key, integral cogwheel of the capitalist system – as a hierarchical and cosmopolitan prerogative. In addition, increased migration of intellectuals and top-qualifying students over the past three decades has negatively impacted the Sri Lankan university. As mentioned at the outset of this article, northern critics such as Salgado popularized the term “nativist critic” (Lau, “The

Sinhalese Diaspora” 55) to profile leading postcolonial academic-critics of the country and, by implication, to morally justify the northern “take over” of the critical industry. Despite superior visibility, publicity, and mileage, the universities of the global north remain distant to the subtleties and day-to-day intricacies of the socio-political and cultural discourses in Sri Lanka. At one level, its spatiotemporal disconnect is comparable to that of migrant/diasporic writers to whom Sri Lanka is always already a far off place. This unbridgeable distance has resulted in an acute dilemma where, on one hand, the most widely circulated academic material on Sri Lankan English writing is produced in a centre that has limited access to the cultural spring well which – in order to do its job– it is supposed to be erudite in. On the other hand, this same academy has spearheaded theoretical discussion that has endorsed the migrant/diasporic tradition whose validity (as cultural translators, not as brokers) the global academy is not fully equipped to assess. In terms of meaningful collaborative action, the exchange between leading northern knowledge hubs and their Sri Lankan counterparts, at best, remain superficial. Whether they satisfy the requirements of a mutually-beneficial, academically-rigorous equal partnership is a debate I wish to leave open.

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However, being an implicated player of the “collaborative industry” (Brennan’s term) that makes the global literature business has prevented the northern critic from raising questions that can be more decisively articulated from the outside. Blind spots can be seen even in the best of the global critics. As recently as 2016, Lau claims Sri Lankan English writers are “mostly educated in the West” and that “many also live in the West” (Lau, “The Sinhalese Diaspora” 48). This is a misleading claim borne by Lau’s lack of access to the locally-produced work by resident Sri Lankan English writers. In another instance, Lau attempts to classify Sri Lankan diasporic writing along categorical ethnic lines: as Sinhalese and Tamil. This is a conceptually problematic maneuver and even a “re-colonialist” approach that enforces in the diasporic space ethnic categories introduced to Sri Lanka in the nineteenth century by British colonialism. From a futuristic perspective, the global and Sri Lankan academies need to bridge the distance between their scholarly practices and search for meaningful collaboration. Collaborative work that transcends the occasional edited anthology where both Sri Lankan and global academics hold forth individually can stimulate the cultural and intellectual integrity of “writing Sri Lanka.” It, in turn, will pave way for Sri Lankan literature in English, as Salgado hopes, to be “read for its internationalism...as well as its cultural specificity” (qtd. in O’Loughlin 173).

As a concluding movement to this article, I return to the Gunsekera Complex in the light of the migrant/diasporic writer’s role of cultural translation. From the point of craftsmanship, any narrated story fundamentally involves character, place and time, and a plot. What, in a manner of speaking, does it signify for a writer to “get a name wrong”: to be a vehicle of the Gunsekera



Complex at the expense of the cultural ignorance of an audience? At yet another level, what are the moral implications of cultural vandalism where characters built in a way to represent a people, a place, and a history are purposefully cast to mislead? This calls for an extension of the present discussion to seek answers by questioning the responsibility of a writer in cultural representation. This conversation has to emerge from the fundamental premise that cultural representation is a sensitive undertaking (that requires responsibility) which calls for empathy and integrity; that the representation of a people and their socio-political and cultural whole requires in depth research, the patience of familiarity, and an objectivity that self-prompts to spot one's own error. The academic critic – both globally and locally – needs to be strong and equipped to defend society by calling narrative malpractices to task, and in challenging writers who engage in fraudulent brokerage.

The character names I have problematized in this article have resulted from conscious choices made by each writer after having deliberated at length before selecting one name over another. But, the superficiality and naivety that seems to accompany their task appears to take away from the intended seriousness of the representation: a fact that immediately registers with a resident reader immersed in the culture being mimicked. In his critique of Romesh Gunsekera's *Reef* and Karen Roberts' *The Lament of the Dhobi Woman*, Walter Perera uses the term "naïve exoticism" (Perera, "Portrayals" 33) to identify the writers' contrived and overwritten simplifications of native culture. Perera implies that certain writers of the migrant/diasporic condition are unable "to delve deeply into the complexities of the indigent characters or their background" and "deal in 'currency values'" (33). The writers I have drawn on demonstrate no reason to be treated lightly for the absurdities they peddle with all seriousness. The end of their enterprise benefits neither writer nor reader. Resulting in cultural vandalism, it distorts the intended projection of the identity of a people. It is an exercise long overdue, but it is about time one turned around to leave. In terms of brokerage, dishonest dealers exploit the ignorance and nonchalance of unsuspecting customers to trade faulty produce, defective vehicles, and real estate with disputes. But, it is for the customer to see wisdom and check for trails of cheap oil, or other foreign sounds.

In activating counter-measures, rather than caving into the pressures of accepting global literature and theorizations of the global academy at face value, the Sri Lankan academy has to relentlessly exercise probing critiques that engage its northern counterparts in a productive exchange. Possessing superior resources and access to technology, the northern academy's lack of thoroughness in being aware of finer aspects of cultures in countries like Sri Lanka – as explained in the article – must be contested. The benchmarks it suggests have to be re-examined, challenged for verification, and vetted through a rigorous practice. The most strenuous challenge

lies in identifying and pushing back the northern academy's self-imposed gatekeeping role of Sri Lankan/regional culture: an activism that requires new frameworks produced in Sri Lanka, and used against the intricately hierarchical comprador capitalist network of global commerce. This requires, fundamentally, an understanding of how global capitalism operates within transnational publication and the academy as a field, and the de-fetishism of cosmopolitan writing as a vanguard of the global south. The limitation of writers who trivialize, exoticize and misrepresent culture to support the demands of the market or who, as vehicles of the Gunsekera complex, render cultural expression quixotic and absurd have to be unmasked and questioned as standard critical practice. For the Sri Lankan/regional critic, the challenge from the globalized age is to resist the temptation to be implicated within the global order and to produce counter-frames that will de-centralize and southernize the global literary paradigm.

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### BIO

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## Mothering the Land: Maternity and Nationhood in Coetzee's *Age of Iron*

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### ABSTRACT

J.M. Coetzee's novel *Age of Iron*, set in South Africa of the 1980s, depicts the brutality rampant in its society and the various repercussions of a nation-state in violent transition. Maternity is a recurring trope in the novel and one of the chief principles along the lines of which Mrs Curren curates a sense of her own self and the body politic of South Africa. Curren's cancer-ridden White body comes to represent the ravages of Apartheid within the South African landscape and its people, both afflicted by a disease fostered and nursed within its own body. The perverted motherland which anchors itself to the corrupt system of Apartheid can only further the systematised bigotry. This necessitates a complete and absolute rooting out of the previous ethos and its adherent's their engenderers to make space for the new. The figure of the dying mother is linked to the figure of a motherland reordering itself as the older order is cast off to beget engendering a new ethical and political system within the country. Coetzee deploys the conventional mother-land dialectic and reorients it within the Apartheid-ridden South Africa to allegorise the nation-state and its people losing their antiquated moorings in the face of rebelling and the unsettling change it effects.

### KEYWORDS

Apartheid; Postcolonial; Motherhood; Colonialism; Illness; Sexuality

### Introduction

J.M. Coetzee's novel *Age of Iron*, set in South Africa of the 1980s, depicts the violence rampant in its society and the various repercussions of a nation-state in violent transition. Coetzee was born to Afrikaner parents and witnessed the empty rhetoric and repressive politics seen during the Apartheid. *Age of Iron* is written as an address by Mrs Curren, who is a retired classics professor, to her daughter who has re-located to the United States of America having decisively shunned the Apartheid-ridden motherland. The very reception of this letter is kept ambiguous which further bolsters the themes of unsettled moorings in a society where the previous order and its oppressions are continually being challenged and confounded. Mrs Curren attempts to inscribe her maternal self into the words of the letter. That this very letter might be unreceived, marks the futility of the classical ideals of motherhood as embodied by Mrs Curren. Maternity is a recurring trope in this novel and one of the chief principles along the lines of which Mrs Curren curates the sense of her own self and the body politic of South Africa. Mrs Curren's cancer-ridden White body comes to represent the ravages of Apartheid within the South African people, each afflicted by a disease fostered within its own body. The perverted motherland which anchors itself on the corrupt system of Apartheid can only further the systematised bigotry. This necessitates a complete and absolute rooting out of previous ethos and its bearers to make space for the new. Mrs Curren – who has unconsciously reaped the benefits of her privileged subject position in Apartheid-ridden South Africa – becomes an unwilling representative of this dictated ethical system which makes the South African landscape a palimpsest of colonial desires. The figure of a dying mother is linked to the figure of a motherland reordering itself as the older order is cast off to beget a new ethical and political system within the country. This liminal stage of violent transition is a stage of possibilities where the normative is challenged and the radically new is imagined.

At the beginning of the novel, Mrs Curren clutches on to her liberal humanist ethos which has long been rendered ineffectual in the hardened and hardening age of iron. Maternal ethics are an essential part of her humanist apprehensions, bearing upon the ways in which she engages with the pervasive violence surrounding her. She employs time-worn maternal ethos as a lens through which to view and judge the world around her – a synthesizing principle where contemporary affairs trace their lineage to classical moorings and attempt to lead towards a stabilizing centre. Mrs Curren's training has been such that this manner of living is deemed rightful and principled. It also poses as a universal and all-encompassing ethical system. Mrs Curren adopts this posture of de-hierarchised order in contrast to her environment where the Apartheid systematically disenfranchises sections of the society.

Moreover, as a retired professor of the classics, Mrs Curren herself has promulgated these ideals through institutions under the aegis of the South African government. As the novel nears its end, Mrs Curren finds it impossible to cling to the neatness of such defining principles and their linear genealogy, consequently wishing for and bearing witness to her own decline. Her daughter's dogged refusal to return, the ambiguity regarding the very reception of the letter, the deaths of John and Bheki who Mrs Curren attempts to assimilate under the fold of her maternal understanding, all testify to the failure of western humanist traditions—primarily Mrs Curren's discourse on maternity, within the socio-politics of South Africa. Maternity had been rejected by the brutalized body politic of the nation much before Mrs Curren was accosted by its unsettling absence: before the Black mothers themselves pronounce, "There are no more mothers and fathers" (Coetzee 39), there are the "grim-faced, tight-lipped Afrikaner children...vowing to die for their fatherland" (Coetzee 51), aspiring death and decay instead of the life-affirming genesis deemed intrinsic to maternity.

### Corrupting the 'Mother' and the 'Motherland'

— 37 — The theme of maternity is linked to the idea of the Apartheid-ridden motherland. Both are corrupt, antiquated systems against which uncontrolled offensives are now being mounted. Mrs Curren's body is old and fighting the growth of cancer cells while the Black rebel forces brewing within the South African body politic, resist and struggle against the institutes bolstering Apartheid and its people. The conflation between the mother and the motherland is a much-employed trope in literature. J.M Coetzee takes this age-old trope often used for nationalistic uproar and parodies it. In his essay "Apartheid Thinking", Coetzee elaborates that for those who actively built and fuelled divisions along the lines of race, the need to control women's sexuality was integral to the project of dictating the "purity" of a race: "...feminine chastity is in itself no guarantee of continuing blood-purity, and the *Afrikanermoeder* (Afrikaner mother) will be the protector of the race only as long as she, too, is protected" (Coetzee 169). The fear of "bastardization" and "blood-mixing" resulted in the heavy policing of the female body. The mother determined and sustained the motherland's demographic divisions and was compelled to surrender her sexuality and desires to those deemed the protectors of the exclusive and exclusionary ethos of the nation. Coetzee's linking of the mother and the motherland derives its mooring from this hackneyed nationalistic and divisive trope. In parodying it, Coetzee calls into question and reorients the ethics of both maternity and nationalism. The liberal humanist mother is depicted as someone who has outlived her times, having unconsciously reaped the benefits of



her privileged subject position. She is now awkwardly caught in a state of uncertain flux. Coetzee reveals the ineptitude of universalised humanist conceptions, baring to the readers the discrimination inherent within such principles and expressing the need to weed it out completely from the South African political landscape. Mrs Curren embodies the principles of Western humanism under the garb of which the Black community in South Africa and their culture was belittled and rubbed out of the colonialist historiography. The restrictive definition of both the humane and the cultural excluded the native African ways of being from its paradigm. At one point in the novel, Mrs Curren remarks- “Death by fire is the only decent death left...to burn and be gone, to be rid of, to leave the world clean. Monstrous growths, miscarriages: a sign that one is beyond one’s term. This country too: time for fire, time for an end, time for what grows out of ash to grow” (Coetzee 65). It is the corruption of the mother through cancerous, monstrous growth which serves to symbolise the corruption of the South African landscape and its ethos through oppressive dictums- both vying for renewal.

#### **Motherhood and the ethics of substituting the self through Levinas’s ‘The Other’**

— 38 — Mrs Curren theorization of her own self is largely predicated on her status as a mother. Mrs Curren’s daughter, though estranged, is deemed to be a part of her own identity. The act of writing the letter is one which inscribes her subjecthood into a narrated maternity- “To whom this writing then? The answer: to you but not to you; to me; to you in me” (Coetzee 6). Motherhood then becomes an act of care and benevolence where the self is able to surpass the limitations of mortality and acts as a means of connecting to the ancient past and the pristine future. Mrs Curren hopes to pass on her truths to her daughter through the letter – which is the only remaining link between the mother and her daughter living in a foreign soil. Micheal Marias considers Coetzee’s novels as exemplifying the Levinasian principle of substituting the self for the other and engendering an ethical relationship based on responsibility (159-170). Motherhood can be easily rendered into tropes which exemplify this Levinasian principle of self-substitution. Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha too posits motherhood as the culmination of Levinasian ethics and writes-

Mother is and is not a part of, and precedes, the foetus. It is an asymmetrical relationship, where the other, in her alterity, is detached from the subject and not dependent on the subject. It is in fact a relationship where the self comes to realize that she is not only responding to the other, but also is in fact responsible to and for the other. (249)

While Coetzee does subscribe to the ethics of such responsibility, he posits it contextually where the binary of giver-taker crumbles. The various aspects of Mrs Curren’s identity- a mother, a

woman, a white person, an aged and diseased body, allow her to embody and access varying roles in the South African society. Rachael Ann Walsh reads Coetzee's depiction of both the self and the other as being contextually defined, which goes beyond Levinas' transcendental self and the other which cannot be pinned into a familiar and historicised definition. This is Coetzee's confrontation with the "ethnocentric failures of universal humanism" (Walsh 174). These humanist abstractions are intrinsic to Levinas' theory of the Other. Coetzee problematizes Mrs Curren's attempts to employ maternity and the image of her daughter as a redemptive refuge from the historicised effects of colonization. The Other cannot be abstracted and disembodied beyond the material and cultural reality it inhabits. The lack of a familiar signifying system, in the case of Coetzee, does not renege into an assertion of transcendental subjecthood but reveals the lack of universal humanist traditions. Mrs Curren clutches on to her liberal humanist leanings as a point of stability and hopes of narrativising herself and her position within Apartheid-ridden South Africa by employing these tropes of motherhood. Yet, they do not lead her to a stabilising centre. She emerges as a coloniser in spite of herself and is conflictually propelled to demand for her own extinction. It is only when the universalised Western humanist tropes disappear that the Black native cultural ethos will find the space to emerge. Hence, her body comes to embody the body politic of South Africa which must die to regenerate a purer form of the South African nation.

### ***Amor Matris: Universalising motherhood***

Coetzee's portrayal of the cancer attacking Mrs Curren's breast as its primary site, symbolises cancer as a dysfunctional form of pregnancy which attacks the maternal space and organ. It signifies the need for renewal preceded by complete destruction. Mrs Curren's attempt to transcend the depraved ethos of her times by deploying her maternity is vain and impotent; she soon realizes: "Though it was not a crime I asked to be committed. It was committed in my name" (Coetzee 164). This links her subject position inextricably to the social landscape of South Africa. From the very start of the novel, Mrs Curren considers motherhood as an offer to give. Robbed of its natural object in the absence of her daughter, Mrs Curren's maternity looks for substitutes and stand-ins, interpellated by the strong impulse towards mothering and providing for those around her. Yet, this substitution, in contrast to Levinas' equalising and de-contextualised responsibility towards the Other, is "radically incapacitated" (Ravindranathan 398). It is steeped in biases both overt and covert. Her interpretations of maternity reflect her subject position within the South African body politic which transcends it in one unifying and universalising sweep. Here, Coetzee

critiques universal humanist tropes and of the inadequacies of a comprehensive and all-encompassing *Amor Matris*. Mrs Curren dismisses Florence's maternal ethics in the beginning of the novel; remarks- "The more you give in, Florence, the more outrageously the children will behave" (Coetzee 48). She is unable to comprehend a motherhood which relinquishes its authority over its children and has accepted the stern severity which has come to define the age, hoping only that her children survive. Mrs Curren instructs Florence to not consign her children to the hardness of the age, vacuously resorting only to rhetoric which sits uneasily within the realities of Florence's life. Walsh calls this the failure of the "Maternal I" and writes- "Her inability to incorporate Florence into her maternal and humanist framework suggests how her schema is shaped by her comparatively sheltered position in the geopolitical landscape of South Africa" (Walsh 176). Coetzee prises the ethics of maternity out of a humanist historicity. Maternity is central to Mrs Curren's classical, liberal framework, but as the novel progresses, this instability calls into question the very idea of Mrs Curren's selfhood. She begins to see her subjecthood as more deeply embedded in history and unravels her inbred complicity in the ravages of Apartheid. While she attempts to narrate herself into the letter she writes to her daughter, the authorial self is unable to account for the history which preceded it. She begins to grow wary of the self she attempts to render into words for her daughter – words which are meant to be unpacked and consequently, absorbed. When her ethics of maternity can no longer be only life-giving and cast into tropes of immaculate genesis, she begins to question her being. She sees how divorced her experiences are from the socio-political realities of South Africa. There are inadequacies in the Afrikaner understanding of native Black lives. The neatness of her experiences which could rely on systems of family and humanism is contrasted against the ravages of Apartheid which Mrs Curren encounters when she visits the Black townships. The evident attempt of the Afrikaner government to compartmentalise the Black community and move it beyond the ambit and purview of the prosperous Afrikaners signifies the divisions which marked South African society. Mrs Curren calls herself a doll – ventriloquised, artificial and unnatural. She writes, "From the cradle a theft took place: a child was taken, and a doll left in its place to be nursed and reared, and that doll is what I call I" (Coetzee 109). Her own link to her childhood is traced through her mother. The cogent genealogy of maternity imbued with life-sustaining qualities unravels and fails to hold as her body, gestating the cancer cells which slowly kill, begins to parody motherhood- "To have fallen pregnant with these growths, these cold, obscene swellings" (Coetzee 64).

The parodying of maternity and linear genealogy reveals the gaping inadequacies of universalised Western humanism within the South African landscape. Coetzee makes evident that all that is spawned within the hardened corruption of the "age of iron" can

only be a flimsy proxy of growth. Mrs Curren's daughter, now "bleeding every month into foreign soil" (Coetzee 64), breaks away from inheriting both her mother and her land and refuses to mother either of it. She roots herself and her family in the foreign land, which is strange to Mrs Curren, severing connections which emerge from a commonality of experience. The daughter fosters a land which Mrs Curren can only imagine. Uprooting herself from the South African landscape is deemed impossible by Mrs Curren who culls her selfhood from within the thoroughfares of her South Africa. The children which are engendered in such a regime and who are emerging from the corrupt body politic of South Africa, do not know the innocent fun of childhood and grow before their years. In addition to a redundant mother, there also exist a shunned childhood. The fallibility of maternal tropes and the maternal self becomes crucial in signifying the non-compensatory and non-sublimating nature of liberal humanist tropes.

#### **Parodying maternity through cancer**

— 4I — In the case of Mrs Curren, cancer blurs the distinction between the colonised and the coloniser. It festers into a thing she cannot give birth to and symbolises the violence which the Apartheid regime systematically meted out upon the Blacks and the consequent rebellion against this institutionalised brutality. Mrs Curren becomes a coloniser who is herself in the throes of being ambushed by cancer cells. Mrs Curren's narrative 'I' begins by being blindingly tied to her humanist liberal conceptions. At the onset of the novel, she instructs Florence- "There are no rubbish people, we are all people together" (47). But these become but paltry defences, failing to embrace and assimilate the black population of South Africa into its purported collective. As the novel nears its end, Mrs Curren realises that her words are but "the words of a woman, therefore negligible; of an old woman, therefore doubly negligible; but above all of a white. I, a white" (79). She acknowledges the privileges and disadvantages which emerge of the nexus of her diverse subject positions, no longer credulous and believing in the all-embracing transcendence of maternity and its unfaltering substitutability. Mrs Curren's cancer brings in its critique of the Western humanist ethos within the South African landscape, eating at all that lies within it. She realises that her subjecthood and narrative 'I' are inextricably tied to the colonial history of South Africa and the plunder of its land and its people by the White colonists. When she rages against the crimes of the White and their sluggish, unfeeling hearts she knows that "when in my rages I wished them dead, I wished death on myself too" (164).

Cancer is linked to notions of shame in the novel. Mrs Curren maps her shame onto her body throughout gestation but is unable to purge the shame from her body. Her corporeal

metaphors symbolise the body politic of South Africa which has engendered the conditions of its own destruction. The repression and shame within a body politic where childhood is despised and which has made heroes out of tyrants, is transposed onto Mrs Curren's body as cancer. Cancer lends itself easily to symbolics of topographical invasions. The cancer cells begin to gnaw at the body and render other cells ineffective. The growth of the cancer cells is an act of claiming the limited space. Susan Sontag in her book *Illness as Metaphor* writes "Metaphorically, cancer is not so much a disease of time as a disease or pathology of space. Its principal metaphors refer to topography (cancer "spreads" or "proliferates" or is "diffused"; tumours are surgically "excised)." (Sontag 16). The body of the mother – the engenderer, the fountainhead – is vectored along the lines of the Apartheid-ridden landscape while both are wrecked and under regenerative attack. The narrative is replete with motifs of colonial invasion. The land which had been taken from the native Blacks by force and plundered was now in the violent process of being taken back. In tow comes the cultural reassertion of native ethos which had been censured and delegitimized. Linking colonial metaphors to the symbolics of cancer, Susan Sontag writes that the metaphors of cancer

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 "... are drawn from the language of warfare: every physician and every attentive patient is familiar with, if perhaps inured to, this military terminology. Thus, cancer cells do not simply multiply; they are "invasive." Cancer cells "colonize" from the original tumor to far sites in the body, first setting up tiny outposts ("micrometastases") whose presence is assumed, though they cannot be detected. Rarely are the body's "defences" vigorous enough to obliterate a tumor that has established its own blood supply and consists of billions of destructive cells" (Sontag 53).

### **Tracing identities to land in *Age of Iron***

As Mrs Curren's body undergoes the process of being invaded by cancer cells emerging out of her own flesh and bones, the corpus of South Africa accounts for the crimes of its own history. Corruption begets corruption in a manner preordained and uncontrolled. Within the spatio-politics of South Africa, history exerts its force in ways both metaphysical and tangible. Mrs Curren's body and her narrative 'I' fail to transcend the perversions of their times and the mother body becomes the site of destructive renewal. Mrs Curren is rooted within the South African land, and it is here that her childhood is spent. She traces a link to her own mother and asserts it as a proof of her being. She confesses that if one were to drive to the Eastern Cape, she would find the place which birthed her: "the place of the navel, the place

where I join the world", laced in the stories which her mother shared with her (121). The land would serve as her "mother" and sustain her, imbued with the spirit and story of her ancestors. Mrs Curren's humanist sense of self is embedded within the South African cultural and historical developments which includes the repression and the violence. When Mrs Curren remarks that she no longer loves the land of her childhood and her ancestors, her own selfhood is implicit in the disgust she now feels towards the South African body politic and its age of iron. Her identity as a mother further problematizes this chain of links where her motherhood is rendered inept because she is cut off from the sources of her own ethical and cultural sustenance. Instead of rendering the once dear landscape inexplicable, Mrs Curren's confronts the effects of Apartheid on the Black community and refuses to turn a blind eye towards the consequences of her idealised ethical anchors. She bears witness to the police brutality upon Blacks, including children like John and Bheki. This propels her to dig deeper and discern the forceful silencing of black lives and histories from the sanitised Western liberal narratives. She initially hopes to find her identity through the links which connect her to the South African landscape – through her mother, her childhood, her daughter – but soon realises that the profusion of her anchored past and its chastity was in fact built on the backs of Black labour. She reviews the photographs of her childhood and questions, "Who are the ghosts and who the presences? Who, outside the picture, leaning on their rakes, leaning on their spades, waiting to get back to work?" (111)? The silencing of their narratives within the expanses of Western humanist traditions is made eloquent. This further explicates the spurious assertion of universality by Western humanism.

The mother is rejected and ravaged by its own to signify the need for rebirth and renewal. The mother's body – the body of the 'engenderer' and nurturer of the white corpus – embodies the turmoil within the South African landscape and is afflicted by it. The topography of the nation becomes linked to the topography of the body which is confronting forces of destruction. Mrs Curren realises the need for such demolition which would attempt to level the South African political landscape and bring the softness Mrs Curren also yearns for. She becomes caught up in her subject position and its need for death as motherhood ceases to be life-affirming and instead harbours and begets only corruption. Mrs Curren and her own body, which is ravaged by cancer cells nursed within it, await the renewal. This renewal is contingent upon the extermination of her current way of being. The familiar tropes of motherhood are defamiliarized and the universalising principles of Levinas' discourse on the responsibility towards the other gives way to a symbiotic exchange where the other is loved within its historicised alterity. It refuses to be moulded into a transcendental, formless and harmless Other. The body of the mother reflects the ravages of the motherland as history runs its

due course, never allowing Mrs Curren to retreat into the synthetic innocence of her liberal humanist past. In Mrs Curren, Coetzee depicts the epistemic and physical violence which a repressive regime and its ethos perpetrated upon its subjects. Maternity is parodied and rendered defunct. The oft-repeated trope of mother as the preserver of national culture is itself portrayed as a product of the degenerative age of iron – the lofty rhetoric of first defining and then preserving national culture is predicated on the need to control women’s sexual mobility. A parallel is drawn between the mother and the motherland as they grapple with forces intrinsic to their own historicised composition, as the renewal towards the promised softer age of clay makes necessarily the destruction of the engenderer.

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<sup>4</sup>The use of Nature here is to emphasize Crake's dematerialization of nature by claiming, "I don't believe in Nature...Or not with a capital N" (OC 242).



**BIO**

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## Nietzschean Nihilism and Alternative Modernities in Select ‘Absurd’ Plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter

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### ABSTRACT

The plays that Martin Esslin famously classified as belonging to the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ are characterised by the presence of nihilism and the influence of pessimism of existential philosophy. The plays of such Absurd playwrights as Beckett, Pinter and Ionesco have been criticised for portraying a world of nihilism and dominated by the angst of existentialism. The major mode of criticism is dominated by the sense of hopelessness and despair of the post Second World War. It has been argued that the plays comprising the absurd theatre are characterised by their depiction of the sense of senselessness and the inadequacy of rationality. While acknowledging the presence of nihilism and the influence of existential philosophy in the plays of the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’, this paper claims that the nihilism in these plays is essentially Nietzschean and hence not pessimistic. This paper will argue that the plays of the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ is essentially based on Nietzsche’s concept of ‘Amor fati’ and that they project an alternative modernity in its response to the pessimistic tone of the existential philosophy.

### KEYWORDS

Nihilism, Existentialism, Angst, Alternative Modernities, Theatre of the Absurd, Amor Fati

**Introduction**

The plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, which have been so famously classified by Martin Esslin as ‘The Theatre of the Absurd’ (Esslin, 1961) are generally looked upon as a response to the existential angst caused by the two world wars, leading to a sense of disillusionment by the European peoples in the 1940s and 1950s. Apart from the war leading to the feelings of emptiness, anxiety and horror, faith in religion started to fade with the enlightenment and the social revolutions’ turning into a totalitarian regime. All these served people well to be in a position where they cannot find any rationale to explain their existence and the surrounding world. It is no coincidence that absurd plays started to be produced at these times. Absurd playwrights theorized and produced plays that thoroughly expressed the absurd human condition in universe. Absurd plays are also responses to the dominant philosophy of Existentialism of the post-war times, expressing human condition such as the tension between the individual and the “public”; an emphasis on the worldly or “situated” character of human thought and reason; a fascination with liminal experiences of anxiety, death, the “nothing” and nihilism; the rejection of science (and above all, causal explanation) as an adequate framework for understanding human being; and the introduction of “authenticity” as the norm of self-identity, tied to the project of self-definition through freedom, choice, and commitment.

‘The Theatre of the Absurd’ depicted the problematisation of the absolutes, historically against the backdrop of the two world wars, which have been considered nihilist. In its devaluation of language, for instance, the play depicts the “existence of an elemental or originary mode of communication underlying all interpretative acts whichever the content of the interpretation may be.” (Wotling, 63) The purpose of this paper is to analyse the existential angst depicted in select plays belonging to the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ and the nihilism in it from the Nietzsche’s philosophy. Chronologically, Nietzsche belonged to the nineteenth century. However, “against the trend of nineteenth-century optimism Nietzsche rejected many of the central tenets of Enlightenment though (the value of reason, the value of science, the value of truth, the inevitability of progress).” (Ken Gemes and Chris Sykes, 377) It is this aspect of Nietzsche’s philosophy that establishes a link with the plays of ‘Absurd’ theatre. By means of an analysis of nihilism in select plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, the paper will argue that the plays classified by Esslin as ‘Absurd’ in fact depict an alternative modernity – a term which implies that the plays can be viewed as a culturally situated phenomenon. Arguments for alternative modernities confirm the need for cultural theories of modernity—theories that foreground place as well as time—but also lead us inevitably to the issue of local agency.

**Absurd Theatre, Existentialism and Nihilism**

The ‘absurd’ plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter have generally been read against

the background of the two world wars and have been taken to represent the pessimistic view of the world that followed the immediate aftermath of the world wars. The faith in the basic tenets of life, considered to be the driving force of life in the planet, was destabilised. The plays dramatise the existential angst in their analysis of the post world war holocaust that has resulted in loss of faith in human values which were considered to be at the root of the development of human being. It is against this background that the philosophy of existentialism has assumed a great significance in readings of the plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter. The philosophy of nihilism propagated by Nietzsche in the nineteenth century, which sought to draw the consequences of the death of God, the collapse of any theistic support for morality, can be seen as the precursor of this existential angst that found its theatrical manifestation in the ‘Absurd’ plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter.

For Nietzsche, ‘nihilism’ is a cultural experience, a profound sense of disappointment and not only the failure of philosophy to justify moral principles. It questions the very basic values, objectivity and rationality that we associate with our lives. The caustic strength of nihilism is absolute, Nietzsche argues, and under its withering scrutiny “*the highest values devalue themselves*. The aim is lacking, and ‘Why’ finds no answer” (*Will to Power*, 9). Inevitably, nihilism will expose all cherished beliefs and sacrosanct truths as symptoms of a defective Western mythos. This collapse of meaning, relevance, and purpose will be the most destructive force in history, constituting a total assault on reality and nothing less than the greatest crisis of humanity:

*What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism. . . . For some time now our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end. . . .* (*Will to Power*, 3)

In Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, two men, Vladimir and Estragon, are shown to be awaiting the arrival of Godot. While waiting, they meet two other men – Pozzo, who is on his way to the market to sell his slave, Lucky. After their departure, a boy enters and tells Vladimir that Godot will not be coming tonight, but that he will surely come tomorrow. After his departure, Vladimir and Estragon decide to leave, but they do not move as the curtain falls. The second act of the play present Vladimir and Estragon waiting for Godot. Lucky and Pozzo enter again, but this time Pozzo is blind and Lucky is dumb. Pozzo does not remember meeting the two men the night before. They leave and Vladimir and Estragon continue to wait. Shortly after, the boy enters and once again tells Vladimir that Godot will not be coming. After he leaves, Estragon and Vladimir decide to leave, but again they do not move as the curtain falls, ending the play.

The play presents the thwarting of the expected 'waiting' for Godot to be frustrated as its sense of certainty giving an impression of the monotony of life and its indefiniteness.

*Boy: Mr. Godot –*

*Vladimir: I've seen you before, haven't I?*

*Boy: No, sir.*

*Vladimir: It wasn't you came yesterday?*

*Boy: No, sir.*

*Vladimir: This is your first time?*

*Boy: Yes, sir.*

*[Silence]*

*Vladimir: Words, words. [Pause] Speak.*

*Boy: [In a rush.] Mr. Godot told me to tell you he won't come this evening but surely*

*tomorrow.*

*[Silence] (Act One, 49)*

There are many issues concerning life, mocked and doubted. To look at one of those issues, Vladimir takes the story Bible and tries to tell it to Estragon:

*VLADIMIR: Our Saviour. Two thieves. One is supposed to have been saved and the other . . . (he searches for the contrary of saved) . . . damned.*

*ESTRAGON: Saved from what?*

*VLADIMIR: Hell.*

*ESTRAGON: I'm going.*

*He does not move.*

...

*VLADIMIR: One out of four. Of the other three, two don't mention any thieves at all and the third says that both of them abused him.*

*ESTRAGON: Who?*

*VLADIMIR: What?*

*ESTRAGON: What's all this about? Abused who?*

*VLADIMIR: The Saviour.*

...

*VLADIMIR: But one of the four says that one of the two was saved.*

*ESTRAGON: Well? They don't agree and that's all there is to it.*

...

*ESTRAGON: Who believes him?*

*VLADIMIR: Everybody. It's the only version they know.*

*ESTRAGON: People are bloody ignorant apes*

This conversation between the two characters in the play is significant as it not only depicts the loss of faith in the Holy Bible and, by extension, Christianity, thus reminding us of Nietzsche's criticism of the religion, which forms the basis of his analysis of nihilism, but also positing the possibility of alternatives to understand the symbolism inherent in the Bible.

This experience of uncertainty and indefiniteness provokes a troubled laughter, so characteristic of the audience response to the 'absurd' theatre - troubled because the play refutes any consistent allegorical interpretation. Jonathan Kalb observed that the audience's response to the plays is essentially based on the following 'local' questions – 'Who is Godot and why doesn't he arrive? Why do Didi and Gogo stay together and keep returning?' The more comprehensive questions seem to be – 'For whom is any performance given and with what expectations? Why am I in the theatre and what am I waiting for?' It is questions such as these that relate the plays to the 'philosophy' of Nietzsche. However, it must be simultaneously admitted that casting Nietzsche as a philosopher is difficult, not only because Nietzsche was not academically a student of philosophy, but of philology. Moreover, the major concerns of philosophy, revealing universal phenomenon, was the least of his concerns. Nietzsche was, as Ken Gemes and Chris Sykes argued, was a 'local' philosopher than a 'global' one. His major concerns were not the search for universal phenomenon, but were like 'How does a particular phenomenon affect an individual in a given context?'. (Ken Gemes and Chris Sykes, 377) It is against this background that the 'contradictions' in his writings is explained. The playwrights of the 'Absurd' theatre do not provide an adequate background that the audience was so familiar with, thereby provoking/forcing them to create their own interpretations of the possible 'backgrounds' to the action of the plays. Against the background information created by the audience, the plays pose questions that relate to the 'local' concerns of each audience.

Beckett's portrayal of a world of insignificance and incomprehensibility has led many critics to identify *Waiting for Godot* with existentialism, the Theatre of the Absurd, postmodernism, and nihilism. Although his works contain slapstick and dark comedy, his characters are often grotesquely exaggerated caricatures—oblivious to predictability and their impending demise. Many critics contend that Beckett's progression from language to silence and light to darkness reflects the author's growing pessimistic vision, yet some feel that by stripping down the characters to the basest levels, Beckett actually proposed rebirth. Some commentators note the numerous biblical allusions, repetitions, and ironic devices in his plays. His works have been interpreted as religious ideologies, chess analogies, atheist texts, and Eastern existentialism, yet Beckett warned against trying to perceive his intended thought, often commenting that his

works have no definitive meaning and advocating the individual's right to personal interpretation.

Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, presents Krapp, a sixty-nine year old man, surrounded by darkness in his room as he sets up an old reel-to-reel tape recorder reliving his previous selves and the decisions and circumstances that have led to his current state. Finally he turns the tape off, fetches a microphone and feeds a blank spool onto the deck and begins to record his last thoughts. When he has finished he puts one of the earlier spools back onto the deck and listens once more to his younger self, to a moment of happiness, as he stares ahead the tape runs to an end and the darkness engulfs him. Much effort is made in *performance*: looking, touching, doing the mechanical, robotic almost: "*Krapp remains a moment motionless, heaves a great sigh, looks at his watch, fumbles in his pockets, takes out an envelope, puts it back, fumbles, takes out a small bunch of keys, raises it to his eyes, chooses a key, gets up and moves to front of table*" etc. . . We, as readers or viewers, are spared the emotional component of Krapp; he stops the tape whenever it seems he ponders the truth of his life or attempts to answer any existential question: "What I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely -- (*Krapp switches off impatiently, winds tape forward, switches on again*). . . unshatterable association until my dissolution of storm and night with the light of the understanding and the fire -- (*Krapp curses louder, switches off, winds tape forward, switches on again*)". However, it is exactly what is left unsaid that is unsettling to us. We do not hear any proposed answers on the meaning of Krapp's life as he reflects. We are left, as is Krapp, in the bleak void of ennui. We are left to face Krapp's pessimism and the fact that there are no answers, that there can be no justification for one's existence. Krapp does not want to hear about his old conclusions about his beliefs or the eventual questioning of formerly relied upon beliefs. He considers his former selves to be foolish for presuming that he once claimed to have any answers: "Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that. Thank God that's all done with anyway. . . . Nothing to say, not a squeak. What's a year now? The sour cud and the iron stool. (*Pause.*) Revelled in the word spool" (24-5). The finale of the play involves Krapp listening to the portion of the tape that describes a final sexual encounter with a woman; perhaps this illustrates Krapp's last chance for happiness but he does not want those years back: I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side. . . . Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn't want them back. Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn't want them back. Thus Beckett creates the effect that Krapp's focus is always on the sensory aspect of each of his life experiences and not on personal meaning or significance. Krapp's excessive physical detail is a coping mechanism that allows him to avoid facing his own emotions and regrets, but his

avoidance of emotion makes it difficult for him to establish sense of continuity over the years. His objective and straightforward tone produces the sense that he is superficially but not emotionally attached to his memories. Krapp's inability to connect with his recorded past suggests that, "As a character he has no depth, since the memory is not inside him" (Langbaum 85). Such treatment of his past prevents him from the self-actualization necessary to construct a consistent identity for himself.

A similar sense of uncertainty prevails in the plays of Harold Pinter. The initial recognisability of the stage setting to the audience turns into a resistance to rationalisation. As Rabey points out, '*... verbal gestures of ostensible accessibility become, in dramatic usage, ironic indications and reiterations of the persistent separateness of individual perspective and interests.*' (Rabey, 52) *The Birthday Party*, Harold Pinter's second full-length play, depicts Stanley Webber's life at a rundown seaside boarding house is disrupted by the unexpected arrival of two mysterious and sinister strangers called Goldberg and McCann, who terrorise him and eventually take him away. The play distorts the conventional sense of speech in theatre to illustrate how bids for linguistic communication seek not *dialogue* but *confirmation*. This becomes evident from the early scenes: -

*Meg: Is that you, Petey?*

*Pause.*

*Petey, is that you?*

*Pause.*

*Petey?*

*Petey: Yes, it's me.*

*Petey: What?*

*Meg: Is that you?*

*Petey: Yes, it's me.*

*Meg: What? (Her face appears at the hatch.) Are you back?*

*Petey: Yes.*

*Meg: I've got your cornflakes ready. (She disappears and reappears.) Here's your cornflakes. (He rises and takes the plate from her, sits at the table, props up the paper and begins to eat. Meg enters by the kitchen door.)*

*Are they nice?*

*Petey: Very nice.*

*Meg: I thought they'd be nice. (She sits at the table.) You got your paper?*

*Petey: yes (I, 19).*



Unlike Petey, Stanley does not automatically confirm Meg's impressions and insistences regarding cornflakes and the world. In an early statement on his craft, Pinter writes that the language his characters speak, like that we also speak, 'is a highly ambiguous business. So often, below the word spoken, is the thing known and unspoken.' But from speech acts rooted in the habits of evasion, unreliability, and defensive obstruction, 'a language arises... where under what is said, another thing is being said'. As a consequence, the act of speaking is rife with its nominal opposite. In effect,

*There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent language is being employed... The speech we hear is an indication of that which don't hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place. When true silence falls we are still left with echo but are nearer nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant strategem to cover nakedness. (Writing for the Theatre': Speech at the National Student Drama Festival, 1962).*

The intrusion of McCann and Goldberg is employed as a destructive force that reduces Stanley to a cipher by the end of Act III. When Goldberg asks Stanley about his opinion of "such a prospect" (p.94), Stanley responds with nonsense and meaningless sounds that reveal his psychological condition. But Goldberg and McCann insist on Stanley to say something while they are watching him break down: "He [Stanley] concentrates. His head lowers, his chin draws into his chest, he crouches." (p. 94). Thus Stanley vanishes from the old couple's life. The old couple, Meg and Petey are reborn.

The same theme of dominance, as manifested in *The Birthday Party*, is explored further in *The Caretaker*. When the play opens, Aston invites Davies home, which is messy and neglected. Because Aston wants him to stay, Mick finds a job for Davies. He wants Davies to be their caretaker and fix up the flat. However, Davies starts making fun of Aston for not doing much work and being lazy. He talks around Aston's brain damage but never says it outright. This angers Mick who tells Davies to stop getting above himself. Aston and Davies continue to fight with each other until Aston tells Davies to leave. Davies doesn't care what Aston says because he thinks Mick will take his side, because he's doing a good job looking after the flat. However, Mick sides with his brother and tells Davies to leave at once. Davies protests and begs Aston for forgiveness, but Aston won't listen. Davies leaves and watches them from the garden, but they don't let him back in. The brothers exchange a small smile which suggests they'll become closer after this drama.

The play poses the nihilism in the interaction between the personal and the social. The play focuses on what it means to take and offer care and the implications of interpersonal

behaviour when the balance of those things is impossible to achieve. The play depicts the demeaning of the value of generosity as the character of Davies, who is ‘morally’ indebted to Aston, who saved him from some altercation at the latter’s work place, gives him shelter and even gives him money to see him through the next few days. The audience response to this act of charity is significant. Firstly, the audience seems to be curious and uncertain as to whether in his acts of charity, Aston is exposing himself too much to an ‘unknown’ man and becoming vulnerable. Simultaneously, the audience is also curious to know what does he stands to gain in doing this act of charity.

Aston’s motivations in being charitable to a homeless old man come across as nothing but innate, unconditional altruism, which chimes with popular conceptions of Buddhist philosophy. This reminds us immediately of the statue of Buddha that forms a part of the setting. That the idiosyncratic Buddha statue stands on top of disconnected gas stove, is indicative of the prevailing nihilism in loss of faith in religious sentiments. This conviction is further strengthened by Mick’s smashing of the statue which might be read as Pinter’s rejection of all systems of thought that pretend to instruct and contour what should be our primary instinctive motivation. Additionally, the character of Mick stands in contrast to Buddhist philosophy of kindness and compassion in his various interactions with Davies. He makes it obvious that he is not welcome and that he is “in the wrong territory” (Taylor-Batty, 47). In contrast to Aston’s charitable and innocent nature, Mick is a worldly wise man who can understand the motifs of Davies.

The audience response to this interaction is double-edged. The audience is aware that Davies is not there on his own but has been permitted to stay there by Aston. Simultaneously, the audience also feels relieved that Mick might be able to limit the exposure that Aston had made himself susceptible to. As the play progressed, Mick sets the trap to expose Davies as he gets him to dig his own grave and caused him to have the confidence to deride and threaten Aston. Wielding the vocabulary of his xenophobia, Davies suggests to Mick that his brother “should go back where he come from”, revealing a confused response to the revelation of Aston’s mental illness that finally shattered the bonds of generosity that gave him access to the house. The final scene has Davies pleading to remain to a silently resolute Aston. If the play has been a game of domination for a right to remain in this space after the offer of care from Aston to Davies, Mick’s care for Aston has necessitated a strategic scheme of manipulation of Davies’s myopic selfishness. Care has been taken to correct an imbalance, when a care tendered unconditionally was not taken with appropriate reciprocity.

#### **Absurdity and Amor fati**

It is curious to note that despite the apparent absurdity of the situations depicted in the plays under consideration, all the plays re-create the world afresh in the end. All of these plays

depict a situation of imbalance and the end seems to correct the same. This feature of the plays relate them to the early Nietzsche, who, in his “The Birth of Tragedy”, analysed the two impulses in man that presented themselves in the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles, viz the Apollonian and the Dionysian. The Apollonian represents the intellectual, form-giving faculty. The Dionysian represents the more primordial, instinctive, sexual drives. When one first reads “The Birth of Tragedy”, it seems that Nietzsche is calling for a reversal, for the overthrowing of the Apollonian in favour of the Dionysian. However, it has to be understood that in championing the Dionysian, Nietzsche is in fact trying to create a balance between the two forces represented by these. The failure of the Apollonian intellectual, as represented by the crises of the two world wars, giving rise to the cultural modernity, represents the necessity of a Dionysian force to oppose it so that the Apollonian emerges stronger and re-creates itself. The nihilism in the plays is required to be analysed in terms of Nietzsche’s concept of ‘Amor fati’ or ‘love of fate’, which repelled the “middle-class ethos – its stifling conformities and banalities; by its discounting of enthusiasm, imagination and moral passion in favour of pragmatic calculation and the soulless pursuit of money; and, more than anything else, by its pretensions, complacencies and hypocries as represented by the figure of the philistine.” (Gaonkar, 2)

— 56 — Viewed from the point of view of Nietzsche’s philosophy, these early plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter seem to be championing the cause of the Dionysian in propagating the nihilism. The nihilism in these plays is also the result of the Apollonian doctrine which has analysed the term negatively. On the contrary, a Nietzschean reading of the nihilism projects it as a necessity that is an essential requirement. As Ken Gemes and Chris Sykes argue, Nietzsche advocates the Dionysian because it has been oppressed and is therefore in need of a champion. The nihilism in the plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter is not entirely due to the loss of faith subsequent to the world wars, but because of the failure of the Apollonian aspect of man to account for “the pull of sameness and the sources of making for difference” interacting in different ways under the exigencies of history and politics to produce alternative modernities.

#### **Nihilism and Amor fati**

‘Nihilism’ is the loss of faith in every aspect of life. This phase is generally associated with the holocaust due to the massive destruction caused by the two world wars. However, the thing that requires to be understood is that life must go on and that the lessons learnt from the holocaust and existential crisis must be incorporated. Nietzsche’s concept of ‘Amor fati’ is extremely significant here. Nietzsche considered the theme of amor fati [love of fate] of essential importance: he referred to it in his later work as his ‘formula for greatness in a human being’ (EH: 258), ‘the highest state a philosopher can attain’ (WP 1041), or again his ‘inmost nature’ (EH: 325). The term is often mentioned by commentators in connection with the eternal

return and implicitly taken as an illustration of the sort of existential attitude characteristic of someone who would respond positively to the challenge of the daimon and affirm his or her life as worth living over and over again.

The plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, as discussed above, projects an ending that is affirmative, and is against the dominant mode of criticism that looks upon them as essentially pessimistic. Despite the difficulties and eternity of waiting – Beckett once said that *Waiting for Godot* is not about ‘Godot’ but about ‘waiting’ – the two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, continue to wait, despite a clear depiction of the change of fate of the other two characters, namely Lucky and Pozzo. It may well be argued that notwithstanding the downward shift of the fate of Lucky and Pozzo, Vladimir and Estragon take the cycle of change of fate in an affirmative note, to affirm in the end that their luck will go upward, perhaps because they are aware that their luck cannot go downward any more. Similarly, in Krapp’s search for a better self in his past, what he essentially does is an introspection of his own self. Such introspection definitely gives him an outlook that makes him aware that he has not evolved, but has lost his own life and has given away any chance of being better. While the tone of Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape* is definitely pessimistic, it nonetheless provides the audience with a methodology of introspection of the self that can be used to evolve as a better human being, so necessary especially to avoid recurrence of the destruction such as caused by the world wars.

Similarly, in Pinter’s *The Birthday Party*, what has been considered an ‘intrusion’ by the two characters, Goldberg and McCann, may be looked upon as a confrontation of Stanley with his own ‘Dionysian’ self. It has been argued above that the play projects Stanley as a character who appears to be ‘hiding’ from something or someone. As the play progresses leading to the eventual transformation of Stanley in the last scene when he is being driven away by Goldberg and McCann, the character of Meg and Petey also undergo a change as their mutual relationship evolves from that of ‘Mother’ and a ‘pampered son’ to that of a husband and wife, despite the fact that this life is also based on an illusion. However, the play concludes with the impression that both Meg and Petey accept this ‘new’ life happily. This new life of Meg and Petey calls for an understanding of the love of life positively, as worth loving. Yet this observation poses two structural problems for amor fati. Firstly, it points towards a potential contradiction between the nature of the attachment and the putative value of its object. As Nietzsche puts it, ‘one will see that the problem is that of the meaning of suffering’. (WP §1052) Secondly, there are two main ways in which we can value a loved object: in relation to our own needs, for example because we deem its possession or enjoyment highly desirable or even indispensable to our well-being or happiness; or in relation to the object itself, because it appears to us as endowed with intrinsic value. In the first case, we perceive the object of our love as something that we should seek to

acquire or, should we be fortunate enough to have it in our possession already, prevent the loss of. In the second, we try to preserve or protect the beloved object for its own sake, regardless of our own happiness. Yet both these options raise further doubts about the suitability of fate as an object of love. Regarding the first, on either construal (Greek moira or necessity), fate is seen as indifferent to our needs and desires and would only fulfil them (or not) accidentally. We are aware that we cannot possess it and have no control over it.

These are not only instances of what Nietzsche considered *Amor fati* but also illustrate the methods to evolve as, to borrow another term from Nietzsche, ‘Superman’. The idea is that the playwrights of the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’, by generating plenty of opposing ideas and marshalling them as and when they become relevant, depict the possibility of *Amor fati* or, in other words, keep the life going despite hardships. The last scene of Pinter’s *The Caretaker*, where the usurper Davies is seen to be pleading to a resolute Aston to allow him to stay, is an example of how, from his supposedly mentally disturbed state, Aston has evolved as a resolute man (or Superman?) to be able to subdue the threat. However, the evolution of Aston need not only refer to the fact that he has lost his faith in the essential goodness and kindness in human being. As Pinter himself had suggested, he depicted a particular scenario of life and not the entire life itself. What the evolution of the character of Aston implied to the audience is that he had learned to differentiate between the deserving and those who don’t deserve the kindness. He has opened up the options of throwing out or keeping those who deserve or don’t deserve the kindness that he would like to offer.

### Conclusion

The Theatre of the Absurd, by promoting the Nihilism from the Nietzschean perspective inspires its audience to love and embrace their fate, as emphasised by Nietzsche’s concept of *Amor fati*. The important point to note here is that arguing against the desirability of love in the name of our existing conception of morality, which is driven by the Apollonian impulses, presupposes precisely the standpoint that would be invalidated by the transfiguration of values resulting from such a love. Our current moral repugnance is the very thing that amor fati would overcome and is thus no decisive objection to it. The other, non Nietzschean, answer would consist in resisting this logic and holding that it is not desirable in principle that certain things, such as powerlessness in the face of the suffering of the people that are dear to us, should come to be loved. While the plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, as discussed above, definitely project the need for power, but it must be simultaneously appreciated that even to love the powerless and embrace them, requires the strength of character. The plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter present this aspect of human life and in their depiction of the ‘Nihilism’, in fact, present an alternative modernity to that of the Apollonian doctrine.

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**BIO**

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## Water and Indigenous Resistance in Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms*

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### ABSTRACT

In her 1997 novel *Solar Storms*, Chickasaw writer Linda Hogan emphasizes the role of water in decolonial resistance and Indigenous healing. *Solar Storms* is a coming-of-age novel about 17-year-old Angel, who arrives at her ancestral homeland, a community called "Adam's Rib," in the boundary waters between Minnesota and Ontario. The language in Hogan's text assigns sentience and agency to bodies of water. Hogan's water imagery stresses the interconnectedness of humans and nature that neocolonialism aims to sever with the construction of the dam in the novel, echoing the real story of the James Bay Hydroelectric Project and its destruction of the James Bay Cree and Inuit lands in the 1970's. Hogan's indictment of the hydroelectric industrial complex and her use of water as a counternarrative to extractive capitalism remain relevant, as Indigenous people continue resisting in places such as Standing Rock and the lands of the Wet'suwet'en Nation in Canada.

### KEYWORDS

Decolonization, neocolonialism, counternarrative



### Water and Indigenous Resistance in Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms*

This article explores the ways in which water's animacy in Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms* (1997) privileges Indigenous resistance against the ongoing colonial projects that are invested in water's commodification. The dual motifs of water and Wiindigoos in *Solar Storms* complicate Western constructions of animacy and resist the myth of vanishing Indigenous people, respectively.<sup>1</sup> My intervention is to unpack how the animacy of water in the novel is a counterpoint to the extractive capitalist figure of the Wiindigoo. In tandem, these two concepts critique the colonial epistemologies that reify land and to give interiority to the Anishinaabeg community's continuous resistance to that reification. Water is an extension of the human body and a symbol of the matrilineal, Indigenous nurturing and resistance that helps Angel heal from her colonial trauma and work against colonial maldevelopment. Hogan then contrasts the defiant water with the ice-cold, cannibalistic imagery of the Wiindigoo. I argue that the Wiindigoo cosmology is an example of harnessing Indigenous hauntology to articulate intergenerational colonial trauma. Hogan's use of the Wiindigoo as a symbol of colonial hauntings unsettles harmful tropes of Spectral Indigenous People<sup>3</sup> and instead establishes Indigenous contemporality, granting authority to Anishnaabe cosmologies, characterizing land and water as living entities rather than static commodities.

In her most recent book *To Be a Water Protector* (2020), Anishinaabeg scholar Winona LaDuke discusses the growing role of what she refers to as "Wiindigoo economics". In Anishinaabeg stories, the Wiindigoo is a cannibal "fueled by insatiable greed and a relentless desire for human flesh" (83). By extension, Wiindigoo economics is the moniker LaDuke gives to fossil fuel era capitalism: "it is a system based on colonization, wastefulness and ravenous greed," (83) destroying the planet it devours. It is Wiindigoo economics, the capitalist logics of privileging profit over people, commodities over entities, that has built on settler colonialism while leaving the planet and marginalized people in its wake.<sup>4</sup> The settler politics of Wiindigoo economics, which are organized by an ethos of disposability and accumulation, is a system in which Indigenous lands and people are considered sacrificial fodder for the profit of fossil fuel industries, the hydroelectric industrial complex, and other visages of colonialism. For decades,

<sup>1</sup> I intersect my own reading of water's animacy with the work of Anishinaabeg scholars--such as Melissa K. Nelson, Winona LaDuke, and Robin Wall Kimmerer---as well as previous literary scholarship done on *Solar Storms*, primarily the work of Fiore, Jespersen, Hellegers, and Vernon.

<sup>2</sup> Although there are many spellings of "Wiindigoo," for the sake of the consistency I chose this particular spelling because I use Winona LaDuke's definition of Wiindigoo economics as my framing of the article.

<sup>3</sup> Much of the material I cite uses the terms "Spectral Native" or "Vanishing Indian," but I have chosen to use "Indigenous people" as consistently as possible in this chapter.

<sup>4</sup> LaDuke contextualizes Wiindigoo economics through the history of colonialism, or "the transformation of ecologies of the many into systems of circulation and accumulation to serve the few is the project of settler colonial infrastructure" (Cowen and LaDuke 245).

pipelines and dams have put Indigenous people and their ancestral land and water in danger. In the 1970's, Canadian company Hydro-Quebec built dams that dammed, flooded, and/or poisoned the lands of the Anishinaabe, the Inuit, and the James Bay Cree, significantly upending the lives of the land's inhabitants.

Chickasaw writer Linda Hogan fictionalizes the resistance against the dams in *Solar Storms*, in which she situates Indigenous resistance in the context of Anishinaabeg views of water's animacy. Hogan's novel remains a vital work in historicizing and articulating the disastrous impacts of extractive capitalism on Indigenous communities. The novel depicts the protagonist Angel Iron's returning to her ancestral homelands after the passing of the Indian Child Welfare Act. Angel's story chronicles how her matrilineal family and community cultivates not only her bravery and empathy, but her ancestral relationship to the land and water. Her relatives guide her progression from the abused, deracinated Angela Jensen to activist Angel Iron, whose stewardship of the land is forged through honoring traditional knowledge. Angel becomes a confident and compassionate community organizer against the colonial powers of the fictionalized development company BEEVCO, a fictionalized Hydro-Quebec.

Throughout her novel, Hogan connects water's exploitation and Angel's people's exploitation as interrelated in the same way Angel's personal history and her people's history are interrelated. Dam building, a part of the patriarchal and colonial subjugation of the land, is situated as a repeating instance of cannibalism. In contrast, Angel's traditional knowledge becomes a key component in acknowledging water as a decolonizing force, and that stewardship of the water must recognize its animacy in the face of its commodification. The disregard for Indigenous traditional knowledge takes on new forms as corporations have been encroaching on Indigenous territory with the help of the settler governments that have done the same. Hogan's resistance to Wiindigoo economics is represented through her use of water in the novel, tying it to the interconnectedness of reciprocity, maternity, and community reflected in Indigeneity.

Hogan's use of water as a theoretical counterweight to the symbols of colonialism offers a vivid picture of Indigenous resistance, contrasting to Western culture's relationship to water through extractive, colonial means. Through the use of symbols and motifs that are integral to Anishnaabe storytelling, Hogan's novel un-reifies water and places its exploitation in the context of ongoing projects of colonialism. *Solar Storms* allows the reader of literature to reimagine water beyond the Cartesian binary of living and non-living that have rationalized the destruction of bodies of water, because Wiindigoo capitalism refuses to see living things beyond its status as a commodity.

Indigenous communities have been disproportionately harmed by the environmental colonialism caused in capitalism's wake. The ideology of settler colonialism portrays Indigenous

land as a *terra nullius* that exists to bring wealth to white settlers (Huggins 55), resulting in capitalist endeavors that destroy whole ecosystems and sacred tribal land belonging to Indigenous tribes under the guise of development. Vandana Shiva's term "maldevelopment"<sup>5</sup> is useful here, as it indicts the term "development" for occluding the human and environmental cost of exploiting nature and robbing Indigenous people of their land, culture, and livelihoods.

In the United States, Indigenous lands have been under attack by maldevelopment for centuries. Narratives of colonialism often portray Indigenous people and their colonization as a thing of the past to justify the continued exploitation of their lands.<sup>6</sup> The Navajo Dam that was built between 1958 and 1963 on the San Juan River resulted in "tribes being forcibly removed by the United States Army, traditional sacred lands and engraved images inundated by the rising waters" (Huggins 62).<sup>7</sup> Other dams have displaced people and ruined the entire ecosystems of fish and other wildlife that rely on water. A part of the project of neocolonialism has been to erase the damming evidence through the discursive removal of Indigenous people. American history often situates Indigenous people in the permanent past of the nineteenth century, with no throughline between the colonial past and present. As Nick Estes (Lower Brule Sioux) mentions, Indigenous people's struggles against the US government in the nineteenth century is narratively severed from "the implementation of the reservation system and then onward to the construction of the dams in the middle of the twentieth century" (Estes). That narrative severing of Indigenous people from the present is rampant in the global north. As George Yúdice observes in *The Expediency of Culture*, NGOs and global north solidarity groups often appropriate Indigenous art not only "to be consumed in tourism" (26), but to portray Indigenous people as "images in museums, tourist guides, crafts advertising" that are treated as "anthropological curiosit[ies] or colorful detail[s] of a remote past" (Marcos, qtd. in Yúdice 106). Johannes Fabian similarly states that for Western anthropologists, time is a "key category with which we conceptualize relationships between us (or our theoretical constructs) and our objects (the Other)" (28) through "denial of coevalness," or: "a persistent and systemic tendency" (31) to place the objects of study in a different time than that of the studier. Mita Banerjee notes the similar problem of that narrative severing, where Indigenous people's existence is "premised on a nostalgia for the

<sup>5</sup> Shiva's definition of maldevelopment is a reframing of "development projects" done by neocolonial nations that become a "violation of the integrity of organic, interconnected, and interdependent systems, that sets in motion a process of exploitation, inequality, injustice, and violence" (6). Although applying the term to Indigenous groups in the Global North might seem like a misattribution, I justify its use because it is an indictment of patriarchal neocolonial practices globally.

<sup>6</sup> For a comprehensive exploration of this idea, please see Mita Banerjee's "'The Myth of the EcoNative? Indigenous Presences in Ecocritical Narratives.'"

<sup>7</sup> In addition to Huggins, other work on the environmental history of the settler state's exploitation of Indigenous people's ancestral rivers include Jane Griffin's "Hoover Dam: Land, Labor, and Settler Colonial Cultural Production," DeJong's work on the Gila River, Jeff Crane's on the rivers of the Northwest, and Nick Estes' work on the Missouri River.

Indian [Banerjee's term] as a vanishing race" (217). This "discursive removal" (220) portrays Indigenous people and the colonialism violence *done to* them solely in the past, erasing the legacy of colonialism from neocolonial maldevelopment projects as a way to justify them. Banerjee posits that the solution to this removal is Indigenous contemporality.

The disparity between Western discursive removal and Indigenous contemporality is evident in Hogan's text. When the Beautiful People attempt to persuade the government to stop building the dam, Angel comments on how white settlers of past and present view the water and land as commodities rather than entities: "To the white men who were new here, we were people who had no history, who lived surrounded by what they saw as nothingness. Their history had been emptied of us, and along with us, of truth" (280). Here, Angel and the other Beautiful People observe their discursive removal happening before their own eyes, where the government and BEEVCO take no account of the traditional knowledge and valuing of land that is so vital to Angel and her people. In contrast to the Wiindigoo economics at play, Hogan portrays Angel's stewardship of water as an extension of her traditional knowledge, exemplified throughout the book as a relationship between water and the body.

Hogan's juxtaposition of water and the body represents the continuity between the water of the environment and the water within humans through Angel's matrilineal heritage. Western epistemologies believe in a very strict dichotomy between the body and what is outside, but Hogan challenges this dichotomy by calling attention to the ways that our bodies produce water as a means of transforming, showing vulnerability, and bearing children, and giving birth. For example, Dora-Rouge describes Angel's birth as leaving forever "the waters of your mother" (109), and the novel ends with Angel being visited by her great grandmother, Dora-Rouge, and hearing her say "that a human is alive water" (350). When Dora-Rouge "makes a deal with the water" (215), Angela recognizes, "[s]he had tricked something, all right....Maybe it wasn't water she'd bartered with, after all, but she'd struck up one hell of a deal with something. ...What she'd traded in exchange, she wouldn't say, but this much was clear: something godly was bringing us through" (195). By posing these challenges, Hogan connects the body to the greater ecosystem, rather than viewing them as separate entities, and privileges the view of the world as a part of human beings, and human beings as part of the world.

Hogan positions Angel's education in traditional knowledge as part of matrilineal nurturing that cultivates the relationship she has with water. As Angel becomes more involved in the activism against the damming of her land, she asserts that "My heart and the beat of the land, the land I should have come from, were becoming the same thing" (236). Toward the end of the novel, Angel's elders give her the name Maniki, a "true human being," one who honors the traditions of reciprocity and stewardship of the land. The definition of humanity through the lens

of stewardship unsettles the colonialist definition of humanity, one based on domination, in favor of one that honors matrilineal heritage, the earth, and traditional knowledge. As Winona LaDuke states, “most matrilineal societies, societies in which governance and decision-making are largely controlled by women, have been obliterated from the face of the earth by colonialism and industrialism” (213). Hogan honors this matrilineal legacy, imbricating the patriarchy and colonial epistemologies with their Cartesian understanding of the binary between nature and humans.

*Solar Storms* makes poignant connections between the animacy of water and traditional knowledge in Anishinaabeg epistemology. In Anishinaabeg cosmologies, the water is not only living, but is viewed as a relative---which creates a culture of reciprocity that values community and is critical of hoarding, greed, and selfishness. It is important to note here that animacy does not equate water to personhood, but rather equates people to water’s students, acolytes, and younger relatives. In *The Manitous: The Supernatural World of the Ojibway*, Anishinaabeg writer Basil Johnston defines the Anishinaabeg word “manitou” as mystery, essence, substance, matter, supernatural spirit, anima, quiddity, attribute, property, God, deity, godlike, mystical, incorporeal, transcendental, invisible reality” (242) in the book’s glossary. As Melissa K. Nelson notes in “The Hydromythologies of the Anishinaabeg,” water or “*niibi*,” is “a primary sacred element in life and therefore must be cherished as an essential relative, elder, and teacher” that both “is a manitou” and “contains manitous” (217). In contrast, the grammar of animacy in English is colonial in nature: “the arrogance of English is that the only way to animate, to be worthy of respect and moral concern, is to be a human” (Kimmerer 910), in which “human” is defined through dominion over nature rather than stewardship. Settler logic strips these conceptions of animacy away from water, which justifies its conquest in the same way stripping animacy from Indigenous people and winning justifies that conquest. In response, Hogan ascribes thought, will, and emotions to water in *Solar Storms* by referring to it in conjunction with nature, history, and the body. After all, “Human is alive water,” (Hogan 350) as Dora-Rouge teaches Angel.

In contrast to Angel experiencing trauma from her birth mother, it is the mothering of the water, like the mothering of the women in her life, that transforms her into an adult. When Angel is preparing to do activist work against the BEEVCO company for the hydropower dam, she reflects on her desire to “hold [her] breath and remain inside water” as a way to ask the water what it wants. The image of Angel remaining inside water is a yonic one: it symbolizes Angel growing in a maternal womb. That symbolism emphasizes the importance of maternity and, by extension, the matrilineal society that increasingly shapes her adulthood. Throughout the novel, Angel sees inside water or is engulfed in it; the water nurtures her, womb-like, often offering her

perspective and guidance: “Water, I knew, had its own needs, its own speaking and desires” (279), she says in one instance. In water, Angel finds the motherhood she wasn’t able to receive from her mother.

In return, Angel becomes a speaker for the water, an important aspect of Anishinaabeg womanhood. The role of Anishinaabe women, according to Anishinaabe scholar Deborah McGregor, “is to speak for the water” (12). An Anishinabe view on the importance of water and its relationship to the people is expressed by ceremonies and traditional knowledge: “the Earth is said to be a woman. In this way it is understood that woman preceded man on the Earth...Water is her lifeblood. It flows through her, nourishes her, and purifies her” (Benton-Banai, qtd in McGregor 3). Additionally, in some Anishinaabeg cultures, the protection of water is tied to womanhood. To the Potawatomi people, “women are the Keepers of water.” In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer discusses how the waters of the womb are an extension of the waters of lakes and rivers, and that “being a good mother includes the caretaking of water” (1412). Thus, the conquest of water is also a conquest of women, as the theft of water severs the sacred tie between women and water.

— 67 — Angel’s understanding of these multiple conquests (patriarchal, colonial, and ecological) coincides with Angel’s decolonial *bildungsroman*: Angel’s connection to water and to her matrilineal line are intertwined through traditional knowledge. Angel’s relationship with water, as well as Dora Rouge’s, then, are a continuation of the Anishinaabeg traditions of women as water protectors. It is no mistake, then, that Fur Island is called “the Navel of The World” (65), or that Angel sees the world as “that which gave birth to fish, the great natal waters parting to make as birds left the sea and opened their wings in air” (81). Within a short period of time in her new home, Angel finds that she has the power to “see[s] inside water” (81). When Angel “live[s] inside water,” she notes that water “was blood spilled on the ground. Some of it was the blood of my ancestors” (78). This relationship between Angel and water gives Angel a perspective on the history of water as not just life-giving, but life itself. In the way a mother’s womb nourishes a fetus, Angel is culturally nourished with historical knowledge when she is inside water.

Angel experiences one of these moments of clarity inside the womb of water later in the novel, when she realizes that the capitalists who want to destroy the land only view the water as a commodity rather than a living entity with a rich history. Similarly, Hogan asserts that water’s exploitation and her people’s exploitation are interrelated in the same way Angel’s personal history and her people’s history are interrelated. Hogan progressively imbues water with characteristics relating to nurturing and vitality. When Angel is preparing to do activist work against the BEEVCO company for the hydropower dam, she reflects on the reification of sacred water in the hands of the colonizers: “Water, I knew, had its own needs, its own speaking and

desires. No one had asked the water what it wanted. Except Dora-Rouge, who'd spoken with it directly" (279). As the novel continues, Angel's understanding of water builds from an understanding of her matrilineal relatives---Bush, Dora-Rouge, and Agnes, specifically---to an understanding of her people and the history of their resistance to those who would steal the land and water for their greed. Through both water and protest, Angel and other activists attempt to communicate to the BEEVCO developers that "nature and humans are trans-corporeally silted in and sifted by the earth," that "people land, and water can never be reduced entirely to a discursive site such as the cartographers' maps that the developers bring with them" (Huang 78). In contrast to the developers', Angel's understanding of water, as passed down from generations of Indigenous women's knowledge, is one based on reciprocity rather than commodification.

The animacy of the land and water is a careful detail in *Solar Storms*. Hogan privileges the Anishnaabe cosmologies that characterize water and land as sentient by situating the water's history with the history of colonial conquest and the people's resistance to conquest. The reciprocal nature of Anishnaabe culture—exemplified by Bush honoring the bear's life and Dora Rouge's deals with water—is thus used to resist the extractive, colonial ideologies of Wiindigoo maldevelopment. Hogan articulates this divide by privileging the Indigenous reciprocity of Angel's lineage of women as water protectors, who contribute to Angel's understanding that water "had its own needs, its own speaking and desires." The role of women in Anishinaabe culture is that of the water protector, and that the sanctity of water and the respect for women is often intertwined. In contrast, masculinist maldevelopment sees the work of women, their traditional knowledge, their leadership, as useless.

The wiindigo economics of privileging masculinist maldevelopment is evident in Angel's history of being abused by her mother and of being exploited by men prior to her coming to Adam's Rib. The intersecting subjugation of women, Indigenous people, and the environment create a structure of white heteropatriarchy that puts these three groups at risk. Brenda Hill (Siksika) states that heterosexist gender violence "condones and encourages violence against women by endorsing the misperceptions of male superiority, ownership and control of women and children, and men's rights to control the environment" (195). The white, male desire for power and wealth is endemic to a system that rewards the needs of the rugged white male individual's greed over entire communities, whose lifeways and land have been diminished by said structure.

Angel's experiences prior to her arrival in Adam's Rib exemplify the long-lasting trauma that the state exacts against Indigenous women. In *Solar Storms*, Angel is arrested (290) and then abandoned in the snow because the Canadian law enforcement worked in tandem with BEEVCO to silence the anti-dam protests. Angel experiencing family separation, sexual assault, and then

police brutality are all consequences of the continuation of colonialism. As Lakota scholar Hilary N Weaver states, the “process of colonization led to the acceptance of stereotypes and rigid gender roles that define indigenous women as less deserving of respect and protection from violence” (1559). The internalization of colonial ideas of women as inferior, and the colonial ideas of nature as property are what propels the state to ignore violence against Indigenous women like Angel. The separation of Angel and the other Fat Eaters from their land is a legitimately traumatic experience for them<sup>8</sup>, and Hogan conveys it as such. Through Angel’s assertion that she is “water going back to itself,” Angel not only expresses her ties to her ancestral land through her matrilineal heritage, but exemplifies how the conquest of land and water are interrelated in the conquest of women and Indigenous bodies. The cultural dominance of male-ness and whiteness are the foundation of Western legal systems, the same legal system that tore Angel away from her family and declared the Indigenous activists who “occupy” (Hogan 302) Two Town Post as terrorists despite the violence enacted against both the people and the land by the state. Hogan’s writing builds upon these ideas through her descriptions of the land and water through the lens of Indigenous history and traditional knowledge.

The novel describes the relationship between human beings and non-human beings as agreements that are often broken by unfettered capitalism. In a story that the elder Tulik tells Angel, the water is the one who finally denies their desire for conquest, showing water’s role of resistance in the novel. The story begins with the humans who ask for attributes that animals have, killing the animals they replace. When they ask for more, they are denied by the defiant water: “The water said, you have asked for too much, and then all of it was taken away from them. With all their wishes they had forgotten to ask to become human beings” (347). In this passage, the humans see nature and ignore the balance that reciprocity allows. They continue to conquer different parts of nature, letting their greed dictate their will. The water acts as an ally to animals and land, being its steward and protector against the greed of colonialism. This story that Tulik tells Angel when she begins to become a part of her community explains the totalizing effects of greed. Greed thematically connects other instances of consumption—both Hannah’s abuse and BEEVCO’s destruction—to the stories of the Wiindigoo.

Hogan historicizes Indigenous resistance by connecting the continued defiance of the Indigenous people with that of the land. When Angel first learns about BEEVCO’s construction of the dam, her thoughts are about land’s response to this destruction: “It was against the will of

<sup>8</sup> Additionally, extractive industries will house workers near maldevelopment projects, where the “combination of patriarchal and colonial attitudes” as well as the projects’ proximity to Indigenous land makes these places particularly dangerous for Indigenous women (LaDuke 191) and have led to increased rates of murder, sexual assault, and sex trafficking.



land, I knew, to turn rivers into lakes, lakes into dry land, to send rivers along new paths. I hoped the earth would one day forgive this breach of faith, the broken agreement humans had with it” (Hogan 330). Here, Hogan characterizes the land as an entity with will and the ability to defy, which she does again when she refers to Holy String Town as a “defiant land” (123) that resists maldevelopment in the same way Indigenous people have resisted colonialism. Angel understands that the land is an “‘extended relative’ of this created earth” (Nelson 216) and that its history is just as rich and filled with trauma as Angel herself. Indigenous peoples “work hard to maintain, restore, and renew these stories of kinship” (216) as a way to listen to the story of the land.

Angel internalizes the importance of speaking to water and finding out its desires, giving her an understanding of the capacity for destruction BEEVCO has exacted on the land and water, and the necessity for resistance. Angel knows that BEEVCO’s values are attached to the “million-dollar dreams of officials, governments, and businesses,” (279) rather than “the life of water, or a regard for the land that sustained people from the beginning of time” (279). Angel’s acceptance of Indigenous thought and her healing from parental and institutional abuse are interrelated, thus highlighting the importance of reciprocal deals as an antidote to the extractive nature of Wiindigoo capital.

— 70 — The nature of the Wiindigo is antithetical to Anishinaabeg traditional knowledge values of “resistance against the insidious germ of taking too much” (Kimmerer 4477). Building on the writings of both Basil Johnston and Stewart King, Kimmerer distills the needs of the wiindigo: “the name for that within us which cares more for its own survival than anything else” (4468). Hogan uses the Wiindigoo’s cannibalism to connect intergenerational trauma to that of colonialism. Within a person, a Wiindigoo is someone like Hannah: biting her own daughter and abusing her for her own survival. Within a system, a Wiindigoo is a multinational corporation like BEEVCO whose bottom line matters more than human lives. The ice-hearted Wiindigoo, a cannibal with corporate, self-serving, colonial, and extractive associations, is diametrically opposed to the association of water with community, reciprocity, and healing. Through her use of the Wiindigoo motif, Hogan situates Angel’s abuse by her birth mother Hannah and the water’s abuse by BEEVCO as interwoven sites of trauma. Similarly to how *Solar Storms* creates a continuum between water in the land and water inside humans, the cannibal-coded imagery of Hannah Wing and those of the colonizers are similarly imbricated to convey how interlocked the parental and colonial abuse of Angel and the land are. Cannibalism is Hogan’s imaging of what happens when the web of reciprocity and communal life are frozen by the privileging of greed and conquest instead.

When the novel begins, the parental and colonial abuse at the hands of Wiindigoo systems are intertwined through Angel's history with family separation. Angel arrives at Adam's Rib "after being raised in foster care in the era before the 1978 Indian Child Welfare act" (Hellegers 3) to a community to Adam's Rib. Angel's experience of trauma through her mother and then through the foster care system is "an experience that mirrors that of many [Indigenous] children, who are overly represented in child protective services and the foster care system" (Vernon 43-44). The neglect Angel faces in foster care as well as the isolation from her family shows how the settler colonial state continues to displace and deracinate Indigenous children. That Bush is not allowed to take Angel because Bush is not Angel's blood relative is an example of the Canadian government ignoring Indigenous family dynamics in favor of the Eurocentric nuclear family, the construct that put Angel in danger of Hannah's care in the first place. After Angel's confrontation with Hannah is met with silence, Bush takes Angel "on her lap like the mother [she] never had" (232). Bush, whose character embodies the maternal and reciprocal, is Angel's introduction to her Indigeneity. Had the federal government shown any real care for Angel's wellbeing, she would have stayed on her own land. But because Wiindigoo economics requires both physical and discursive removal of Indigenous people to justify settler colonialism, Angel must cope with her abuse for the first 17 years of her life with little support.

— 71 — Hogan connects Angel's abuse at the hands of her birth mother with the water's abuse at the hands of BEEVCO through three main motifs: ice, poison, and cannibalism. Angel describes her abuse by Hannah as being cannibalistic, symbolized by Hannah giving Angel a scar on her face by biting her. Bush recounts that Hannah has the smell of almonds on her, evoking the poison that shows up in the novel again thematically as "Poison Road"—the road where settlers poisoned wolves using cyanide during the fur trade—as well as the methylmercury contamination that poisons the people during the dam's construction. The explanation that Angel's elders give is that Hannah's heart is frozen like a Wiindigoo's, and that the same affliction applies to the settlers and colonizers. Angel even uses the language of cannibalism to describe Hannah's abuse: "She tried to kill me, swallow me, consume me back into her own body, the way fire burns itself away, uses itself as fuel" (251), where the use of consuming and fuel evoke the goals of extractive maldevelopment to consume the land and use it as fuel. Hannah's cannibalism is as Desiree Hellegers says, "a microcosm and a casualty of the cold calculus of capitalism, which relegates animals, Native people, and lands to objects of consumption to satisfy the needs of urban centers in both Canada and the United States" (10). Anishinaabe translator and writer Basil Johnston characterizes the modern Wiindigoos as "corporations, conglomerates, and multinationals" (235), where the desire for unfettered profit results in cannibalizing humans and more-than-humans alike. The fact that Angel's trauma stems

partially from the scar that Hannah has imprinted on her face parallels not only how Indigenous people have been colonized by white people, but how the winter of greed's discontent forces people like Hannah into patterns of abuse, greed, and selfishness. A cannibal becomes separated from the web of reciprocity, privileging their own survival over the community. Hogan mythologizes and makes this colonialist disruption into a monstrosity, connecting white settlers with cannibal imagery and the Wiindigoo.

Hogan uses Indigenous stories as an indictment of capitalism, characterizing colonialism and capitalist greed as cannibalistic. To further explicate the relationship between nature and capitalism, Hogan uses the traditional story of the Wiindigoo to carve out the themes of Western capitalist greed, connecting the Wiindigoo to cannibalism and intergenerational trauma.<sup>9</sup> According to Basil Johnston's *The Manitous: The Supernatural World of the Ojibway*, the greed of the Wiindigoo grows with each feeding: "the more it ate, the bigger it grew; and the bigger it grew, the more it wanted and needed" (Johnston 234). In the traditional stories, "Wiindigoo stories reinforced the taboo against cannibalism, when the madness of hunger and isolation rustled at the edge of winter lodges" (Kimmerer, loc 4462). Wiindigoo stories are cautionary tales that emphasize the self-discipline that comes with valuing reciprocity, or as Robin Wall Kimmerer phrases it, "to build resistance against the insidious germ of taking too much" (4473). Kimmerer suggests that the stories of the Wiindigoo started as an act of remembrance of who wanders without passing on to the next world, those "banished from the web of reciprocity" (4507). In this way, Wiindigoo are akin to ghost stories, visages of the past that carry us toward a better future. The specific use of Wiindigoos in *Solar Storms* provides an additional function in the text: establishing Indigenous values as a way forward into a decolonial future. Wiindigoo hauntology unseats the Indigenous ghost story by using the traditional knowledge of Wiindigoo stories to support Indigenous sovereignty.

The use of the Wiindigoo is also important in establishing Indigenous contemporality and problematizing the way the Western tendencies to cast Indigenous people as ghosts. As Emilie Cameron states in "Indigenous Spectrality and the Politics of Postcolonial Ghost Stories," ghosts have the potential to "embody the mismatch between the ideal and real, the present and the absent" (383). However, Cameron points out that ghosts in the writings of settler Canadians and Americans become a trope called "the spectral native" (Cameron 284)—a trope akin to that of the "Vanishing Indian"—that situates Indigenous people in the past. Cameron rightfully observes that despite haunting's potential for decolonial storytelling, Canadian writers use the

<sup>9</sup> For more specifically on the role of Wiindigoos in *Solar Storms*, see Arnold, Hellegers, Harrison, and Castor.

<sup>10</sup> Among the culprits is Duncan Campbell Scott, a poet who lamented the Cree and Ojibway as "the race [that] has waned and left but tales of ghosts" (Scott, qtd. in Cameron) and served on Canada's Department of Indian Affairs as Deputy Superintendent from 1923-32 during a time of legislative violence against Indigenous people (Cameron 385).

spectral native as “an aesthetic link between the ‘Indian past’ and the settler present” (384).<sup>10</sup> The motif of haunting in these stories centers the settler present in lieu of Indigenous contemporaneity. In contrast, *Solar Storms* disrupts the pernicious trope of the Spectral Native by using the Anishinaabe story of the Wiindigoo to articulate colonial violence, thus reversing the haunting/haunted dynamic.

Superimposing whiteness onto the Wiindigoo story disrupts the colonial gaze because it shifts the focus away from “haunted settlers” to thinking about Indigenous contemporaries and futures. The hauntology of the Wiindigoo figure conveys colonialism’s proclivity for hollowing out life through consumption. The Wiindigoo’s cannibalistic nature is defined not only by the absence of caring for others as well as an absence of the thing it craves. Hogan’s use of the Wiindigoo situates the Fat Eaters as the haunted ones and the white settlers as the figures on which ghost stories are inscribed. Rather than using the “spectral Native,” which focuses on putting Indigenous bodies to rest so that the white settlers do not have to think about them. The point of ghosts is not to situate marginalization in the past, or to even solely understand the past as monolithic emblem of despair,<sup>11</sup> but to imagine moving forward with the past. By using the Wiindigoo as a spectral presence of colonialism, abuse, and capitalism, Hogan shifts the settler discourse of haunting to the possibilities of an Indigenous future and a settler past. The absent-presence of colonialism is no longer the justification of further exploitation, but rather the use of Indigenous storytelling to contextualize and justify resistance to Wiindigoo capitalism. The Wiindigoo’s iciness, its spectral heart frozen by greed, is a narrative foil to the running water of life. Water has more animacy, more dignity, than the Wiindigoo, and thus exists as a counter narrative to the totalizing narratives of Wiindigoo capitalism that justify greed.

The all-consuming trauma of Hannah<sup>12</sup>’s absent presence, for example, is healed only after Angel accepts water’s animacy and capacity for healing. Healing as a way towards resistance is what thaws the ice of Wiindigoo greed into the waters of reciprocity. Angel’s character is essential to resisting narratives of colonialism that center entirely around the ghosts of the past. Angel not only carries forward the wisdom of her people, but her process of healing herself from trauma establishes not just an Indigenous contemporaneity, but a decolonial future. Angel’s body is a microcosm of the water, meaning that her process of healing throughout the novel evokes the potential for land and waterways to also heal from their own trauma caused by

<sup>11</sup> Among the culprits is Duncan Campbell Scott, a poet who lamented the Cree and Ojibway as “the race [that] has waned and left but tales of ghosts” (Scott, qtd. in Cameron) and served on Canada’s Department of Indian Affairs as Deputy Superintendent from 1923-32 during a time of legislative violence against Indigenous people (Cameron 385).

<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, Hannah is still treated with more humanity and compassion than the trope of a “spectral Native” allows. Angela’s forgiveness of Hannah is the compassion Hogan shows to individuals within a system, and the possibility of restorative justice that resists “native spectrality.”

the cannibals. Hogan thus portrays healing, an action traditionally associated with femininity, an act of resistance that Angel is already embedded in before she learns of the BEEVCO dam building. Angel's coming-of-age—when she learns about Indigenous reciprocity, the history of her people, the relationships to water and its surroundings—are vital to the formation of resistance, because those are the elements that inform how urgent resisting the dam's construction is.

Like Bush's reciprocal hunting as a contrast to LaRue's taxidermy, Hannah's icy Wiindigoo heart exists as a foil to Angel's affinity to running water. In this contrast, we see that Angel attempts to thaw the ice of her trauma by developing her relationship with water not only as a deeper understanding of her people, but also as the source of her healing from the intergenerational and colonial trauma.

The novel's use of Wiindigoo imagery to connect cannibalism with colonialism is important here, as it situates Angel in a legacy of being victim to and healing from colonial violence. This dynamic coincides with the larger themes of the novel: that scars, as Angel observes, "were proof of healing" (Hogan 125). Angel's ability to see herself as someone who is growing and strengthening converges with her ability to see the earth and water as entities with their own will that also grow, strengthen, and change. This dynamic again contrasts with the capitalist reification of earth as a resource or obstacle, both of which characterize nature as something static and therefore easy to manipulate without consequences.

At the culmination of Angel's healing journey, she transforms into a Wolverine, a trickster figure who acts as an ally to water. In the traditional stories Bush tells Angel, Wolverine not only steals and sabotages traps laid by settlers, but also vanquishes the twins of war and starvation by making skin bags out of them and "fill[ing] them with berries and meat" (186). The stories of Wolverine as a decolonial figure depict a force that heals strife by nurturing strife and resisting settler greed. Angel similarly adapts the Wolverine story by "[taking] care of her dying mother" and by "becoming Wolverine" (Castor 172) thus breaking the cycle of abusive anger. After becoming more involved in the activist struggles against the dam-building, Angel becomes the trickster figure of the Wolverine when she steals food from the white store owners. Hogan foreshadows this transformation: first, when Bush tells Angel that Wolverine "takes away [human's] luck in hunting" when humans "forget to respect the bond" between humans and more-than-humans" (82); and again when Angel learns that Wolverine can inhabit "a strange, two-legged body, wearing human skin" (253) which is how Wolverine knew to steal what was valuable to humans as a way to humble them.

<sup>13</sup> See page 10.

Angel-as-Wolverine acts as the culmination of her transformation into *Maniki*<sup>13</sup>, where her education in traditional knowledge aids her in the decolonial struggle of her people. Angel understands that Wolverine wanted the dammers to leave, and it is with this understanding that she conceives of the idea of sneaking into the colonizers' food supply. Angel "[knows] Wolverine and his destruction perfectly well," that she, "like Wolverine, would tell the men to leave our world" (322). Angel's history of being accused of theft finally comes full circle here, as she reclaims this accusation as a way to challenge the greed of the white people hoarding excess food while her people starve. Angel's role as Wolverine mirrors and subverts Hannah's transformation into a Wiindigoo: Angel "embodies a mythical figure that poses a threat to humans, like her mother once did when she enacted the Wiindigoo in the collective narrative of her community" (Castor 172). But Angel does so because her "ultimate motive is to restore the world to balance. Hogan uses Angel's trickster narrative as a way to "draw attention to the text as a story that raises questions about changing power dynamics in the actual world" (172). Angel is told her habit of "taking things" (43) was a reason for her being kicked out of a foster home, but here we see the interiority of theft as protest, specifically as protest against the bigger, more destructive capitalist theft of land. Angel's use of Wolverine also provides context to the criminalization of Indigenous resistance by putting it into context: although Indigenous resistance is often characterized as violent or "looting," it pales in comparison to the theft of colonialism.

Wolverine's resistance to colonial theft mirrors water's resistance to the reifying coloniality of maps. Throughout the novel, Hogan problematizes Western cartography, which relies on two-dimensional drawings. Maps and blueprints, thought by the colonizers to be objective drawings of land and water, are a staple metaphor in Indigenous literature, where resistance to colonialist cartography is given interiority and subjectivity. When Angel encounters the maps that Bush collects, she states that "They [maps] were only as accurate as the minds of their makers" (122). Bush's collection of maps presumably comes from the fur traders, whose use of mapmaking came from a colonial desire to control and shape the land without considering the repercussions of dominance.

Land and water both resist the colonial cartography of mapmaking and damming, articulated through the Angel's recognition of the water's animacy. When Angel looks at Bush's map collection, Angel admits that although the maps were "incredible topographies," they are incomplete images that only tell "the territories and trick and lies of history," excluding "the people or animal lives or the clay of land, the water, the carnage" (123). In contrast, Angel refers to the land as a "defiant land" and observes that "land refused to be shaped by the makers of maps" because "Land had its own will" (123). The inadequacies of maps play an important role in Agnes' death, as Angel attempts to use the map given by two white people—heavily implied

to be Wiindigoos—to find healing plants for Agnes. Upon Angel’s return, Agnes has already passed away. Those who rely on maps rather than an intuitive and respectful relationship with the land are viewing the land as something to be traversed and conquered. The maps, like colonial revisionism, exclude “the viewpoints of the people or animals who suffered from conquest, and whose inaccuracies lead to fatalities” (Jespersen 280). Angel’s use of maps results in Agnes’s death—this is significant because Angel’s choice to eschew using her ancestral gift (of seeing through water) facilitates the literal death of one of her ancestors. In maps, the water is reified and commodified, viewed as an afterthought, whereas Angel’s more complex gift honors the water’s long arc of history. The sentiment of maps and blueprints being pernicious in their incompleteness echoes the view of capitalist maldevelopers: a shallow view of water that ignores the depth of its significance to the people and the ecosystem.<sup>14</sup> Angel and her peoples’ cultural tradition and epistemology are in deep contrast to the BEEVCO official’s view of the land: “They saw it only on the flat, two-dimensional world of paper” (279). Furthermore, the motif of maps foreshadows how Hogan characterizes the BEEVCO blueprints as capitalist cartography that commodifies the land.

— 76 — Maps and blueprints symbolize a process of continuing reification that characterizes the earth and water as means to an end rather than as advancing poor and Indigenous communities’ livelihoods. This commentary conveys the environmental displacement that the characters in the novel suffer through; their health, vitality, and cultural traditions are entirely at stake. The BEEVCO company seeing Indigenous people as an afterthought is part of a long history of colonialism where the act of conquest is emphasized over the people who originally lived there: “Their history had been emptied of us, and along with us, of truth” (280). For the community, BEEVCO’s construction doesn’t just mean the displacement of the land, but an erasure of history that has been caused by and continuing after settler colonialism and the fur trade.

The language of animacy that Hogan uses, then, acts as an antidote to the scar of Windiigo capital. As Schultermandl notes, “Hogan in particular juxtaposes the healing powers of the ancestral landscape with the protagonists’ fighting for a restorative healing of the landscape” (70), where the land and the people have parallel narratives of healing: Angel’s coming-of-age is imbricated with decolonial resistance. Her acceptance into her family, her

<sup>14</sup> My chapter section only touches on the exploration of the relationships between maps and coloniality in *Solar Storms*. For further discussion of this element of the novel, please see Fiore, Hellegers, and Jespersen (cited in the bibliography).

<sup>15</sup> Tommy is an example of how Hogan also uses certain male characters to convey what masculinity looks like when untangled from the roots of colonial violence. It’s no surprise that Angel’s relationship with Tommy is based on her admiration of his respect for tribal elders and care for Angel’s female relatives. Similarly, Tulik, who offers Dora Rouge food, listens to her speak when they meet in the land of the Beautiful Ones, and offers his house as a communal place, depicts a masculinity that values community and reciprocity over the individualist petro masculinity of whiteness.

relationship with water, and her relationship with Tommy<sup>15</sup> are predicated on continuing her people's traditions of honoring traditional knowledge and reciprocity, resisting Wiindigoo greed in all its forms. Angel's embrace of traditional knowledge—particularly of Wolverine, the windigoo, and the reciprocal deals with water—depict how Angel's transformation is a culmination of centuries of decolonial resistance told through story.

As a work of resistance, *Solar Storms* highlights the urgency of listening to and reading Indigenous people's stories. Hydropower as a neocolonial enterprise has been dangerous for Indigenous communities worldwide, and Hogan's decision to set her novel about hydropower near Canada is one that makes *Solar Storms* a relevant work in the current landscape of Western maldevelopment.<sup>16</sup> A study on hydroelectric dams in Canada found that, as of 2016, "all 22 Canadian hydroelectric facilities being considered for near-term development are located within 100 km of indigenous communities" (Calder et al. 13115). In addition to First Nations people dealing with the loss of their land and the lifestyle tied to it, they have also faced an epidemic of methylmercury poisoning caused by the dam-building's chemicals poisoning the water and the wildlife. The three-phase James Bay Project had already begun construction in 1971, and the James Bay Cree had already begun seeing "thousands of square miles of land" being flooded by the project before even hearing about its existence (Hellegers 1). The capitalist projects that destroy the land are often greenlit without consideration for the land and water's material and cultural significance to Indigenous people, whose lands have been stolen and exploited for capital for centuries. Hogan bridges the colonialist gap between water and people that Western epistemology has privileged, tying the sanctity of water to life—life that is being destroyed by colonial masculinist capitalism.

Capitalism's death grasp on Indigenous land is a continuation of heteropatriarchal colonialism. To quote Winona LaDuke, the "predator/prey" relationship that capitalism has with the Earth is analogous to the relationship male patriarchy has with women: women are often "in the role of the prey to a predator society whether through sexual discrimination, exploitation, sterilization, absence of control over our bodies, or being the subjects of repressive laws and legislation in which we have no voice" (213). The destruction of the environment and the ways "industrial society is consuming the lifeblood" (LaDuke 105) of the world is inextricably linked to the destruction of matrilineal societies and the subjugation of Indigenous women's bodies through instances of gendered colonial violence like forced sterilization and rape. *Solar Storm*'s emphasis on the importance of the matrilineal, Indigenous society that raises Angel to become an

<sup>16</sup> For more on methylmercury poisoning, see Hellegers' "From Poisson Road to Poison Road: Mapping the Toxic Trail of Windigo Capital in Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms*" and Hori et al's "Use of Traditional Environmental Knowledge to Assess the Impact of Climate Change on Subsistence Fishing in the James Bay Region of Northern Ontario, Canada."



activist on behalf of the water stresses the importance of storytelling as a site of resistance. Hogan reclaims and reshapes the history of colonialism that has been so central to understanding the toll of maldevelopment on stolen land.

In *Solar Storms*, water is a resistant counterpoint to capitalistic maldevelopment and settler colonialism. Through this framework, Hogan asserts the interconnectedness of different heads of a colonial Cerberus as it explores the lives of four generations of women and their trauma and healing. Hogan gives authority and interiority to Angel as a way to historicize and articulate the disastrous impacts of extractive capitalism on Indigenous land, water, and communities, encouraging readers to empathize with Angel, and by extension, the water and her people.

*Solar Storms* provides an alternative narrative that indicts dam-building as neocolonialism and emphasizes the importance and necessity of resistance. Just as Bush smuggles the stories of resistance “out to newspapers in the United States and to cities in Canada” (300), so does Hogan introduce her own story that directly confronts and protests a history fraught with violence against land and people. The awareness that Hogan facilitates of Indigenous sovereignty gives readers an opportunity to conceptualize Indigenous contemporality and Indigenous resistance through the lens of fiction, a space where readers are encouraged to feel empathy for fictional characters. Through empathy for Angel and vicarious pride in her capacity for compassion and resistance, Hogan encourages readers to unsettle the preconceived ideas of Wiindigoo capitalism.

*Solar Storms* is a work of resistance, as it simultaneously tells the story of exploitation, as well as the resistance to that exploitation predicated on embracing community and recognizing the sanctity of nature. The novel uses the animacy of water and the hauntology of the Wiindigoo as contrasting motifs of Indigenous reciprocity and settler greed, respectively. By doing so, *Solar Storms* illuminates the colonizing forces behind the commodification of water—a force that has become even more relevant in the wake of pipelines that threaten to ravage Indigenous land and endanger Indigenous people and their lifeways. Honoring the memories of water is the first step to protecting it and being its steward. As settlers, witnessing and believing Indigenous scholars and leaders is not only essential, but long overdue. Kimmerer’s assertion that “Our relationship with land cannot heal until we hear its stories” (loc 203) extends to the relationship between humans and water, and the pact between them at which colonialism eats away. By listening to those who tell water’s stories through fiction, protest, and resistance, settlers can help heal the scars of Wiindigoo capitalism and participate in true allyship with Indigenous land, water, and people.

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**BIO**

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## *Colonial and Postcolonial Cyprus: Transportal Literatures of Empire, Nationalism, and Sectarianism*

by Daniele Nunziata, Springer Nature, 2020, 297 pages, \$78,45 (hardback), ISBN-13: 978-3030582357.

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### Book Review

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*Colonial and Postcolonial Cyprus* analyses colonial and postcolonial writings about Cyprus, before and after its independence from the British Empire in 1960. Nunziata uses a postcolonial lens to address Cyprus's history as a "strategically located Mediterranean island that has had a distinct experience of major world events" (Huggan 2). Cyprus is a postcolonial space, an island in the East Mediterranean in between Africa, Asia and Europe; as such it is referred to as being part of the Middle East, ceded by the Ottomans to the British in 1878 and independent with a divided capital since 1960s. Despite 1960 being the year of independence the UK maintains two sizeable military bases on the island, the British overseas territories Akrotiri and Dhekelia. In addition, after the island gained independence, intracommunal conflict broke out between Greek speakers and Turkish speakers still feeling the impact of British divide of politics from the preceded decades. These events culminated in the events of 1974 leaving the island divided by a buffer zone which was in view partial opened in 2003. Most Turkish speakers now live in the north of the island whereas Greek speakers live in the south. Thousands became refugees during this new part of the twentieth century.

The purpose of Nunziata's research was to explore the degree to which Cyprus has adapted to its literary representations. He asks questions about how different writers relate to Cyprus, how they depict the island's past and attempt to predict its future. He examines the language form, genre and translation of Cypriot literature through the lens of postcolonial literary studies to observe the ways that Cypriot history aligns with established theories of the discipline while

also offering contextual differences which forces the readers to reconsider the assumptions of postcolonial Cyprus. While some postcolonial theorists examine the model of the center in relation to the periphery, such as the relationships that the British metropole used to have with a specific colony and post-colony, Nunziata attempts to showcase the ways in which Cyprus has a center-periphery relationship to three metropolitan spaces; the UK, Greece and Turkey. Even though these three nation-states were given the role of guarantor power over the island in 1960, Cyprus has not been fully decolonized. Its cultural production has been largely affected by its colonial status.

In chapter one, British colonial travel logs, inspired by the Prime Minister Benjamin Israeli and his promise to queen Victoria, are analyzed. This language of keys, doorways, gateways and liminality commences a literary history of Cyprus being seen as a transportal location between languages, continents and religions. This is evident in the orientalist travel logs whose writing was in the time of the colonial violence of the 1950s. The first chapter is a significant study because it provides a “fruitful model for understanding other sites of conflict and division” in a globalized world (Nunziata 1).

In chapter two, Nunziata further explores the term ‘transportal’. Many writers connected Cyprus to new forms of travel writing but often in ways to modify the conventions of genre. For this reason, Nunziata coined the term transportal literatures when defining writing about Cyprus. Transportal literatures is the name of the genre typified by a sense of movement, instability and transportation between various states. The works analyzed in the book fall under the ‘transportal literature’ genre, as they explore how colonialism hinders the freedom of the island. Nunziata compares how the kind of privileged movements enacted by British colonial writers is very different from the forced movements of Cypriot refugees from the 1950s- to the 1970s and it is the opposite of the lack of movement created by the division of the communities living in the north and the south. The movement of British colonizers is the antithesis of a non-movement experienced by displacedness, an inability to return to ancestral homes.

In chapter three, Nunziata analyzes the writing of Cypriot writers such as Costas Montis, who use transportal modes of prose to write back to the British imperial discourse. He explores the literature written by contemporary Cypriot writers whose work has been challenged from British colonialism and various nationalist forces making claims on the island today. These writers use transportal motives to represent the trauma of Cypriot refugees and destabilize fixed distinctions between Cypriots based on language, religion, gender or national identity. Nunziata asks why some Cypriot writers compose their writing in English instead of in Cypriot Greek, or Cypriot Turkish to understand how they aim to open up readership to people living on the so-called other side of the buffer zone. This often involves writers forming acts of self-translation in

order to come to terms with whether they see themselves as producers of Cypriot literature for a Cypriot audience or whether they see their work as belonging to other national or linguistic categories of cultural production. Most of the authors discussed in this chapter, use the transnational forms of literature to push against the boundaries of the long division which separates Cypriots along ethnic lines, particularly a line division which has been complicit in sectarian violence for decades. It was vital to Nunziata to introduce Cypriots who speak Greek, or Turkish, or Armenian and to listen to voices from the island's different linguistic communities which are deeply interconnected but often severely divided.

Nunziata concludes by showing the points of commonality between contemporary Cypriot authors and the use of transnational texts in interrelated ways to combat nationalism. He further builds on the conversation that Yiannis Papadakis has started about the relationship between the politics of the empire and the politics of space. The ultimate aim of Nunziata is to add more attention to Cyprus within pre-existing postcolonial literary studies. This book is unique as it examines the hegemonic relationship Cyprus has with Greece, Turkey and England, metropolitan centers with which it is directly in dialogue with. This intricate relationship is explored by contemporary Cypriot writers who address Cyprus' unique positioning in order to grapple with their deferred postcoloniality.



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**BIO**

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