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Literary Musings

A Peer-Reviewed, Refereed Journal

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. G. Rajesh Kumar



Research
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SUGGESTIVE PARAMETERS FOR PEER-REVIEWED JOURNALS

UGC 2025 GUIDELINES

In strict compliance with the UGC's 2025 Guidelines, we adhere to the 36 parameters for selecting peer-reviewed journals, as established in the circular of February 11, 2025, and further detailed in the 591st meeting (June 24, 2025). These guidelines ensure academic rigor, transparency, and publication excellence. To support this commitment, HEIs must use the following UGC-recommended parameters to evaluate journals, tailoring them to their institutional priorities. The analysis below cross-verifies this journal's alignment with the mandated 36 criteria.

Suggestions for HEIs

1. Choice of Peer-Reviewed Journals: Faculty and students should select peer-reviewed journals that are relevant to their specific discipline and research focus for publishing their work.

2. Internal Review Committees: To Maintain quality and align with institutional goals, HEIs are encouraged to form internal committees. These committees will periodically refine the journal selection criteria, as referenced in the UGC's circular (February 11, 2025) and public notice (July 16, 2025).

References

[1] https://www.ugc.gov.in/pdfnews/9678711_Public-Notice-CARE.pdf

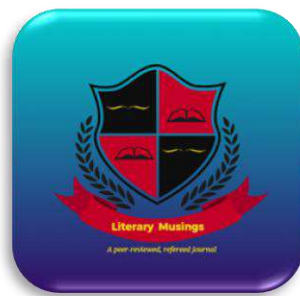
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***Literary Musings* commitment to UGC Guidelines:**



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Editor's Message

Literary Musings (E-ISSN: 2584-1459) is an online Journal of English Language and Literature which is committed to academic research, welcomes scholars and students all over the world who to advance their status of academic career and society by their ideas. The journal welcomes publications of quality papers on research and other mentioned forms in English Language and Literature. It follows calendar year schedule – July and December. Research ought to be active to create a major boundary in the academic world. It must enrich the neo-theoretical frame that facilitates re-evaluation and enhancement of existing practices and thoughts. Eventually, this will effect in a primary discovery and lean-to the knowledge acquired. Research is to establish, confirm facts, reiterate previous works ant to solve issues. An active endeavor to endow rational approach to these types for educational reformations through academic research has become the focal intention of the journal. I thank to the paper contributors from various institutions and the anonymous reviewers who reviewed the papers. Now, I feel very proud to bring the present issue contributed by the Academicians and research Scholars of the literary field.

Dr. G. Rajesh Kumar

Editor-in-Chief

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Understandings of Intersexuality in Current Novels

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Research Article

Abstract

The following paper examines different conceptualizations of intersexuality, as they appear in current day novels. The topic of intersex representation and conceptualization has, so far, been significantly under-researched. However, researchers such as Walker (2022), De Clercq (2022), and Pellegrini (2022) find that intersex representation may be a deciding factor in the way intersex people are perceived and treated. As such, it is important to further examine representations and conceptualizations of intersex people. This paper uses close reading as well as thematic text analysis to explore ten novels representing intersex people. It finds different repeated conceptualizations of intersexuality, reflecting different understandings of what being intersex means. These conceptualizations are: a punishment to hide, a medical issue, a personal secret, a superpower or advantage, something that does not matter, a revelation, a social issue, something subversive, and a reason to belong. They may reflect views about intersexuality in society, as well as contribute to their formation.

Keywords: Intersex, English Literature, Representation, Thematic Text Analysis.

Introduction

The following paper examined conceptualizations of what it means to be intersex, in various English language novels. It is based in the belief that intersex representation matters, following researchers such as Walker (2022), De Clercq (2022), and Pellegrini (2022). These scholars suggest that representation may be the deciding factor when it comes to the way intersex people are treated medically, legally and socially. Given this, it is important to explore what current representations are telling intersex people about themselves, and others about them. This paper examines ten novels that include prominent intersex representation. It seems to explore the different ways in which the novels perceive and conceptualize intersexuality, and the way they present it to readers.

Materials and Methods

The following paper examines current novels, to ascertain ways in which intersexuality is being conceptualized and understood. It utilizes both close reading and thematic text analysis to perform this analysis. Thematic text analysis (Guest et al. 2012) is a methodology in which texts are examined to find repeated themes. Those themes are then closely read and analysed.

The novels examined for this work are “Cattywampus” by Ash Van Otterloo (2020), “That Inevitable Victorian Thing” by E. K. Johnston (2017), “Across the Green Grass Fields” by Seanan McGuire (2021), “Just Ash” by Sol Santana (2021), “Sorrowland” (2021) by Rivers Solomon, “The Deep” by Solomon, Rivers, Daveed Diggs, William Hutson, and Jonathan Snipes (2019), “Pantomime” by Laura Lam (2015), “Middlesex” by Jeffrey Eugenides (2002), “Sovereign: Nemesis - Book Two” by April Daniels (2017), and “Icarus” by K. Ancrum (2024). “Cattywampus” (2020) tells the story of two teenage witches who struggle to come into their powers and sense of self. “That Inevitable Victorian Thing” (2017) is a regency inspired futuristic



novel about young people finding romance. “Across the Green Grass Fields” (2021) is about a teenager who is transported to a different universe. “Just Ash” (2021) is about a teenage boy who struggles with stigma and unwanted medical treatment of his intersexuality. “Sorrowland” (2021) tells the story of a teenager who runs away from a cult. “The Deep” (2019) is about a community of sea beings, born from slaves who were thrown off ships. “Pantomime” (2015) is the story of a teenager who runs away from an abusive home to join the circus. “Middlesex” is the story of an intersex person and his family. “Sovereign: Nemesis - Book Two” (2017) is about a trans superhero who is targeted by an intersex witch. “Icarus” (2024) is the story of an art thief and his intersex love interest, a recovering addict dancer. All have prominent intersex characters, in most cases, the protagonist.

It should be noted that this paper does not seek to provide an evaluation of how well these sources represent intersex people, or whether the information they provide is correct. As Pellegrini (2022) points out, books such as “Middlesex” are deeply problematic and harmful. However, after some consideration, I chose to include it in this work regardless, since it is widely known and is, unfortunately, many people’s only information about intersex people. As such, I find it important to examine more of what it portrays.

This paper offers an analysis of ways intersexuality is understood. The conceptualizations identified in this paper are not necessarily contradictory. Some texts display a variety of them. Different conceptualizations may exist at the same time in the same character, or in different times or characters. For example, “Just Ash” by Sol Santana (2021) includes a variety of intersex people, who have different conceptualizations of their intersexuality. This echoes findings that intersex people use different terms for intersexuality depending on who they are speaking with (Abrosimova et al. 2024).

Literature Review

Intersex is an umbrella term for people with medicalized or socially non-hegemonic conditions that frame them as other from entirely male or female (Wolff et al. 2022). Current research has found a variety of understandings of intersexuality. Commonly discussed is the medicalization of intersexuality. Many medical professionals hold the opinion that intersexuality has to be treated, in order to protect the intersexual person from stigma (Das 2022; Hegarty and Smith 2023; Mestre 2022; Roen and Oliver 2022). When criticized, some medical professionals assert that treatments have improved, rather than acknowledge that non-consensual treatments are unethical and harmful regardless of their supposed quality (Berry 2024). However, intersex activists strongly reject this conceptualization as dangerous and harmful (Bauer et al. 2020). Scholars such as Hegarty and Smith (2023) point out that medical intervention focusing on a stigmatized person is not a solution to a social problem, and cannot replace education. Bauer et al. (2020) explain that often treatment of intersex children is abuse and mutilation, and should be recognized as such. Monro et al. (2024) find that the erasure of intersex people from policy stands in the way of this recognition, and puts them in danger.

Hegarty and Smith (2023) found that the public does not necessarily agree with the medical conceptualization. They explain that this disproves the assumption made by the medical conceptualization, that stigma so prevalent and severe that it requires medical treatment. These issues are even more severe when combined with other types of marginalization. For example, for intersex asylum seekers and refugees (Monro et al. 2024). As Berry (2024) explains, older intersex people with disabilities also face unique troubles, that should be addressed, such as physical and mental health issues as a result of unwanted medical interventions in childhood.

The medical conceptualization is intrinsically colonial, not only in that it is based in settler cultures, but in that some medical procedures are based in experiments done on colonized



bodies (Rubin 2017; Malatino 2019; Wolff et al. 2022). Settler knowledge is still dominant and used to erase voices and knowledge such as Māori (Roen and Oliver 2022).

Previous research has found older conceptualizations of intersexuality and intersex people. Gilbert (2000) found that many historical representations fall under ‘monstrosity’ or ‘medical curiosity’. Later, Hart (2015) found that other framings were added or even replaced the previous ones. These new framings were ‘the innocent victim’, ‘the ultimate woman’, and, maintained, ‘the complete monster’.

Representation may be a deeply important aspect of intersex activism. Walker (2022) compares intersex rights and general LGBT+ rights. While some intersex people choose not to identify as LGBT+, others do (Berry 2024). Walker wonders why intersex rights are lagging behind, and suggests it may be a question of representation (2022). Walker reads medical reports as texts, to point out the importance of the way intersex people are represented in them.

De Clercq (2022), as well, finds representation to be important in changing harmful perspectives, yet cautions that some representations are more harmful than good. Pellegrini (2022) agrees, and suggests that texts may either replicate or subvert harmful ideas. If so, it is doubly important to examine emerging representations and the conceptualizations they provide. Hart (2015) suggests that since the turn of the century, representations have been shifting. Newer understandings of intersexuality appear alongside or even instead of monstrous or medical ones. This paper explores some of the current conceptualizations.

Discussion

The following section examines this research’s findings. The conceptualizations of intersexuality found in this work are: punishment, a medical issue, a personal secret, a superpower or advantage, something that does not matter, a revelation, a social issue, something subversive, and a reason to belong.

A common conceptualization of intersexuality is as something to either hide and fear being exposed, or disclose and be rejected. In Ash Van Otterloo’s “Cattywampus” (2020), the protagonist loses friends when it is revealed that she is intersex. In Jeffrey Eugenides’ “Middlesex” (2002), the protagonist avoids getting close to love interests, waiting for rejection and preferring to avoid it in advance. Here, the fear of being known is not unfounded, but rather than blame bigotry or systemic injustice, the protagonists feelbadly about themselves.

In E. K. Johnston’s “That Inevitable Victorian Thing” (2017), the protagonist almost ends two romantic relationships which she wants to continue, over her intersexuality. She feels as if it is a lie to withhold information about her gender and body from lovers. In Sol Santana’s “Just Ash” (2021), bullies at the protagonist’s school seem to feel similarly, and beat him up over not disclosing to his ex that he ‘is a girl’. Ash comes to the conclusion that it is his information to share or not share. He does not have to hide it, but he also does not owe anyone information about his body. In Seanan McGuire’s “Across the Green Grass fields”, as well, the narrator debates the protagonist’s choice to confide in a bad friend: “[S]taying quiet wasn't the same thing as lying. And that while her body wasn't any sort of shameful secret, she was under no obligation to share it with anyone. Especially not with a girl that had proven, over and over again, that she couldn't be trusted with anything that didn't fit her narrow view of the world” (McGuire 2021).

One conceptualization of intersexuality is as a punishment. In April Daniels’ “Sovereign: Nemesis - Book Two”, the antagonist doesn’t know she is intersex. She repeatedly shows transphobia towards the novel’s protagonist, ending up creating a magical trap for her, based on chromosomes. Since she is intersex, she ends up being captured by her own trap, thwarted by her own transphobia (and interphobia).

This plot point echoes problematic relationships between trans and intersex movements.



While, on the surface, it may seem as if trans and intersex goals should be in line with one another, trans scholars repeatedly ignore or erase intersex voices. As Wolff et al. (2022) point out, trans activists and scholars tend to disregard an uncomfortable shared history. Gender affirming medical procedures were originally developed on the bodies of BIPOC intersex people (Wolff et al. 2022). Such history should, at the very least, inspire trans people to uplift and support intersex people, rather than, as in this novel, treat intersexuality as a punishment.

Another novel that treats intersexuality as a punishment is Sol Santana's "Just Ash" (2021). While providing a variety of intersex representations, the novel also represents conceptualization of it as a dark secret. One of the novel's antagonists has known she was intersex from a young age, and has hidden that fact from her bigoted, abusive husband. She attempts to force her son, the protagonist, into unwanted surgery, and have the sister trying to help him imprisoned. The protagonist ends up blackmailing her to let them be. He threatens to reveal her intersex status to her husband, and put her in danger. While here, as well, the antagonist's internalized bigotry is her downfall, this plot is far from a happy ending for all. Both stories frame intersexuality as not only a dark secret to hide from the world, but as a downfall, a punishment.

Another conceptualization of intersexuality is as a medical issue to fix. This is an unfortunately enduring conceptualization, persisting for centuries (Gilbert 2000; Hart 2015). This conceptualization is at the core of the non-consensual medical procedures done on intersex people. At the same time, some intersex people find merits in it, as it allows for access to needed and wanted medical care (Abrosimova et al. 2024). This conceptualization, as this entire paper, echoes Oliver's (2013) and Kafer's (2013) work on disability. As Oliver explains, there are different models of conceptualizations of disability. One is the medical model, which perceives disability as a medical issue to be cured. This model centres medical professionals rather than the disabled person, and disregard's the social aspects of disability (as is discussed below).

This model is echoed in the behaviour of some of the antagonists in the novels. For example, in E. K. Johnston's "That Inevitable Victorian Thing" (2017), the protagonist's DNA is processed through a medical computer, that decides she is a man even though she seems to identify as a woman. In Sol Santana's "Just Ash" (2021), a doctor decides Ash's gender for him and convinces his parents agree to surgery he doesn't want. In Laura Lam's "Pantomime" (2015), the protagonist shares: "I had seen far too many doctors already, and none of them ever seemed to know quite what to make of me. They liked to exclaim, poke, prod, and then write articles in medical journals about me, calling me 'Patient X' or some other dramatic letter. I could not face it again" (Lam 2015). This experience is echoed throughout many of the narratives.

In Rivers Solomon's *Sorrowland* (2021), the protagonist, Vern, refuses to be told the name for what she calls 'being in-between': "without a name for it it's just something I am, a part of life. Once it's got a name, I know that means someone has studied it, dissected it, pulled it apart. When something has a name, they can say it's bad", said Vern. And she didn't want to hear anybody else's thoughts on what was bad anymore. In fact, the more likely someone was to say something was bad, the more thought Vern would give to its potential goodness" (Solomon 2021). Vern, like many of the protagonists in the examined texts, yearns for her own subjectivity and voice when it comes to who and what she is.

Notably missing from medical representations, and representations of intersex people in general, is PTSD. While as discussed, many works of research point out that intersex people are subjected to trauma from medicalization and from stigma, and experience PTSD (Haghighat et al. 2023; Hartand Shakespeare-Finch 2022; Khanna 2021; Monro 2021; Van de Grift 2022), it is rare to find representations that reflect this. Hopefully, future representations include, for



example, people who experience triggers and flashbacks in regard to medical care.

Some of the texts frame intersexuality as an advantage, or even a superpower. For example, in Seanan McGuire's "Across the Green Grass fields" (2021), the protagonist manages to squeeze through a small gap and escape her pursuers, thanks to the shape of her body: "for once her delayed puberty felt like a blessing and not a punishment. If she'd developed the hips or breasts she's been envying on the other girls [...] She might not have been able to fit" (McGuire 2021). In Ash Van Otterloo's "Cattywampus" (2020), the protagonist realizes she is the one who can save her town from fighting zombies pointlessly and dangerously, because "she'd had a whole life to spend pondering why folks feared different" (Van Otterloo 2020)

In other texts, being different is more than an advantage and even a superpower. In *Pantomime* by Laura Lam the protagonist finds out that some people like him have magical powers, as well as other advantages: "My sense of hearing was remarkably good, according to the doctors, along with my sense of smell, touch, and taste, and I rarely fell ill. They believed it was somehow linked with my birth disorder, though they had not come across it in other case.

This conceptualization is helpful in that it reframes bodies deemed bad by stigma as good. However, some of its more extreme iterations run the danger of making it seem as if an excuse for difference is required. As if only usefulness is good enough to excuse difference. Borrowing from Disability Studies, Kama (2004) interviewed disabled people about representations of disabled superheroes. It seems that while there was some enjoyment in seeing such representations, they also presented the possibility that disabled people would be required to be superheroes in order to be worthwhile. Similarly, it is important for this conceptualization not to require above and beyond from intersex people just to have the right to exist safely.

Another repeated conceptualization of intersexuality is of monstrosity or reclaimed monstrosity. Several of the characters frame themselves as monsters or freaks. This conceptualization echoes Malatino's (2019) reading of Michel Foucault and Herculine Barbin, framing difference as monstrosity and raising the possibility of reclaiming it. It is also in line with the framing found by Gilbert (2000) and Hart (2015).

For example, in Laura Lam's "Pantomime" (2015), the protagonist looks at a display of animals at the circus, thinking: "These were creatures on display only because they were malformed. Just as I would be put on display without a second's hesitation if I told the ringmaster what I was." (Lam 2015). The protagonist ends up joining the circus as an aerialist in training instead, perhaps subverting these founded fears.

This reclaiming is at times, as a subversive, innovative state thwarting traditional gender roles. In Rivers Solomon's "Sorrowland" (2021), the protagonist gives birth to a baby who may have, like her, "transgressed bodily notions of male and female" (Solomon 2021). The protagonist likes this possibility, thinking, "let him unfold as he would" (Solomon 2021). Moreover, the protagonist's body turns out it is living in collaboration with a form of fungi, that connects it to other bodies, leaving behind most human dichotomies.

This conceptualization echoes the 'superpower' one, in that it may place unfair demands on intersex people. There should be no obligation of intersex people, in particular, to subvert gender roles or fight the gender binary. Still, this subversive practice is worthwhile and helps society, when it is consensual.

A common conceptualization of intersexuality is a revelation, something to explain everything about life. For example, in Seanan McGuire's "Across the Green Grass fields", the protagonist waits for her parents to tell her about herself: "She felt like she was being taunted with some great mystery that would put everything else into context. She was waiting for the world, which had been slipping slowly out of alignment over the course of the past year, to begin



making sense again" (McGuire 2021). Here, the protagonist's parents withhold from her a truth about herself. Intersexuality is understood as a great, deep truth that has the power to change lives to the core and explain anything. It frames intersexuality as so important to a person's life that its revelation has the power to change who a person is, or rewrite their entire world. While in Seanan McGuire's "Across the Green Grass fields" (2021), the revelation does not shatter the protagonist's world, in Jeffrey Eugenides's "Middlesex" (2002), the protagonist learns of his diagnosis at 14, and promptly runs away from home to avoid medical procedures and to live as a boy. Another common conceptualization of intersexuality is, that it does not matter at all. As put by a character in "Just Ash" by Sol Santana, she loved the main character, Ash, not the shape of their privates (Santana 2021).

This conceptualization offers pros and cons to intersex representation. On one hand, it offers a form of neoliberal understanding. As long as one is nearly indistinguishable from the norm, one may be allowed similar rights to those of the norm. On the other hand, this approach does not account for the rights of those who are unable or unwilling to be nearly indistinguishable from hegemonic. It disregards the unique voices and lived experiences of intersex people, their knowledge and needs. It also disregards society's responsibility for systemic change, and accountability for past interphobia and endosexism.

Characters living in societies that are not interphobic, also seemed to experience no issue. The protagonist of "The Deep" by Rivers Solomon et al. (2019) lives in a community where everyone is intersex. The topic only comes up when she meets a lover from outside of the community. Similarly, the protagonist of Seanan McGuire's "Across the Green Grass Fields" (2021) has some issues with society in the human world. She crosses into an alternative universe, populated by mostly non-human beings, in which intersexuality is not an issue. There, she gets to go through puberty in a safer, loving environment. As the narrator explains, "No one seemed to notice or care that puberty was passing her almost entirely by. And somehow, that took any potential sting out of the situation." (McGuire 2021)

A different conceptualization of intersexuality is as a social issue. Scholars such as Hegarty and Smith (2023) and Wolff et al. (2022) explain that intersexuality is a social matter at least in part: the issues around it are mostly or entirely a result of bigotry, and not of anything to do with the intersex person. This model echoes Oliver's (2013) work in Disability Studies. As Oliver explains it, an important model of conceptualization of disability is the social model. This model explains that many if not all issues a disabled person faces, are rooted in society's bigotry and not in any medical issue. Similarly, intersex people in the examined novels mostly face issues with interphobia and internalized interphobia.

In the novel "Cattywampus" by Ash Van Otterloo (2020), the intersex protagonist is Othered and prayed over by people who used to be her friends before they knew she was intersex. In Seanan McGuire's "Across the Green Grass fields" (2021), the protagonist is criticized by her peers for not developing like them during puberty. She is framed as childish and immature, and suffers socially for it.

In "Just Ash" by Sol Santana (2021), the protagonist is revealed to be intersex, then faces a myriad of social issues. He is sexually assaulted by a friend who wants to touch his chest. He is suddenly framed as a girl, despite being a boy. He is kicked off the sports team he loves. His parents even try to force him into unwanted and nonconsensual surgery that he does not need. Terrified, he runs away from home, and police is sent after him to bring him back to the horror he had run from. The issues most intersex characters face are rooted in bigotry and stigma, in systemic structures that work against them.

Another important conceptualization of intersexuality is as part of a community. While



most representations seem to depict a single, Othered, intersex person, some view intersexuality as a way of belonging. In “Just Ash” by Sol Santana (2021), the protagonist’s sister makes sure to bring him to a peer group meeting. There, Ash meets a variety of intersex people, who later help Ash get by when Ash’s family sends the police after him. Meeting other intersex people broadens Ash’s understanding and gives him a place to belong.

This community is not always physical and tangible. In “Icarus” by K. Ancrum, Helios is an intersex recovering addict and dancer who is being abused by his father. He is, at first, unsure how his love interest would respond to his body. But his love interest, a painter, tells him –“there is a statue like you in Warsaw [...] you think I’d know art and not know this? [...] There have been men like you before we had words for it” (Ancrum 2024). While the community offered in this quote is not as tangible, it still allows for belonging. Helios has kin in history and in art, and like his kin, Helios can know he is not entirely alone.

Conclusion

This paper examines ten novels and analyses them to find various conceptualizations of intersexuality. The ways it finds that intersexuality is framed as a punishment, a medical issue, a secret, a superpower or advantage, a monstrosity, something that does not matter, a revelation, a social issue, and a reason to belong. While some of these conceptualizations of intersexuality are harmful, and others more subversive against interphobic systems, they all seem to exist alongside one another. As previous research suggests intersex rights are trailing behind general LGBT+ rights, perhaps as a result of a lack in good representation (Walker 2022). Additionally, perhaps the most prominent intersex conceptualization is complete erasure. Intersex representation may be the necessary tool with which to educate and reduce stigma, for example among policy makers and medical professionals (De Clercq 2022; Pellegrini 2022; Walker 2022). As such, examining the repeated tropes in intersex conceptualization is important, and has the potential of helping fight systemic interphobia.

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Emotional Dexterity in Nayantara Sahgal's Select Novels

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Research Article

Abstract

Nayantara Sahgal has written several non-fictional works that include her two memoirs Prison and Chocolate Cake (1954) and From Fear Set Free (1963). Sahgal has been overwhelmed since childhood by the experience of the world recorded her valuable experiences in these memoirs. In her memoirs with greater interest, she portrayed the Father of our Nation Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and other national leaders and freedom fighters of India. The other components of her memoirs were the hectic political activity in Anand Bhawan, her parental home in Allahabad and the Indian Freedom Movement. Nayantara Sahgal's non-fiction is a curious mixture and amalgamation of both autobiography and memoir. The Prison and Chocolate Cake and From Fear Set Free are two spellbinding and action-packed narrative sprinkled with the author's personal reminiscences of the lengthy struggle for India's independence, farsighted national heroes of India, colonization, decolonization and the consequences of it..

Keywords: Emotion, Dexterity, Nayantara Sahgal, Novels.

Nayantara Sahgal's *Prison and Chocolate Cake* was written in 1952. This popular work of Sahgal tells the first part of her life story. This work is a dramatic portrait of the spirit of sacrifice that carried British governed India through the years of the freedom struggle. This reminiscent memoir of an extraordinary and remarkable childhood concludes with the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by Nathuram Gotse in New Delhi on 30th January 1948. The book is a flexible record of the writer's childhood. The book does not contain much political bragging of the Nehru dynasty as many of her fictional works are. Instead, it takes the readers to the era of pre-independence through the eyes of a charming little girl and narrates the experiences of her at a specific period in her life. *Prison and Chocolate Cake* proves that fact that reality is sometimes more appealing and enthralling than an imaginary tale.

In *Prison and Chocolate Cake* her narrative style is sometimes random, but mostly linear. Sahgal, in this work presents a recollection of the extraordinary teenage experiences of her in India, Mexico and the huge expanse of the United States of America. The author virtually steps outside her 'self' like an observer, to give a delightfully touching account of her mature parentage, evenhanded childhood, healthy relationships, forceful and dynamic influences and multi-cultural experiences of her younger days. The book also shows her artistic comfort and fondness for description, a balanced act of sensitivity and objectivity that makes alive the people and personalities and the locales she experienced in childhood. She presents a very beautiful des

Thus, all the three daughters breathed the spirit of freedom from their early childhood. In the introduction to the book, Sahgal has affirmed her purpose of writing this autobiographical book of hers: "*Prison and Chocolate Cake* was intended for myself and my family, and for the circle



of friends who had been part and parcel of the atmosphere it described” (PCC 18). Sahgal’s life-story is a recapitulation of the past dealing not only with the history of her ‘self’ but with that of the whole nation. It also describes certain political events of the period and hence it is good or rather must read for anyone who is interested to know the history of the nation as well as the political developments of the nation during the 20th century.

Sahgal’s first encounter with Gandhiji who is quite noteworthy. The whole event focuses Sahgal’s truthful, frank and honest nature. Sahgal recalls in *Prison and Chocolate Cake* her first meeting with Mahatma Gandhi at Anand Bhawan, Allahabad, at the age of four. She innocently blurted out, “But he’s ugly” (PCC 25) to which Gandhi responded by gleefully laughing, affectionately patting her cheek and hoping she would always remain as honest. This early autobiographical account conveys a clear sense of the contemporaneous growth of the writer’s generation with that of Indian nationalism. It was a battery, charged with Gandhi’s empirical amalgamated approach to politics, colonialism, religion, economy and social structures. As Sahgal recounts: “Our growing up was India’s growing up into political maturity - a different kind of political maturity from any that the world had seen before, based on an ideology inspired by self-sacrifice, compassion and peace” (PCC 20).

Sahgal also acknowledges Gandhi’s conviction to emancipate the downtrodden from the age-old psychological stigma. She understands his cleaning of latrines as “an act of infinite compassion that had the effect of dynamite on rock, setting the country’s social conscience ablaze against un touchability” (FFF 226). Gandhi’s adoption of a persona symbolizing austerity – his wearing just a loin cloth - berated by his critics as moral exhibitionism, was a visual connection with the deprived masses. Sahgal eulogizes his adopting this symbolic equalizer as “no single fact had done more to re-orient the thinking of an entire nation than Gandhi’s semi-nakedness” (FFF 40).

Sahgal reminisces her inspirational ‘third parent’, the pragmatic national icon, Jawaharlal Nehru. An image of the dauntless realistic hero coping with “the deluge of problems freedom had brought” (FFF 38) has been lastingly etched out by Sahgal in this book. Her description of a glimpse of the Prime Minister’s residence, on her return from America in 1947, helps gauge the limitless task in the aftermath of the partition that plagued the country’s freedom:

In the garden I could see a huddle of tents set up to shelter the refugees who straggled in. Lights were on in the small reception office downstairs. It was crowded with people...Upstairs in Mamu’s office the light would burn till late at night... In the morning the look of scant sleep would be on his face... contact with(masses), transcended fatigue and discouragement, kindled a lambent optimism. (FFF 28)

In the backdrop of the partition experience, Sahgal has depicted her fragile relationship with her husband Gautam Sahgal. Though she is very rational about marriage, she is not very conventional. Marriage meant a life-long alliance that gave an individual cent-percent space and freedom. At the outset, Sahgal confesses that she was well aware about the differences between the culture, customs and even ideologies of Gautam and those of hers.

In Gautam’s house there was a plenty of linen, glass and wine imported from Europe. On the other hand Sahgal’s parents and even grandparents abandoned all that was termed ‘foreign’. They were the pioneers of Swadeshi Movement in India. She remarkably refers to the notable difference in Gautam’s mental make-up and that of her own. She observes that “...this was an Indian [Gautam] to whom Gandhi was just a name and freedom for his country an event that had deprived him of his home [in Lahore] and a part of his inheritance” (FFF 21). She also discussed her confusion related to marriage with her Mamu Jawaharlal Nehru who advocated a



sense of freedom in every aspect of life. She too firmly believes that one should live with an individual with whom one is comfortable. Hence, Nehruji taught an urge for freedom inherent in the texture of her life to her. There is a political coloring even when she talks about her personal life when she mentions how their family habits and practices were influenced by the political conditions of the nation.

The entire text operates and advances through contrasting colonial and post-colonial scenarios including the fulfillment of independence and the bloody partition. The list of the keenly experienced dichotomous observations is unending and creates a fiction-like tension in the autobiography. For instance, the Sahgals, whose home in pre-partition Lahore had the best linen, glass and wine that “frequent visits to Europe could provide” and the Nehru-Pandits, who in support of the Swadeshi Movement made bonfires of foreign good and used only indigenous products. The author understands this dichotomy as an echoing resonance of the clash of the opposing currents of the past and present and its inevitable intervention in her life:

A part of me, deeply enmeshed in a political consciousness, strained every nerve in automatic response to what went on in India. This part was emotionally involved with India’s future, and belonged to my uncle’s home at this moment. The other part struggled to pull free and build a life as near normal as possible for myself. Long after I was married the tug of war continued. (FFF 47)

Being a privileged member in the Nehru household, she believes in complete inner freedom that was illumined by Gandhi. She always pined for not doing something creative. Hence, she pursued the path of creative writing. She firmly believed that Indian women did not need to unfurl feminist flag. “Indian women did not have to march in suffragette processions to proclaim their equality with men, or don bloomers in place of their feminine garb. No such measures were necessary. Gandhi’s call to women to take part in the national movement beside their men brought them forward as natural as if they had been born to such a life” (FFF 67).

Sahgal’s autobiographical account is truthful, confessional, picturesque and contemporaneous dealing with the greatest freedom struggle of India. This life-story is not only a life-story of Sahgal herself but also a saga of Nehru’s family, RanjitSitaram’s family and above all India, the motherland with her “Unity in Diversity”. Sahgal’s habit of story telling obviously suggests that she is a novelist. Nevertheless, her habit of story-telling and the use of anecdotes have definitely enriched the organization of experiences in her life story. Sahgal’s memoirs express her inner life as a reflection of outward movement of India’s freedom struggle. Her autobiographical works truly express the tone and temper of her Era. Hence, one feels that they are the true records of 20th century India. Her works have reflected India with all her cultural diversity.

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Between Silence and Invisibility: Queer (Lesbian) Desire as a Mark of Excess in Selected Indian Literary Texts

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Research Article

Abstract

*In recent decades, the representation of queer women and their desire has gained significant attention in Indian Literature. This paper explores selected literary works by Indian women writers and aims to shed light on the complexities of their characters, some fictionalised while others autobiographical. The paper further examines a diverse range of life writings, ranging from short stories, autobiographies, memoirs and fictionalised accounts, authored by women from different region and linguistic backgrounds within India. The paper investigates various strategies employed by these writers who sometimes succumb and at times challenge heteronormative structures and patriarchy through their literary works. Through the idea of silence and invisibility, the social intolerance towards female sexuality and queer women desire has been reflected in most of the narratives. The paper further investigates the ways in which these writers negotiate their multiple identities, including gender, sexuality, caste, class, and religion, while grappling with societal norms and prejudices. It further explores the themes of self-discovery, coming out, resistance, and activism, as well as the narratives of love, desire, and relationships that emerge from these texts. The study will do an extensive analysis on the works of women writers like Ismat Chughtai's *Libaaf* (1942), Kamala Das's autobiography titled *My Story* (1977) and Shobha De's novel titled *Strange Obsession* (1992). The paper reflects how the mainstream literature at times refuses to address the idea of queer desire and compares it to fleeting adolescent traits of experimentation and even if addressed, it is seen as deviant in nature.*

Keywords: Queer, Desire, Lesbian, Identity, Narratives.

Introduction

The debates surrounding the concepts of “woman” and “lesbian” remain central to feminist and queer theoretical discussions. The term “queer” itself continues to provoke a range of questions: What does it mean to be queer? Is there a distinction between being lesbian or gay and being queer? Is it possible for heterosexual individuals to identify as queer? Traditionally, the word “queer” has been defined as both “eccentric” and “homosexual.” Within queer theory, this definition is used to challenge established norms, disrupt familiar assumptions, and draw attention to the fluid and unpredictable aspects of desire—particularly lesbian desire. Such desires often become obscured within patriarchal social structures, where women are expected to conform to heteronormative ideals and fulfil prescribed familial roles. This critical inquiry seeks to unsettle conventional boundaries and foreground the complexities of identity and desire that resist easy categorization. Within the Indian semantic and linguistic field, the word lesbian has been incorporated to convey negative meanings associated to the West. In “Silence and Invisibility”, Giti Thadani comments: “The self-identified Indian lesbian is viewed as inherently Western and is subject to frequent criticism on this account.” (Sukthakar, 1999) Thus, lesbianism is seen as a Western importation that refers to abnormal sexuality or sexuality against the law of nature. Likewise, the term lesbian defies “correct” gender roles, claims feminist



independence and attempts against the moral codes and traditions of the country. From the Indian perspective, the construction of the west holds layers of materialism, sexual vices, moral corruption, capitalism, pornography, violence etc. As lesbianism is at times seen “un-indian”, especially for those in power who are upholders of the Hindu Right, the hegemonic discourse defines the Indian lesbian or lesbianism, by producing social myths, and cultural prejudices that are inscribed on the lesbian body (Butler, 1990). Giti Thadani further opines that it is “vital to ask other questions pertaining to the new constructions of the ‘West’ in ideologies emerging from the geographic ‘Orient’”. Thadani posits that the prevailing discourse reflects a form of reverse Orientalism, or what might be termed "Occidentalism." Drawing on Edward Said's framework—where Orientalism is understood as a system of thought that culturally and ideologically serves to dominate, restructure, and assert authority over the "Orient"—Thadani suggests that constructing narratives around lesbianism which are shaped by negative perceptions of the West operates as a dual mechanism of control. In this context, the negative framing of lesbian identities through the lens of Western influence not only reinforces cultural boundaries but also serves to regulate both gender and sexual norms within Indian society.

Hence, this paper endeavours to discern instances of lesbian representation within a curated corpus of Indian literary compositions. It engages with a curated selection of literary creations authored by Indian women writers and endeavours to illuminate the intricacies inherent in their character portrayals, which span a spectrum from wholly fictionalized to semi-autobiographical depictions. Moreover, the study delves into a heterogeneous array of autobiographical and semi-autobiographical life narratives, encompassing short stories, autobiographies, memoirs, and fictionalized renderings, composed by women hailing from diverse geographical and linguistic origins across the Indian subcontinent. The study will do an exploration of diverse strategies employed by these authors, at times acquiescing to, and at other times contesting, established heteronormative frameworks and patriarchal constructs through their literary endeavors. By examining the themes of silence and invisibility, the pervasive societal intolerance towards female sexuality and the desires of queer women is elucidated within many of these narratives. Additionally, the paper scrutinizes the intricate interplay of multiple identities, including gender, sexuality, caste, class, and religion, among these writers as they navigate the landscape of societal norms and biases. Furthermore, the study delves into the overarching themes of self-discovery, the process of coming out, acts of resistance, and the propagation of activism, in tandem with an exploration of the narratives surrounding love, desire, and interpersonal relationships that emerge within the literary texts under consideration. It undertakes an exploration of this trajectory through the literary works of female authors, including those who identify as queer (in case of Suniti Namjoshi), such as Ismat Chughtai's “Lihaaf” (1942), Kamala Das's autobiographical work “My Story” (1997), and Shobha De's novel “Strange Obsession” (1992). The paper discerns how conventional literature occasionally avoids engaging with the concept of queer desire, often equating it with fleeting adolescent experiments, and, when addressed, stigmatizes it as deviant in nature.

Origins of Lesbian Writing: Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf*

While there's a considerable amount of contemporary feminist as well as gay writing in India, women's writing on lesbianism are comparatively sparse (Sandhya, 2003). One of the first instances of lesbianism in Indian literature are to be found in the short story *The Quilt (Lihaaf)* by the Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai. The plot of the story and the writer's submission to a trial in Lahore remains to be one of the controversial moments in literature, and subject for critically acclaimed film *Fire* by Deepa Mehta. Upon its publication, Chughtai was hailed as a progressive writer challenging social norms while also questioning lesbian desire when the society even



refused to acknowledge female desire. It was published in Urdu literary journal *Adaab-i-Latif* in 1941, *Lihaaf* is a first-person narrative by an unnamed adolescent narrator (now an adult) who upon visiting her aunt Begum Jaan comes across her illicit 'sexual' relationship with her maidservant, Rabbu. The writer never refers to lesbianism explicitly, yet some homoerotic tropes, massaging, hugging and above all the exciting action occurring beneath the quilt, confirm the lesbian relation. Besides, the last sentence that closes the story: "What I saw when the quilt was lifted, I will never tell anyone, not even if someone gives me a lakh of rupees" (Chughtai, 1942). Throughout the narrative, there are subtle hints of queer desire as the narrator first talks about her experience while staying with Begum Jaan. The narrator first describes Nawab Saheb, Begum Jaan's husband, as a man "of ripe years" yet virtuous as he doesn't engage in adultery and performs 'haj' (holy pilgrimage for muslims). However, despite marrying Begum Jaan, there's no marital conjugality between the two and Begum Jaan is treated as a 'priced commodity', "tucked her away in the house with his other possessions and promptly forgot her." (Chughtai, 1942). The narrator further hints at homosexual orientation of Nawab as:

He kept an open house for students- young, fair and slender waisted boys whose expenses were borne by him. (Chughtai, 1942)

The above-mentioned instances also indicate how both Nawab Jaan and Begum Jaan are victims of both patriarchy and religion which subdues their queer desire and this becomes a catalyst for the illicit yet intimate affair between Begum Jaan and Rabbu. Throughout the narrative, there's mention of a 'persistent itch' that Begum Jaan suffers from which no doctor can find a cure to; and the only way it subsides is through constant oil massages by Rabbu. This indicates how marriage becomes a space of repression for Begum Jaan and how her sexual desire is satiated by these massages by Rabbu, a massage "more important than life's necessities" (Chughtai, 1942).

Ashley Tellis in his work describes this as,

...where prayers, vows, vigils, and charms, necromancy, seances and 'romantic novels and sentimental poetry' failed to come to Begum Jaan's rescue, sexual bonding with Rabbu proved to be the potion she seemed to have needed to come out of her 'melancholy and despair' and become a vibrantly healthy woman" (Tellis, 2006).

Lihaaf reiterates the stereotype of the homosexual as the "victim or villain" (Russo, 1981) where Begum Jaan is first portrayed as a 'victim' then as a 'villain' by the narrator. Begum Jaan's character is type casted and stereotyped as a 'lustful woman' as she takes advantage of her social hierarchy to begin an illicit yet intimate homosexual relationship with her maid servant, Rabbu. The story doesn't highlight whether the relationship was 'consensual' in nature, but clearly power dynamics operate between the two. Chughtai through her narrative also hints towards Begum Jaan's perversion and paints her as a woman with 'paedophilic' tendencies as there is a sequence where Begum Jaan grabs the narrator tightly and counts her ribs and forces her to massage her in the absence of Rabbu.

The narrator however encounters several illicit acts when she shares the room with Begum Jaan and Rabbu. The writer uses several euphemisms to describe possible sexual acts including "sound of someone smacking her lips, as though savouring a tasty pickle", "Begum Jaan's quilt was once again swaying like an elephant." The narrator witnesses these acts in horror in the dark and is unable to comprehend it till she becomes an adult. Through *Lihaaf*, Chughtai reflects and represents female desire, sexuality, and touches upon the topic of lesbian relationship. "This story is an expose, a tight slap to the oppressive politics of patriarchal set up which try to bind and restrain female sexuality and confining them within the zenana" (Debnath). Chughtai depicts Begum Jaan as a woman who refuses to be victim of patriarchal



beliefs and decides to live her life on her own terms. However, representation of homosexuality is rather seen as 'deviant and situational' since absence of marital conjugality causes Begum Jaan to succumb to homosexual behaviour.

Chugtai's representation in *Lihaaf* resonates her own politics as a writer who views homosexual behaviour as 'aberrant' as narrated by her unnamed protagonist. While Chugtai was only representing the signs of the times where precolonial India considered homosexuality as sinful and aberrant and in tandem with Victorian beliefs; the text becomes a stereotype painting the queer community as 'deviant' or 'sinful' and reflects author's own homophobia and repulsion towards queer behaviour. One wonders whether the story can be seen as radical and progressive in portraying 'lesbian subjectivities' as political or sheer convenience?

The next section would reflect on a memoir by another popular Indian fiction woman writer Kamala Das aka Madhavi Kutty and representation of female homosexuality.

Kamala Das's My Story: Memoir or Fiction?

Kamala Das's name stands as an eminent presence among the foremost poets of the 20th century. In critical works and anthologies, she is introduced as "a unique literary phenomenon in India. Frank, bold and controversial in life and literature, Kamala Das made an enormous contribution to the growth of Indian poetry in English." (Mittapalli, 2001, p. 5). She is pre-eminently a poet who surprises the reader with her "compelling originality and freshness." (Rahman, 1981, p. xi). Rajeev Patke describes her work as "fierce and unsparing honesty about the difficulties of being a woman and a wife in a time and for a culture which had trained women to a long tradition of silence" (Patke, 2003). Collectively, scholars concur in highlighting her profound examination of sexuality and her distinctive perspective on love, qualities that permeate the entirety of her literary corpus. Nevertheless, a salient observation arises from their varied analytical approaches: a conspicuous oversight in recognizing instances of same-sex desire within her literary oeuvre, notably evident in works such as "*My Story*" (1977), "*The Sandal Trees*" (1988, trans., 1995), and "*Iqbal*" (1992).

In this context, the discussion will revolve around Kamala Das's autobiographical work, "*My Story*," which was published in 1976. Within this narrative, the rationale employed to depict and rationalise same-sex love aligns with the prevailing sexual biases or societal taboos of that era. "*My Story*" chronicles the author's personal experiences during her adolescence, when she profoundly falls in love with an eighteen-year-old young woman.

The girl I admired was beautiful, then she lay near me holding my body close to her. Her fingers traced the outlines of my mouth with a gentleness that I had never dreamt of finding. She kissed my lips then, and whispered, you are so sweet, so very sweet, I have never met anyone so sweet, my darling, my little darling...When all had left for the lunch my friend took me to the bathroom and coaxed me to take a bath with her...Both of us felt rather giddy with joy like honeymooners" (Das, 1977, pp. 82-83).

The brief glimpse of the same-sex encounter of the protagonist is explained as an adolescent phase something that becomes a trope in describing fleeting sexual flings between teenagers, which some people describe as gay till graduation or lesbian till graduation.¹ Soon after, Das comments that the fifteen-year-old girl is married to a much older man, whose rough hands bruised her body when he wants sex. The young wife remembers the love and caresses of her girlfriend and longs to be with her:

On a sudden impulse, I phoned my girlfriend at the hostel...Can't you take me away from here, I asked her. Not for another four years, she said. I must complete my studies" (Das, 1977)



Despite the protagonist's thwarted wishes, the quotation confirms that it is not mere illusion but rather there is love and desire between the two young women. Further on, the story narrates that the protagonist also falls in love with other women later on in her adult life. These relationships are not articulated as lesbian on the grounds that sexual desire is something that affects a man and a woman only. The protagonist expresses this idea with these words: "I kept telling my husband that I was in love with the doctor and he said, it is all right, she is a woman, she will not exploit you" (Das, 1977). Rosemary M. George interprets the term "exploit" as a safe relationship, which means that within heteropatriarchal parameters this kind of relationships do not deserve much consideration. (Das, 1977). What Das seems to convey is that within the hetero-patriarchal system these lesbian relationships are invisible and unacknowledged. However, by naturally telling her own queer story and placing queerness within the hegemonic straight culture in India, Das subverts the domination of constructed attitudes and social taboos.

Kamala Das's literary oeuvre, particularly her autobiographical work "My Story," led to the author acquiring a reputation characterized by terms such as "controversial," "promiscuous," and even "nymphomaniac." Her advocacy for the concept of free love, she contends, attracted the attention of numerous men who corresponded with her through letters or phone calls, often presenting proposals or making indiscreet suggestions. This period was marked by the propagation of scandals, the circulation of rumours, and a general lack of respect directed toward her. In response, Das's narrative voice resolutely denounces societal transgressions and moral lapses that remain concealed within the veneer of social hypocrisy and complicit silence. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the price exacted upon the writer for her steadfast belief in and defense of love and human dignity is social ostracism.

Lesbianism as a Western Import: Shobha De's Strange Obsession

Shobha De is a prolific writer whose novels are placed in the in between of "Western popular and pulp fiction" (Dwyer, 2000). Her writing style reflects a new cultural expression of the interests of the new urban cosmopolitan middle-classes. Rachel Dwyer posits that De's celebrity status can be attributed to the amalgamation of several conflicting attributes: her role as a devoted spouse and mother to six offspring, her adherence to the Hindu faith, and her public persona, which is often characterized as that of a femme fatale due to her literary contributions pertaining to women's sexual desires and gratifications. Dwyer further assess, "In her status as celebrity and in her writing Shobha De promotes a new kind of modern, bourgeois family, a modern Hindu family for the next millennium." (Dwyer, 2000). The values upheld by the emergent middle-class or bourgeois households are rooted in a dual framework that encompasses metropolitan patterns of leisure and consumption on one facet, and concurrently, a commitment to notions of destiny, religiosity, tradition, reverence for familial ties, and regulated expressions of sexuality on the other. Shobha De's literary works prominently exemplify these characteristics through the portrayal of male antagonists and female antagonists who manifest Western "obsessions." Within De's narratives, the charismatic protagonists strive to negotiate a delicate equilibrium between adherence to tradition and engagement with modernity.

In "Strange Obsessions" (1992), De' delves into the exploration of the theme of lesbianism; however, she approaches this subject matter with sheer homophobia. De tends to equate lesbianism with an "obsession," characterizing it as a peculiar Western fixation, a connotation that is explicitly conveyed by the title itself. Within the narrative, De' embarks on an examination of the realm inhabited by female supermodels, individuals who have acquired a status as iconic exemplars of beauty, serving as aspirational models for young Indian girls. The author not only makes reference to the encroachment of Western ideals of beauty upon indigenous Indian standards but also portrays women's emotional connections, including lesbian



relationships, as both infectious and fraught with peril. The portrayal of the lesbian protagonist, Minx, within the narrative of "Strange Obsession" aligns with the utilization of stereotypical and homophobic discourse that is emblematic of heterosexist societies. Minx's affection rather obsession with Amrita, the supermodel, is a central facet of the narrative; nevertheless, her overt exhibition of romantic feelings for Amrita is met with societal censure. Primarily, Minx is characterized within the text as an affluent, Westernized character who engages in behaviours such as drinking and smoking, and she is portrayed as being ensnared by an unconventional form of love. This portrayal aligns with the perception of Minx as an evil figure, as a 'villain' or a 'criminalized pathological subject' in accordance with conventional stereotypes. Amrita conveys this perspective in the story as:

I don't want to be your friend. Why can't you accept that? We can never be friends. You are weird. Abnormal. I knew girls like you at school." (De, 1992, p. 22)

A few pages further on Amrita repeats the same opinion:

You say 'I Love you' to me as if it's perfectly natural for one woman to say it to another. I think it's abnormal. You are abnormal. I don't know what you're looking for in me. (De, 1992, p. 42)

Secondly, De further attempts to influence the reader as she continues to describe Minx as a stereotypical lesbian who can become a subject of pathological study. She delves into Minx's path and see her upbringing as 'dysfunctional' and 'traumatic'. In the novel, Minx is abused and raped by her own father because of lack of marital conjugality between her parents. De attempts to sympathise with Minx but perpetuates the stereotype of how 'queer people come from dysfunctional homes' and see the lesbian as an "unhappy miserable creature without a man". However, what the writer subtly seems to point at is that both actions, raping, on the one hand, and loving another woman, on the other hand are equally deplorable by society and have to be punished. Amrita's words confirm this perspective: "Get away you filthy creature," she said. "I always knew you were a pervert. You and that father of yours" (De, 1992, p. 46). By drawing sources from Adrienne Rich's seminal work, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Chris Weedon contends that the concept of "lesbian" has been subject to reductionist and clinical interpretations enforced by heteropatriarchal norms. Within this framework, relationships characterized by love between women have been systematically divested of their erotic and sexual dimensions, instead being relegated to a status akin to 'mere platonic friendship' (Weedon, 1999). To transcend this constraining association, as exemplified by Minx's actions in "Strange Obsession," entails the act of challenging the prevailing hegemonic norms, thereby inevitably subjecting oneself to societal censure. In addition to subverting the constructed stereotype of the lesbian, De also incorporates a quintessential motif found in Western literary tradition: that of sexual inversion (Faderman, 1994). The narrative explores the concept of a person who has been assigned female at birth but identifies as male, thereby grappling with issues related to gender dysphoria. Minx harbors a deep aversion toward her feminine attributes, with a particular focus on her breasts, and subsequently opts to undergo plastic surgery to reduce their size:

It's a tit's job. Where do you think I'd gone for a fortnight? Why do you think I wasn't in touch, wasn't around? Well...most women go to this plastic surgeon for cosmetic surgery to enhance their breasts-boy! I could give you a few names- but actually asked him to reduce mine. You know, slice them off. Don't ask me why, but I got the feeling you didn't like that them- their huge size put you off. I didn't like them either" (De, 1992, p. 93).



Within narratives exemplifying traditional constructs reflective of a heteronormative society, a recurring trope is the emergence of a heroic male figure who assumes the role of the saviour, thereby rescuing the heroine from the clutches of a stifling lesbian relationship in which she has been ensnared. The ultimate culmination of liberation within such narratives is typically depicted as occurring upon the institution of marriage. This is exactly what occurs in De's novel:

We shared an unnatural relationship. She forced me into it...blackmailed me...tortured me...scared me...And then...I began to enjoy it. To respond. I became dependant on her... so dependant I thought we'd spend our life together till I met my husband. It was he who saved me from her clutches." (De, 1992, p. 204)

Remarkably, the narrative appears to earnestly endorse a notion akin to a "peculiar fixation," by foregrounding the institution of marriage and the traditional family as unassailable and stable constructs that fulfil the fundamental needs of individuals. Within the framework of these dynamics, any exploration of alternative sexual orientations is portrayed as a source of discord. In a 1999 interview with *Bombay Dost* (Vol. 7 no.1), Shobha De articulated that, although the cultural climate surrounding homosexuality in India has experienced shifts, the degree of comfort in openly acknowledging one's homosexuality remains a subject of contention. She criticizes the advocacy efforts undertaken by the LGBTQ+ movement, specifically the public displays of one's sexual orientation and overt demonstrations. De views such actions as superfluous provocations that may inadvertently lead to a reactionary response. Instead, she advocates for individuals within the LGBTQ+ community to adopt a discreet and low-profile stance, particularly if their objective is to instigate legal change.

According to De, the utilization of provocation in a manner akin to Ashok Row Kavi's approach is not conducive to advancing the cause of the LGBTQ+ community. De posits that the LGBTQ+ community in India has inadvertently adopted a Western model, a pattern she views with skepticism. She describes the Indian feminist movement today as: "a bunch of often quite unpleasant ladies in Delhi with some agenda of their own" (*Bombay Dost* Vol.7 No.1, 1999). Nevertheless, De openly acknowledges herself as a "progressive mother" who would unreservedly support and safeguard her own children, just as she advocates for and defends marginalized groups, should any of them identify as queer. It is apparent that De's viewpoints align with what Daniel Borrillo has termed "liberal homophobia," a phenomenon that is prevalent in contemporary societies.¹¹ Numerous manifestations of homophobia, as elucidated by Professor Borrillo in his work "Homofobia" (2001), exist. One prominent form of this phenomenon, termed "liberal homophobia," ostensibly advocates for a stance of tolerance toward individuals with homosexual orientations, while concurrently upholding heterosexuality as the sole legitimate sexual institution. Within the framework of liberal homophobia, individuals identifying as gays and lesbians are relegated to the confines of the private sphere, with homosexuality being construed as a matter of personal choice. Consequently, liberal homophobes advocate for the decriminalization of homosexuality, yet concurrently consign homosexual individuals to the seclusion of their private lives, rendering them virtually invisible. Liberal homophobes purport to espouse tolerance and progressive ideals; however, it is imperative to note that tolerance, in this context, does not entail the acknowledgment of LGBTQ+ individuals' rights or their equitable acceptance. Instead, it implies a hierarchical division in which those in positions of power, typically heterosexual individuals, dictate the societal norms, relegating LGBTQ+ individuals to a marginalized status. The phrase "I tolerate you" thus signifies an assertion of superiority, permitting one to coexist with another group while refraining from recognizing their equality.



De's critique of the "provocative" activism undertaken by the gay and lesbian community in India to politicize sexual identities underscores a nuanced manifestation of homophobia known as "liberal homophobia." This form of homophobia seeks to address matters with a veneer of political correctness. The construction and perpetuation of stereotypes, as exemplified in De's work "Strange Obsession," serve to reinforce and perpetuate homophobia, while also constraining the portrayal of lesbians within narrowly defined boundaries, relegating them to the margins.

Conclusion

Across these texts, several recurrent themes emerge: the negotiation of multiple, intersecting identities; the pervasive influence of silence and invisibility; the fraught process of self-discovery and coming out; and the ever-present specter of social censure. The writers examined deploy a range of strategies—irony, ambiguity, confession, and subversion—to navigate the constraints imposed by patriarchy and heteronormativity. Their works testify to the resilience of queer women in asserting their desires and identities, even as they grapple with the contradictions and limitations of their cultural contexts. Therefore, the literary representation of queer women's desire in Indian literature is marked by both progress and persistent challenges. While there has been a gradual move toward greater visibility and complexity in the depiction of queer identities, the legacy of stigma, erasure, and stereotyping endures. The texts discussed not only document the lived realities of queer women but also invite readers to question the normative assumptions that govern sexuality, gender, and belonging. By foregrounding the voices and experiences of queer women writers, this paper underscores the vital role of literature in both reflecting and shaping the ongoing struggle for recognition, dignity, and freedom. The act of narrating queer desire—whether through silence, confession, or resistance—remains a powerful tool for challenging the boundaries of the possible and imagining new forms of kinship, love, and community.

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End Notes

- I. Lesbian until Graduation (LUG), Gay until Graduation (GUG) and Bisexual Until Graduation (BUG) remain popular slangs used to “describe men and women primarily in high school or college who, for personal or logistical reasons decide to be lesbian, gay or bisexual till they graduate, experimenting or adopting a temporary identity for the sake of convenience. Seriousness of this varies between officially identifying with a particular identity which includes elaborate process of ‘coming out’ to not labelling oneself and simply using it for one’s benefit”. This term was appeared for the first time in a 1999 article in the Seattle Weekly by writer A. Davis, where she related “her experimentation with same-sex relationships, and how as a result she experienced hostility from her gay and straight friends alike, with some of her lesbian friends pushing her to identify herself primarily as bisexual, despite the fact that Davis identified herself as heterosexual and briefly experimented with women in college”. For see A. Davis (1999) Confessions of a College Lesbian, Republished on 10/9/2006 Accessed on 1/30/2019 <http://www.seattleweekly.com/news/confessions-of-a-college-lesbian/>
- II. The term homophobia first appears in the USA at the beginning of the 1970s and describes a systematic hostility, aversion, fear or prejudice against homosexuality or homosexuals, which is a result of an established and “naturalized” hierarchy of sexualities that prioritizes heterosexuality. See, for example, Byrne Fone’s Homophobia, a History (2001).

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A Theatrical Eco-Quest: Adding Shades of Green to the Gray Stage of the Absurd

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Research Article

Abstract

*This study seeks to delve into less-charted territories by carrying out an ecocritical investigation of *The Birthday Party* (1957) by Harold Pinter, widely examined as one of the quintessential offsprings of Theatre of the Absurd, delving into existentialist waters flowing into meaninglessness and pointlessness of human existence. From an ecocritical perspective, its puzzlingly layered story infested with portrayals of not only decaying and isolated settings in general but also the human's dire disconnection from the nonhuman in particular is aimed to be explored to unravel the subtle dialogue the play enters with the Anthropocene. As a predominantly indoors play whose absurd narrative is expected to be centered around the celebration, its eponymous birthday party devolves into a disorienting and disruptive spectacle following the arrival of the unexpected, literally and figuratively. In this sense, the eco-quest of this study seeks to build an unveiling bridge between Pinter's absurdist play and its veiled dialogue with the Anthropocene and its haunting repercussions to bring what is celebration-worthy, if any, into question. Such an eco-spotlight shed on the play in question and its latent dialogue with such timely matters is oriented towards unearthing its subtle eco-seeds that could pollinate into greening the gray stage of the Absurd.*

Keywords: Theatre of the Absurd, Anthropocene, Ecocriticism, Anthropocentrism.

As an unorthodox and unsettling movement in modern theatre, the Theatre of the Absurd appeared on the 20th century stage in the wake of World War II, primarily during the 1950s and 1960s. Considering the horrific period in which it sprouted, this unprecedented genre of theatre was unsurprisingly gravitated towards mirroring the profound impacts of the war and related terrors on human beings including the existential angst, spiritual desolation, confusion and disillusionment. Introduced by Martin Esslin who also coined the very term in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), the term is rooted, not merely in ridiculousness, commonly evoked by the word absurd, but in nonsensicality of it all, lacking any meaningfulness or purposefulness (37). In this regard, purposelessness, pointlessness, and absurdness of life and existence of the human, coupled with hopelessness looming over the mid-20th century, evidently ended up fanning the flames of severance of ties with conventional theatre of the pre-war era. During the post-war years, this nonconformist theatrical genre, theorized by Esslin, took over the stage and sought to not follow in the long-established footsteps of the pre-war theatre but to map out its own uniquely absurd routes. Rooted in the philosophical belief that human existence is doomed to be futile in an always already indifferent universe, most offsprings of this 20th-century movement in theatre tended to feed off of human beings grappling with feelings of alienation, powerlessness, frivolousness, absurdity of it all and defy traditional structures of the theatre by favoring irrationality, circular logic, nonsensical monologues and/or surreal dialogues filled with repetitions and pauses by characters that often find themselves in situations characterized by futility and/or in pointless loops (Esslin 1961). Considering what a radical departure this is from traditional theatre, playwrights of this movement including Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Pinter to



name a few, are credited by their subversion of the longstanding theatrical dogmas regarding the necessity of logical narratives, moral lessons embedded, clear and smooth progressions by means of their inclination towards embracing more of chaos, fragmentation, and circularity to shed more of bright light on the absurd condition of humanity and existence. As a then-new theatrical genre eclipsing the long-established traditions of the pre-war theatre and bringing the overall nonsensicality of existence to the spotlight, it draws so heavily from existential philosophy that the gravitation between the two is overwhelmingly intense. Despite its emergence in the 19th century through foundational ideas of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche among others, existentialism can be fairly said to have come to widespread recognition in the same century as the theatre of the absurd, following unprecedentedly despair-inducing events of the early and mid-20th century, through the works of prominent philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus among others.¹ At its core, it can be pointed out that existentialist school of thought grapples with the human condition in general and the absurdity of life, the futility of existence, the existential angst and anxiety that go hand in hand with the radical freedom of the human in particular, all of which can be fairly said to add various shades of gray to the always-already gray stage of the Absurd.

In this direction, considering such conventional bridges already built between the theatre of the absurd and existential school of thought on the common ground consolidated via emphases put on the senselessness of it all, what this study seeks is to build unconventional bridges between the Absurd, going hand in hand with existentialism, and the Anthropocene. Besides such existential struggles of a human-centered nature which demanded the spotlight around the mid-20th century, it is possible to draw attention to one particular, particularly multifaceted, sort of an existential crisis of a different nature that has been denied to be shed bright light on since even prior to the 20th century, preceding the dawn of the Theatre of the Absurd, which springs from eco-existential crises on a planetary scale. Since especially the industrial breakthrough, modernization processes and a wide range of techno-scientific advancements have added fuels to the flames of humanity's deep-rooted inclination towards inhabiting the planet in ways that are based on human exceptionalism, which inevitably led up to the coinage and introduction of the term Anthropocene in the early 21st century by two atmospheric scientists, namely Paul Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer,² who opted via this relatively new term to refer to "the geological epoch that the Earth entered with the industrial revolution, around 1800" (qtd. in Clark 1). This proposed act of renaming the most recent epoch of the planet is primarily based on the ever-growing impacts of human activity on the planet's natural processes, which have been excessively interfered with and radically altered since the "Great Acceleration" and resulted in a wide range of interconnected, sustainability-threatening issues such as global warming, deforestation, acidification of the oceans, loss of biodiversity and so on.³

In this vein, such unconventional bridges aimed to be built in this study are oriented towards offering a relatively new perspective to explore the intersection of existentialism, embedded in the Absurd, and anthropocentrism, eponymously embedded within the Anthropocene, which leads to not only opening a new window to get a grip on it all but also adding shades of green to the dark gray stage of the former. In this regard, it is possible to articulate that the Anthropocene as an existential, as well as potentially extinction, level crisis on a planetary basis can be said to lend itself already to be engaged in deep eco-dialogues with existentialism since the latter is very likely to provide a unique lens to gain further insight about not only the human condition in an indifferent universe but also the human role and agency on a planet that is far from being indifferent. The despair looming over the totality of existence in an



ever-present way is portrayed by both the Anthropocene and existentialism via the former's emphasis on the severe threats posed by unprecedented consequences of anthropogenic influences on the planet's natural processes and the latter's emphasis on the overwhelming threats posed by senselessness and absurdness of it all. However, both certain contemporary conceptualizations of the Anthropocene and certain conceptualizations of the Absurd, such as that of Camus', can be said to meet on the common ground via them being oriented towards offering insights into navigating such inherent meaninglessness of it all but also radical independence, coupled with immense responsibility, of the human in it all. While Camus' philosophy encourages the human to revolt against the absurdity of life by owning up to their own free will that comes with responsibilities so as to lead an individually meaningful life that is unique to them,⁴ certain contemporary philosophies with regards to the Anthropocene⁵ tend to encourage the human to revolt against the absurdity of life that is led in excessively self-seeking ways of the longstanding anthropocentrism by embracing a new perspective that recognizes the gravity of human agency as well as responsibilities that come along with so as to lead not only an individually but also a collectively meaningful life. In essence, such philosophies relatively in parallel seek to encourage the human not to succumb to despair and/or nihilism when it comes to existential crises of any nature that might stress the ultimate frivolousness of it all and/or seem harbingers of an imminent end of it all, but to keep on engaging with life by embracing the radical freedom to act, though in consideration of responsibilities of any potential actions.

From an eco-existential angle framing the global eco-crisis, and consequently the Anthropocene, as an existential challenge, it can be said that such a distressingly liberating aspect of freedom is possible to end up leading to a sort of inertia, already looming over the existentialist school of thought, in responding to eco-matters and sustainability on a planetary level for two reasons in parallel. On the one hand, one of them is driven by the standpoint that human will and agency, coupled with radical freedom, have evidently been overtly anthropocentric and fanned the flames of such eco-existential tensions at hand, which paints inaction, keeping any further human action and interference out of the equation, in glowing colors and ends up with bringing forth further alienation from both the rest of the human and the nonhuman world. On the other hand, the overwhelming scale of eco-existential crises at hand and on the horizon that actually demands immediate action is possible to seem too vast for the human to comprehend one's complicity in it all and put faith in the possibility of any individual action to matter on this level, which burns the coals of inertia and alienation to the fullest. In light of such bridges built between the Anthropocene and existentialism for the purpose of shedding some existential light on the global eco-crises, driven by the former, in general, the eco-spotlight of this study can be put particularly on Pinter's profoundly absurdist play and the eco-undertones it echoes. Through framing the planetary eco-anxieties as existential challenges, it is aimed to be delved into such implicit echoes of Pinter's play and its subtle dialogue with the Anthropocene.

In this sense, *The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter is one of the most prominent plays of the mid-20th century which are widely recognized for their engagements with overwhelming existential matters. While its conventional analyses are primarily based on existential, psychological and/or political frameworks, it is possible to unearth its more latent eco-seeds, including eco-neglect, eco-alienation, and eco-psychosis that could burst out into subtler dialogues on overwhelming eco-matters that are latently but tightly tied to existential ones as well, rendering any sorts of Anthropos-oriented celebrations nonsensical on an anthropogenically deteriorating planet in an already absurd universe. Even though it is worth elucidating that his play does not fully lend itself to be examined as a prominent example of *the*



Theatre of the Anthropocene,⁶ it can be regarded as one of the earliest theatrical examples that refer, albeit implicitly, to the Anthropocene, whose dawn already precedes the Absurd itself. In this direction, what instantly catches an ecologically informed eye is the setting of the play in a ramshackle boarding house in an isolated seaside town along with its seemingly mundane environment and the nonhuman's almost entire erasure from such environment, which inevitably paves the way for an environmental lens to be carried into effect to analyze portrayals of severe eco-disconnection and spatial decay even in the first place. Considering vitality, recreation and renewal among those that are conventionally associated with seaside towns, they are, not only in real life but also in literature, commonly portrayed as liminal spaces between the land and the sea, the domestic and the wild, the human and the nonhuman and so forth. However, such conventional emphases on therapeutic and/or renewing and/or liberating qualities of such places seem to be elaborately subverted by Pinter. The one in the play is not portrayed in great details but only a glimpse of it is provided. As barely a faded backdrop, the town is notably far from such common associations of seaside locations and seems to be in contrasting conditions such as in decline, isolation and neglect. Considering a relatively long time ago in the play when this seaside boarding house in this town had been in operation and had been presumably resided by many others, the once-vibrancy of this coastal town comes to light. However, such light is now so dimmed that, due to almost humanlessness of the town, Petey's job as a deckchair attendant, which is a seaside occupation conventionally rooted in leisure and interactions between the human and the nonhuman natural world, seems to become not only radically rotted and absurdly irrelevant but also symbolic of the rotted cord between the human and the nonhuman. In this sense, the absurd fact that even the sea is not actually seen in the play and the portrayals of no sensory interaction with the sea, no waves, no seagulls, no trees, no animals, coupled with no visitors, no beachgoers, no indication that the seashore preserves its traditional vibrancy, make it possible to point out that the town now seems to have become a space of bleak eco-decay where its ecosystem and its overall vivacity seem to be in retreat. To put it another way, the town, whose vibrancy can be presumed to have been provided by both its own eco-thriving and its bridge-building qualities in mutually effectual senses between the human and the nonhuman, seems to have become nothing but a forgotten and/or an exploited space mirroring the human's growing neglect of the nonhuman, which adds latent fuel to the existential, and eco-existential for that matter, dread of the human in return.

As a result, such an absurd absence of the nonhuman components of the planet in a seaside town, coupled with the human's eco-neglect and apparent inability to show any eco-emotions⁷ even in times of timely need, can be said to reinforce the idea of eco-erasure by modernity. By eco-erasure, what is meant in the context of the play is the damage done over time by modernization processes characterized by industrial expansion and exploitation to name just a few, via either the erasure of crucial meaningfulness of not only the nonhuman world in general, the natural world of the coastal town in the play, but also the deep entanglement of the human and the nonhuman or the erasure of the nonhuman world itself over time through severe exploitations and depletion of its natural resources for any sorts of solely self-seeking purposes of the human driven by principles charting the excessively anthropocentric route of modern life. In this vein, shedding some ecologically sourced light on the non-portrayal of the nonhuman in the broader setting of the play, ironically a coastal one though, makes it possible to assert that the seaside town in which the play is set comes to be stripped of its not only eco-vibrancy but also traditional function by a much larger eco-malaise which is not characterized by explicit eco-disasters but by implicit and more insidious post-industrial ways of anthropogenic erosion. Thus, what the town seems to be severed from due to the gravity of eco-neglect is not only the human



in general but also natural rhythms in particular.

Furthermore, such lifelessness looming over the town, setting the tone of the play in general, is accompanied by the lifelessness of where all the action, or lack thereof, is particularly located. As a play taking place almost entirely indoors, its main stage, which is the seaside establishment run by Meg and Petey Boles, comes to represent not just a mere setting but a manifestation of decay, a decaying human-made space where the absurdness of the absence of the nonhuman goes hand in hand with even more absurdness of human existence in such absence. In terms of the absurd severance of the nonhuman from this space, Boles' establishment becomes a symbolic representation of the eco-neglect followed by the consequent eco-decay outside of its walls owing to its own deteriorating environment within. The spatial decay fueled by the crumbling infrastructure of the establishment, narrow rooms, dimmed lightning, sparse furniture as well as its peeling wallpaper⁸ speaks volumes about the global eco-existential malaise that was either long-denied to be shed bright light on or provided with one as dimmed as the one in the setting at best. As an establishment whose atmosphere is filled with stagnancy and environment with mundaneness, the disrepair of the boarding house lends itself to be associated with the sense that everything in it is on the verge of disintegration, if not further, which echoes the eco-existential threats fueling some sense of entrapment and paralysis. As for the former, due to the narrowness and barrenness of its rooms that are also already dimly lit, the sense of entrapment becomes almost so palpable that what can be said to be sensed by its overall atmosphere is that the house is slowly but surely closing in on them in particular and the imminence of an entire collapse in general, referring to that of both the human-made establishment and the long-established, vital bridges between the human and the nonhuman to a larger extent. Such a sense of confinement intertwined with a sense of inevitable collapse of it all seems to be followed by a sense of paralysis to take action to avert neither such a life-threatening danger of the impending collapse of the house nor such eco-existential crises worsened by the burnt bridges between the human and the nonhuman.

Considering the decay portrayed in the play as not only external, referring to that of the seaside town, what makes it possible to point out that it is also internal is the portrayal of deep deterioration of identities, memories, and meanings within the lives of the occupants of this house. This is arguably most evidential via the portrayal of Stanley Webber, who is a former pianist living as the only lodger in idle seclusion in one of the dingy rooms of Boles' boarding house. As a woebegone character within this anthropogenically sealed world, Stanley comes to become a figure of eco-disconnection and eco-alienation from an ecocritical stance which allows the layers of his psychological instability and nonsensicality of his routines, language, and his overall insensibility to be read not only personal and/or political but also environmental. His reclusive existence, marked by paranoia and inertia, positions him as someone withdrawn from a world that he is no longer able to sustain any meaningful connections to due to not only his existential distress on an individual level but also his latent eco-existential angst resulted by longstanding disconnection from the nonhuman world, fueling even further eco-alienation. In the context of the Anthropocene, he can be said to become a symbolic representation of the human whose sense of self is not fully stained by excessive anthropocentrism because he seems quite out of touch with his environment, echoing the global anthropogenic decay, as though he has been displaced from a more ecologically coherent mode of being. His being out of touch with his environment due to his sense of sort of displacement is followed by his being out of sync with his mind, memories, identity, and overall sense of self, evidenced by meaningless routines and senseless dialogues in general and his erratic speech and denial of even simple facts such as the existence of the piano in particular. In this light, his mental and emotional



fragmentation suggests that his deep eco-estrangement contributes to his psychological unease, existential dread, stagnation and apathy.

In this direction, from an ecocritical stance, it is worth pointing out what can be inferred from how eco-alienation, existential dread and extreme inertia loom over the establishment and its occupants. On the one hand, the boarding house comes to turn into a non-spacehaunted by the non-presence of the nonhuman and detached figuratively from the land of the living as well as literally from the living nonhuman components of the planet. On the other hand, Stanley, one of its woebegone occupants, though already quite few, can be said to become a haunting emblem of the human that is not only stripped of ecological grounding and crucial interactions with the nonhuman due to anthropocentric flights of fancy imagination, driving this current epoch in general. His sort of confinement, along with that of other few human occupants, to the decay inside the ramshackle house, echoing the eco-decay outside, can also be said to lead to sort of eco-paralysis due to the overwhelming extent of eco-malaise at hand. As a result, the world crafted by Pinter ends up being so claustrophobically populated by the human in terms of it being sterile, closed off and cut off from the rest of the organic components of the planet that human existence, already inherently meaningless, is stripped of any possibilities of being attributed any sorts of individual meanings to since any quests for such meaning-making purposes become more meaningless than ever in this virulently human-centered epoch, sterilized from the nonhuman to such an unsettling extent. In this sense, the senselessness of the birthday party and celebration comes even more to the fore because, due to the severe severance of the human from the nonhuman, rendering the possibility of attributing any individual meanings to an already meaningless existence in order to cope with all meaninglessness looming around even more meaningless, any sorts of human-oriented celebrations are rendered even more absurd on an anthropogenically deteriorating planet in an already indifferent and absurd universe from an eco-existential perspective.

Hence, such a subtle dialogue of the play with the terrors of the Anthropocene comes even more to the fore and what arguably deepens such a dialogue is the arrival of Goldberg and McCann. As a symbolic representation of the human with a more eco-oriented and/or a less anthropocentric mode of being, Stanley's eco-existential terrors are intensified with such a terror-inducing arrival of the Goldberg-McCann alliance composed of two mysterious and sinister men who arrive at the Boles' establishment in pursuit of Stanley. This ominous arrival of two men of an unnamed association, functioning as aggressive agents of normalization within society in general, and the symbolic representation of the arrival of overly human-centered modes of being and living, normalized in the Anthropocene in particular, is followed by them helping throwing Stanley a birthday party to cover up their insidious plan to interrogate him and eventually take him away. Therefore, viewing them particularly as the symbolic representation of the Anthropocene makes it possible to assert that their arrival is oriented towards domineering it all and derailing them all, especially those who have not yet embraced anthropocentric modes of being to a fuller extent, if needed by force. Their tendency to not think twice about exerting their force in a way becomes clear especially during Stanley's interrogation when his glasses are intentionally taken away by Goldberg for the purpose of rendering their target not only blind but also dependent on them in his time of need. In this way, the symbolic representation of the Goldberg-McCann alliance as the Anthropocene closing oppressively in on humans to make them more dependent on it, if not force them to, can be said to come more to the fore.

Such a force is also evidenced in the form of a linguistic one in the scene of the eponymous birthday party, dissolving into a series of unsettling and aggressive acts including a bizarre cross-examination and a bombardment of ruthless allegations and accusations. In their



quest for wearing Stanley down, by bringing up bizarre topics such as chicken-egg matter and which came first, among others in a way that is devoid of any moments of silence, pauses, repetitions or interruptions, they brutally beleaguer him and put their pressing power on him on both psychological and mental levels, which can be said to refer to the menacing influence of the Anthropocene. Furthermore, in the course of this absurd interrogation, their demeaning remarks and insults are not only accelerated but also pointed directly at Stanley's overall existence, reducing his identity to "a washout," "an odour," "a plague" (Pinter 32-6). At this point, from an ecocritical perspective, the chicken-egg account and which one actually came first can be extended to the anthropos-anthropocentrism account, represented by Stanley as the former and Goldberg-McCann as the latter, and which one came across as the actual plague.

While which one is what is open to interpretation, shedding some eco-critical light makes it possible to point to the latter as the actual plague by bringing forth that such strategies of Goldberg and McCann, using language as a weapon, lead to the intensification of Stanley's paranoia and his detachment further from his presumably once-coherent sense of self in more of eco-sync, laying the foundation for his imminent breakdown towards the end. From the eco-angle of this study, Stanley's eventual psychotic episode⁹ following the arrival of the Goldberg-McCann alliance in general and their psychological tormenting in particular can be read as a sort of eco-psychosis, fueled by dysfunctional and consequently disorienting rupture of relations between the human and the nonhuman, kindled by a self-seeking figment of human imagination favoring severe separation of the human from the nonhuman on the grounds of the supposed superiority of the former over it all. Hence, viewing the Goldberg-McCann alliance as a symbolic representation of the Anthropocene and Stanley as a symbolic representation of the human with, so to say, a pre- or less anthropocentric mode of being, who, as previously discussed, presumably goes through a sense of displacement from his prior modes of being in more of eco-sync within the walls of the decaying house, it is possible to frame what occurs between these two parties as a sequence of events symbolizing the gruesomely growing influence of the Anthropocene on the human, which gravitates towards deepening the rupture of any meaningful relations between the human and the nonhuman. In this sense, the fact that the Goldberg-McCann alliance's inveigling offerings¹⁰ and insidious deeds to mess with the mind of and penetrate to the marrow of Stanley leads to his dreadful downfall towards the end can be said to refer to the Anthropocene's both allurements on the surface and entrapment, if not effacement, underneath.

To conclude, a fairly unconventional perspective to interrogate what has been widely examined on conventional grounds is at the heart of this study which is oriented towards adding shades of green to Pinter's gray stage by unearthing latent eco-seeds in his absurdist play and revealing its subtle dialogue with the Anthropocene. From an ecologically informed standpoint, the ways in which lifelessness looms around in Pinter's play become deeply discernible even in the first place through the eco-stagnation of the seaside location. What seems to have replaced the once-vibrant coastal town and community is a ghostly one haunted by certain eco-horrors fueled by the longstanding eco-neglect of the human lacking or pressing any eco-emotions even in times of pressing eco-malaise. In a similar vein, the ramshackle house along with its woebegone occupants comes to be the center of further lifelessness, albeit figuratively, due to further eco-alienation and inertia of those non-revolting denizens trapped in absurd and senseless routines, dialogues, and modes of being. The arrival of Goldberg-McCann alliance, representing the symbolic arrival of the Anthropocene plagues more deeply the denizens, particularly Stanley, who can be viewed as the symbolic representation of the human not-yet fully plagued by, given in to and devoured by excessively anthropocentric modes of being and living. At its core, besides conventional examinations of the play under similar rays of light, or more



conveniently put, under similar shades of gray light, the eco-spotlight of this study reveals that not only does adding shades of green to this gray stage prove to be only possible via darker shades of green but also such an eco-end endeavor for greening intends up reddening it as well. What is meant by that is, unearthing the subtle engagement of the play with the Anthropocene for the sake of greening it ends up dark-greening it at best due to the fact that the play comes to bear no refreshing fruits inducing any hopes for non-anthropocentric ways of inhabiting the planet to outweigh overly anthropocentric ones, considering the triumph of Goldberg-McCann alliance, the Anthropocene, and the surrender of Stanley, the human, which ends up figuratively painting the stage in blood-red. What unveils under such light is that the dialogue of Pinter's play with the human-oriented nature of existential struggles extends to the existential crisis of a different nature, referring to eco-crises on a global scale because the flames of the inherent existential dread of the human have been fanned to a more dreadful extent by crimson flames of eco-existential angst, fueled by a sort of fright that the end of it all is already imminent as a result of the human's accelerating severance of vitally deep ties with the nonhuman especially since the dawn of the Anthropocene. Such trepidation seems to get so numbing that further inertia and a sort of self-surrender to the futility of it all end up being kindled in terms of both existential and eco-existential matters. Ultimately, in light of such unearthed eco-seeds in an attempt to add shades of green to the gray stage, which ends up being also reddened to a certain extent, coupled with the portrayal of celebrationlessness in the play in spite of the eponymous birthday party, it is possible to assert that Pinter's play puts a subtle emphasis on the nonsensicality of any sorts of human-oriented celebrations on a planet whose celebration-worthy animateness and habitableness are on the verge of human-induced extinction in an already indifferent universe.

End Notes

¹ See Walter Kaufmann (1956) for a more detailed examination of the paralleled and unparalleled aspects of the conceptualizations of existentialism outlined by Sartre and Camus.

² See, for more, Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, "The 'Anthropocene,'" in *IGBP Newsletter* 41 (2000), 17–18.

³ See, for more, Clark (2015) among others.

⁴ See, for more, Camus (1959).

⁵ See, for instance, the philosophy outlined by Clive Hamilton (2017).

⁶ *The Theatre of the Anthropocene* is a unique and such a timely initiative, founded by Dr. Frank M. Raddatz and Prof. Dr. Antje Boetius in Germany in 2019. By bringing together scientific findings on contemporary eco-matters and theatrical responses to them, it comes into existence at the intersection of art and science as a well-resourced eco-theatre, addressing and contributing to growing debates regarding the multifaceted realities of the Anthropocene. See, for further details, *The Theatre of the Anthropocene* (2023) by Frank M. Raddatz. See, also, "Anthropocene Play Company: Theatre for the Modern Age" (2018) by Bronwen Coleman, Pia O'Meadhra and Claire Larman, <<https://www.anthropocenepplaycompany.com/about>>.

⁷ See, for further details regarding what eco-emotions refer to, Louise Chawla (2020), <<https://besjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/pan3.10128>>.

⁸ It is worth noting that even though the peeling wallpaper effortlessly lends itself to be read as a symbol of further deterioration of identities, memories, and meanings within the lives of the occupants of the boarding house, there is no direct mention of the wallpaper which is specifically peeling in the original manuscript. However, Pinter's original stage directions are as sparse as the furniture in the boarding house and make enough room for those in charge of a given production to stretch their imagination in terms of how to project the atmosphere of decay and



neglect in the play onto the stage. In this direction, certain productions of *The Birthday Party* such as the one, staged at the Harold Pinter Theatre and designed by The Quay Brothers in 2018, include the peeling wallpaper in order to put emphasis on the ramshackle condition and harsh realities of the establishment while projecting the tone of the play onto the stage and visually enhancing the haunting atmosphere of the spatial decay in the manuscript to a greater extent. In this regard, see, <<https://www.londontheatre.co.uk/reviews/review-the-birthday-party-at-the-harold-pinter-theatre>>.

⁹Despite the fact that Stanley is not explicitly diagnosed with any mental health issues in the play, what is drawn attention to here is his exponentially increasing paranoid ways of thinking and acting which worsen in the aftermath of the arrival of Goldberg and McCann and their absurd but maddening interrogation, all of which culminate in him being stripped of his ability to communicate, his sanity, his own sense of self, and his overall existence.

¹⁰What they offer him towards the end of the play to convince him to go along with them includes promises about being “rich,” owning “yachts” and “animals.” From an ecocritical standpoint, this can be said to put emphasis on the false promises of anthropocentrism not only plaguing human perspective but also beguiling them and standing in their way of reawakening to the bigger picture, painted by interconnected and interdependent relationships between the human and the nonhuman, and living accordingly. See, for further details, the final act of Pinter’s play.

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Sustainable Digital Humanities in Practice: A Study on Johanna Drucker's Critical Framework

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Research Article

Abstract

Digital Humanities (DH) enabled the merging of digital technology with different disciplines of humanities and has opened new paths in research, analysis and cultural heritage conservancy. The concept is growing widely for the last forty years and has brought a tremendous change in the preservation of our cultural heritage domain. The intersection helped in digitizing archives and provided wider access for a larger audience in the beginning. Now the evolution is advancing with the integration of technologies like AI, Machine Learning and Big Data Analytics, there by paving platform for increased collaboration and fostering partnership between scholars, technologists and public. Johanna Drucker, a leading figure in the discipline of Digital Humanities, in her article 'Sustainability and Complexity: Knowledge and authority in Digital Humanities' argues that sustainability in DH should not be understood as a mere technical or operational concern but as an epistemological and ethical issue. This paper is an attempt to study about sustainability in the discipline of Digital Humanities through the case studies of Johanna Drucker.

Keywords: Cultural heritage Conservancy, Digitizing Archives, Sustainability. .

Introduction

Digital Humanities is an interdisciplinary field that integrates digital technology with different disciplines of humanities such as literature, history, philosophy and many more. The process involves analyzing, interpreting and understanding human culture using digital tools. DH integrates creation of digital archives, data bases and corpora. This is a quickly developing field that provides humanities scholars to explore deep in to complex research questions and present their findings in innovative ways. It paved new paths for research, teaching and publication. With the support of DH, printed knowledge is no longer the primary method for dissemination. The intersection helped in digitizing archives and provided access for wide range of audience in the beginning. With the evolution of new integration methods and wide range of digital tools and techniques now a days, the field of DH enables wider range of activities from text analysis and data visualization to geospatial analysis and digital text encoding. Though the expansion of DH has contributed a lot in various fields in humanities, its long-term viability is always a question. In her article 'Sustainability and Complexity: Knowledge and authority in Digital Humanities' published in 2021, Johanna Drucker highlights the argument that sustainability in Digital Humanities should not be understood as a mere technical or operational concept but as an epistemological and ethical issue. This paper is an analysis on the arguments raised by Drucker regarding Sustainability in the discipline of Digital Humanities. Johanna Drucker is widely recognized as an author and a book artist. Also, she is a well-known visual theorist and a cultural critic. Currently, she holds the distinct position of the first Martin and Bernard Breslauer Professor of Bibliographical Studies in the Information Studies Department at University of



California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Her work addresses themes such as book history, graphic design history and visual epistemology. Drucker's themes also include artists' book, digital humanities and contemporary art and culture. She has books such as *The Digital Humanities Course Book: An Introduction to Digital Methods for Research and Scholarship* (2021), *Visualisation and Interpretation: Humanistic Approaches to Display*, *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production* (2014), *Digital Humanities* (2012) to her credit in the discipline of Digital Humanities.

Review of Literature

Long term sustainability of resources in Digital Humanities is always a question. Gasparini and Gheldof in their article explain the challenges associated with sustainability in Digital Humanities, 'Understanding Sustainability in Digital Humanities is complex. Researchers, Students, IT and university staff, and the public are the stakeholders, as well as the IT infrastructure, including the software, the project with data, and how it is organized. One way to approach all complex connections and dependencies is to adopt a holistic approach rather than focusing on each separate part' (Gasparini and Gheldof 268). Dr. Joanna Tucker explains the issues in digital sustainability in her article, 'The question of sustainability is not an especially new one in Digital Humanities (DH). It does, however, seem to be all the more pressing now. It should be recognized that this is largely due to the success of so many DH projects and DH research generally, especially in widening out to non-DH specialists who have found that digital resources are now embedded in how we research, how we teach, how we access materials, and even how we expect to view and interact with our sources. It might be assumed that 2020's sudden 'online pivot' as a result of Covid-19 restrictions has accelerated this, embedding our reliance on working and communicating' (Tucker 94). Csernoch, et.al in their research paper expresses the need to fill in the gaps between digital sustainability and digital humanities. They opine, 'Our primary concerns – filling a gap in digital sustainability and digital humanities – are to contribute critical perspectives and practices by the analysis of office data management (office computing), the efficiency of office employees and their employers, the source and consequences of wasted human resources, and finally the educational issues connected with these problems. Analyses from the previous studies revealed that low efficiency of data handling is almost never recognized and continues without revealing its nature and the negative financial effects caused' (Csernoch, et.al 30551-30552). Christine Henseler in her recent interview with Johanna Drucker, shares the insights of Drucker, regarding the designing of effective humanities communication. She writes on Drucker's innovative thoughts on present education and DH, 'To expand students, understanding of the value of the humanities, Drucker maintains, educators must acknowledge and build upon students' inherent desire to tell stories they can identify with and to understand how knowledge, history and culture shape those narratives. This approach transcends disciplinary boundaries, holding particular relevance for students in fields such as engineering and computer science, who, Drucker explains, can be engaged in digital humanities projects that combine imagination and world building' (Johanna Drucker on Identification, Imagination, and Problem-solving to Communicate the Humanities – Center for Humanities Communication (CHC)). Damon Strange, et.al explains how digital humanities sustainability was made possible in Oxford. They suggest, 'A solution was in the form of the Digital Humanities Sustainability (DHS) project, which sought a way to utilize the collective knowledge of many projects and collaborators and attempt a way to standardize the non-standard' (Strange, et.al 355).

Theoretical Background

Johanna Drucker's influential article "Sustainability and Complexity: Knowledge and authority in Digital Humanities" will be the theoretical base of this article.



Sustainability as a Multi-Layered Concept

The development of Digital Humanities over the past two decades has contributed a lot in restructuring the scholarship, pedagogy, archival practices and research infrastructure internationally. The viability of sustainability of digital humanities is always a question in a rapidly changing digital world. Johanna Drucker explores two major concepts *Sustainability* and *Complexity* and how these concepts affect the field of digital humanities. Johanna Drucker defines a sustainable system as ‘one that replenishes its resources at the same rate as it consumes them’ (Drucker ii 86). She argues that DH cannot be understood only in terms of tech infrastructure or digital utilities; it also requires a deep understanding of how knowledge is produced, preserved and circulated in a constantly changing digital environment. Drucker states Sustainability as a complexity. She defines complexity as ‘nonlinear, probabilistic, and nondeterministic, and its outcome cannot be determined in advance’. (Drucker ii 86). Johanna Drucker emphasizes that sustainability in Digital Humanities is a complex one as it depends on worldwide technological shifts, institutional policies, cultural values and academic traditions. Drucker makes this statement with the case study of her two projects.

1) Artists Book Online

This was one of first project of Drucker launched between 2004-2008 with the help of her colleagues with technological expertise at her home institution University of Virginia. Later she found the project as unsustainable due to these challenges:

- a. **Dependence on University of Virginia’s technical infrastructure**
- b. **Incompatibility when the project is moved to UCLA**
- c. **Obsolesce of plug-in functionality**
- d. **Unclear institutional agreements**
- e. **Reluctance from the part of user community**
- f. **Lack of interest on the part of creator**

2) History of the Book Online

This book was originally built in Drupal. The project became unsustainable due to:

- a. **Drupal’s upgrades made the project obsolete**
- b. **Complex interfaces required too much maintenance**

Drucker and her team migrated the content of *History of the Book Online* to HTML/CSS which she addresses as ‘Poor Media’- using the simplest media that lasted long. Drucker gives a detailed explanation for using simplest markup language. Drucker highlights in her article that, ‘The advantage of HTML is that it does not become obsolete, and it is legible after a few lessons. It can be corrected, fixed, and upgrades through CSS manipulation without much specialized skill. The Drupal experience reinforced the principle that you should never wed intellectual content to a platform structure as getting it out is a time-consuming tedious process. Design decisions should be thought through in short-and long-term time frames and expectations of scale. We did not need Drupal for project, but learning it was useful exercise. Knowledge about content management system is sustainable-it can be used across platforms-even if the platforms become obsolete’ (Drucker ii 89). From the experience of these two projects, Drucker comes in to a conclusion that, ‘From these two examples, Artists Books Online and History of the Book Online, what became clear is that at the project level, sustainability is complicated by the need to assess the long-term viability of platforms but also to work effectively with in institutions conditions. None of these are stable. The window of project sustainability will vary considerably depending on these many factors’ (Drucker ii 89).

Pedagogical Sustainability

Johanna Drucker shares her experience of sustainability in pedagogy and challenges in



sustaining course materials with the example of her online course book *DH101- Introduction to Digital Humanities*. The course book contained modules that offered an introduction to core areas of Digital Humanities, including digitization practices, interface and navigational design, structured Data, metadata management, analytical methods, data visualization, mapping technologies, three-dimensional modelling, intellectual property concern across varied communities, and sustainability. Each unit presented lessons that engaged with core critical debates and was supplemented with suggested reading as well as practicums with different DH tools. The course book is funded by UCLA with the aim of doing well to the public and it is still available freely online. The book was initially built in WordPress but soon it faced sustainability challenges due to frequent updates, plug-in failures and exercises given in the course book were outdated. The PDF version of the book stayed useful on the other hand the website became obsolete with the rapid change in the technology. In Drucker's own words, 'The PDF version of the Course book remains useful for its organization, structure, ethical and critical frameworks, and basic introduction to Digital Humanities. But to update and keep the project current proved unsustainable without someone taking ownership'. (Drucker ii 89)

Institutional and Infrastructural barriers to Sustainability

Drucker points out the drawbacks she learnt from the side of institutions regarding sustainability. They are:

- a. **Standardization requirements that flatten intellectual nuance**
- b. **Digital projects are not indexed in online catalogues**
- c. **Technological and intellectual lifecycles that reduce longevity of projects**

Ethical and Ecological Dimensions of Sustainability

One of the greatest highlights of Drucker's article is the ethical and ecological dimensions of sustainability in Digital Humanities. She brings out the fact that the devices, servers and infrastructures depend upon exploitative global supply chains. Chips and circuits are made with rare-earth elements such as gold, silver, palladium and cobalt 'are often mined with a blind eye to human rights abuse, in unregulated and dangerous conditions' (Drucker ii 91). Exploitation of man power may be happening in form of exposure to toxic elements, unsafe work environment, Child labour and unfair wages. Yet, these elements are inevitable parts of servers and storage components of DH projects. Every Digital archive, tools or visualization depends on various global industrial processes that cause environmental pollution and creates toxic waste and ecological damage. Drucker points out those DH scholars must recognize their ethical responsibilities and understand sustainability as a moral concern, not as a technical one.

Sustainability as an Epistemological Issue

Johanna Drucker argues sustainability as a complex conceptual construct that cannot be encapsulated in 'mechanistic, deterministic, and models' (Drucker ii 91). She says that sustainability is also about how knowledge is represented, structured and thoroughly interpreted in digital environments. She uses the popular *Renear-McGann debate* to bring out the tension between computational methods and humanistic methods. Allen Renear, by drawing computational logics, argued that literature texts can be represented as hierarchical, ordered, unambiguous structures using models like XML. The computational methods prefer data that are clean, structured and determinant that can be fit in to rigid systems. On the other hand, Jerome McGann argued that literary texts are integrally ambiguous, interpretive and layered. When they are put in rigid structures essential aspects of meaning will be lost. Thus, sustainability becomes an epistemological issue:

- i. **If the Digital Humanities build tools to over simplify knowledge, those tools won't be useful for real scholarship.**



- ii. **If a project is built in a rigid way that cannot adapt to new interpretive theories, it will become unsustainable.**
- iii. **If data structures cannot accommodate ambiguity, researcher and scholars will abandon eventually when theoretical paradigms evolve.**

Sustainability is connected to both technological longevity and ability to adapt intellectually. A truly sustainable project must be able to evolve with newly originating theories, new interpretive approaches, and new scholarly conversations.

Sustainability through Hermeneutic Approaches

Twenty years before Johanna Drucker suggested 'hermeneutics, nonmechanical approaches', for addressing the challenges regarding the designing of computational systems based on humanistic methods in DH. Johanna Drucker cited her own three experimental projects Temporal Modeling, Ivanhoe Game and 3DH as examples of systems built on humanistic principles rather than on computational methods.

Temporal Modeling

This project shows that time can be understood in many different ways. Instead of placing events in a strict, straight timeline, it allows for personal and subjective experiences of time. It also understands that narratives, memories, and historical interpretation do not always fit into one fixed sequential frame work.

Ivanhoe Game

Ivanhoe functions as a role oriented interpretive game in which participants assume distinct characters and analyze text from those adopted viewpoints. The format privileges creativity and subjectivity, allowing players to rewrite and reinterpret the narrative in different ways. Consequently, the act becomes transparent, collaborative and open to continuous negotiation.

3DH

The project tries to build visual and spatial models that show how interpretations and arguments develop, instead of displaying fixed or final data. It understands meaning as something that is always changing, layered and open to many possibilities. To quote her words, 'Each of these projects worked to incorporate humanistic methods through recognition of the situated, partial, historically and culturally inflected position of observer-dependent knowledge' (Drucker ii 93). To put it in to a single line Digital tools built in Digital Humanities should understand the complexity and multiple meanings of humanities. Forcing everything into simple, rigid computer structures is impossible in humanities. Hermeneutics complexity becomes a frame work for designing tools that:

- a. **Allow multiple interpretations to coexist**
- b. **Foreground subjectivity rather than hide it**
- c. **Make ambiguity visible rather than eliminate it**
- d. **Encourage critical reflection instead of automated output**
- e. **Sustain relevance as a theoretical paradigm to evolve**

A DH project built on these principles is more likely to survive intellectually because it accommodates change, debate and reinterpretation. It sustains not just data but the interpretive processes that define humanities.

Conclusion

Drucker's critical framework on sustainability in the discipline of Digital Humanities goes far beyond computational methods. She urges DH to reassess its underlying principles by emphasizing ethical responsibility, epistemological flexibility, and hermeneutic complexity. She emphasizes that sustainability in DH can be achieved through the perception of global ecological



impact, rejection of rigid computational models and creation of digital tools that can reflect the hermeneutical richness of the humanities. If the ethical, intellectual and creative dimensions are given due consideration, Digital Humanities can preserve digital objects and sustain the essence of humanistic scholarship.

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