

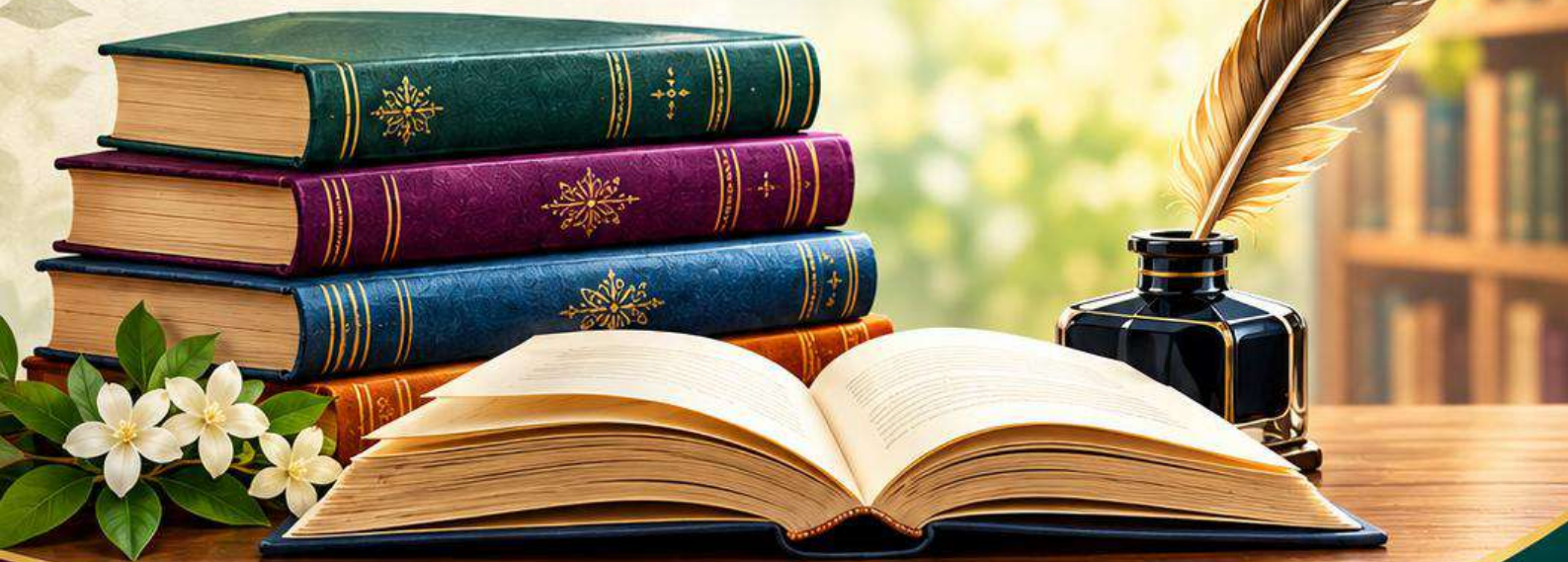
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Literary Musings

A Peer-Reviewed, Refereed Journal



Research
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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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Eco-anxiety and Resilience in Indian Children's Climate Fiction: Reading Ruskin Bond and Anushka Ravishankar

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Research Article

Abstract

*Climate change is no longer an abstract threat but an everyday reality shaping the lives and imaginations of India's children. This paper investigates how Indian children's literature mediates ecoanxiety—the fear and helplessness generated by ecological crisis—while simultaneously offering strategies of resilience and hope. The central research question guiding this study is: How do Ruskin Bond's nature tales and Anushka Ravishankar's *Tiger on a Tree* narrate ecological conflict and prepare young readers to emotionally and ethically respond to the challenges of climate change? The methodology combines literary analysis with insights from ecocriticism and childhood studies. Selected texts include Bond's *The Cherry Tree*, *Rusty and the Leopard*, and *Panther's Moon*, alongside Ravishankar's internationally acclaimed picture book *Tiger on a Tree*. A close reading of these works is supported by theoretical frameworks drawn from Lawrence Buell's concept of "environmental imagination" and Rob Nixon's idea of "slow violence." The study also draws on recent UNICEF and Lancet reports on ecoanxiety in children to contextualize the literary analysis within wider psychological and social concerns. The key findings suggest that these two authors, while writing in very different registers, converge in their attempt to balance environmental fear with imaginative resilience. Bond's works foreground a deep bond with nature, presenting it as both fragile and nurturing. His stories often depict ecological imbalance—the loss of trees, displacement of animals—but he softens the anxiety by framing nature as a companion and moral guide. Ravishankar, by contrast, employs humour, nonsense rhyme, and visual play in *Tiger on a Tree* to represent the conflict between the wild and human society. While the tiger's displacement generates anxiety, the absurdity of the narrative allows children to confront ecological tension without being overwhelmed. Together, these texts reveal that Indian children's literature does not simply mirror climate anxiety but actively mediates it. By blending fear with play, loss with continuity, these narratives enable young readers to process environmental uncertainty. They highlight a spectrum of child responses—from Rusty's gentle curiosity in Bond's stories to the tiger's chaotic presence in Ravishankar's picture book—suggesting that resilience lies not in denying ecoanxiety but in reframing it through narrative and imagination. The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it introduces well known Indian children's authors into the global discussion of climate fiction, a field dominated by Western texts. Second, it demonstrates how literature functions as a pedagogical tool for climate education, addressing children's emotional as well as ethical needs. Third, it offers policymakers and educators cultural resources for integrating climate awareness into early learning without amplifying despair. In a time when India is ranked among the most climate vulnerable nations, children's literature emerges as a crucial site where ecological trauma is narrated, negotiated, and transformed. By reading Bond and Ravishankar together, this paper shows how storytelling equips India's youngest generation to face a future shaped by both risk and resilience.*

Keywords: Eco-anxiety, Resilience, Climate Fiction, Ruskin Bond, Anushka Ravishankar.

I. Introduction: Children, Climate Change, and Literary Responsibility

Climate change is no longer a distant abstraction but a pervasive force reshaping the everyday realities of children across India. In regions like the flood prone plains of Bihar and



Assam, where annual monsoons have intensified into catastrophic deluges, displacing millions, children witness homes submerged and communities uprooted. Heatwaves in arid states such as Rajasthan and Gujarat push temperatures beyond 50°C, making outdoor play impossible and school attendance hazardous, while deforestation in the Western Ghats and Eastern Himalayas erodes biodiversity, turning once lush forests into barren landscapes. Animal displacement compounds these issues; leopards and tigers, pushed from shrinking habitats, encroach on human settlements, creating fear and conflict. These phenomena are not isolated events but interconnected manifestations of ecological disruption, embedding themselves into the fabric of childhood experiences. For Indian children, climate change means disrupted routines, health risks from polluted air and water, and a growing awareness of an unstable future. This lived reality fosters what psychologists' term ecoanxiety: a chronic emotional response encompassing fear, uncertainty, helplessness, grief, and stress triggered by the awareness of environmental degradation and its irreversible impacts. Unlike generalized anxiety, ecoanxiety stems from the recognition of humanity's role in ecological harm, often amplified by media exposure and personal encounters with disasters. Global studies, such as the 2021 Lancet Planetary Health survey involving 10,000 young people aged 16-25 across ten countries, reveal that 59% feel very or extremely worried about climate change, with 84% at least moderately concerned. Over half report feelings of sadness, anxiety, anger, powerlessness, and guilt, and 45% indicate these emotions impair daily functioning (Hickman et al. 2021). In India, where the Children's Climate Risk Index ranks the country as highly vulnerable, UNICEF estimates that one billion children globally are at extreme risk, with Indian youth facing compounded threats due to poverty, inequality, and rapid urbanization (UNICEF, *The Climate Crisis Is a Child Rights Crisis*). These statistics underscore ecoanxiety not as a fleeting worry but as a profound psychological burden, potentially hindering cognitive development, social relationships, and long-term wellbeing.

Children's literature emerges as a crucial mediator in this context, serving as an emotional and ethical arena where anxieties are articulated, softened, and reframed. Unlike didactic texts that overwhelm with facts, literature invites imaginative engagement, allowing young readers to process fear through narrative distance. Stories can humanize environmental issues, fostering empathy for the nonhuman world while modelling resilience—strategies for coping, adapting, and hoping amid uncertainty. In India, a nation with a rich tradition of nature-centric folklore and modern environmental writing, children's literature offers culturally rooted pathways to address ecoanxiety. Authors like Ruskin Bond and Anushka Ravishankar exemplify this, blending local sensibilities with global concerns.

The central research question guiding this study is: How do Ruskin Bond's nature tales and Anushka Ravishankar's *Tiger on a Tree* narrate ecological conflict and prepare young readers to emotionally and ethically respond to the challenges of climate change? Bond, renowned for his Himalayan set stories that evoke a gentle intimacy with nature, and Ravishankar, celebrated for her whimsical picture books infused with nonsense rhyme, represent contrasting yet complementary styles. Bond's works, often dismissed as idyllic escapism, subtly embed themes of loss and displacement, while Ravishankar's playful absurdity confronts disruption without inducing paralysis. Both authors, widely read in Indian schools and homes, are infrequently analysed through a climate anxiety lens, despite their relevance to contemporary ecological discourses. Justifying their selection, Bond and Ravishankar are pillars of Indian children's literature, with Bond's tales like *The Cherry Tree*, *Rusty and the Leopard*, and *Panther's Moon* drawing from his Mussoorie upbringing to portray nature as a moral companion. His stories, translated into multiple languages and included in curricula, reach millions, yet ecocritical readings remain sparse. Ravishankar's *Tiger on a Tree*, an internationally acclaimed picture book,



employs humour and visuals to engage younger audiences, earning praise for its innovative form (Kirkus Reviews). Together, they span age groups and genres, from prose narratives to illustrated verse, offering a spectrum of approaches rarely juxtaposed in cliff scholarship.

This paper argues that Indian children's climate fiction does not deny ecological fear; instead, it transforms ecoanxiety into emotional resilience through narrative intimacy, humour, and imaginative engagement. By acknowledging loss while emphasizing continuity, play, and ethical responsibility, these texts equip young readers to navigate uncertainty, contributing to a broader pedagogy of hope in a climate vulnerable world.

II. Theoretical Framework: Ecocriticism, Eco-anxiety, and Childhood Studies

Ecocriticism, as a literary approach, interrogates the interplay between texts and the physical environment, challenging anthropocentric views that prioritize human concerns over ecological ones. Emerging in the 1990s, it draws from diverse fields like ecology, philosophy, and cultural studies to analyse how literature represents nature, environmental degradation, and human nature relations. Pioneered by scholars like Cheryl Glotfelty, ecocriticism posits that "literature does not float above the material world in some cloud of discourse but is embedded in and interacts with the physical environment" (Glotfelty xix). In the context of children's literature, it reveals how narratives shape young minds' perceptions of the biosphere, fostering either exploitation or stewardship.

In central to this framework is Lawrence Buell's concept of the "environmental imagination," which posits that literature cultivates an emotional and ethical orientation toward the nonhuman world. Buell argues that effective environmental texts encourage an "eccentric" perspective, where nature possesses intrinsic value and agency beyond human utility. In *The Environmental Imagination*, he outlines four criteria for environmentally oriented works: the nonhuman environment as a presence implicating human history in natural history; human interests not as the sole legitimate focus; ethical accountability toward the environment; and the environment as a dynamic process rather than a static backdrop (Buell 78). For instance, Buell emphasizes "the dream of relinquishment," where characters surrender anthropocentric control, and "Attentiveness to environmental cycles," promoting humility and interconnection (Buell 143). These ideas illuminate how children's stories can shift readers from dominion over nature to harmonious coexistence, countering ecoanxiety by imagining restorative bonds. Complementing Buell is Rob Nixon's notion of "slow violence," which describes environmental harm as gradual, dispersed, and often invisible, contrasting with spectacular, immediate violence. In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Nixon defines it as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2). Examples include habitat erosion, toxic drift, and deforestation, which disproportionately affect vulnerable populations like children, who inherit long-term consequences. Nixon critiques representational challenges: "The insidious workings of slow violence derive largely from the unequal attention given to spectacular and unspectacular time" (Nixon 6). In children's literature, slow violence manifests as subtle disruptions—shrinking forests or displaced animals—requiring narratives that make the invisible visible without overwhelming young audiences.

These ecocritical lenses intersect with childhood studies, which emphasize children's unique experiences of crisis. Children process climate threats differently from adults: emotionally through heightened sensitivity, psychologically via limited coping mechanisms, and ethically by internalizing responsibility for future generations. As Nixon notes, slow violence exacerbates this, as its delayed effects burden youth with inherited traumas. Childhood studies advocate viewing children not as passive victims but as agents capable of resilience, with literature serving



as a tool for emotional literacy.

Empirical data from UNICEF and Lancet reports ground these theories in reality, documenting ecoanxiety as a global phenomenon. The 2021 Lancet survey found 75% of youth viewing the future as frightening and 83% believing humanity has failed the planet, with 45% reporting impaired daily life (Hickman et al. 2021). UNICEF's 2021 report highlights that in India, children face amplified risks from floods, heat, and pollution, linking ecoanxiety to stunted development (UNICEF, 'The Climate Crisis Is a Child Rights Crisis'). These findings affirm ecoanxiety's tangibility, not mere abstraction. Combining literary theory with real world data enhances interdisciplinary contributions, revealing how texts like Bond's and Ravishankar's mediate anxiety. Ecocriticism provides analytical tools, while childhood studies and empirical insights contextualize emotional impacts, arguing for literature's role in building resilience amid slow violence.

III. Ruskin Bond's Nature Writing: Eco-anxiety as Intimate Loss

A. Nature as Companion and Moral Presence

Ruskin Bond's portrayal of nature transcends mere backdrop, positioning it as a living companion that imparts moral lessons and evokes quiet ecoanxiety through themes of fragility and care. In 'The Cherry Tree', young Rakesh plants a cherry seed on a whim, inspired by his grandfather's wisdom: "Nothing is lucky if you put it away. If you want luck, you must put it to some use" (Bond, "The Cherry Tree"). The narrative chronicles the tree's arduous growth over years, enduring goats nibbling its leaves, grass cutters slicing its stem, storms battering its branches, and fungal diseases threatening its survival. Despite these adversities, the tree perseveres, symbolizing fragile continuity in a volatile environment. Bond's prose emphasizes patience and nurturing: Rakesh waters it sporadically, encircles it with pebbles for protection, and watches it sprout into a resilient entity bearing pink blossoms and ripe cherries.

This intimacy aligns with Buell's environmental imagination, where nature's agency fosters eccentric empathy. The tree is not passive; it "struggled to survive difficulties like being eaten by goats, damaged by grass cutters, and affected by disease" (as summarized in various analyses), mirroring slow violence through gradual threats. Yet, Bond frames it as a moral presence, teaching Rakesh—and readers—about ecological interdependence. The tree's growth evokes quiet anxiety about potential loss: What if the seed had failed? This subtle unease reflects ecoanxiety's anticipatory grief, softened by the narrative's optimistic tone. For Indian children facing deforestation, the story reframes nature as a nurturing ally, not an adversary, promoting resilience through attentive care. Bond's Himalayan setting adds cultural depth; the foothills, once teeming with biodiversity, now face habitat loss, making the tree a microcosm of broader ecological imbalance. Critics note Bond's "celebration of the Himalayan environment, emphasizing harmony between humans and nature" (Dwivedi 45), yet underlying is an intimate loss—nature's vulnerability demands human stewardship, transforming anxiety into ethical action.

B. Animal Displacement and Environmental Unease

Bond extends this theme in 'Rusty and the Leopard and Panther's Moon', where animal displacement signals environmental unease, connecting to Nixon's slow violence. In 'Rusty and the Leopard', orphaned Anglo-Indian boy Rusty, escaping his guardian's oppressive home, adventures in the Dehra Dun hills. He encounters a leopard in shrinking habitats, a dignified yet mysterious intruder driven by human expansion. The leopard's presence evokes tension: "The trees had multiplied! They were moving. In one small corner of the world, Grandfather's dream was coming true and the trees were moving again" (Bond, Rusty quotes). This quote hints at ecological restoration amid loss, but the leopard's encroachment underscores habitat erosion—slow



violence unfolding through deforestation and urbanization. Similarly, Panther's Moon narrates a wounded panther turning maneater in the village of Manjari. Twelve-year Bishnu, walking miles to school through forests, faces the threat after the panther kills his dog Sheru and livestock. Bond describes the panther's plight: impaired by hunters' bullets, it preys out of desperation, not malice (as per summaries). Villagers live in fear, with Bisnu's family vulnerable. Moments of intrusion—the panther entering human spaces—highlight shrinking habitats, aligning with Nixon's attritional harm: "Environmental damage unfolds gradually and affects vulnerable populations, especially children" (Nixon 2).

Bond avoids panic by framing animals as survivors with agency, not threats. The panther is "ferocious" yet pitiable, evoking empathy. For children, this generates unease about imbalance but models resilience through courage—Bisnu's determination to attend school despite dangers. In India's context, where wildlife conflicts rise due to climate induced migrations, these stories mediate anxiety, urging coexistence.

C. Managing Anxiety through Gentleness

Bond's calm tone, simplicity, and nostalgia serve as emotional buffers, helping readers acknowledge instability without despair. His prose, devoid of sensationalism, employs short sentences and vivid imagery: in *The Cherry Tree*, "The tree was a very small plant, young and fragile, vulnerable to all kinds of external dangers" (Bond). This gentleness models resilience via attentiveness, empathy, and memory—Rakesh's nostalgia for the planting moment sustains hope. Critics praise Bond's "optimistic tone, full of wonder for nature" (as in poem analyses), countering ecoanxiety's helplessness. By focusing on small acts—planting, observing—Bond empowers children, aligning with childhood studies' view of youth as agents. In a climate vulnerable India, this style transforms fear into quiet strength.

III. Anushka Ravishankar's "Tiger on a Tree": Eco-anxiety Through Absurdity and Play

Anushka Ravishankar's "Tiger on a Tree" (1997), illustrated by Pulak Biswas, stands as a landmark in Indian children's picture books for its innovative fusion of nonsense rhyme, whimsical typography, and minimalist yet striking visuals. This internationally acclaimed work—winner of the Bratislava Biennale of Illustrations prize in 1999—employs humour, absurdity, and playful language to engage very young readers (ages 3–6) while subtly addressing themes of human wildlife conflict and environmental disruption. In a genre often dominated by didactic environmental tales, Ravishankar's approach prioritizes delight and emotional safety, making it an effective vehicle for mediating ecoanxiety without inducing fear or moral overload.

The narrative unfolds in a circular, repetitive structure that mirrors the tiger's journey: beginning and ending with "Tiger, tiger on the shore." A timid, "scaredy-cat" tiger cub wanders from the shore, swims across a river to an island, and is startled by a small animal (variously described as a goat or deer in summaries), prompting him to climb a tree for safety. Villagers discover the tiger, surround the tree with a net, create chaotic noise by beating drums, blowing horns, and shouting, and eventually scare the tiger down into the trap. Once captured, they debate his fate—"What shall we do now?"—before deciding to release him unharmed. The tiger returns to his original shore, unhurt and perhaps wiser, restoring equilibrium. This simple plot, conveyed through sparse, rhythmic verse ("Tiger, tiger on a tree / Is it true? Can it be? / Did he fly? Did he flee? / Did he fall and hurt his knee? / Did he cry? Did he plead? / If you want to know, read."), emphasizes motion, surprise, and gentle resolution.

A. Humour as a Strategy for Ecological Fear

The tiger's intrusion into human space—swimming across a river and ending up treed on an island—symbolizes environmental disruption: habitat pressure from human expansion forces wildlife into unfamiliar, often dangerous territories. This echoes Rob Nixon's "slow violence,"



where gradual processes like deforestation and land encroachment displace animals, creating conflicts that unfold incrementally rather than catastrophically (Nixon 2). In India's context, where tiger populations face shrinking forests and increasing human tiger encounters in regions like the Sundarbans or Western Ghats, the tiger's displacement evokes real world ecoanxiety: fear of the wild encroaching on the domestic, and guilt over human caused imbalance.

Yet Ravishankar diffuses this tension through absurdity and nonsense. The tiger is not ferocious but timid and comical—a “scaredy-cat” who climbs a tree out of fright rather than menace. Villagers' overreactions—frantic drumming, horn blowing, and netting—parody human panic, transforming potential threat into farce. Lines like “Get him! Net him! Tie him tight!” build rhythmic energy that mimics chaos but resolves harmlessly. As Kirkus Reviews observes, the “minimalist verse follows the little fellow as he intrepidly crosses a stream,” using play to confront tension safely (Kirkus Reviews). Humour serves as a coping mechanism: by exaggerating fear into silliness, the book allows children to acknowledge ecological unease (the tiger doesn't belong here) without feeling overwhelmed or powerless. This aligns with Lawrence Buell's “environmental imagination,” where literature personifies the nonhuman to foster empathy and eccentric awareness (Buell 7). The tiger possesses agency—he swims boldly, climbs instinctively, and flees peacefully—inviting young readers to see wild animals as relatable beings rather than threats. For children experiencing ecoanxiety through news of animal intrusions or habitat loss, this reframing reduces helplessness, turning anxiety into manageable curiosity and laughter.

B. Visual Play and Emotional Engagement

Pulak Biswas's illustrations amplify the text's emotional safety net. Rendered in a striking palette of black, orange, and white on handmade paper, the visuals are bold and minimalist: sweeping brushstrokes capture the tiger's fluid motion, wide-eyed expressions convey vulnerability, and dynamic layouts make typography “swoop and dart” across pages (Kirkus Reviews). The tiger's exaggerated fear—large eyes, crouched posture—contrasts with villagers' comical frenzy, preventing any sense of real danger. White space surrounds sparse text, drawing the eye to movement and rhythm, while orange black contrasts evoke the tiger's iconic stripes without realism that might frighten. These elements function as emotional buffers, per insights from childhood studies: visual exaggeration and rhythmic play allow children to process anxiety through delight rather than dread. The book's format—large font, one sentence or word per page, curving text—promotes print awareness and engagement for emerging readers, while the circular narrative reinforces continuity and safety. Humour here is not denial but active reframing: imbalance (wild in human space) becomes navigable through collective, absurd action and merciful release. In a picture book medium where images dominate perception, Biswas's craft aesthetic lends “pleasing simplicity” that nurtures emotional resilience (Kirkus Reviews).

C. Wildness, Order, and Child Perception

At its core, “Tiger on a Tree” explores tension between wild nature and human order. The tiger embodies ecological imbalance—human intrusion (implied through habitat loss) pushes him into vulnerability, mirroring real displacements. Yet, the villagers' decision to vote and release him (“What shall we do now?”) models' ethical coexistence over domination or harm. This resolution invites children to imagine harmony: the tiger returns home, the order restored without violence.

Ravishankar's absurdity models an ethical response—confront fear lightly, act compassionately—transforming ecoanxiety into imaginative possibility. For young readers, this fosters perception of nature as dynamic and relational, not oppositional. In India's climate vulnerable landscape, where children witness wildlife conflicts, the book nurtures resilience by



emphasizing empathy, release, and circular continuity over conquest.

IV. Comparative Analysis: Two Modes of Resilience

Ruskin Bond's quiet realism and Anushka Ravishankar's playful absurdity offer contrasting yet complementary modes of addressing ecoanxiety in Indian children's literature. Bond's tales—rooted in Himalayan intimacy—portray ecological loss as gradual, personal erosion: the cherry tree's fragile growth, leopards and panthers displaced into human proximity. His narratives employ slowness (patient nurturing over years), memory (nostalgic reflection on bonds), and attentiveness (empathic observation of nature's agency), aligning with Nixon's slow violence by making attritional harm visible through subtle unease (Nixon 2). Resilience emerges from deep, sustained connection—Rakesh's care, Rusty's curiosity—modelling emotional processing through empathy and continuity.

Ravishankar, by contrast, confronts disruption through chaos and energy: the tiger's absurd journey, villagers' frantic yet nonlethal response. Humour, visual exaggeration, and rhythmic nonsense diffuse tension rapidly, allowing safe confrontation of imbalance. Where Bond lingers on quiet loss, Ravishankar accelerates to playful resolution, using absurdity to reframe fear as manageable delight. Both acknowledge ecoanxiety—Bond via intimate fragility, Ravishankar via displaced wildness—but respond on a spectrum. Bond suits introspective readers seeking moral guidance through nature's companionship; Ravishankar engages younger audiences with visual and auditory play, making anxiety accessible. Neither provides simplistic solutions (no magic fixes for habitat loss or conflict); instead, they cultivate emotional readiness—Bond through empathy and memory, Ravishankar through humour and coexistence. Together, they demonstrate resilience as multifaceted: not uniform denial of fear, but varied imaginative strategies blending acknowledgment of uncertainty with hope and ethical action. In Indian children's climate fiction, this spectrum enriches pedagogical potential, offering tools tailored to developmental stages and cultural sensibilities.

V. Children's Literature as Climate Pedagogy

Children's literature functions as a form of climate pedagogy by educating the heart alongside the mind, addressing emotional dimensions often sidelined in factual instruction. While science curricula convey data on rising temperatures or biodiversity loss, stories prepare children to live with uncertainty—processing grief, fear, and responsibility without paralysis. Bond and Ravishankar exemplify this: Bond nurtures care through intimate bonds, Ravishankar through playful reframing, both fostering ethical stewardship.

In India, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 prioritizes environmental education, integrating sustainability, climate literacy, and traditional knowledge across subjects from foundational to vocational stages. It calls for infusing climate awareness into mainstream curricula, promoting global citizenship, resource conservation, and multidisciplinary approaches (Ministry of Education, NEP 2020). The 2023 National Curriculum Framework further emphasizes environmental education's connections to all disciplines, aligning with UNESCO's push for climate responsive schooling (UNESCO State of Education Report 2023). Yet implementation remains uneven: outdated content, limited teacher training, and resource constraints hinder full integration, as noted in critiques (Earth.Org; Forbes India). Eco clubs in states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh engage students in practical activities—tree planting, waste management—but emotional preparation lags.

Culturally rooted narratives like Bond's and Ravishankar's fill these gaps, complementing scientific knowledge by nurturing empathy and hope. They emphasize stewardship drawn from Indian traditions (ahimsa, harmony with nature) while addressing contemporary vulnerabilities—floods, heatwaves, wildlife conflicts. By mediating ecoanxiety through imagination, such literature



equips children for resilience, turning passive worry into active care and responsibility in a climate challenged nation.

VI. Contribution to Indian and Global Climate Fiction Studies

This study intervenes in global climate fiction (cliff) scholarship, long dominated by Western apocalyptic narratives (e.g., dystopias from Margaret Atwood or Kim Stanley Robinson), by cantering Indian children's literature. Indian cliff for youth—emerging in works like Bijal Vachharajani's "A Cloud Called Bhura" or Roopal Kealia's "The Little Rainmaker"—offers alternative emotional frameworks: gentle intimacy and absurd play rather than doom (Sustainability Next; Scroll.in). Reading Bond and Ravishankar through ecoanxiety lenses highlights originality—familiar authors reframed as mediators of climate distress—bridging gaps in ecocritical attention to South Asian texts. The contribution is interdisciplinary: advancing literary analysis of children's cliff, informing education policy (NEP 2020's environmental focus), and supporting policymakers in culturally sensitive climate awareness. Amid India's extreme vulnerability (ranked high on climate risk indices), this work underscores literature's role in emotional resilience, offering resources for educators and parents to integrate hope without despair. By introducing non-western voices, it enriches global cliff discourse with diverse, child entered narratives of care and coexistence.

VII. Conclusion: Storytelling as Emotional Survival

Indian children's literature, exemplified by Ruskin Bond and Anushka Ravishankar, actively mediates ecological fear rather than passively reflecting it. Bond transforms ecoanxiety into resilience through intimate bonds, patient care, and nostalgic continuity with nature; Ravishankar through humorous absurdity, visual play, and ethical release that reframes conflict as navigable. Together, they demonstrate storytelling's power to acknowledge loss and disruption while cultivating imaginative hope—blending fear with empathy, chaos with resolution. In a climate changed world, where Indian children confront daily realities of vulnerability, such narratives serve as emotional survival tools. They equip the youngest generation not with denial but with readiness: to feel uncertainty, process it imaginatively, and respond ethically. As cliff evolves in India, these texts remind us that hope lies in culturally rooted stories that nurture resilience, ensuring future generations face risk with imagination and care intact.

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Decoding The Life of Escape: A Postmodern Reading Of Somerset Maugham's *The Lotus Eater*

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Short Communication

Abstract

Somerset Maugham is widely considered as a modernist writer but his short story "The Lotus Eater" is tinged with certain Postmodern traits on the basis of which this short story can be interpreted from a Postmodern perspective. Written in 1935 much before Postmodernism came into being, Maugham consciously or unconsciously has infused Postmodern traits into his central character Thomas Wilson whose character is loosely based on the life story of John Ellingham Brooks. The character of Wilson has been built in such a way that his character demonstrates certain later Postmodern sensibilities, specifically regarding the fragmentation of a stable identity, life of Escape, subjectivity of truth and tendency of denying societal responsibilities. As the Title of this article indicates, it aims to analyse this short story from a Postmodern outlook.

Keywords: Decoding, Life, Escape, Postmodern Reading, Somerset Maugham, *The Lotus Eater*.

Introduction

The plot of "The Lotus Eater" has been woven in such a way that the story itself has become an epitome of postmodernism. It is noteworthy that Maugham wrote this short story in early twentieth century much before Postmodernism emerged. This short story has multiple Postmodern orientations starting from the character of Wilson to the method of story telling. The character of Wilson has been given Postmodern fragmentary structure who, abandoning the conventional life of purpose and object, chooses the life of leisure and amusement on the Italian island of Capri which ultimately proves blunder in his life. While this short story can be traditionally read as a cautionary tale about the dangers of idleness, a Postmodern perspective offers various distinct explanations.

Decoding Life of Escape in Postmodern Perspective

The character of Thomas Wilson is at the core of this story whose fragmentary and disintegrated life sets the Postmodern tone. Wilson was a bank manager of the Crawford Street branch of York and City Bank, London. The job to which he was engaged, was a respectable and reputable one which he abandons for having a life of leisure and enjoyment on the picturesque island of Capri. Abandoning a conventional purposeful and aimed life, he chooses a completely different life that is fully devoid of work and duty, goal and objectives. The time he does it, his life gets disintegrated; and in this process, his identity gets fragmented. Wilson's decision to abandon his stable, "tram-car" life as a bank manager in London directly opposes the societal expectation of work, responsibility, duty and deferred gratification. This decision in his life has ample significance in giving his character and personality a crystal clear postmodern shape. His pursuit of amusement and leisure can be viewed as an effort to construct his own meaning outside of traditional societal structures. Wilson's life gets an unexpected turn when he decides to dislocate himself on the island of Capri through his pursuit of leisure. Bramaditya points out that, "...his sense of displacement has created an ambivalent situation..." (Bramaditya 24). This



ambivalent situation is very important when it comes to a Postmodern being. Due to this ambivalent situation which Wilson encounters, his identity becomes strange and complex. Wilson climbs to the hostland Capri leaving his homeland England. The idea of homeland always sparks in his mind, and like a diasporic postmodern subject, his identity gradually begins to destabilise by this very idea of homeland and a feeling of displacement. Bramaditya opines that this idea of displacement is responsible for making an ambivalent identity of his life. In this way, Maugham, through postmodernism, tries to question universally accepted grand narratives that structure society. Wilson, as a character, develops by plunging into the world of uncertainty and thereby imbibes postmodern traits of unsteadiness, fragility and fragmentation. He thus rejects the existence of grand narratives that consists of traditional societal norms and structures. Apart from the character of Wilson, the narrative technique used in “The Lotus Eater” contributes a lot to infuse Postmodern motif. In this short story, Maugham uses First person narrative with a frame story structure. This omniscient narrator simultaneously demonstrates the tragedy of idealised escape from societal reality through Wilson and exerts tone of melancholy through rich imagery of Capri’s beauty and irony through Wilson’s failed venture to live his life revolving his idealised utopian dream, and incorporates nuances of disillusionment as Wilson’s keen desire to live carefree life leads to his mental instability instead of freedom and amusement at the end. Thus the unnamed narrator tries to present Wilson’s failure to create a realm of pleasure, joy and carefree life and in order to do so, the narrator, like the later Postmodern Novelist John Fowles’s “The French Lieutenant’s Woman” violates norms of narration in breaking sometimes the “fourth wall” to remark on the nature of human character and at the same time, the narrator acknowledges the subjectivity of his observations. The way the narrator ends the narrative is completely predicated on postmodern fashion. The ending is very important in that it is replete with heavy irony in showing the tragic predicament of Wilson who once escaped societal reality for having carefree and pleasurable life, ends up as a devastated and “broken man” whose fate is decided by the economic and biological forces which he attempted to escape.

The ending of “The Lotus Eater” is also fashioned in postmodernist approach. Postmodern literature often lacks a consistent and meaningful ending. In contrast to it, postmodern endings do have fragmentation of identity and dissolution of character stability. Like many postmodern texts, the ending of this short story turns out to be a failed ending. Wilson wanted to end his mundane life in a specific manner when his annuity runs out but in vain. He wished to have a structured and controlled end of his life but instead, his disintegrated life ends with a whimper – a botched suicide attempt, mental decline, dependency. It shows that he is unable to take control over both his life and destiny. Apart from these, like many postmodernist texts, this short story makes use of pastiche and intertextuality to generate meaning. “The Lotus Eater” is imbued with mythological intertextuality in that the plot of this short story is based on the framework of Homer’s “Odyssey” and Tennyson’s “The Lotus-Eaters”. Maugham’s story is a modern and ironic adaptation of the “Lotus-Eaters” episode of book IX of Homer’s Odyssey. Like the race of people whom Odysseus encountered who only used to eat the Lotus plant which led them to live in a state of dreamy and peaceful apathy forgetting everything regarding reality, Wilson also in the same manner is too much enamoured by the “unreal” beauty of the Island that he wants to stay here forever forgetting his past and reality. In this context, Wilson’s transformation from a bank manager’s rigid life to the life of leisure and idleness on the island of Capri is very important. This transformation is fully predicated upon ancient Greek mythology. By juxtaposing a modern bank manager’s story onto ancient Greek mythology, Maugham employs intertextuality to remark on the cyclical nature of human desire and stark contrast



between dreamy life and stable world. In addition to it, Maugham uses cultural allusions in that there are references to Donizetti's operas and Roman history of Tiberius to frame the setting as "charming and unreal", very much like a theatrical stage set or a simulation.

Like many later postmodernist texts, Maugham, in a subtle manner, avoids moralising. He does it though the unnamed narrator of this story. The narrator is not a active participant into the life of Wilson. The narrator closely observes Wilson and his change, and through his observations of Wilson, he seeks to understand it and tells the readers the possible ways of living life putting aside traditional and societal norms. The narrator acts as a curious observer of a "human comedy" rather than a moral authority. The narrator on the one hand admits that Wilson's situation is "horrible" and on the other, confesses that he also "got what he deserved". Thus the narrator has been given an ambivalent structure who makes the reader sink into the state of moral ambiguous characteristic of postmodern irony.

Conclusion

Therefore, it can be argued that this short story by Maugham has multiple Postmodern tenets on the basis of which it could be analysed from a Postmodern outlook. Yet, it was written much before Postmodernist movement of 1950s, it is certainly a Postmodern text, centralised on the character of Wilson. Wilson is such a character who has been given a typical Postmodern mould who discovers a different entity of his life through the alteration of his identity and fragility of his personality after choosing an uncertain life of leisure on the "unreal" Island of Capri. So, it could be said that Maugham in his "The Lotus Eater" has left no stone unturned to criticise grand narratives of life which consist of work, purpose, duty and following norms of society. In this story, he has rendered the best of him to uphold the chaotic, fragmented reality of trying to exist in a separate world which is free from all kinds of societal norms and structures, and at the end, displaying that truth and happiness are subjective, often replete with illusions.

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Staging the Self: Teaching Identity through Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

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Research Article

Abstract

This article proposes a pedagogical framework for teaching identity through a comparative study of four canonical dramatic works: Oedipus Rex, Hamlet, A Doll's House, and Waiting for Godot. Tracing a chronological progression from classical antiquity to modern drama, the study examines how each play stages a distinct conception of identity: as fated and ultimately revealed, as internally contested and uncertain, as socially constructed and consciously redefined, and finally as fragmented and existentially unstable. Drawing on psychological, existential, and post-structural theories, the article argues that identity in dramatic literature is not a fixed essence but a dynamic and evolving problem, enacted through performance, language, and action. Through close readings of key moments in each text, the study demonstrates how the respective characters engage with questions of selfhood in ways that reflect broader shifts in philosophical thought. Further, it emphasizes the pedagogical value of teaching these works in sequence, enabling students to move from assumptions of stable identity toward an understanding of self as contingent, constructed, and potentially unknowable. By situating literary analysis within a classroom context, the article highlights how drama serves as a powerful medium for exploring identity as both an intellectual and experiential inquiry. Ultimately, it suggests that teaching identity through these plays does not resolve the question "Who am I?" but rather deepens it, encouraging students to recognize identity as something enacted, embodied, and continually reimagined.

Keywords: Identity, Dramatic literature, Pedagogy, Selfhood, Existentialism, Social construction, Performance, Canonical drama.

INTRODUCTION: TEACHING IDENTITY THROUGH DRAMA

At once deeply personal and shaped by external forces, identity has long occupied a central place in philosophical inquiry and literary expression. From classical antiquity to the modern era, dramatists have repeatedly returned to the question of what it means to "know oneself," often revealing such knowledge to be unstable, contingent, and, at times, unattainable. In the classroom, this enduring concern offers a powerful point of entry for students, who encounter in dramatic literature not only representations of identity but also invitations to interrogate their own assumptions about selfhood, agency, and social role.

Recent research in developmental psychology underscores the urgency of this work. Identity formation is widely recognized as "the ongoing developmental task of defining who you are" (Raemen et al. n/p), characterized by processes of exploration and revision rather than the attainment of a fixed self. At the same time, identity development involves both continuity and change, encompassing "systematic maturation and substantial stability" (Branje et al., 908). Crucially, the quality of this development is closely tied to psychological well-being, with difficulties in identity formation associated with increased vulnerability to mental health



challenges. Identity thus emerges not merely as an abstract concern, but as a critical dimension of student development. Within this context, the literature classroom becomes a valuable site for identity exploration. Dramatic texts, in staging the self through action, dialogue, and performance, allow students to engage identity not only as a concept but as an experience; something enacted, contested, and embodied. By guiding students through plays that progressively complicate the nature of the self, instructors can foster a deeper understanding of identity as dynamic, relational, and uncertain.

This article examines the teaching of identity through four canonical works: *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen, and *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett. Spanning over two millennia, these plays trace a progression in the representation of identity: from a condition governed by fate, to an inward psychological struggle, to a socially constructed role, and finally to a fragmented or absent sense of self. In *Oedipus Rex*, identity is something to be discovered, determined by forces beyond human control. *Hamlet* shifts identity inward, shaped by introspection and doubt. In *A Doll's House*, identity becomes entangled with social expectations and performative roles, while *Waiting for Godot* presents a world in which stable identity dissolves into repetition and uncertainty. Taught in sequence, these works offer a framework through which students can explore how identity is formed, challenged, and destabilized. By placing these works in chronological dialogue, this study argues that teaching identity through drama enables students to perceive both continuities and shifts in the concept of the self. More importantly, it demonstrates that a pedagogical focus on identity encourages active engagement, as students move from recognizing externally imposed definitions of the self to grappling with its psychological, social, and existential dimensions. In this way, the classroom becomes a space where identity is not merely analyzed, but actively examined, questioned, and reimagined.

CONSTRUCTING THE SELF: THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO IDENTITY

Any pedagogical examination of identity in dramatic literature must be grounded in a theoretical understanding of how the self is formed, perceived, and destabilized. The concept of identity has been shaped by multiple intellectual traditions, including developmental psychology, existential philosophy, and post-structural theory. Together, these frameworks illuminate the shifting representations of selfhood encountered in works such as *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, *A Doll's House*, and *Waiting for Godot*, while also offering a foundation for their effective teaching. From a psychological perspective, Erik Erikson's theory of identity formation provides a useful starting point. Erikson defines identity as "awareness of the fact that there is self-sameness and continuity to the ego's synthesizing methods, the style of one's individuality, and that this style coincides with the sameness and continuity of one's meaning for significant others in the immediate community" (Erikson 50). This formulation underscores the idea that identity is not fixed but develops over time through stages of conflict and resolution. In the classroom, this developmental model helps students recognize identity as something negotiated rather than given, a concept that resonates across the dramatic texts under consideration. While Erikson emphasizes continuity, existentialist philosophy complicates the notion of a stable self. Jean-Paul Sartre argues that human beings are fundamentally responsible for creating their own identities, asserting that "existence precedes essence" (Sartre 22). In this view, identity is not predetermined but emerges through choice and action. This framework is particularly relevant when teaching characters such as Hamlet, whose prolonged indecision foregrounds the difficulty of self-definition, and Nora in *A Doll's House*, whose ultimate act of departure signals an assertion of selfhood against prescribed roles.

At the same time, post-structuralist thought challenges the very coherence of identity.



Michel Foucault contends that the self is shaped by systems of power and discourse rather than existing as an autonomous essence. As he notes, “the individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus... [but] is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation” (Foucault 98). This perspective is especially productive in examining how identity operates within social structures, as in *A Doll’s House*, where Nora’s identity is constructed through patriarchal expectations, and in *Waiting for Godot*, where the absence of stable structures contributes to the dissolution of coherent selfhood. Taken together, these theoretical perspectives reveal identity as a dynamic and often unstable construct variously shaped by internal development, individual agency, and external systems of power. Pedagogically, introducing students to these frameworks enables them to move beyond surface-level character analysis toward a more nuanced understanding of how identity functions within and across dramatic texts. By situating literary study within these broader theoretical conversations, the classroom becomes a space in which students can critically engage with the evolving concept of the self, recognizing both its historical specificity and its enduring philosophical complexity.

IDENTITY AS FATE AND DISCOVERY IN SOPHOCLES’ *OEDIPUS REX*

From the outset, Oedipus presents himself as a figure defined by knowledge and public responsibility. His declaration that he suffers not only for himself but for the entire city, “my soul mourns the city, myself, and you,” frames identity as inseparable from civic duty rather than as a private construct (350). This reflects a premodern conception of the self as embedded within larger structures such as family, polis, and divine order, rather than autonomously formed, and offers a useful point of contrast with more modern, individual frameworks. Within this framework, *Oedipus Rex* presents identity as both fixed and unstable: determined by forces beyond human control, yet experienced as coherent and self-evident. This tension between identity as fate and identity as lived perspective becomes central to the play’s pedagogical value, inviting students to confront the possibility that identity may never be fully knowable, but only partially understood through shifting perspectives.

Oedipus initially embodies this subjective certainty. Recounting his origins, he asserts, “My father was Polybus of Corinth, my mother the Dorian Merope, and I was held the foremost man in all that town” (365). From his perspective, this identity is stable and socially affirmed. Yet the audience, aware of the dramatic irony, recognizes that this certainty rests on incomplete knowledge, underscoring the play’s central insight: identity, though deeply felt, may be contingent and provisional. Oedipus knows who he is, and yet that knowledge is ultimately revealed to be false. At the same time, the play foregrounds the limits of human knowledge. Jocasta’s attempt to calm Oedipus introduces a striking claim: “Listen to me, and learn to your comfort that nothing born of woman can know what is to come” (363). This challenges the premise of Oedipus’ investigation. If the future, and by extension the truth of one’s identity, cannot be known, then his search is fundamentally misguided. At the same time, this claim anticipates later philosophical concerns with uncertainty and indeterminacy. Yet Oedipus refuses to abandon the search. Even when confronted with mounting evidence, he insists, “What, with a clue like that in my hands and fail to find out my birth?” (372). Here, identity becomes something actively pursued, aligning partially with Erikson’s notion of identity as a process of becoming. However, Sophocles complicates this model. Rather than leading to integration, Oedipus’ search leads to fragmentation. The more he uncovers, the less stable his sense of self becomes.

Jocasta’s subsequent warnings deepen this tension between knowledge and destruction. Her plea, “May you never come to know who you are, unhappy man!” marks a pivotal shift,



while her lament, “Alas, alas, miserable man! Miserable! That is all that I can call you now or for ever,” suggests that identity, once revealed, becomes fixed in suffering (372). These moments invite students to consider the unsettling possibility that self-knowledge is not inherently liberating, but may instead impose a permanent and devastating definition of the self.

The climactic recognition scene confirms the collapse of Oedipus’ constructed identity. His cry, “O! O! All brought to pass! All truth!” suggests a moment of total revelation (376). Yet what he attains is not stable self-knowledge, but a catastrophic reconfiguration of identity that exposes the limits of his earlier certainty. Identity remains mediated by perspective, circumstance, and limitation.

The play’s conclusion further resists resolution. The Chorus declares, “Call no man fortunate that is not dead. The dead are free from pain” (382). This stark pronouncement suggests that identity can only be judged at the end of life, yet even then it is defined by suffering rather than clarity. In this sense, *Oedipus Rex* offers no stable model of identity, but presents the self as shaped by forces beyond comprehension and resistant to full understanding. In this way, the play can be read through Erikson’s conception of identity as emerging through crisis. Oedipus’ pursuit of truth initiates a developmental process, yet it culminates not in integration but in rupture. His discovery does not stabilize identity but shatters it, challenging the assumption that coherence can be achieved through knowledge alone.

In the classroom, *Oedipus Rex* becomes foundational for tracing the evolution of identity across dramatic literature. Students begin with a model in which identity appears fixed and discoverable, only to find that such certainty dissolves under scrutiny, preparing them for increasingly unstable representations of the self in later works.

IDENTITY AS QUESTION, PERFORMANCE, AND EXISTENTIAL UNCERTAINTY IN SHAKESPEARE’S *HAMLET*

In *Hamlet*, the question of identity emerges immediately and insistently. The play opens not with action, but with a question: “Who’s there?” (1.1.1). This seemingly simple inquiry establishes a pattern that reverberates throughout Act I and beyond. Characters repeatedly ask one another to identify themselves: “Stand and unfold yourself” (1.1.2). Hamlet himself presses others with variations of the same question, asking Horatio why he has come and later confronting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: “What make you at Elsinore?” (2.2.270). These questions extend beyond the immediate dramatic situation; they become philosophical. Beneath “Who’s there?” lies a deeper and more unsettling inquiry targeted not just at the characters but to the viewer/reader their self: *Who am I?* and *Why am I here?*

Like Oedipus, Hamlet is driven by a relentless pursuit of truth, yet the method of that pursuit differs significantly. Where Oedipus seeks knowledge through direct questioning and public inquiry, Hamlet turns inward and adopts indirect strategies including feigned madness, surveillance, and theatrical performance. Identity in *Hamlet* is therefore not simply discovered but constructed, tested, and performed. This shift marks a crucial development in the evolution of identity across dramatic literature: the movement from external revelation to internal uncertainty.

Hamlet’s reflections on human nature further destabilize any fixed conception of identity. In one of the play’s most famous passages, he declares: “What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason... and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?” (2.2.303-8). Here, identity is framed as paradoxical: humanity is at once exalted and insignificant, rational and reduced to dust. This duality reflects a growing skepticism toward stable definitions of the self. From a pedagogical perspective, this moment allows students to interrogate competing views of human identity which could include Renaissance humanism’s celebration of human potential alongside a more pessimistic recognition of existential fragility.



Hamlet's sense of dislocation within the world further complicates his identity. Questioning his place in existence, he asks: "What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?" (3.1.126-8). Unlike Oedipus, whose identity is bound to a divine and social order, Hamlet experiences himself as suspended between realms; neither fully grounded nor fully transcendent. This image anticipates later existential concerns, particularly the idea that human beings occupy an uncertain and often absurd position within the universe.

At the same time, Hamlet recognizes (earlier than Oedipus) the burden of his role. Confronted with the ghost's revelation, he laments: "O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right!" (1.5.188-9). Here, identity is experienced not as discovery but as obligation. Hamlet's sense of self is defined by a task imposed upon him, yet one he resists and delays. Pedagogically, this moment offers a point of comparison with *Oedipus Rex*: both protagonists are bound to a fate they did not choose, but whereas Oedipus moves decisively toward revelation, Hamlet hesitates, reflecting the increasing inwardness and psychological complexity of early modern drama.

This hesitation is resolved only after Hamlet's return from England, a turning point that can be read symbolically as a form of death and rebirth. Having escaped execution and endured a journey across the sea—a space often associated with transformation—Hamlet re-enters the play with a new philosophical clarity. His declaration to Horatio marks this shift: "...we defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come—the readiness is all" (5.2.219-22).

In this moment, Hamlet relinquishes the need to control or fully understand his fate. Identity is no longer something to be solved or constructed through action, but something to be accepted within a larger, incomprehensible order. This shift contrasts sharply with Oedipus' relentless pursuit of knowledge and aligns more closely with an emerging existential awareness: that certainty is unattainable, and that meaning lies not in knowing, but in readiness. Importantly, *Hamlet* resists any final or stable definition of identity. Unlike *Oedipus Rex*, which culminates in a moment of tragic recognition, Shakespeare's play leaves identity unresolved, dispersed across performance, language, and philosophical reflection.

If *Oedipus* enacts the crisis of discovering identity, *Hamlet* embodies the burden of creating it. Sartre's assertion that "existence precedes essence" resonates throughout the play, as Hamlet confronts the necessity of defining himself through action while simultaneously recoiling from that responsibility. His hesitation reveals the paradox at the heart of existential freedom: the capacity to choose is inseparable from the anxiety of choice. Unlike Oedipus, who moves inexorably toward revelation, Hamlet remains suspended in the space between thought and action, where identity is neither given nor fully realized. For students, this tension becomes central: identity is no longer something one uncovers, but something one must enact; and yet the very act of choosing may produce paralysis rather than clarity. In this sense, *Hamlet* dramatizes not the resolution of identity, but its perpetual deferral. Given the scope of this study, it is impossible to fully account for the complexities of identity in *Hamlet*. However, this very resistance to closure is itself instructive. In the classroom, students encounter a model of identity that is no longer fixed or discoverable, but fragmented, performative, and ultimately unknowable.

In tracing the movement from Oedipus to Hamlet, students begin to see a clear evolution: identity shifts from something externally determined and ultimately revealed, to something internally contested and perpetually in question. This transition prepares them for the even more radical destabilizations of identity that will emerge in modern drama.

IDENTITY AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND SELF-ASSERTION IN IBSEN'S *A DOLL'S HOUSE*



If *Oedipus Rex* presents identity as something fated yet unknowable, and *Hamlet* renders it as something internally contested and perpetually deferred, then *A Doll's House* marks a decisive shift: identity becomes socially constructed, performed, and ultimately subject to conscious reinvention. In Ibsen's play, the question is no longer simply *Who am I?* but rather *Who have I been made to be?* and *Who might I become if I refuse that role?* From the outset, Nora Helmer appears to inhabit a stable identity as wife and mother, yet this stability is immediately revealed to be theatrical. Her interactions with Torvald establish her as a performed figure (playful, childlike, and dependent) an identity reinforced through diminutive language and ritualized behavior. When Torvald greets her with pet names and mild reproach, Nora responds in kind, participating in a dynamic that reduces her to what she later recognizes as a constructed role. As she ultimately reflects: "It's your fault that I've never made anything of my life" and "I have been your doll wife, just as at home I was Daddy's doll child" (580).

These lines crystallize Nora's realization that her identity has never been her own, but rather something imposed and maintained through performance. Unlike Oedipus, who is tragically ignorant of his true identity, and Hamlet, who cannot resolve his internal uncertainty, Nora arrives at a different kind of knowledge: that her sense of self has been shaped entirely by external expectations.

Throughout the play, Nora navigates a series of roles, adjusting her behavior depending on her audience. With Torvald, she performs the obedient and charming wife; with Dr. Rank, she adopts a more intimate and suggestive tone; with Krogstad, she becomes calculating and desperate; and with Mrs. Linde, she reveals fragments of a more authentic self. This multiplicity suggests that Nora does not possess a singular, stable identity, but rather a network of situational selves, each shaped by social context. In this way, Ibsen extends the performative dimension of identity seen in *Hamlet*, but relocates it from the realm of philosophical inquiry to that of social necessity.

Nora's awareness of this performance gradually develops. Early in the play, she takes pride in her secret act of financial independence—borrowing money by means of forgery to save her husband—suggesting a latent desire for agency. Yet even this act must be concealed within the confines of her prescribed role. As she explains to Mrs. Linde, she has lived by "other sources of income [including] copying" and that it was "almost like being a man," yet this labor cannot be acknowledged openly (558). Identity, here, is constrained not only by expectation but by what can be publicly recognized.

The turning point of the play occurs when Nora fully confronts the gap between her performed identity and her lived reality. In her final conversation with Torvald, she rejects the roles that have defined her, asserting: "I believe that first and foremost I am an individual, just as you are—or at least I'm going to try to be" (580). This moment represents a profound shift in the evolution of identity across the texts examined in this study. For the first time, identity is not something discovered (*Oedipus*) or endlessly questioned (*Hamlet*), but something actively chosen and pursued. Nora does not claim to know who she is; rather, she asserts her right to find out.

Importantly, Nora's departure does not resolve the question of identity but instead opens it. When she leaves, she does so not with a fully formed sense of self, but with the recognition that such a self has yet to be constructed. This distinguishes her from both Oedipus and Hamlet: where Oedipus arrives at a devastating truth and Hamlet at a philosophical acceptance, Nora arrives at a beginning. Her famous exit, marked by the slamming of the door, signals not the completion of identity, but its possibility.

Pedagogically, this moment is especially powerful. Students are often struck by the realization that Nora's most authentic act is not a declaration of identity, but a rejection of



imposed roles. This invites critical discussion: Is identity something that can be discovered within existing social structures, or must those structures be abandoned? Does Nora know who she is when she leaves, or only who she is not? Such questions encourage students to move beyond static conceptions of identity and toward an understanding of the self as dynamic, contingent, and shaped by both constraint and choice.

At the same time, *A Doll's House* retains a degree of uncertainty that anticipates the more radical destabilization of identity in *Waiting for Godot*. Nora's assertion that she must "try and become" herself suggests that identity is always in process, never fully achieved. In this sense, Ibsen's play occupies a transitional space: it affirms the possibility of self-creation while acknowledging the difficulty (and perhaps impossibility) of ever arriving at a complete and stable understanding of the self.

Nora's awakening in *A Doll's House* reflects a shift from existential uncertainty to social critique, aligning closely with Foucault's understanding of identity as produced through systems of power and discourse. Her realization that she has been "a doll-wife" exposes the extent to which her identity has been constructed within—and constrained by—patriarchal structures. Unlike Oedipus, who is undone by truths beyond his control, or Hamlet, who struggles to define himself internally, Nora recognizes that the self she inhabits is not her own, but the product of external forces. Her departure, then, is not simply an act of personal liberation, but a rejection of the discursive structures that have defined her. For students, this moment reframes identity as something imposed before it is chosen, revealing that selfhood must first be disentangled from systems of power before it can be meaningfully constructed.

In tracing the progression from Oedipus to Hamlet to Nora, students encounter a clear evolution: identity moves from fate, to question, to performance, and finally to conscious reinvention. Yet even here, the question remains open, preparing the ground for Beckett's world, where the very notion of a stable or attainable identity is called into question.

IDENTITY AS ABSENCE, REPETITION, AND EXISTENTIAL INDETERMINACY IN BECKETT'S *WAITING FOR GODOT*

If *Oedipus Rex* presents identity as fated and ultimately revealed, *Hamlet* renders it as internally fractured and endlessly questioned, and *A Doll's House* imagines it as socially constructed and consciously redefined, then *Waiting for Godot* marks a final and radical departure: identity is no longer stable, discoverable, or even constructible: it is fragmented, repetitive, and possibly nonexistent. From its opening moments, the play resists the very structures that earlier dramas used to define identity. Estragon's first line, "Nothing to be done" establishes a world in which action, purpose, and by extension identity, are suspended (Beckett 7). Unlike Oedipus, who acts decisively in pursuit of truth, or Hamlet, who wrestles with the burden of action, Vladimir and Estragon exist in a state of perpetual inaction. Identity is no longer something to be discovered or created, but something that fails to cohere in the absence of meaningful progress.

This instability is further reinforced through the play's treatment of memory. Vladimir and Estragon repeatedly fail to recall past events, undermining any sense of continuity that might ground identity. As Vladimir accuses, "You forget everything," while Estragon struggles to piece together fragments of shared experience (32). Without memory, identity cannot accumulate or stabilize; it dissolves into a series of disconnected moments. In contrast to Nora, who leaves in order to begin constructing a self, Vladimir and Estragon cannot even sustain the narrative coherence necessary for such a project.

Language itself becomes unreliable as a tool for establishing identity. Their conversations circle, repeat, and collapse into contradiction, suggesting that meaning (and by extension selfhood) is perpetually deferred. At one point, Estragon asks, "What exactly did we ask him



for?” only for Vladimir to respond uncertainly, “Were you not there?” (13). The inability to confirm even shared experiences further destabilizes the notion of a coherent self.

Most significantly, identity in *Waiting for Godot* is relational and dependent, yet even this dependence fails to provide stability. Vladimir and Estragon rely on one another to affirm their existence, yet their connection is fragile and inconsistent. Estragon’s plea, “Don’t touch me! Don’t question me! Don’t speak to me! Stay with me!” reveals both the necessity and insufficiency of companionship (37). Unlike Nora, who ultimately asserts independence, these characters cannot exist meaningfully either together or apart. Their identities are suspended in a state of mutual dependence that never resolves into coherence.

The figure of Godot further complicates this dynamic. As an absent-presence, Godot represents the possibility of meaning, purpose, or identity that never arrives. The repeated refrain, “We’re waiting for Godot,” defines the characters not by who they are, but by what they are waiting for (10). Identity becomes deferred expectation, contingent upon an event that perpetually recedes into the future. In this sense, Beckett extends Jocasta’s earlier claim in *Oedipus Rex* that “nothing born of woman can know what is to come” to its logical extreme: not only can the future not be known, it may never arrive in any meaningful way (Sophocles 363).

The play’s cyclical structure reinforces this existential indeterminacy. Each day repeats the last, with only minor variations, suggesting that identity cannot develop over time. At the end of each act, the characters resolve to leave, yet remain motionless:

ESTRAGON. Well, shall we go?

VLADIMIR. Yes, let’s go.

They do not move. (Beckett 35)

This moment encapsulates the central paradox of the play: the intention to act exists, but action itself does not follow. Without action, there can be no transformation, and without transformation, identity remains static; or, more precisely, nonexistent.

Pedagogically, *Waiting for Godot* represents the culmination of the trajectory established across the earlier texts. Students who began with *Oedipus*—where identity, though hidden, ultimately exists—now confront a world in which identity may be an illusion altogether. The progression is stark: from certainty, to doubt, to agency, to absence. This shift challenges students to reconsider their assumptions about the self, particularly the expectation that identity is something stable, coherent, or attainable.

At the same time, the play resists total nihilism. The very act of waiting, of speaking, of remaining together suggests a minimal form of existence, if not identity. Language, however fragmented, becomes a means of sustaining presence: as Vladimir urges, “Say anything at all!” (41). Speech functions not to produce meaning, but to defer silence; to create, however fleetingly, the conditions under which existence can be felt. This tenuous performance becomes the closest approximation of identity available within Beckett’s world. Unlike Nora, who seeks to become herself, Vladimir and Estragon can only simulate the conditions of being, caught in an endless cycle of repetition without development.

In *Waiting for Godot*, the frameworks that once structured identity—developmental, existential, and social—begin to collapse. Erikson’s model of identity formation through crisis finds no resolution here, as Vladimir and Estragon remain suspended in a perpetual state of uncertainty without progression or synthesis. Sartre’s emphasis on choice and self-creation is equally destabilized; although the characters speak, decide, and resolve to act, their choices fail to produce meaningful transformation, rendering agency itself ineffective. Even Foucault’s notion of identity as socially constructed loses its grounding, as the absence of stable structures leaves no system through which identity might be formed. What remains is a world in which identity is



neither discovered, nor created, nor imposed, but endlessly deferred. For students, this final stage is perhaps the most unsettling: identity is no longer a problem to be solved, but a condition to be endured; one in which the self persists only as a fragile and fleeting performance in the absence of certainty, coherence, or resolution.

In tracing the evolution from Oedipus to Hamlet to Nora to Estragon/Vladimir, students encounter a profound transformation: identity moves from something divinely structured, to psychologically contested, to socially constructed, and finally to existentially unstable. *Waiting for Godot* does not answer the question “Who am I?” Instead, it dissolves it entirely, leaving only the echo of the question itself, repeated endlessly in a world where no definitive answer can ever arrive. This dissolution is already present in the play’s opening line: “Nothing to be done” (7). What appears at first to signal inactivity or despair is immediately undercut by the action that follows. The characters speak, move, wait: they *do* despite the claim that nothing can be done. The irony, and the quiet comedy, lies in this contradiction. Beckett thus reframes existence itself: not as meaningful action, nor even as the pursuit of identity, but as the persistence of activity in the absence of purpose. “Nothing to be done” becomes less a statement of resignation than a recognition that nothing one does will ultimately resolve or define the self.

CONCLUSION: STAGING THE SELF

To teach identity through dramatic literature is not to offer students a fixed definition of the self, but to invite them into an unfolding inquiry; one that is enacted, embodied, and repeatedly reimaged across time. From *Oedipus Rex* to *Hamlet*, *A Doll’s House*, and *Waiting for Godot*, identity does not emerge as a stable essence, but as a problem staged in different historical and philosophical forms. What begins as a question of fate becomes, over time, a question of consciousness, then of social construction, and finally of existential uncertainty.

In *Oedipus Rex*, identity is something already determined yet tragically unknown, revealed only through a process that the protagonist himself initiates. At the crossroads, “where three highways meet,” Oedipus makes a choice without knowledge, yet that choice is inseparable from the identity he will later come to recognize (Sophocles 363). The image of the crossroads becomes emblematic not only of fate, but of decision: identity is both inherited and enacted, even when the consequences of action remain obscured. In *Hamlet*, this tension shifts inward. Identity is no longer something to be uncovered through external inquiry, but something interrogated through thought, hesitation, and performance. Hamlet’s question—who he is and what he must do—remains unresolved, suspended between action and reflection.

With Nora in *A Doll’s House*, identity becomes explicitly social and, for the first time, consciously chosen. If Oedipus acts without knowing and Hamlet knows without acting, Nora acts in order to know. Her departure marks a decisive moment in the evolution traced in this study: identity is no longer revealed or deferred, but initiated. Yet even here, the self remains incomplete, defined less by what it is than by what it refuses to be. Finally, in *Waiting for Godot*, identity dissolves into repetition and uncertainty. No revelation occurs, no stable self emerges, and no decisive action alters the characters’ condition. Instead, existence persists as performance without resolution, as language without grounding, as waiting without fulfillment.

Pedagogically, this progression offers students more than a sequence of literary interpretations; it provides a framework for understanding identity as a dynamic and evolving concept. Students begin with the assumption that identity is something one can know, only to discover that such knowledge may be partial, constructed, or altogether unattainable. In this way, the classroom becomes a space not for defining the self, but for exploring its limits where each text complicates and redefines what has come before.



To return to the metaphor of the stage, identity in these works is not something one simply possesses, but something one performs, negotiates, and inhabits. It is shaped by forces both internal and external, revealed through action and constrained by circumstance. Like Oedipus at the crossroads, like Hamlet in his hesitation, like Nora at the threshold, and like Vladimir and Estragon in their endless waiting, the self is always in motion; caught between what is given and what is chosen.

Ultimately, drama does not resolve the question “Who am I?”; it sustains it. Each play stages the self differently, not to arrive at an answer, but to expose the complexity of the question itself. In guiding students through this progression, we do not lead them toward certainty, but toward a deeper awareness: that identity is not a destination to be reached, but a condition to be lived.

Enacted.

Embodied.

And continually reimagined.

SCOPE AND DELIMITATIONS

This study offers a focused, pedagogical examination of identity through four canonical dramatic works: *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, *A Doll's House*, and *Waiting for Godot*. These were selected for their historical range and their capacity to illustrate a conceptual progression in the representation of the self. The scope of the article is therefore deliberately limited: it does not attempt a comprehensive account of identity in dramatic literature, nor does it claim to exhaust the interpretive possibilities of the texts under consideration. Instead, it advances a specific pedagogical framework, using these plays as representative case studies through which students may trace an evolving understanding of identity across time.

Several limitations follow from this approach. First, the selection of texts, while canonical and widely taught, reflects a particular Western literary tradition. Other dramatic traditions, genres, and cultural perspectives (each of which might complicate or expand the concept of identity in different ways) fall outside the bounds of this study. Second, the analysis necessarily privileges thematic and pedagogical coherence over textual exhaustiveness. Each play, particularly *Hamlet* and *Waiting for Godot*, resists any singular or totalizing interpretation; the readings offered here are therefore selective, designed to support the article's central argument rather than to provide definitive accounts.

In addition, the theoretical framework employed (drawing on psychological, existential, and post-structural perspectives) serves as a guiding lens rather than a comprehensive theoretical synthesis. Other frameworks, including psychoanalytic, feminist, postcolonial, or performance-based approaches, could yield alternative or more nuanced readings of identity in these texts. Similarly, while the article foregrounds pedagogical application, it does not present empirical classroom data; its claims are grounded instead in interpretive practice and instructional experience.

Finally, the chronological structure of the study, while useful for tracing a conceptual progression, risks implying a linear development in the understanding of identity. In practice, these modes (fated, psychological, social, and existential) often coexist and overlap within and across texts. The progression articulated here is therefore heuristic rather than definitive, intended to provide a coherent framework for teaching rather than a fixed historical trajectory.

Despite these limitations, the study demonstrates the value of approaching identity as a staged and evolving problem within dramatic literature. By narrowing its focus to a set of carefully selected texts and a clearly defined pedagogical aim, it offers a model that can be adapted, expanded, and reinterpreted in a variety of classroom and scholarly contexts.



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“Locust” of Control: Animorphs versus the Metamorphosis as Transformative Metaphors

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Research Article

Abstract

*The theme of transformation between human and nonhuman has been prevalent for characters in popular media since its first surviving use in text, a Roman poetry collection that would form a cultural foundation: Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. From the authors of 15th century werewolf stories to the illustrator that drew DC comic Martian Manhunter, storytellers have gravitated towards portrayals of shapeshifting. This paper serves as a comparative analysis of two such texts: *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka and the *Animorphs* series by K. A. Applegate. The prior is a 1915 novella following a working class man named Gregor Samsa after he wakes up one morning having transformed into a giant insect. The latter, meanwhile, is a middle-grade fiction series about five human children who are granted the power to morph into any animal they touch—one of whom becomes trapped in his transformed animal body in the first book. Using frameworks of disability and trans studies—drawing from texts including Devlin and Pothier (2006), Garland-Thomson (2002), and Cael M. Keegan (2020)—this paper argues that while Kafka's work lends itself more heavily to a disabled reading of its protagonist Gregor Samsa's transformation into a dung beetle, a transgender reading is more appropriate for Applegate's character Tobias's morphing into a red-tailed hawk. While both characters experience irreversible transformations into their respective nonhuman forms, Gregor's narrative is characterized by stigmatization, exclusion, and lack of agency; meanwhile, Tobias's story emphasizes empowerment, an embrace of monstrosity, and culminates in an explicit choice to become and remain nonhuman. Both stories exemplify the relationship between body, self, and society—however, they diverge significantly in the implications of what the journeys serve to represent when viewed through the real-world mirror of the medical humanities and the transgender and disabled people represented therein.*

Keywords: Science-Fiction; Fantasy; Genre; Media Studies; Sci-Fi; Young Adult; Middle Grade; Gender Studies; Transgender; Kafka; Disability.

Transformation Spanning Generations

The theme of transformation between human and nonhuman has been prevalent in popular media since its first surviving use in text, a Roman poetry collection that would form a cultural foundation: Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. From the authors of 15th century werewolf stories to the illustrator that drew DC comic Martian Manhunter, storytellers have gravitated towards portrayals of shapeshifting. Not yet explored in scholarship is the striking juxtaposition of transformation between Kafka's most popularized novella and the popular early-2000s children's series *Animorphs*, penned by Katherine Applegate and husband Michael Grant. Though the fifty-four books are targeted at elementary-school-aged readers, they tackle advanced themes of genocide, imperialism, and body horror—specifically emphasizing that of transformation itself. This paper compares the depictions of transformation in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Applegate's *Animorphs* in order to demonstrate shared patterns across the two narratives while also analyzing key difference in the metaphor most accurately represented by each act of transformation. I argue that the prior showcases a story of disability due to its themes of stigmatization, exclusion, and lack of agency; meanwhile, the latter can



be more accurately read as an allegory for the transgender experience due to alternative themes of empowerment, an embrace of monstrosity, and explicit choice in the allegoric character's transformation.

Franz Kafka's 1915 novella *The Metamorphosis* tells the story of a working class man named Gregor Samsa after he wakes up one morning having transformed into a giant insect. While Kafka's stories were originally penned in German, quotes used in this paper are excerpted from an English translation by Willa and Edwin Muir. In the original novella, Kafka's narrator describes Gregor's form as *ungeheures Ungeziefer* or monstrous vermin, while the housekeeper specially refers to him as a dung beetle. Gregor's insect form has also frequently been interpreted by English-speaking readers as a cockroach. As a result of the limitations and stigma of his new body, Gregor's life falls to pieces: he is unable to make it to work and is subsequently fired, his family rejects him, and he eventually dies after starving himself and being bludgeoned with an apple by his father. He loses the will to live after his mistreatment and passes away, leaving his family to recover their middle-class lifestyle without the burden of caring for Gregor in his transformed and grotesque body.

K. A. Applegate's *Animorphs* series began its publication in 1996, following five human children—Jake, Marco, Cassie, Rachel, and Tobias—who are granted the power to shape-shift into any animal they touch. This gift was given to them by a benevolent alien Andalite to further the goal of stopping a second, parasitic race of aliens called the Yeerks. The Yeerks' aim is to take over the brains of every other sentient creature including all humans, whether through the cooperation of hosts or by force. Aximili, a teenaged alien of the Andalite species, joins the human Animorphs in their fight to defeat the Yeerks early on in the series. Tobias is the first of the children to use his power of transformation and is also the only one of the group to become permanently stuck in one of his morph forms, that of a red-tailed hawk, as a result of staying in the animal form for longer than two hours. Through the book series, the characters take on hundreds of different animals ranging from household pets to prime predators to insect pests. My argument's primary focus is Tobias's character arc, as his story lends itself most overtly to a transgender reading of the *Animorphs* series.

Transgender and Disabled Frameworks

Frameworks around critical disability theory and transgender readings of texts are part of rapidly-evolving fields, with many universities beginning to implement crip and queer studies into their curricula. For the purposes of this reading, I aim to distill core ideas that differentiate what makes a fictional experience disabled from qualities that situate a story as transgender in order to help establish common patterns in representations of these communities in narratives—separating these shared patterns from literal disability in real-life individuals in order to effectively interpret literary metaphor. Beginning with a critical disability theory framework, Devlin and Pothier (2006) write of the priorities for the field at the time of their publication pertaining to real-world populations. Due to the difficulty in drawing lines in the sand regarding who is disabled or not, they emphasize instead that “the vital question is not whether the disability inheres in a particular person, but what is society's response to a particular person's circumstances” (5). Society often reacts to disabled individuals with a tendency to try to either prevent or nullify their existence, thereby “fixing” them. The authors further emphasize that “stigmatization is pivotal” with “the existence of exclusionary social practices” (7). Disabled people are habitually denied voice when language is itself “deeply partial” making it all the more important for those who are disabled to be able to speak for themselves (7). Those who have disabilities are also often removed from populations in which they deserve unhindered involvement or inclusion, denying them the rights for voting, parenthood, or inclusion in public spaces: “disability is not just an individual impairment but a systematically enforced pattern of exclusion” (14). Also core to this framework is the idea that disability, while not infrequently a trait possessed since birth,



can also be acquired at any time. As Garland-Thomson (2002) writes, “Disability is an identity category that anyone can enter at any time, and we will all join it if we live long enough” (20).

Previous scholars have published research into Gregor Samsa as fitting into an established mould of disabled allegory. Uttara Ghosh (2013) writes of Gregor as disabled, emphasizing the presence of alienation and exclusion, worthlessness, and lack of voice. Rameez Raja and Ananya Dasghosh (2022) frame sections of their research around the connection between disability and capitalism and how Gregor’s transformation parallels the loss of economic opportunity often experienced by those who acquire disability. Jaya Upadhyay (2023) also analyzes Gregor’s transformed form as a non-normative body that fits within the disables studies lens of interpretation, focusing on the way in which others treat Gregor. This emphasis is similar to the aspects of analysis I employ to differentiate Gregor’s story of disability from Tobias’s transgender narrative. As prior scholarship evaluates Gregor as disabled, the primary originality of my paper is its contrast of the ways in which the descriptions and contexts of transformation drastically alter the implications of the characters as representing minority groups.

The transgender experience and portrayals of it, on the other hand, deal significantly with self-reflection and choice in how one presents. Differentiating queerness from disability, Garland-Thomson notes that “disability and sexual identity, however, seem more porous, although sexual mutability is imagined as elective where disability is seldom conceived of as a choice” (20). Whether someone indeed chooses their sexuality or gender identity is not at the crux of this paper’s argument, but it is relevant that a trans person does choose to come out as their gender identity and, in the case of many trans people, medically transition. Lyrically, Cael M. Keegan (2020) refers to this as the “shifting [of] the transgender body from the position of a medically created *thing* to that of self-author” (68). Rather than being subject to, trans people are agents of their own change. They have a locus of control inherent in the choice to embrace their identity when the path of least resistance for many would be to remain closeted and live a life masquerading as their birth sex. Keegan brings up trans poet Susan Stryker’s fixation upon and use of the monstrous as imagery (70), the reflection one experiences in a mirror while looking at oneself (70), and treating texts as bodies rather than bodies as texts (71) as symbols that can represent transness. Keegan pauses on the idea of the monstrous several times, defining that historically, “transgender phenomena have generally been represented as *things*—indefinable and monstrous objects that threaten the taxonomies of the western scientific episteme” (72), with such language and imagery being reclaimed by trans people in stories such as *The Thing* (1982) featuring a “monster [with a] wildly permutating body... possess[ing] the ability to assimilate living flesh and imitate its forms” (74). Cumulatively, this prior literature establishes disparate reoccurring themes within experiences that are to be read as either disabled or transgender while also setting up a framework for the analysis on which I now embark.

Sans Metaphor: Preliminary Comparison Between Kafka & Applegate

A unifying plot device in both *The Metamorphosis* and the *Animorphs* series is the transformation of human characters into insect forms, an experience that is painted in a negative light for each of the protagonists; this shared representation differs in the magnitude of emotional descriptions of and visceral reactions to the bodies themselves. It is clear that Gregor gains no satisfaction from his transformation into a bug, and this change sets into motion a series of events that eventually leads to his death near the end of the story. The opening pages of the story portray Gregor as fraught with anxiety about the implications and aftermath of his new form—fears that come to pass in the proceeding acts of the book—though he does not comment directly on the transformative experience and focuses instead on secondary effects. The stage is set with reference to Gregor’s “uneasy dreams” the night before and an “overcast sky [that] made him quite melancholy” (89). After this, the process of getting out of bed is both difficult and painful for Gregor—narrated with



descriptions I will analyze in the context of disability in the subsequent section. All of Gregor's mental energy is fixated on his inability to go to work that day, fretting about losing his job when he takes his first sick day in the five years at his job and being seen as lazy by his family members. He later stops eating and stays confined to his room for the majority of the text's second half, entering an isolated depression. However, Gregor's transformation is not described using highly emotional language by the third-person narrator of the novella. Though Gregor does not have an internal dialogue directly lamenting his new form as a beetle, the text is laden with images and thoughts with negative connotations stemming from the transformation.

The Animorphs, on the other hand, verbalize a specific and visceral disgust at the idea of taking on their insect bodies—a reaction that both foils and echoes the coinciding chronic depression that Gregor develops. Before the opportunity and necessity to take on a bug morph presents itself, narrator Rachel preemptively remarks that when Jake morphed a lizard, it “had crept him out big time. A roach would be even worse” (*The Visitor* 25). The Animorphs continue to speculate on the eventual task, with Rachel telling the others, “I don't think I'll be willing to [become a bug]” (*The Visitor* 41). It's a vehement emotional rejection, one that is fitting for the child who is experiencing the feeling. The changing of the self into something that they are afraid of or disgusted by presents a reaction tangible in the first-person narrative voice. Still, in spite of it being “not anyone's favorite morph” (*The Conspiracy* 31), every one of the Animorphs assumes a cockroach form at at least one point to further their fight against the Yeerks. In fact, it is one of very few animal forms that all of the children able to shape-shift do eventually take on at some point in the series. They emphasize the resilience and functionality of the body as well as mentioning its downsides, calling the body “harder to kill” than other forms even if less emotionally favorable (*The Conspiracy* 24). It is a necessary discomfort, and one that the young protagonists opt into. In this way, the two stories demonstrate the experience of an insect transformation as narratively different while also showing key emotional parallels for those being transformed: no one draws pleasure from this change, but the Animorphs are given agency and functional silver linings that Gregor is not granted.

Gregor's Condition as Disability, Tobias's Journey as Transness

As noted previously, there are key differences present between the bug transformation of Gregor versus those of the Animorphs, and further analysis of these juxtapositions supports broader interpretations of the transformative metaphors. In the *Animorphs*, there is a very strong emphasis on each character's experience of existing within their body—an experience that becomes strongly negative and emotionally arduous when faced with inhabiting a body that the protagonists do not identify with and are disgusted by. This is a perspective that is absent from Gregor's own experience as described by the narrator of his text. Most of Gregor's upset is not about the body he inhabits but rather than effects that it causes: he focusses on his immobility and the resulting inability to work rather than trains of thought surrounding disgust with himself. There is not a significant amount of emotional connotation to the narrator's depictions of his form, rather a matter-of-fact description of the events of the story. For the Animorphs, however, emotions run high as the young characters discover new relationships to their changing bodies—like a young transgender person going through puberty and realizing they do not align with their maturing body, there is a dysphoria that strikes the heart of the teenaged Animorphs' tumultuous emotions. Gregor lacks this intense internal turmoil and presents as pragmatic about the limitations caused by becoming a dung beetle, possessing the emotional regulation of the older person he represents. In relating this to the differences in metaphor between each fiction, the propensity for dysphoria to appear in adolescent years versus the near-inevitability of disability in older age form the first allegoric discrepancy in these two works.

Disability, when addressed in the *Animorphs* books explicitly, is positioned in diametric opposition to the alien morphing technology. Thirty-one pages into the first book when Jake assumes



his very first morph, he immediately uses language that directly juxtaposes his transformed body and its abilities with a visual disability, saying, “It was like being blind all your life and then suddenly you can see” (*The Invasion* 34). Leaving his peregrine falcon form in the second book, Jake once again describes the morphed animal form as opposite disability, describing being “back in a human body [as] feel[ing] like [he is] handicapped” (*The Visitor* 10). Cassie follows this up with “and blind,” echoing his comment from the previous installment (10). The Animorphs’ native form is the one that leaves them feeling limited while the new, transformed versions of themselves grant a freedom they haven’t felt before as humans. Tobias uses slightly different emphasis when he describes the difference between being a hawk and being human, focusing on the upsides of the red-tailed hawk rather than using language surrounding disability as a metaphor. He says, “There were millions of things I could do as a bird that I couldn’t do as a human” (*The Encounter* 45). In both characters’ cases, when they are morphing into a form they prefer, they do not feel out of place in their transformed body. The abilities of the non-human are lauded while the less capable human bodies are dismissed, showcasing morphing as something like an opposite to disability, at least from the teen protagonists’ perspectives.

While Gregor’s transformation into a beetle eventually causes his demise after his father attacks him, the Animorphs’ transformations are not only painless but actually heal any non-genetic health conditions. The process of morphing is not painful, as Marco says in book five, “morphing doesn’t hurt. It creeps you out some times, but it doesn’t hurt” (*The Predator* 4). But morphing goes far beyond simply not causing harm. This is established in book one, when Marco explains why one could acquire the morph of an injured bird but still shapeshifter into its healthy form: “DNA has nothing to do with some injury. The DNA wasn’t broken. Just a wing” (*The Invasion* 46). When Tobias first reclaims his ability to change shape after being stuck as a hawk for thirteen books, he does so under duress: his hawk morph’s wing has been broken, and he is in peril of death from a hungry raccoon that is closing in on his vulnerable body. Discovering he can once again acquire other animals, he transforms into the raccoon that is threatening him before “remorph[ing] back into [his] own body” as a hawk, now in perfect condition (*The Change* 81). He reinforces this with explicit language, as is common in the middle-grade series: “The others had done it. They had morphed out of injured bodies. Then when they re-morphed, the bodies were whole again” (p. 57). Morphing even saves Jake from death in book six after his cockroach morph is sprayed with bug poison—he is “trapped inside a dying body” but morphs out of it in the nick of time as a healthy but very stressed human boy (*The Capture* 35). The temporary injuries of the animal bodies are made even more fleeting when a simple transfiguration will reset them to full health.

If that was not example enough, book fifty of the collection has an even more poignant stance on the matter: disabled children who are granted the morphing capability are no longer affected by their disabilities after morphing and resuming their human form—just as long as their disability was not genetic in origin. As the war with the Yeerks continues escalating, the Animorphs realize they need to find kids who they know for certain are not Controllers to grant morphing capabilities to. “The Yeerks don’t want a blind Controller. They don’t want a disabled Controller. Deaf people, people in wheelchairs, people with serious illnesses” (*The Ultimate* 53). Previously, Tobias’s mom “was blinded in an accident. Tobias gave her the ability to morph, and now she’s not blind” (57). The same is true for James, the leader of the new Auxiliary Animorphs, who is healed from the paralysis he acquired in a car accident years prior. Following his initiation into the Animorphs, his unmorphed form is athletic and healthy, not even experiencing the muscle atrophy of living in a wheelchair for many years. The culmination of the Auxiliary Animorphs’ plot is every one of them being killed in one of the final conflicts of the war with the Yeerks. Though *Animorphs* is a series that involves disability, disabled characters don’t tend to ‘stick’ narratively, and morphing certainly is never shown



to create disability in a character in a way that would support the transformation as a disabled allegory.

The one direct reference to disability in *The Metamorphosis* similarly features Gregor praising the healing capacity of his dung beetle form. After noticing he's healed from past wounds, the narrator describes that Gregor "felt no disability" and remembers how "more than a month ago he had cut one finger a little with a knife and had still suffered pain from the wound only the day before yesterday" (Kafka 108). In spite of the word choice of "disability," the majority of the narrative tells a very different story about Gregor's new form compared to his old. He is painted as ineffectual and incapable of basic mobility from the beginning. When he wakes and tries to rise, his "pitifully thin" legs "wave helplessly," leaving him unable to easily get out of bed; facing this inconvenience alone, he is struck by "how simple it would be if he could get help" (89). When he makes his first efforts to move out of bed, he feels "in his side a faint dull ache he had never experienced before" (p. 89) akin to a form of chronic pain. Gregor is unable to go to work, demonstrating that he fits within an economic definition of disability as established by Julie Smart (2004) and further discussed by Jan Grue (2022) wherein he has "an inability to perform socially valued roles, most often work roles" (Smart 37). As he is sequestered to his bedroom, unable to leave, his circumstances also echo Devin and Pother's description of the habitual exclusion of the disabled, resulting in an inability to participate in a space he was formerly able to. When he does emerge from the room, his father strikes him with an apple which starts a spiral of mental and physical health issues that end in Gregor passing away. Gregor's dung beetle body is overall a disabling change, foiling the Animorphs who repeatedly contrast disability and their preferred animal forms.

Gregor also does not have any choice or cause to why he ends up in his newly transformed body. The opening line is all of the context the reader receives, which is to say, very little: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect" (Kafka 89). The form is permanent, but no decision process goes into it, nor is there a reason or fault to it. Much as there is not a choice made by disabled people to opt into their disability, Gregor does not elect to embody his new insect form. "Disability is seldom conceived of as a choice" (Garland-Thomson 20), and Gregor does not choose. Going further, this plays into the idea that any person could become disabled at any time. If there was no cause for Gregor's transformation, it could have just as easily happened to any other person in their bed on a particular night. This differs greatly from Tobias's journey of transformation. His initial transformation was seemingly accidental albeit causal, a change laden with a permanency that Tobias didn't feel entirely comfortable embracing. However, from that point forward he began a process of accepting that the red-tailed hawk was more representative of his true self than his original body as a human.

Time and time again, Tobias refers to his transfigured body as preferable to his human one. "I hate changing back. It's like going back into a prison or something. I hate it when I don't have wings" (*The Invasion* 53). This comment and Tobias's subsequent identity arc have led to fan speculation about whether he might have intentionally become stuck as a hawk from the very beginning, but there is not a canonical consensus therein. When the Animorphs are planning to acquire new morphs from the zoo early in the series, Tobias initially has no interest in any form but his eventually-permanent raptor form. "I'm happy with just my hawk morph. I don't want to be anything else" (*The Invasion* 68). He continues to reiterate this sentiment after the fact even as his friends see the transformation as somewhere between an accident and a curse. Tobias not only is at ease in the new body, but it is the animal of his choice, saying, "If you ever have to be stuck as an animal, I think being a hawk is the coolest choice of all" (*The Encounter* 21). By the final few books of the series, the other Animorphs begin to share the previously mentioned fan sentiment, with Cassie saying of Tobias's permanent change, "None of us are one hundred percent sure it was an accident" (*The*



Ultimate 8). Unlike the fluke change of Gregor into a beetle, Tobias's change is loaded with insinuations not only of an overt cause but of choice and consequence.

The thirteenth Animorphs book *The Change* culminates in Tobias choosing to remain in his hawk body with reclaimed access to morphing capabilities, a gift granted by a cosmic deity called the Ellimist. Hints are peppered throughout this book in regards to what Tobias's innermost desire is for himself, a yearning not to become a human again but stay a hawk—in spite of his insistence otherwise. Midway through the book, Tobias mentions that he's "changed" in reference to now living in the body of a hawk instead of a boy; the alien Jara Hamee to whom he is speaking says that he has changed too, earning his freedom from slavery under the Yeerks (72). Though Jara's line is spoken without context to Tobias's journey, and the alien's intelligence is suspect, the dialogue hints at a truth about Tobias. He, too, can be read as achieving a newfound freedom through his transformation. In the scene where he encounters the Ellimist, Tobias's physical form in the dreamscape is transient and mid-transformation, a seeming representation of the true inner form of Tobias himself: "both a human and a bird and some third thing that was in between the two" (58). At this book's culmination, he has the opportunity to change the course of his timeline and avoid ever becoming trapped as a hawk, but he chooses to actively encourage his past self to begin the series of events that led to his present raptor self. He also has a moment of reflection, not in a mirror but staring into his own face as a human through the eyes of his true bird form.

In Sandy Stone's "The 'Empire' Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," she describes a trans woman formerly called James Morris "say[ing] good-bye to [himself] in the mirror" leading up to the moment of transition—for James (soon to be Jan), this is via surgery, while for Tobias, this is through the morphing capabilities which will soon be bequeathed to him. One step beyond the trans mirror imagery to which Keegan and Stone refer, Applegate narrates Tobias's post-transition self encountering his old form and acquiring the ability to morph into that human body when he chooses. Instead of fully leaning in the "wrong body" interpretation of a gender discovery experience and an emphasis on "passing" as a binary, Tobias instead bucks the idea that "only one body per gendered subject is 'right'" (Stone 13). He is not "erasing a considerable portion of [his] personal experience," but following in Stone's ideals of the post-transsexual (12). This is juxtaposed by his friends' own perspectives on his change, consistently not understanding that his transformation is net good. Cassie uses this "wrong body" interpretation common to cisgender perspectives and more dated trans theory when she calls Tobias "our friend, who had been trapped forever in a body not his own" (*The Message* 48); however, Tobias does not echo this language when referring to himself and his existence halfway through a spectrum of identity. Going beyond standard human constraints wherein a person can embody only one slowly-changing form, Tobias is able to assume an ultimate control over his own presentation and image, existing between spaces of embodiment and acquiring a fluidity of presentation.

Because Gregor wakes up already transformed, there is also no opportunity for descriptions of physical change in his narrative. Gregor is not shown in his narrative to have ever been anything but a dung beetle. His bodily change from a man to an insect is neglected to be described and he simply is. It is often considered a faux pas or outright offensive to ask a disabled person how they became disabled. The internet footprint of disabled individuals asking for new friends to avoid this line of conversation is immense. Some people are born with disabilities, other acquire them, and very few of either want to break the ice by telling a stranger about it. Meanwhile, descriptions of change are constant and graphic in the *Animorphs* series. Tobias and his fellow teens are repeatedly shown to change from one body to another. They are nearly-constantly in an act of transformation. Trans identity is based thoroughly around the act of change, the process of transformation being innate in the identity. No person is born having already medically transitioned, and the changing of one's body



is a shared and important experience for a large majority of transgender people—whether that is the simple act of cutting their hair or the more intensive hormone replacement therapies and surgeries available.

Associations between disability, transness, and the monstrous are varied in prior research; however, there is an emergent pattern in literature wherein disability scholars are engaging in a concerted effort to disconnect disability from body horror while various trans artists and audiences have leaned into their identities' intersection with it. I turn my attention to Susan Stryker's seminal trans theory text mentioned previously, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix." In this, she likens her identity as a trans woman to Frankenstein's monster in 1994, beginning her written monologue with the remark that:

The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster's as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist. (Stryker 245)

Stryker is by no means unique in how she embraces monstrosity as prominent imagery to represent her transition. Movies such as mind-bending Sundance film *I Saw the TV Glow* (2024) have been overwhelmingly interpreted as trans allegories which use body horror to convey the transgender experience. While the story has horror elements, it does not frame its genderqueer or questioning characters in a negative light. Mirrors also play a pivotal role in the film, as the final scene features the likely-transfeminine Owen cut into his chest, which he stretches open to reveal a television screen that he gazes into in his reflection. The canonically transmasculine protagonist of the young adult novel *Hell Followed with Us* by Andrew Joseph White also embodies transformation into the monstrous without undergoing medical transition. Benjamin refers to himself as "a monster standing among the living, a boy made of raw meat and dying flesh" (290). He revels in embodying monstrosity because it separates him from girlhood and being perceived as a woman: "everyone will see my razor-sharp, jumbled mess of teeth and rotting flesh when people look at me, the first thing they'll think is *monster*, is *Seraph*, not *girl*" (313).

For disability theory, there is too long a history of disabled representations in media coming from those who are not disabled themselves, a prevalence of films within the horror genre which paint their disabled characters in negative lights. Paul D. C. Bones (2022) writes that "disability isn't just another horror trope, it is the cornerstone of how we express and understand fear" due to the assumptions that have been instilled in the back of each viewer's mind about real-world disabled people; he goes on to state that "consuming horror is very much an act of reaffirming the status quo and reinforcing stereotypes" (257). In this light, disability rights voices in the digital sphere have published dozens of articles arguing for the trope's elimination as a Hollywood staple. There is not a wave of reclamation of the grotesque and the other in relation to this movement (nor does there need to be) but rather pleas to separate genuine and literal disability from the role of monster or villain. Juxtaposing the way in which young trans artists seem to gravitate to body horror, stories of disability from disabled authors often take on other metaphors and images.

Drawing from this understanding, I would like to emphasize the difference in visceral imagery and emotional language regarding the transformations portrayed in Kafka versus Applegate's work. *The Metamorphosis* paints Gregor's new body as more helpless and ineffective than grotesque. The other characters are appalled at his insect form, but the narrator of the story itself as Gregor's main voice does not lean into this as the raw description of Gregor's new body. Applegate's imagery, on the other hand, is frequently gruesome—surprisingly so for a middle-grade children's series. Their



transformations are plagued with the children's skeletons defying laws of biology: "the odd crunching sound you get sometimes when bones are stretched or compressed" (*The Message* 31); "a sickening crunch as her knees changed direction" (*The Encounter* 19); "the terrifying sensation of knowing that all the bones inside my body were dissolving" (*The Predator* 25). The morphs are unpleasant, unattractive, "something straight out of a nightmare" (*The Encounter* 18). To demonstrate the frequency of these descriptions, I would like to note that all of these quotes are excerpted from the first five books of the series, demonstrating a pattern of language that continues throughout. (*The Change* 87) The ineffectual emphasis and matter-of-fact descriptions regarding Gregor's body could not be more different in connotation from the words describing the Animorphs, paralleling the ways in which real-world disabled and transgender people choose to self-describe in their art.

Kafka's Gregor is rendered less able to communicate with others due to his transformation, both through his voice itself and how he is understood externally. The first section of the book has him speaking comprehensibly to others, but only through the physical barrier of a wooden door; his words then become "no longer understandable, apparently, although they seemed clear enough to him, even clearer than before" (99); finally, communication lapses fully as Gregor's mother becomes "convinced that he could not understand her words" (116). Two months of "lack of all direct human speech" (116) isolate Gregor, driving him to self-starvation and desolation. He is stripped of voice in the way that Devlin and Pothier (2006) describe is common for disabled people. In this case, the silencing is literal, as he is no longer capable of human speech and could not be understood even if his voice was valued. For Gregor, though, no one wants to listen to him in the first place—which is at the crux of how many disabled people in real-world society are left unheard.

Meanwhile, the Animorphs are able to speak telepathically, expanding their power of communication beyond human limits while in their morph forms. As humans, they speak like anyone else, but in their animal forms they can project their thoughts into the minds of anyone they want, whether a specific person or a larger group. They can even talk through barriers like brick walls, communicating in a way that neither auditory language nor visual languages like American Sign Language are able. In this way, each of the characters is actually more capable of being heard when they are not limited by their human form. By eliminating a barrier of communication, the morphs are painted as more of a superpower than a curse. Tobias is able to be heard by others better and from a greater distance than in his past human body, and it is his friends who he cannot hear as easily, directly contrasting Gregor who could hear his family but was not understood by them.

Throughout Applegate's *Animorphs* series, the act of transformation is framed as expansive and freeing, described using language that explicitly juxtaposes words pertaining to disability while echoing experiences of adolescent dysphoria. Tobias's arc demonstrates patterns of autonomy, comfort with monstrosity, and bodily fluidity—providing an opportunity for analysis of his experience as a transgender metaphor. These narrative choices juxtapose the hindered communication, exclusion, and lack of agency granted to Gregor in his inadvertent and detrimental metamorphosis that parallels a tale of disability. Though both texts introduce overlapping experiences of insect transformations, the prior lends itself naturally to a genderqueer interpretation in ways that Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* does not. Coincidentally, K. A. Applegate and Michael Grant's child who was born the year after *Animorphs* began its publication would later come out as a transgender woman; years after the release of *The Metamorphosis*, Franz Kafka would die from an acquired disability, suffering for seven years with the negative health effects stemming from tuberculosis. Though neither author could have known they were penning a reflection of their life's later plot points, there is poetry in the reverberations of their fictions into the life stories that would follow.



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Communal Masculinity in Conrad's *Lord Jim*

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Research Article

Abstract

Just below the surface of Joseph Conrad's novel, Lord Jim (1899), lies anxiety about the potential harm that contemporary models of manhood may have on the psyche of male performers. Jim's understanding of what it means to be "one of us"--white, European, and in charge-- plays a determining role in this novel. Conrad's text clearly illustrates Jim's acceptance of Victorian notions of chivalry, adventure, and imperial manhood (which Joseph Bristow identifies as "romantic masculinity") through "character-shaping" institutions such as print media and education, which perpetuated institutional power and legitimized the imperial project. While critics such as Linda Dryden and Michael Roberts have explored the existence of romantic masculinity in Lord Jim, there has been little discussion of the ways in which the novel actively critiques this construction of male behavior. It is this psychological pressure to act according to a institutionally constructed "script" of male conduct which Conrad illustrates within Lord Jim. I argue that Conrad critiques the romantic masculinity of imperialism through Jim's over literalization of a chivalric code, which leads to his isolation and death.

Keywords: Masculinity, Manhood, Romantic Masculinity, Communal, Joseph Conrad, Colonialism.

In one of the key scenes of Joseph Conrad's novel, *Lord Jim* (1900), the protagonist Marlow observes:

There is such magnificent vagueness in the expectations that had driven each of us to sea, such a glorious indefiniteness, such a beautiful greed of adventures that are their own and only reward! [. . .] In no other kind of life is the illusion more wide of reality – in no other is the beginning all illusion – the disenchantment more swift – the subjugation more complete. Hadn't we all commenced with the same desire, ended with the same knowledge, carried the memory of the same cherished glamour through the sordid days of imprecation? (97)

This passage is instructive, for it offers the reader their own glimpse into a defining tension of this novel. Marlow recalls the dreams of glory and adventure that led so many young men to the sea, and discredits them as illusions. However, he ends with an assertion of shared experience, essentially claiming that this "dissolution" initiates men into knowledge. This passage presents a narrative of masculinity: a boy accepts a version of manhood through adventure stories, finds out that reality contradicts that idealized code of behavior, and comes away with knowledge that permits him access to a community of men that have the "same" desires, memories, and knowledge. Yet this is not how Jim's narrative trajectory progresses. Jim does not understand the difference between the idealized constructions he reads about and the realities of his experience. Instead, he consistently holds himself up to this unattainable code of behavior and suffers psychologically when he fails to perform according to that standard. This conflict informs critical approaches to gender in Conrad's novel in many illuminating ways, yet while scholars have



discussed Jim and masculinity specifically, they have limited their explorations to the title character¹.

Several studies of masculinity in *Lord Jim* have analyzed Jim's behavior according to conventional notions of Victorian masculinity. Scott McCracken assert that *Lord Jim* constructs and values a "romance of lonely masculinity" (18). This passage is representative of many studies of Conrad's male characters². These texts look at the "dominant" constructions of masculinity perpetuated by various social institutions and apply them towards a critique of empire or Victorian values. While these explorations offer provoking analysis of gender performance in Victorian culture, *Lord Jim* and individualism, or Jim as a romantic construction of a more imperial masculinity, these studies rarely qualify their observations or show how these constructions affect the psyche of these men. More importantly, they do not articulate the possibility that Conrad depicts competing notions of what it means to be a man in order to actively critique a more pervasive social narrative and to champion a more communal form of masculinity. In his discussion of the lack of an "alterity" to the essentialist masculine mores of the current sort propagated by dominant ideologies, Michael Roberts actually hints at a very important concern (210). I believe that *Lord Jim* offers "alterity," a different vision of masculinity than that which Jim (and by extension the British boys raised on the milk of imperialist, phallocentric discourse) accepts as a young man. This alternative model of masculinity is offered to the reader in the figure of Marlow. The fact that the main narrative trajectory follows a young man who consistently rejects the greater community of men has also been glossed over, even in those few studies which concern themselves with communal relationships.

Recent readings of Conrad and community focus on the failures of male community, rather than providing a comparison of different masculine constructions which could illustrate the attempt to privilege communal manhood. Interestingly, one study seems to anticipate such a need. Sarah Cole states: "after the novel has chronicled the cultural and literary disruption caused by the fracture of one type of male community, it offers a competing system also based on the bonds between men" (114). The observation that Conrad seems to present his readers with two options regarding the performance of masculinity is an excellent point that is seldom articulated in previous studies. Many theorists in masculinity studies agree that the performance of maleness contains different orienting roles or options, whose relationships to one another are sometimes complementary, other times oppositional³. However, in only looking at the various ways in which community is depicted, Cole does not seize the opportunity to place the competing models of male behavior (romantic individualism and communal manhood) into dialogue. Instead, the reader is merely presented with different models of community. There is still a need to compare and qualify the versions of male behavior instead of merely illustrating and analyzing the existence of a single construction, whether individual or community-oriented, and this study will function as an extension and synthesis of these previous critical approaches. I will argue here that *Lord Jim* presents a communal model of masculinity beside older, traditional forms in order to critique the model of individualized, romantic manhood.

I will attempt to render visible these different models of male behavior presented in Conrad's novel through a comparison of the characters of Jim and Marlow. Ultimately, this approach should illustrate that Conrad's text depicts communal masculinity in a more positive light than individualism, which privileges it over the other models depicted in the novel. Conrad presents his reader with two different versions of masculinity in his primary characters and guides their interaction to show the devastating failure of the constructions of romantic masculinity posited by the imperial romance.

Ideological institutions illustrated the way they felt a "real man" should behave through



depiction of heroes in popular fiction, editorial reports in newspapers, and idealization of certain historical figures and narratives. While this attempt to shape male behavior may not have been reached by a cultural consensus and was only one competing narrative about male behavior available in a print culture, critics have shown that there was a conscious attempt by various state and private institutions to promote a certain type of male behavior through adventure fiction⁴. Elaine Showalter and Isabel Fernandes have demonstrated that the “masculine quest romances” of this period contained themes which helped men to define their understanding of manhood (83). Regardless of their ultimate purpose, these “male romances” constructed masculinity according to the traditional motifs of muscular Christianity, adventurous manhood, and patriotism/imperial duty⁵. Much critical attention has been devoted to the link between masculinity and Empire, as the conventions of chivalrous adventure tales set in imperial settings oriented the perception of proper male behavior well into the twentieth century⁶. By printing the “script” of male performance, adventure romances constructed a vision of masculinity which perpetuated their sales and legitimized the imperial efforts that provided their settings. These portrayals of imperial patriotism did not just drive demand for adventure fiction in the marketplace, however; they had a distinct impact on the versions of acceptable behavior available to British men. Stephen Miller observes that, “Patriotism not only drove men to take action, but it also defined what types of actions were acceptable” (708). It is this psychological effect of social pressure to act according to carefully scripted terms which I feel Conrad attempts to document within *Lord Jim*. Perhaps more importantly, he then uses this emotional damage to illustrate the more integrated values of community which Marlow represents.

Lord Jim appears to be a story of honor and redemption in far-away lands, yet just below the surface lies an ambiguity about the potential harm and/or benefit that the romantic models of manhood may have on the psyche of male performers. Jim’s understanding of what it means to be a man, and specifically to be “one of us” – white, European, and in charge – plays a determining role in everything he does in this novel (Conrad 81). However, his perception of manhood is not created in a vacuum. Rather, several studies illustrate Jim’s indoctrination and acceptance of Victorian notions of chivalry, adventure, and imperial masculinity (ideas which are often identified as “romantic masculinity”) ⁶. However, Jim’s desertion of over nine hundred passengers on a sinking ship calls the idealization of these values into question. Tim Middleton states, “Jim appears to be the epitome of those codes of English good conduct which his audience holds dear and yet this appearance is mere illusion” (270). In a horrible accident at sea on the steamer *Patna*, Jim abandons thousands of religious pilgrims to a watery grave when it seems that the ship’s sinking is inevitable. Jim recalls, “I was so lost, you know. It was the sort of thing one does not expect to happen to one” (Conrad 97). The fact that he is enticed by the ship’s captain and crew make no difference to the young man; in his mind he is a coward for allowing his indecision and fear to control him. He spends the rest of the novel attempting to atone for his humiliation and trying to outrun his deep sense of shame. As Terry Collits puts it, “What is now at stake is not Jim’s existential experience of the event but the ‘code’ itself” (130). Collits’ observation regarding the unarticulated colonial systems of behavior has direct application towards the equally unspoken but defining expectations of male performance. But the distinction I wish to highlight here, and clarify through an eventual comparison to Marlow, is that this construction of romantic masculinity damages the individual, for it causes the performer to emulate an unattainable standard of conduct. Failure to live up to this constructed fantasy is inevitable, but it causes incredible anxiety and despair. The reader witnesses this emotional damage when Jim relates, “There was no going back. It was as if I had jumped into a well – into an everlasting deep hole” (Conrad 84). Yet his failure of duty and its corresponding emotional



impact are not products of state judgment. Jim is the only member of the crew who is brave enough to stand trial for the incident, and he is given little more than the proverbial slap on the wrist by the colonial authorities (Conrad 121). However, Jim is deeply affected by his failure to live up to the unattainable standard set forth by the imperial culture. Jim remarks to Marlow, "I am not good enough; I can't afford it. I am bound to fight this thing down – I am fighting it now" (Conrad 116). In not following the near mandates of a romantic construction of masculinity, Jim feels inadequate; his identity as a man is in question and he spends much of the novel fighting to regain a sense of self-worth.

It is the self-delusion of heroism which becomes important as the novel progresses, for it is the lynchpin of Jim's increasingly fragile sense of identity. Jim goes to great lengths to protect his "honor," or identity, both out of natural instincts for self-preservation, and because the source material for his understanding of masculinity permits and even expects this reaction. Once Jim's bravery is questioned in the public sphere, he resorts to increasingly extreme measures to defend his conception of gender identity. Jurgen Kramer proposes that these social constructions "do not treat masculinity as something natural but, rather, as some precarious state which has to be fought for, won and defended against great resistance" (143). Notice the isolation implied by such a statement; this is a sharp contrast to Marlow's masculinity, which does not need defending, as it supported through his associations with other men. Initially, Jim just quits the various positions which Marlow secures for him once his employers begin to question his mysterious past (Conrad 141). However, as the novel progresses, Jim becomes more confrontational about his mysterious background. He refuses to give Eglestrom and Co. any reason for his immediate departure (Conrad 146-47) and he smashes up a billiards room in a bar fight when someone makes a joke about the *Patna*. Marlow notes that, "He was universally condemned for the brutal violence, so unbecoming a man in his delicate position" (Conrad 150). Marlow implies here that Jim's "delicate position" necessitates developing bonds with members of the male community, rather than severing them through antagonistic bravado. Here we see Jim playing out the "script" of romantic masculinity: he defends his honor by force. Yet the rejection of this tactic by the larger group speaks to the failure of this construction of masculinity in the real world. By rejecting the fellowship with other men over his feelings of inadequacy, Jim's construction of manhood increasingly isolates him from all forms of community. This piece shows the damage wrought by the alienation from community which occurs when one follows the construction of romantic individualism too literally, as well as the misery and torment inflicted upon those who do not enact this idealized fantasy. Jim reacts to his failure to belong in various ways: frustration, confusion, violence, and finally segregation.

One of the more stark comparisons between the masculine representations of Jim and Marlow lies in the alienation of the title character. The reader sees a self-isolated boy who often removes himself from the group to give his daydreams of valor and adventure free reign (Conrad 4-6). This desire contributes to his isolation, which in turn prompts illusions of great bravery:

At such times his thoughts would be full of valorous deeds: he loved these dreams and the successes of his imaginary achievements. They were the best parts of life, its secret truth, its hidden reality. They had a gorgeous virility, the charm of vagueness they passed before him with a heroic tread; they carried his soul away with them and made it drunk with the divine philter of an unbounded confidence in itself. There was nothing he could not face. (Conrad 14)

Even the language of the above passage is heroic; illuminating the vision of his manhood which Jim cherishes the most. He ruminates over "those events of the sea that show in the light of day the inner worth of a man, the edge of his temper, and the fibre [*sic*] of his stuff; that reveal the



quality of his resistance and the secret truth of his pretences, not only to other but also to himself" (Conrad 6). Jim performs his duties in self-imposed isolation and does not fraternize with those around him. Here the reader gains a concrete example of the critique of individualism that the author initiates through the subtle comparison to Marlow. Marlow observes that Jim always appears "withdrawn" and "alone with his loneliness" (Conrad 128). Jim refuses to return home, even to visit his family, because he does not want to seem a failure. He has virtually no contact with loved one's back home or England more generally. Marlow's inquiry into this prompts only an embittered response (Conrad 179). The narrative commentary in this passage indicates a critique of Jim's individualism, for it is not a good thing to reject one's family, friends, and country out of stubborn isolation. Jim consistently rejects the help of others. He seems to desire fellowship, in the sense that he seeks Marlow out in order to tell him his side of the *Patna* incident, but at the same time he rejects Marlow's companionship. Cole puts it another way in remarking that, "failed male intimacy and the problem of alienation become nearly interchangeable conditions" (107). This "failure" is not endemic to all masculine constructions, however. The strong sense of individualism seems to be a product of Jim's boyhood and reading, yet we must remember that this is not the only model of behavior or interaction available to Jim or the other men in this text. Rather, the figure of Marlow represents a possibility of manhood that relies on a community of men instead of the valor of the individual.

It is important to pause here and explain what is intended by the term "communal masculinity" in this study. The connotation I desire to evoke is one of group-oriented epistemology and experience, where men/male characters respond to challenges and exterior threats by relying on established homosocial bonds. In this view, a communal manhood values narrative interaction between men as a way of gaining information about the world, asking other men for advice, and using friendship networks to secure privilege. In other words, communal masculinity values talk over action, debate and exchange over violent response, homosocial bonds over individuality, and temperance over emotional excess.

Marlow, the pseudo-narrator and confidant of Jim, embodies a form of communal masculinity which places value on the support of others, rather than individual prowess in action. While this is the same character which appears in *Heart of Darkness*, the gestures he makes towards community and homosocial bonds with Kurtz in that book are posited in *Lord Jim* in a manner which is more fully developed and integral to his character. In this text the reader is not privy to Marlow's background, as they are Jim's. The lack of information about Marlow's past limits the direct application of historical precedents for communal masculinities⁷. Instead, the reader is forced to conceptualize Marlow's brand of masculinity through his actions, relationships, and commentary from the men to whom he is telling this story. McCracken observes that "*Lord Jim* is a tale told by Marlow to other, professional men" and that his setting evokes a "collective manhood and discourse 'between men'" (19). This simple observation does necessary work, for it helps to remind the reader of the way in which Marlow is presented in the novel. I think that it is worthwhile to pause and recall just how representative of community Marlow truly is. He is the captain of a ship, an all-male world in which relationships between men are necessary for the survival and operation of the vessel itself⁸. Marlow usually depicts himself as traveling from port to port, making new male acquaintances, and maintaining old friendships. He is telling this tale about one man's struggle to negotiate his perception of normative male behavior to a group of men, perhaps indicating the commonality of this dilemma.

Clearly, the things which Marlow values, the ways in which he interacts with other men, and the types of relationships he maintains, all point to a different construction of masculinity



than Jim's.⁹ Marlow continually seeks out the opinions and advice of others and constructs his understanding of events from the vantage point of many participants, rather than relying on his own subjective impression of events. Marlow explains, "My information was fragmentary, but I've fitted the pieces together, and there is enough of them to make an intelligible picture" (Conrad 261). Marlow faithfully completes Jim's tale through a reliance on the narratives of others, whom he tracks down and interviews. He narrates the recollections of a Frenchman in a bar and even seeks out the loathsome Gentleman Brown to figure out the end of Jim's story. This illustrates a version of masculinity which relies more on the experience of the group and which creates a network of inter-connected men to mitigate adverse circumstances and gain knowledge. Anytime a difficulty or concern arises in his own life, Marlow contacts his friends for advice and support. For example, Marlow continually corresponds with other acquaintances and explicitly recounts the letters he writes to or receives from Stein, Eglestrom, etc. As a result, he is a more integrated and content figure in the novel than Jim. "Marlow's sense of heroism, in other words, is still tied to some notion of participation in cultural endeavors and to the idea that a true hero [. . .] can only exist within a community of men. Whatever 'honor' is [. . .] it is not dependant upon mere courage" (Jones 88). I contend that Jones' observation speaks not only to the notions of "virtue" in the novel, but more generally to the very necessity of male community itself. In other words, this text seems to question the masculine ideals of rugged individualism and personal valor in favor of a group masculinity which strives for consensus, support, and balanced solutions to difficulties.

Marlow spends much of his time making and maintaining social connections in a variety of networks. According to Cole, "a consistent value in Conrad's work is the commitment to a tradition of 'organic community,' where group well-being is valued over individual heroics" (106)¹⁰. This point has strong implications towards the value of community when it is placed into dialogue with a more individual-oriented system of behavior, as occurs in *Lord Jim*. Throughout this tale, Marlow continually seeks Jim out to offer him advice, a confiding ear, and physical support. He uses business contacts to find Jim a job every time he runs out on his existing one (Conrad 135-136). Various establishments throughout the South Seas know of Marlow and value his reputation. Jim secures a position through Eglestrom and Company by merely mentioning Marlow's name. Jim states, "For reference I gave them your name, which they know of course and if you could write a word in my favor it would be a permanent employment" (Conrad 142). This correspondence is another example of the care with which Marlow develops and maintains relationships with other men. Marlow consistently seeks to talk with Jim, even when the other tries to reject his overtures of companionship (Conrad 177). In his conversations with Jim, Marlow tries to get the other to open up and express his inner turmoil, perhaps in a cathartic effort to ease Jim's self-imposed isolation. Jim notes this function in saying, "You are an awful good sort to listen like this . . . It does me good. You don't know what it is to me" (Conrad 96). Marlow is always anticipating things that "do Jim good," because he represents a different model of masculinity, one which places value on the homosocial bonds between men. In an immediate comparison, Jim is incredibly isolated throughout the book; his only friend is Marlow, and he actively shuns intimacy with other men out of fear that they will deride him for his act of cowardice. Marlow periodically travels home to England to visit family and friends, something Jim rejects because his code of masculinity has left him afraid of disappointing his father. Yet Marlow actively critiques Jim's individualistic attitude: "those meetings [were] more trying to a man who believes in the solidarity of our lives than the sight of an impenitent deathbed to a priest. That, to tell you the truth, was the only danger I could see for him" (Conrad 169). This is a self-fulfilling prophecy in many ways, for Jim's understanding of proper male behavior is



dangerous, both emotionally and physically.

Marlow seems to desire intimacy at the emotional level. In a conversation with Jim, Marlow recounts that, "There was a moment of real and profound intimacy, unexpected and short-lived like a glimpse of some everlasting, of some saving truth" (Conrad 182). Here the reader gets to see a masculine value system, in which "intimacy" between two men offers a vision of a more satisfying "truth". It seems appropriate that the truth is unarticulated here; it is this inexpressible quality to fellowship which powerfully counteracts the expressed and reiterated value system propagated by the print culture at the end of the nineteenth century. Marlow is an older man in this novel, and it is possible that he is drawn to Jim because he sees Jim as representative of the values he once embodied. In other words, Jim fascinates Marlow because he is an image of himself as a younger man. Whether these bonds are merely homosocial in nature and deny homoerotic potential is not within the scope of this study¹¹. Rather, it is enough to note that it is Marlow (and by extension, his value system and construction of masculinity) that survives in this novel. Christopher Lane observes that "the narrator seems to ask what it means to be, desire, or identify as a man, in an attempt to stabilize the meaning of masculinity at home and abroad" (115). The narrative question seems to be answered in the implicit comparison between the two primary male characters in the novel. Jim is sacrificed to his system of honor and duty quite literally. It is Marlow who is left to construct the pieces of the story through his social networks of friendship and support. In other words, this novel cannot answer the question of normative masculinity because no definitive answer exists; rather, this book places differing versions of manhood in dialogue with one another. However, Jim's romanticized notions continually fail because their standards are unrealistic as the imperial fiction in which they are portrayed. Consequently, it is Marlow's version which remains in the end, and the existence of this tale inside of a system of multiple narrators bears testament to the necessity of interconnected bonds of male friendship and communal interaction.

It is necessary here to acknowledge the ulterior motives that privileges a more communal form of masculinity may imply. Certainly, tales of male camaraderie and *esprit de corps* continue to help male military cultures cope with the trauma of the death and destruction in which they participate daily, as well as recruit other volunteers for service. The ending of the novel forces the reader towards the crucial realization that the British imperial project was a male, military landscape in which European men were vastly outnumbered by the indigenous inhabitants. Strong social networks, then, were essential in maintaining the physical and economic domination of these foreign places. Writing a story that illustrates the importance of a communal masculinity functions both to create social networks to consolidate power, which simultaneously putting a kinder, gentler face on British imperialism. While I find neither of these motives particularly defensible, they do both help support my overall argument that *Lord Jim* privileges communal manhood over other available constructions of masculinity.

This text questions the masculine ideals of rugged individualism and personal valor in favor of a group masculinity which strives for consensus, support, and balanced solutions to difficulties. This ideal of the self-made man would continue to be attacked in more public spheres throughout the beginning of the twentieth century, when the First World War showed that the martial heroism of the individual could no longer survive in an impersonal, mechanized war. It seems probable, however, that Conrad may have been proposing the same conclusions decades earlier in a way which did not need the horrific loss of human life for illustration. However, some critics like Michael Jones ultimately believe that Marlow serves to enforce community standards of virtue (89), and assertion which may need to be revisited in light of this study. I think that Marlow reinforces the value of community, rather than serve as an



embodiment of dominant social values. Again, the distinction here is illustrated through the difference between Jim and Marlow. It seems that Marlow advocates a different brand of male behavior from the one asserted in Jim's stories of imperial romance, one that seems more inclusive and less destructive than Jim's in several ways: Jim constantly fights with others to prove his courage and defend his honor, while Marlow talks with people from different backgrounds and is outwardly tolerant of even the detestable Gentleman Brown. Jim's adherence to his "code" of honor produces incredible self-doubt and emotional duress, while Marlow appears rather more adjusted and comfortable with the choices he makes. While Marlow does not necessarily challenge Jim's code of conduct, he does admonish him several times in the novel for his short-sighted reactions to opportunities presented to him by the greater community. This certainly upholds the value of community (although not necessarily community values).

I think that the answer to the question of whether Marlow challenges or enforces social expectation depends on the type of mores in question. Marlow does assert the idea of manly self-control, but he also seems to critique Stein's collection mentality as eccentric and isolating. The applications of these observations to the understanding of class, race, and empire have been advocated by multiple critics, including Bristow, Dryden, Moore, and others. I think that Jones' study raises necessary questions about the ultimate ability of any depiction of gender roles to effectively subvert or critique the existing social construction of identity. To what extent can even the most ironic portrayal of masculine excess truly affect change in a society where the ideologies underlying it are seen as normative and desirable? This is a fundamental question that Conrad poses in many of his texts, and though I feel he offers a more attractive option to the imperial romantic construction of manhood in *Lord Jim*, that is not to say that this portrayal of communal masculinity subverts the entire social system or even applies to non-white male groups (although Jim's relationship with Dain may be read that way); rather it illuminates a different way of approaching his stories. While it is necessary to explore the ways adventure novels perpetuated a system of male behavior which is now rightly understood as misogynistic, racist, and hetero-normative, it is also necessary to recognize that these representations were not directly advocated by artists such as Conrad. Rather, it seems possible to read Conrad's novels as sites in which notions of masculinity are placed into dialogue with one another and actively critiqued for the incredible social and psychological damage they may be inflicting. Ultimately, it is my belief that Conrad presents competing constructions of male behavior in order to illustrate the complex relationship between identity formation and social participation. In other words, the novel may attempt to illustrate how particular constructions of gender cause people to perform in ways which may either alienate them from one another or facilitate enabling bonds and support systems. That this raises more questions than it answers seems part of the point and a hallmark of reading Conrad, but it also highlights the incredible applicability his texts continue to have to the contemporary experiences of many different audiences. We too, live in an age in which various social institutions put out competing notions of "normative" male behavior which must be negotiated and qualified according to their potential to alienate and/or unify. Privileging narratives which illustrate the necessity of male community, as Conrad does in *Lord Jim*, may provide the catalyst for a more inclusive understanding of gendered positions than more "traditional" models of individualism and aggression.

Endnotes

1. Unfortunately, this short discussion of conflicting versions of masculinity presented in *Lord Jim* does not include analysis of the depiction of women in this text for reasons of space and



- coherence. For a balanced and critically supported discussion of the construction of femininity in Conrad see Kaplan and Jones.
2. Although they have done necessary and provoking work, studies by Fernandes, Kramer, McCracken, Middleton, and Roberts have not provided a full picture of Conrad's nuanced portrayal of masculinity.
 3. Connell and Kimmel articulate the point made here in their critiques of "hegemonic masculinity" and the cultural attempt to forge consistent gender construction.
 4. The romantic portrayal of the Empire by writers such as H. Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling, and Arthur Conan Doyle has been well documented by Krebs and Miller. For a specific discussion of the gendered imperialism portrayed in the press and literature of the *fin de siècle*, see Bristow and Dryden
 5. For an understanding of the muscular Christianity promoted by Victorian notions of chivalry as it applies to Conrad, see Fernandes.
 6. See Collits, Dryden, Moore and Roberts. Bristow and Fernandes specifically discuss the link between adventure fiction and Jim's understanding of normative male behavior.
 7. See Traetner for a more in-depth approach to the existing social narratives about community circulating at the beginning of the twentieth century in England.
 8. Packer-Kinlaw notes that many sea-faring stories in the late nineteenth century center on the negotiation of homosocial male bonds, both in an enclosed physical space, such as a ship, or in the public male sphere more generally. While Melville come immediately to mind in this context, a more commercially successful and adventure-oriented author such as Robert Louis Stevenson would also apply. See Lane or Dryden's introduction for more.
 9. Yet we cannot just assume that Marlow conceives of his understanding of manhood as all that different from Jim's. In fact, Marlow dubs Jim "one of us" several times in the narrative, and it is clear that he occasionally admires Jim's orientation around honor and duty.
 10. Cole's observations here are informed by Fleishman's study.
 11. Although this study does not apply the homosocial continuum Eva Sedgwick theorizes in *Between Men*, I think that it is essential to acknowledge the homoerotic tension between Jim and several other men in this story. Marlow's "bachelor" friend who first employs Jim after the *Patna* incident has a distinct physical interest in Jim which the young man finds distasteful - he flees when the man become to confidential and familiar. Marlow makes keen observations about Jim's physical appearance and "clean, bright limbs (41). These scenes have interesting implication for this study in suggesting that homosocial (and, by extension, veiled homoerotic) bonds between men are a necessary part of communal masculinity. While work remains to be done on the theme as it specifically applies to *Lord Jim*, see Cole, Hodge, or Lane for initial discussion.

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Forged Letters, Fractured Lives: A Study of Manipulative Motherhood in *The Stationery Shop of Tehran*

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Research Article

Abstract

This paper critically examines manipulative parenting as represented through the character of Mrs. Aslan in The Stationery Shop of Tehran (2019) by Marjan Kamali. While much of the existing discourse on maladaptive parenting is grounded in Western psychological frameworks, there remains a gap within literary and cultural studies in addressing covert emotional manipulation in specific sociocultural contexts. Through a close reading of the novel, the study analyses key tactics of manipulative parenting, including guilt induction, conditional affection, emotional invalidation, emotional blackmail, and intrusiveness. It highlights how Mrs. Aslan strategically employs these mechanisms—particularly through threats of self-harm and interference in Bahman’s relationship—to assert control and undermine his autonomy. The paper demonstrates how these practices, though framed within the rhetoric of maternal sacrifice and aspiration, function to erode autonomy and enforce compliance. Ultimately, the novel foregrounds the enduring psychological impact of such manipulation, revealing how parental control can shape identity, relationships, and the capacity for independent choice across the lifespan.

Keywords: Manipulative parenting, Psychological control, Emotional blackmail, Maternal authority, Intrusiveness, *The Stationery Shop of Tehran*.

Introduction

Parenting stands as one of the most powerful environmental forces influencing a child’s emotional, cognitive, and social growth. The approaches and attitudes adopted by caregivers shape not only a child’s immediate behaviour but also leave a lasting imprint on their psychological well-being across the course of life. Among the various parenting styles such as authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful—as pointed out by Animisetty, “authoritative parenting has consistently been associated with positive psychological outcomes such as self-regulation, self-esteem, and resilience” (Animisetty 2025, 746). In contrast, maladaptive parenting styles—especially those marked by emotional manipulation and psychological control—are increasingly acknowledged as harmful to children’s mental health and identity formation. One such pattern is manipulative parenting: a subtle yet deeply damaging approach that relies on guilt, fear, conditional affection, emotional invalidation, and control to secure obedience and foster dependence. Despite a strong theoretical foundation in Western scholarship, there is a relative scarcity of research within literary and cultural studies addressing manipulative parenting in the Iranian context. Iranian psychological literature and public discourse continue to prioritize more visible forms of abuse—such as physical punishment, academic pressure, and neglect—while covert emotional abuse remains largely overlooked. This relative invisibility also results in a critical gap in literary and cultural analyses, limiting nuanced understandings of how such covert dynamics are represented, perpetuated, and internalized



within specific sociocultural contexts. Against this backdrop, my present study seeks to offer a critical reading of Marjan Kamali's novel *The Stationery Shop of Tehran*, examining how culturally normalized forms of manipulative parenting shape the psychological well-being of young adults.

The Stationery Shop of Tehran (2019), written by Iranian American novelist Marjan Kamali, is set across Tehran and the United States between 1953 and 2013. The novel traces the poignant love story of Roya and Bahman, a young Iranian couple who meet and fall in love in the 1950s at a stationery shop. Roya is raised alongside her younger sister, Zari, in a household shaped by forward-looking parents who nurture a sense of ambition in their daughters. In contrast, Bahman is raised by a mother whose temperament is marked by emotional volatility and a controlling disposition. The study aims to determine, through a close reading of the novel, whether Mrs. Aslan can be understood as a manipulative parent, and to examine how her behaviour influences both the individual directly subjected to it and those within her immediate relational sphere.

Unlike overt forms of abuse, manipulative parenting often evades recognition and critique, particularly in cultures where family hierarchies, obedience, and parental authority are deeply valued. In certain sociocultural contexts, such as among Persian communities, emotional manipulation may become woven into the moral fabric of parenting and normalized under the guise of discipline, love, and familial responsibility (Animisetty 2025, 746). Psychologically controlling parents exert pressure on children to conform to their expectations, frequently employing emotionally manipulative strategies such as inducing guilt, conditional affection, invalidating feelings, resorting to personal attacks, restricting open expression, and displaying inconsistent or erratic emotional behaviour (Choe et al. 2023, 72). Through a close reading of the novel, this study seeks to examine whether Mrs. Aslan may be characterized as a manipulative parent, particularly in light of the above-mentioned traits, and to analyse how her parenting practices shape the emotional and relational lives of those around her.

1. Inducing Guilt:

Guilt induction operates as a subtle yet powerful manipulative tactic in which parents position children as responsible for their emotional well-being. This tactic often disguises control as care, leading children to equate compliance with love and loyalty. Through this mechanism, children are compelled to regulate their behaviour in order to protect the parent's emotional equilibrium. In the long term, this can foster a lingering sense of emotional indebtedness and difficulty in establishing healthy personal boundaries. In his final letter of confession to Roya, Bahman writes the following about Mrs. Aslan:

She told me I had no idea the pain I was putting her through, how all she'd wanted was for her one son to have a life that was successful and filled with the right people in the best circles and that meant marrying Shahla [...] She had busted out of the class into which she'd been born, and now, instead of letting me marry for love, she insisted that I just keep going as if I were an athlete grabbing her baton. I would not be allowed to stop running, would not be able to turn around, as if my marriage to someone I loved would somehow negate the 'progress' she had made in fighting her fate. (Kamali 2019, 270)

Bahman's reflection on his mother's words reveals a clear pattern of guilt induction as a form of psychological control. Mrs. Aslan frames her expectations in terms of personal sacrifice and suffering, thereby shifting the emotional burden of her aspirations onto Bahman. His refusal to comply is thus not merely disobedience, but an act that appears to betray her sacrifices and undermine her life's efforts. By casting Bahman as "an athlete grabbing her baton," Mrs. Aslan denies him autonomy, positioning him instead as a vehicle for the continuation of her ambitions. His life is not his own to shape but an extension of her unfinished journey. This reinforces the



guilt-tripping dynamic: any deviation from her prescribed path—such as marrying for love—becomes laden with emotional consequences, as though it would invalidate her progress and render her sacrifices meaningless. Bahman is compelled to prioritise his mother's emotional needs over his own desires, internalising a sense of responsibility for her well-being. In the long term, this dynamic not only restricts his agency but also fosters emotional conflict, as his pursuit of personal happiness becomes inseparable from feelings of guilt and indebtedness.

2. Conditional affection

Conditional affection refers to “parents providing love and affection when children display particular behaviors or attributes and parents withholding love and affection when children do not” (Choe et al. 2023, 84). Basically, it is a pattern in which love, approval, or validation is extended to a child only when they conform to parental expectations or desired behaviours (Animisetty 2025, 749). Rather than being experienced as stable and unconditional, affection becomes contingent upon performance, obedience, or achievement. Quite pertinently does Kaur opine, “The employment of conditional love delivers another significant blow to a child's self-esteem. When a parent's affection and approval are explicitly or implicitly contingent upon the child's behavior, achievements, or compliance with the parent's desires, the child learns that their worth is not intrinsic but rather something that must be constantly earned. This fosters a deepseated fear of disappointing the parent, leading to a relentless and often anxiety-ridden pursuit of external validation” (Kaur 2025, 1083-1084). In such an environment, children learn to equate their worth with their ability to please, often suppressing their own needs and desires in order to secure approval. Mrs. Aslan's behaviour can be productively understood through the lens of conditional affection, wherein love and approval are not offered freely but are made contingent upon compliance with her expectations:

She had raised their boy; did anyone in the entire city doubt the energy and intelligence and absolute talents of her son? Was he not the sun and the stars [...] She wanted to prevent this catastrophe of a match. Her gorgeous son, who had so much to offer, who could do fabulous things with his life! Marrying some bookish, average girl who thought reading novels translated from Russian or English was something worthwhile, who was pretty but not astounding so, whose father struggled to maintain his stagnant clerkship. (Kamali 2019, 59-60)

At first glance, her admiration for Bahman—describing him as “the sun and the stars”—appears as an expression of maternal pride. However, this praise is not unconditional; rather, it is rooted in how well he embodies her aspirations of success, prestige, and upward mobility. Her valuation of him is tied less to his individuality and more to his potential to fulfil a carefully constructed ideal. Her rejection of Roya further underscores this conditionality. By dismissing Roya as “average” and socially inferior, Mrs. Aslan frames Bahman's romantic choice as a “catastrophe,” not because it threatens his happiness, but because it disrupts the trajectory, she has envisioned for him. In doing so, she implicitly communicates that her approval—and by extension, her affection—is contingent upon his adherence to her standards. Bahman is celebrated as long as he aligns with her expectations, but risks devaluation if he chooses otherwise.

3. Emotional Invalidation

Emotional invalidation refers to “the feeling that one's emotions are invalid, unreasonable, irrational, or should be concealed” (Caskey 2022, 11). Emotional invalidation involves dismissing, minimising, or undermining a child's feelings, thereby denying the legitimacy of their emotional experiences. Instead of acknowledging the child's perspective, the parent may label their emotions as exaggerated, irrational, or unworthy of attention. For Mrs Aslan, Bahman's zeal for nationalism and the Prime Minister was “useless” and she “didn't need her



boy embroiled further in useless political activism. She wanted Bahman to succeed. Join the oil company, make money” (Kamali 2019, 60). By characterising his nationalist zeal and admiration for the Prime Minister as “useless,” she reduces what is, for Bahman, a deeply meaningful engagement with identity, purpose, and collective belonging into something trivial and misguided. In doing so, she denies the legitimacy of his convictions and the emotional significance they hold for him. Her insistence that she “didn’t need her boy embroiled” in such pursuits further shifts the focus from Bahman’s aspirations to her own anxieties and expectations. Rather than engaging with his perspective, she imposes her own framework of success—economic stability, professional advancement, and financial gain—thereby invalidating alternative forms of fulfilment. The directive to “join the oil company, make money” exemplifies this substitution, where personal meaning is overridden by a narrowly defined, utilitarian vision of achievement.

Emotional invalidation, as a tactic of manipulative parenting (Choe et al. 2023, 88), serves to maintain control by discouraging open emotional expression and reinforcing the parent’s authority as the sole arbiter of what is “appropriate” to feel. Over time, children subjected to such invalidation may begin to doubt their own perceptions and internal states, leading to confusion, suppressed emotions, and difficulty in articulating their needs. In the long term, this can result in diminished self-worth, emotional insecurity, and challenges in forming healthy, communicative relationships. In his final confessional letter, Bahman states, “I was supposed to be the ‘boy who would change the world.’ But life has a way of squashing dreams, plans, ideals. In the end, I barely served my country” (Kamali 2019, 281). His statement captures the long-term psychological consequences of growing up under emotionally manipulative parenting, particularly in the forms of conditional affection and emotional invalidation. His admission that “life has a way of squashing dreams, plans, ideals” suggests not merely circumstantial disappointment but a deeper erosion of aspiration, likely intensified by the persistent dismissal and redirection of his desires. Under conditions where his nationalistic passions were invalidated, and where affection was tied to conformity, his capacity to sustain and pursue his own ideals becomes compromised. What emerges instead is a subdued, conflicted self, caught between what he once valued and what he was made to prioritise. Bahman’s concluding remark, “I barely served my country,” reveals a persistent sense of inadequacy and quiet regret. It points not only to the failure of a personal aspiration but also to the internalisation of an external standard against which Bahman continues to judge himself. This feeling of insufficiency emerges from a sustained tension between imposed expectations and repressed desires, where the inability to fully inhabit one’s own choices leads to a diminished sense of purpose and a fragile self-conception.

4. Emotional Blackmail

Madhuri Animesetty states that “this manipulative style involves using fear, obligation, or threats to control behaviour” (Animesetty 2025, 750). In this dynamic, the parent leverages the emotional bond to coerce compliance, often implying—directly or indirectly—that love, approval, or stability will be withdrawn if the child fails to conform. Discussing the effects of emotional blackmail, Susan Forward, Donna Frazier and C. Newman state that “though we may be skilled and successful in other parts of our lives, with these people we feel bewildered, powerless” (Forward et al. 1996, viii). Bahman experiences exactly this kind of bewilderment and powerlessness in front of his mother’s erratic behaviours and emotional manipulations. In his final letter to Roya, Bahman recounts how Mrs. Aslan resorted to emotional blackmailing, threatening to take her own life should he choose to marry according to his own wishes:

My mother was standing on a small stepladder. Her arms were by her sides. In her right



hand she held a large butcher's knife. My body went cold [...] In a swift move, she lifted the knife. Then she pierced her own throat [...] Gently, she stroked my head. When I looked up, drops of blood had bubbled up on her neck. (274-275)

Here, Mrs. Aslan weaponises self-harm to exert absolute psychological control over Bahman. The scene is not merely an expression of distress but a calculated act designed to instil fear, shock, and an overwhelming sense of responsibility in her son. By staging such a dramatic and violent gesture in his presence, she ensures that her suffering becomes inseparable from his choices. Her calmness while “gently” stroking his head creates a disturbing contrast with the violence of the act. This juxtaposition intensifies the manipulation — maternal tenderness is intertwined with self-destruction, making it impossible for Bahman to separate love from threat. The act of harming herself becomes a message—that his autonomy carries catastrophic consequences for her life. Bahman is not simply persuaded but psychologically cornered; any assertion of independence is rendered morally unthinkable because it is tied to the potential loss of his mother. The responsibility for her survival is implicitly transferred onto him, creating a burden that far exceeds normal filial obligation. The trauma of witnessing such an act has a deep psychological impact on Bahman:

I stood among the fallen books, among the words of artists who'd spent happy, circuitous hours writing, honing their words for years [...] I wanted to leave and not come back to that shop, to escape from the whole city, to run away and hide somewhere. I rushed out. On the pavement I heaved forward and vomited and hid my tears as best as I could from passersby. (Kamali 2019, 277)

The stationery shop, once a space of love, intellectual companionship, and emotional intimacy between Bahman and Roya, is violently transformed into a site of trauma and coercion. By choosing this very location to stage her act, Mrs. Aslan does not merely threaten Bahman—she deliberately invades and contaminates a space that embodies his autonomy, affection, and personal happiness. The shop, which once represented possibility and emotional freedom, is now overwritten by fear, shock, and moral conflict. Bahman's reaction—his urge to flee, his physical collapse, and his attempt to suppress his emotions—can thus be understood as a response not only to the act itself but also to the destruction of a meaningful emotional refuge. The violation of this shared space intensifies his sense of loss: he is not only being coerced into relinquishing Roya but is also being stripped of the symbolic space where that love was nurtured.

Mrs. Aslan's manipulative behaviour does not end here; even after relocating to a villa in the north for her supposed ‘recovery,’ she continues to subject Bahman to emotional blackmail. Bahman confesses:

That next morning, in the villa, I walked into my mother's room. I didn't even have to say a word. I didn't have to tell her that I wanted to contact you. She took one look at me and said, “You call that girl, you tell that girl where we are, you let on to any of this, and guess what, Bahman?” A smile spread across her pale face. “I'll do it again. And this time, I'll do it all the way. I promise you.” She sucked in her breath and held her hand to her neck. “Just let her go, Bahman. For me. You communicate with her and I'll do it again.” (Kamali 2019, 279)

Here Mrs. Aslan moves from a performative act of self-harm to an explicit and calculated threat of self-destruction. Unlike the earlier incident, which carried an element of shock and ambiguity, this moment is marked by clarity and deliberation. Her words— “I'll do it again. And this time, I'll do it all the way”—function as a direct ultimatum, leaving Bahman with no space for negotiation or resistance. The “smile” on her face, coupled with the gesture of holding her neck, introduces a chilling theatricality to the threat. This is not an uncontrolled emotional outburst



but a staged performance designed to maximise fear and compliance. The invocation of her previous act—now transformed into a repeatable threat—ensures that Bahman relives the earlier trauma, reinforcing his sense of helplessness. The phrase “Just let her go, Bahman. For me” encapsulates the core mechanism of emotional blackmail: the conflation of love with sacrifice. By framing his abandonment of Roya as an act done “for” her, Mrs. Aslan converts coercion into moral obligation. Compliance is presented not as submission, but as filial duty, thereby intensifying Bahman’s guilt and making resistance feel like an act of cruelty.

5. Intrusiveness

According to Choe et al., “intrusiveness [...] concerns ‘what’ parents aim to control and emphasizes that parents attempt to change their children’s minds on matters that do not warrant parental intervention” (72). It also concerns “‘how’ parents intervene in the child’s personal domain” (72). Basically, intrusiveness refers to the persistent violation of a child’s emotional, psychological, and sometimes physical boundaries under the guise of care, concern, or involvement. Such parents insert themselves excessively into the child’s thoughts, decisions, and relationships, often refusing to recognise the child as an autonomous individual with independent desires and a private inner life. This behaviour may manifest through constant monitoring, unsolicited interference in personal choices, controlling friendships or romantic relationships, and an insistence on knowing or dictating every aspect of the child’s life. In Kamali’s novel, Mrs. Aslan’s manipulation extends beyond emotional blackmail to a direct violation of personal boundaries, as she actively intrudes into Bahman’s relationship with Roya by altering and forging their letters. Through this calculated interference, she disrupts their communication, ultimately coercing Bahman into severing his relationship with Roya and marrying a partner of her choice. In his final confessional letter to Roya, Bahman writes:

I was determined to marry you, despite the threats, the illness, the hell. That’s why I wrote that last letter. She could not stop us. She could not end our happiness with the threat of suicide! I had had enough, and I had decided to escape. She was holding us hostage with her threats, and I didn’t want her to have that power over me. (Kamali 2019, 281)

Bahman’s assertion reveals a moment of heightened self-awareness, where he begins to recognise his mother’s actions as an illegitimate intrusion into his personal domain. In light of Choe’s formulation that “behavioral control or structure could be intrusive if the child believes the area that their parent intervened in (or structured) belongs to their personal domain” (74), Mrs. Aslan’s intrusiveness lies not merely in the act of control but in Bahman’s perception of it as a violation. Her threats of self-harm function as a mechanism to regulate Bahman’s behaviour in an area he believes should be governed by his own will. Marriage and romantic attachment constitute a deeply personal sphere, central to one’s identity, autonomy, and emotional fulfilment. Bahman’s determination “to marry [...] despite the threats, the illness, the hell” signals his attempt to reclaim authority over this domain.

Sensing Bahman’s growing resistance, Mrs. Aslan recalibrates her strategy of manipulation, shifting from overt emotional coercion to a more invasive form of control. Rather than relying solely on threats, she directly violates his personal boundaries by intervening in his private sphere. Her deliberate alteration and forgery of the letters exchanged between Bahman and Roya exemplify this intrusion, as she not only disrupts their communication but also asserts control over a relationship that rightfully belongs to Bahman’s personal domain. Devastated by his mother’s manipulations, Bahman writes:

She knew I waited for you at the square. She knew I was heartsick with worry over you. And when I read your last letter and told her in anger and confusion that you had said



you wanted to see no more of me [...] she laughed. She told me, “Good, I told you so, I told you that girl is no good,” and she promised to starve herself to death if I tried to reconcile with you, if I tried to get you back. (Kamali 2019, 281)

This passage brings into sharp focus the convergence of intrusiveness and emotional blackmail in Mrs. Aslan’s manipulation of Bahman. Her prior interference—altering the address in Bahman’s letter and forging Roya’s supposed rejection—creates a carefully engineered misunderstanding that severs the relationship at its most vulnerable moment. What appears to Bahman as abandonment is, in reality, the result of his mother’s deliberate intrusion into his private correspondence, thereby appropriating control over a deeply personal domain. Her reaction to his distress is particularly revealing. Instead of responding with empathy to his “heartsick” anxiety, she laughs and asserts, “I told you so,” thereby invalidating his emotional pain while simultaneously reinforcing her own narrative about Roya. This response exemplifies a dual tactic — the emotional invalidation of Bahman’s suffering and the consolidation of control through the distortion of reality. At this point, Bahman is not only misled but also trapped: the relationship has been dismantled through deceit, and any effort to restore it is foreclosed by the threat of maternal self-harm. His autonomy is thus constrained on two fronts—externally, through the falsification of communication, and internally, through the fear and guilt induced by his mother’s threats. Taken together, this moment exemplifies the extent of Mrs. Aslan’s control. She does not merely influence Bahman’s choices; she engineers his reality, dictates his emotional responses, and precludes alternative outcomes. The result is a profound psychological entrapment, where love, loss, and obligation are inextricably intertwined, leaving Bahman unable to distinguish between his own desires and the consequences imposed upon him.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a close reading of *The Stationery Shop of Tebran* reveals that Mrs. Aslan embodies a complex and deeply insidious model of manipulative parenting, one that operates through multiple, interlocking tactics rather than a single mode of control. Her behaviour encompasses guilt induction, conditional affection, emotional invalidation, emotional blackmail, and intrusive boundary violations, all of which function collectively to regulate and ultimately dominate Bahman’s emotional and personal life. The impact on Bahman is enduring and deeply internalised. His sense of self, his capacity for autonomous decision-making, and his emotional well-being are all shaped by the constant negotiation between personal desire and imposed obligation. The loss of Roya is not merely a romantic tragedy but the culmination of a prolonged process of psychological conditioning, where love, guilt, fear, and duty become inextricably intertwined. By situating Mrs. Aslan within the framework of manipulative parenting, this study underscores the need to recognise and critically examine covert forms of emotional control, particularly within cultural contexts where such behaviours may be normalised or obscured. The novel thus emerges as a compelling literary space for examining the enduring consequences of such parenting, illustrating how the gradual erosion of autonomy in childhood can echo across a lifetime, influencing identity formation, interpersonal relationships, and the ability to exercise independent choice.

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A Child's Journey: From Kabul's Dreams to Survival in Pakistan

By Mehrullah Rahmani

Autobiographical Refugee Memoir

The walls of exile echo with silence, but inside that silence, hunger, fear, and survival scream loudly. In refugee settlements across Pakistan, hunger gnaws at bellies, shelters are makeshift, and work is a privilege. For Afghan refugees, food, shelter, and dignity are not rights, but distant dreams. Before fleeing to Pakistan, I was a high school student in Kabul, my heart full of dreams and my future bright with possibility. Living with my family, we had the simple joys of life: food to eat, a home to sleep in, a yard to play in, and the freedom to move without fear. I spent my days laughing with friends, pursuing knowledge in school, and dreaming of becoming a doctor. But beneath the surface, a storm was brewing, and soon our world would be torn apart.

Everything changed in August 2021. When the Taliban took over, my father—the bedrock of our family, the one who made us feel safe and loved—lost his job as a government prosecutor. Because of his position, he was now at grave risk. Former government employees were seen as enemies, and soon we became targets. Anonymous calls began to reach us, warning us to leave or face severe consequences. The man who had always been our shelter and guide, our everything, was now powerless.

Security vanished, and fear crept in, suffocating us. Neighbors whispered of families like ours fleeing—some to Iran, others to Pakistan. Then came the moment that made our decision unavoidable: a direct message warning that our home was being watched. We knew we could not stay.

We had little time to pack. Each moment we had taken for granted—our home, our yard, our village—was slipping away. We were not just leaving a country; we were losing a life. We left with hearts heavy, carrying both fear and a fragile hope that across the border, we might find safety—and perhaps a future.

Crossing into Pakistan, I remember every detail: my foot freezing as it crossed the border, stepping into a strange world where nothing was certain. I could not have imagined how quickly everything would collapse. We arrived not with hope, but fear, confusion, and emptiness. Survival was our only goal, replacing every opportunity we had dreamed of in Afghanistan.

What we were living through was not unique. Across Pakistan, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), reports that hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees struggle to access basic necessities such as food, shelter, and healthcare. Echoing this, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) highlights that Afghan refugees often lack access to essential services, which exacerbates their vulnerability and puts them at risk of food insecurity.

We lived in a small, dark, suffocating room in Rawalpindi, seven of us crowded into one cramped space, where breathing felt heavy with fear and exhaustion. The room felt too tight, leaving us trapped, powerless, and quietly breaking inside.

Time passed only through hunger, a constant, painful ache slowly draining strength and hope. Many days we had no food, and the emptiness felt deep and unbearable.

Clean water was uncertain, something we waited for with silent worry. Without legal documents, every moment was filled with fear—arrest, being sent back, or losing this fragile shelter that was our only protection.



Life kept getting harder. My two younger brothers worked long hours in a sandal factory, their small hands worn by labor. They left early in the morning and returned exhausted, earning almost nothing—just enough to This is not just our story. Organizations such as UNICEF warn that refugee children are often forced into labor, losing access to education and the chance for a future. My brothers were living that reality every day.

My father had tried to protect me from that life for as long as he could. He believed in my education—he knew how deeply I wanted to continue my studies and become a doctor, and he held onto that dream for me even when everything else was falling apart. My younger brothers had started working first to help us survive, while my father still tried to hold onto my future—the one we were slowly losing. But hunger does not wait, and hope cannot survive on emptiness forever.

That afternoon, I was sitting quietly with my younger brother, lost in thoughts of what lay ahead. When my father opened the door, something in his face made my chest tighten. He looked at me for a moment, as if searching for the right words, then placed his hand on my right shoulder—his eyes heavy, urgent—and, in a quiet, gentle voice, hesitantly asked me to go outside and find work. That moment changed everything. It was the moment I felt my childhood slip away. I stepped into a world where survival was no longer a choice, but a duty I walked those streets afraid and silent, each step heavier than the last. as if I were carrying more than just my own weight.

The heat was unbearable, and everything felt unfamiliar. For hours, I worked beside my brothers, my body weak, my mind numb. That day felt endless. I watched time crawl forward, pain spreading through my body in ways I could not explain. When I returned home empty-handed, reality crushed me—no food, no money, no hope.

That night, when my father saw my pale, exhausted face, he sighed deeply and decided I should not go out like that again. For weeks, we lived in uncertainty, sometimes surviving on a single meal a day, holding on to the last fragile pieces of hope we had left.

Then, unexpectedly, something changed. Early that morning, as the sun rose, I was still asleep, deep in dreams of food or work. My father's phone sat on the shelf; a ray of sunlight hit it, and it rang, waking me. When he picked it up, he was called to a meeting by the IOM, an organization supporting Afghan refugees. I watched him leave quickly that early morning, carrying a fragile sense of hope.

I lay on the floor, covered by a thin blanket, wondering if anything would ever change. When he returned, I lifted my head, my eyes fixed on his hands—small bags of rice, oil, and beans—but more than that, he carried hope that I had been waiting for since I left Afghanistan. He set them down on the floor and knelt beside me, gently resting his hand on my forehead, and spoke softly: "My son, there may be an opportunity for you at a pharmacy, because of your abilities."

In that instant, something inside me broke open. I exhaled and tears welled in my eyes. After such darkness, even a small light was overwhelming. I stood, kissed his hand, and stepped outside, unable to believe what I had just heard. For the first time since fleeing Afghanistan, in a long while, I felt something I had almost forgotten: hope.

What we were living through was not unique. Across Pakistan, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that Afghan refugee children in Pakistan are deprived of essential services such as food, clean water, shelter, and protection. The IOM reports that since 2023, hundreds of thousands of Afghans have been forced to return, pushing already vulnerable families deeper into poverty. Meanwhile, Human Rights Watch emphasizes that many refugees live under constant fear of arrest, with limited access to work, housing, and basic safety.



I did not need reports to understand this reality—I was living it. My brothers worked long hours just to delay hunger. We waited for clean water with quiet fear. Some days, even a single meal felt uncertain. As researchers such as Edris Ahadi have observed, Afghan refugee communities face long-term deprivation, where survival becomes the only priority and basic human rights remain out of reach. Behind every statistic is a real story—like mine: a child forced into labor, a family struggling for food, a household surviving on one meal a day. A future shaped not by choice, but by necessity.

As Khaled Hosseini, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Goodwill Ambassador, once wrote: “It always strikes me how fragile a childhood can be, especially when basic rights—food, shelter, freedom—become luxuries beyond reach.”

Afghan refugees are not asking for sympathy; they are asking for dignity. They are asking for protection, for human rights. We do not wait for charity; we wait for justice —so that no child has to trade education for survival again.

And even in exile, even in silence, sometimes it only takes one voice to remind us: our future is not over—and no child’s dream should be lost to survival.

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