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Editor's Note

That from the focal theme of 'Race' in 2023, Singularities Conference theme has moved to 'Fantasy' in its 2024 edition is interesting. As we have been experiencing the debilitating and disturbing dimensions of the cocktail of the real and the fantastic when it came to the question of race of late, the progression of focus from Race to Fantasy may sound logical. Fantasising has been key to creative writing ever since literature evolved. From pure story telling (is there something like that?), the genres, its tributaries and offshoots have grown placing varying emphasis on the use of fantasy element. This conference issue of the journal carries a selection of articles which are presented in the conference which is being held from 9 to 11 January 2024 at the Department of English, University of Calicut. Categories like Elizabethan, Existential and Magical realist have employed elements of the fantastic in their writings and Smitha Susan Varghese makes a predatory exploration of the same in her writing. Kafkaesque, Borhesian and Shakespearean crafts' take on the fantastic vary from subtle to pronounced, putting the fantasy element to the service of the world view they pronounce. Zeroing on the element of 'strange', Susan offers an 'oriental' reading of their selected texts.

The New Media has usurped locational sovereignty engendering critical evaluations of the power they hold and problems they bring to being. Afeeda's analysis of select episodes of Fresh & Fit Podcast argues how such content operates on concepts such as hegemonic masculinity, contributing to a reiteration of the 'feminine mystique'. The author's investigation juxtaposes this analysis with digital content creators who offer alternative perspectives, firing warning shots of the power 'manospheres' hold and the scenario it can lead to. Recent Netflix productions rework the supernatural figures from historic genres of gothic comedy, and present them in auras of dark fantasy, with a grittier violence, and simultaneously a strong emphasis on racial and gender diversity. As Netflix's algorithm allows suggestion of content specifically catered to the viewers' interests, it leads to renewed interest in teen series and repeated viewings. Sara Garcia Cespedes and Aneesh Barai argue how these series rebrand the feminist gothic narratives, helping girls and young women question oppressive systems, implicitly

rejecting earlier forms of their own stories by expanding on issues of representation and inequality.

The capability of mythologies in imparting moral education leading to virtuous living has been discussed for long. 'Along with the Gods: The Two Worlds', a 2017 South Korean fantasy action film is taken up for analysis by Ardra Das and Abhisha K to show how the movie encourages reflection on decisions and actions, reminding that one's choices have lasting effects not only on themselves but also on those around them. Athira. S and Gloria Richard probe the 'Prism of Mimetic Desire' by David Malouf in their article which works on the text 'Remembering Babylon', exploring how the main protagonist of the novel is torn between his indigenous and non-indigenous identity in line with Homi Bhabha's notion of colonial mimicry.

Science Fiction has long been a terrain which employed the fantastic with futuristic, science-centred otherness. Ours is an age of digital capitalism and the bite-sized digital tentacles of the Digital Haves are accelerating the economic divide. Dr. Sambhu discusses, through Neo-Marxian analysis of Noah Hutton's low-key SF dystopian flick *Lapsis* (2020), how the film short-circuits the possibility of a socialist utopia attained through a "cognitarian" revolution by invoking the naiveté implicit in visualising technology as the Other that can be brought under human control.

Dr. Sithara reads three texts of fiction, illustrating the manner in which characters resort to fantasising as a mode of resistance while caught in oppressive, life-denying systems. Religious rituals which are reflective and reflexive of the culture, can be fluid and multi-vocal. In the current issue of the Journal, Soumya. N. G. subjects 'Muthappankalam' to critical analysis and examines the role that the performance of muthappankalam plays in the history-making process of the community concerned. The evocative fantasy in Stephen King's 'the Eyes of the Dragon' is studied by Sridheepika V. S and Dr. Tamilmani K. T in which the narrative, characterisation and literary devices are subjected to analysis to underscore the power of Fantasy.

P. K. Babu., Ph. D
Chief Editor

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'The Strange' : The Fantastical Other

Abstract

Fantasy arises from man's impulse to envision, create and experience the extraordinary. It presents not that which is, but that which could be imagined to be. By defamiliarizing what is considered familiar, fantasy holds undeniable potential to inspire new and alternate conditions of being. Rather than being a limitation, the perceived ontological distance between the fantastical and the real contributes to a productive sense of displacement. Foregoing any claim to reality, fantasy exists outside of its restrictions and suppressions.

Fantasy reimagines the self, the other and the world and weaves a unique existential fabric through their interrelations. This paper looks at how representations and descriptions of 'the strange' within fantasy complicate these relations. For the reader, an encounter with 'the strange' wouldn't just be an encounter with the 'not-me' but with the 'unlike-me'. Exploring these encounters as sites of disengagement and reengagement with sedimented notions of the self, the paper presents the challenges posed by fantasy to man's instinct of security regarding his reality and its inevitability.

In other words, 'the strange' within and beyond the world of fantasy appears to interrupt an otherwise unfractured and natural way of being in the world. By thus complicating the standards of normalcy, 'the strange' provokes a larger inquiry into whether any form of existence, even the most ordinary, can escape being inherently disruptive. Moreover, by easily lending itself as an allegory, 'the strange' through its representations and descriptions within fantasies simultaneously contributes to and undermines essentializing perspectives.

In considering classic examples of 'the strange' such as the ghost, the creature, and the monster, the paper offers an oriented reading of Shakespeare's Hamlet, Kafka's Metamorphosis and Borges' House of Asterion. In all three texts, 'the strange' is present and perceived in varying degrees and to various ends. "Metamorphosis" poses the question of liminality and of strangeness as a lapse between unities, with a before and an after. "The House of Asterion" presents the possibility of an autonomous, self-determined and coherent self even within strange forms, and Shakespeare's Hamlet utilizes the transgressive license and potential ascribed to the unnatural. The paper's engagement with these texts and these themes will be set in the philosophical context of phenomenology, in a critical relation to the narrative of lack, lapse, and derivative identity that is often assumed about 'the strange'.

Keywords: Fantasy, representation, strangeness, self, other

Fantasy arises from man's impulse to envision, create and experience the extraordinary. It presents not that which is, but that which could be imagined to be. By defamiliarizing what is considered familiar, fantasy holds undeniable potential to inspire new and alternate conditions of being. Foregoing any claim to reality, fantasy exists outside of its restrictions and suppressions. Rather than being a limitation, the perceived ontological distance between the fantastical and the real contributes to a productive sense of displacement.

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In considering classic examples of 'the strange' such as the creature, the monster and the ghost, the paper offers an oriented reading of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Borges' "The House of Asterion" and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In all three texts, 'the strange' is present and perceived in varying degrees and to various ends. *The Metamorphosis* poses the question of liminality and of strangeness as a lapse between unities, with a before and an after. "The House of Asterion" presents the possibility of an autonomous, self-determined and coherent self even within strange forms, and the ghost in *Hamlet* utilises the transgressive licence and potential ascribed to the unnatural. However, before we attempt to address the particular implications of 'the strange' within these texts, it is important to engage with certain ethical and philosophical concerns that the category itself presents.

What It Means To Be Strange

"Esse est percipi" or "to be is to be perceived" is a phrase famously used by the philosopher, George Berkeley. As an understanding of ontology, it has much to contribute to a discussion of 'the strange'. The notion of being as an effect of perception lends itself to a particular understanding of existence. Following Berkeley's thought, to exist then would be to exist in the perception of another, an inference that has particular value within religious philosophy, wherein God is given the position and function of an all-

constituting perceiver. The premise of the thought, therefore, rests on the assumed presence of an absolute consciousness, which has the power to survey this world and man from up above. Within such an all-encompassing perception, Berkeley proclaims, existence comes into being.

Even in the absence of such a metaphysical assumption, the assertion of "esse est percipi" holds relevance. In the absence of what Merleau-Ponty calls the *kosmotheoros* or the sovereign gaze, the world presents itself as an intentional object, not to God but to each individual. To exist within the perception of fellow human beings is fundamentally different from existing within the perception of an omniscient being. Here, the perceiver too is subject to the perception of the other whom he perceives. The world, therefore, always comes with the possibility of the other. Hence, it might be useful to modify Berkeley's original statement from "to be is to be perceived" to "to be is to be in relation". 'The strange' in this sense does not exist in isolation but is constituted through its relations.

When understood in terms of the phenomenological conception, existence is ontologically relational in nature, and the ethics of such a relation warrants great importance. With the world available to each individual to experience and interpret, difference is present at the level of the individual. How one chooses to relate with such difference is a question of intention. In other words, perception not only characterises the seen but also implicates the one who sees. "Strange" as an adjective, therefore, signifies at multiple levels.

One can choose to treat the other as an object to be known or as a subject with their own experience of the world. When treated as an object of knowledge, the other is robbed of its subject position and is reduced to a concept, a 'whatness' that denies the living 'thatness' of their particular existence. Recognition of the reductiveness of such an approach underlies the work of psychiatrist R.D. Laing, whose method of practice and extensive writings on mental health sought to radically re-conceptualise the field of psychiatry. Laing's subject of concern is mental illness, a type of "difference" that is seen as diagnosable but not understandable. His observations, however, carry value beyond his field and are relevant to any difference that is considered too different to be understandable, that is, to anything that is considered not just different but strange.

Conventional approaches to such differences essentialize them as concepts, marked by their deviation from what is considered the normal. Such methods fail to understand the existential experience of difference. Labels, be they of a disorder, race, gender or any other collective identity, are prone to neglect the distinct experiential world within which an individual exists. Offering an alternate approach, Laing in *The Divided Self* attempts to demonstrate how even the most unrecognisable of differences can be understood existentially and phenomenologically, that is, by acknowledging a person's experience of herself and the world. Difference, in other words, can be understood by considering the unique existential position from which each individual relates to and interprets the world.

The self is constituted within its distinct and plural relations with the world, and these relations form the context of being. A particular form of being, therefore, cannot be abstracted from the *lebenswelt* within which it is experienced. An other's existential position then cannot be assumed to be derivative. Rather, difference in its distinctiveness ought to be recognized for its possibility as one of the many forms of being in the world.

Each particular comes with its own frame of reference and cannot be understood through another's. The other, Laing asserts, exists as a "form of unity that is specifically personal", a unity created in a particular relation to the world (23). Understanding difference thus requires plasticity, a capacity to orient oneself to another's world and to see the other as a subject in their own terms and not as an object in ours.

Though Laing advocates for such a reorientation, the language he uses and the categories he constructs betray a limited understanding of difference. For instance, the schizophrenics, according to Laing, suffer from a "rent" in their relation to the world and a "disruption" in their relation with themselves (17). Their experiences do not correspond to reality and rationality, and therefore, he claims that they are "ontologically insecure" (39) and are unable to experience themselves as "real, alive and whole" (39).

Though Laing's observations are specifically concerned with a form of mental illness, they exhibit the failing of any method that approaches the other as an object in an external field of reference. It is only from an assumed position of ontological security that the different seem ontologically insecure. Difference is then regarded as synonymous with defect. The different are found to be lacking and incomplete, with a rent or a disruption that separates them from the ideal. The ontologically different, thus, become the ontologically insecure. The different becomes the strange.

Laing further claims that the "reciprocal recognition of identity", which is taken for granted between ontologically secure individuals, fails to occur with the ontologically insecure (35). This failure to be recognized and approved by the normal is then proof enough of the abnormality of the other. When the identity that the other claims for himself does not correspond with what Laing calls the "unquestionable, self-validating certainties" (39) of reality and rationality, the other is found to demonstrate a "low threshold of ontological security" (42). In other words, the other is unrecognisable and, therefore, assumed to be anomalous.

However, the other's lack of correspondence with the way in which we inhabit the world does not signify a lack of internal coherence or integrity. Such an inference stems from the assumption that there is one ideal form of being in the world, which we claim for ourselves. The ethical impulse, however, would be to acknowledge even the unrecognisable difference as a legitimate form of existence. Though ontologically different, the other retains its own form of unity. An ethical relation with the other can only arise from accepting the coherence of this specific and personal form of unity, even when that coherence is unfamiliar to us.

Cohesiveness of the other is to be understood in terms of their existence within their world. When removed from their world and placed in ours, the other will inevitably be found lacking in terms of what we understand as normal and rational. A derivative identity is thus constructed for the other, and terms like “ontologically insecure” and other such adjectives of deficiency are attributed as features of being different.

It is clear then that it is intention that drives the interpretation of the other. The intention to meet difference in its own form of existence comes with the willingness to yield one's frame of understanding in order to understand the possibility of another. The interpretation of the other that emerges from such an intention would be wholly different from the interpretation that sees the other as derivative and deficient.

This detailed discussion on the ontology of 'the strange' was meant to demonstrate the assumptions that representations of the unrecognizably different within fantasy address and challenge. Intention practised as interpretation characterises the process of reading a literary text. In literature, especially in fantasy, one finds possibilities of existence, worlds different from the one that I, as a reader, inhabit, and experiences of the world that I do not experience myself. Therefore, being itself is defamiliarized in literature. How the difference is then read depends on the intention with which it is read. The reading of a text implicates the reader.

A particular intention, therefore, is what prompts Laing's reading of literature as a demonstration of the categories of the ontologically secure and the ontologically insecure. In Kafka, he claims to find characters who have been “stripped of all that is becoming to a man” (40) and who lack a “strong sense of personal identity” (40). Life as experienced by the complete and secure man is thus distinguished from the life as experienced by the ontologically insecure. In the absence of the assurances of what Laing called the “unquestionable, self- validating certainties” (39), the latter is “life, without feeling alive” (40). Thus, a form of being by virtue of being different is excluded from the possibilities of legitimate existence. However, our understanding of difference as a valid form of being warrants a reading of Kafka against the one offered by Laing.

The Creature In *The Metamorphosis*

The novella *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka presents itself as the most appropriate candidate for such a reading. It tells the story of Gregor Samsa, who wakes one morning to find himself inexplicably transformed into a creature. According to Laing, Gregor is an example of a character stripped of his beingness. Whether this is indeed the case will have to be discovered through our own reading of the text.

“As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed to a gigantic insect” (Kafka 89), thus the story begins by introducing a strange state of being in the world. From there, the reader is presented with both Gregor's experience of himself and others' experience of him. As Gregor's difference reveals itself in degrees, the reactions from others around him grow extreme and hostile.

To his family, Gregor in his strange form is terrifying and unrecognisable. In his state of difference, he is, for them, an animal that has usurped the position of a beloved son and brother. Their reactions to him stem from this perception. His sister, the only family member who ventures into the room to which he is banished, acts as if she were in the presence of an “invalid or even a stranger” (Kafka 107). The bowls he eats from are not touched by her bare hand but with a rag. In spite of her efforts, she finds his appearance “repulsive” (Kafka 113) and struggles to “to stay in his presence without opening a window” (Kafka 113). The family’s concern for what once used to be Gregor is complicated by their disgust for his new form. Their strained tolerance is merely a fulfilment of “family duty” that “required the suppression of disgust and the exercise of patience” (Kafka 122). Incapable of understanding his strangeness, they attempt to withstand it and fail at that as well.

In his strangeness, Gregor not only loses a recognizable form but also a recognizable existence. He ceases to be Gregor for his family not just in his appearance but in his being as well. His speech comes out in an animal’s voice, so they proceed to treat him as one, responding to his efforts to communicate with fear and violence. Gregor and his intentions, therefore, become incomprehensible to his family. (“No entreaty of Gregor’s availed, indeed no entreaty was even understood, however humbly he bent his head, his father only stomped on the floor the more loudly” (Kafka 103)).

The family’s inability to comprehend him leads them to believe that he is, in turn, incapable of comprehension. (“For since what he said was not understood by the others it never struck any of them, not even his sister, that he could understand what they said” (Kafka 109)) For them, a being capable of comprehension does not and cannot exist in a form so different from their own. The possibility of a meaningful existence is thus denied for ‘the strange’ because of its unrecognizability, and strangeness is understood in terms of an incapacity to form relations. It is this phenomenon that Laing refers to as the failure of reciprocal recognition of identity. However, this failure arises more out of assumptions about the other than from some inherent lack in the other.

How does Gregor experience his self? Does he not continue to exist as himself within the strangeness of his new body? Or does he exist as a grotesque deformation of his former self, as a conspicuous absence of the unity that he once possessed? Within the perception of others around him, Gregor is deprived of beingness itself. However, for the reader who is privy to Gregor’s thoughts and experiences throughout the story, it ought to be clear that his difference does not deprive him of a coherent and secure sense of self. Rather than an absence of beingness, Gregor presents an alternate form of being.

Gregor is not displaced within the difference, nor does his strangeness erase the concern and love that he has for his family. Gregor feels “shame and grief” for the hardships faced by his family (Kafka 112) and is so moved by the music that his sister plays that he wonders, “Was he an animal that music had such an effect on him?” (Kafka

130). Experience as a conscious and feeling self, therefore, is not a property exclusive to a particular form of 'valid' existence but is shown to be possible even within strange forms.

However, Gregor's state of being, his strangeness, is treated by his family as a lapse between unities, a lapse in being itself. His mother, therefore, hopes for a return and says, "I think it would be best if we tried to keep his room exactly as it has always been, so that when he comes back to us he will find everything unchanged and be able all the more easily to forget what has happened in between." (Kafka 116). Difference, therefore, is not recognized as a stable state of being. Rather, it is considered a state of absence. Self is thought to be suspended for the strange, and Gregor is not understood as who he experiences himself to be but is limited to who he once was for the family, who he could one day return to be.

"You must try to get rid of the idea that this is Gregor" (Kafka 134), offers the sister as a solution to the family's plight. Unable to reconcile the Gregor she knew with the strangeness that she was now confronted with, she forsakes him. ("I will not utter my brother's name in front of this creature" (Kafka 133)). The family's inability to consider the possibility of a different form of existence limits their ability to understand Gregor and leaves them with something unnatural in his place, an 'it'. "If only he could understand us" (Kafka 133), laments the father at the end of the story, without realising that Gregor could indeed understand them in spite of his strangeness.

The tragedy of *The Metamorphosis*, therefore, lies not in Gregor's loss of self or ontological security, as claimed by Laing, but in the family's failure to recognize the ontologically different. Difference, therefore, cannot be equated with ontological insecurity. Instead, difference implies that there are plural ways of being. Being does not have to depend on "unquestionable self-validating certainties" and can lie outside of them. In fact, literature, especially fantasy, by presenting multiple possibilities of existence, questions such seemingly unquestionable certainties.

The Monster in "The House of Asterion"

Borges' story, "The House of Asterion", is another example that presents 'the strange' as an autonomous being capable of self-determination. Though based on the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, the story deviates from the original by presenting Asterion, the Minotaur, as the protagonist. The story is told entirely from the perspective of Asterion, except for the last paragraph of the story, where Theseus is introduced by way of a third-person narrator. Through the shift in perspective, the story demonstrates that the world, the self, and the other seem different and hold different meanings when seen from different existential positions.

In "The House of Asterion", the themes of isolation, connection, freedom, and confinement are explored. In Asterion, the Minotaur, these experiences aren't contradictory but portray the unique configuration of a particular existence. By

presenting such a complex and layered experience of existence, the story challenges the reductive mould to which the strange is often confined to.

Within the first-person narrative of “The House of Asterion”, what is presented in the story is the I’s experience of the world and the I’s interpretation of the self. By giving voice to the monster, the story complicates the relatability that is often expected to follow when the first-person voice is used. The reader is not allowed to claim the subject position for herself but is consciously displaced and urged to acknowledge a distinct perspective. The strangeness of the I in the story facilitates this process.

The others “accuse” and create “falsehoods”, says Asterion (Borges 129). What is then true for Asterion is what he himself experiences as the truth. Consider Asterion’s account of an encounter with human beings: “One afternoon I did step into the street; If I returned before night, I did because of the fear that the faces of the common people inspired in me, faces as discoloured and flat as the palm of one’s hand” (Borges 129).

These lines question the fixity of the category of ‘the strange’. In other words, ‘the strange’ is revealed to be a malleable adjective rather than a definitive quality. What qualifies as strange depends on the one that perceives. The ‘truth’ of such a valuation is relative and does not indicate an essence. Instead, characterizations of the other follow from convictions that one holds about oneself.

Asterion views the humans in relation to what he knows and believes about himself. Seen through this lens, Asterion describes the people’s reaction to him:

The helpless crying of a child and the rude supplications of the faithful told me that I had been recognized. The people prayed, fled, prostrated themselves; some climbed onto the stylobate of the temple of the axes, others gathered stones. One of them, I believe, hid himself beneath the sea. (Borges 129)

Asterion has his own interpretation of why his presence elicits such mayhem and explains it thus: “Not for nothing was my mother a queen; I cannot be confused with the populace...the fact is that I am unique” (Borges 129). It is thus made clear that Asterion does not recognize himself as frightful or strange. In fact, what is strange for him is the frightfulness of the “discoloured and flat faces” that the humans possess. The story thus does not aim to present the truth *about* him but is more interested in showing what is true *to* him. In doing so, the story demonstrates how his truth is formed on the basis of his experiences and on the basis of how the world presents itself to him.

The story ends with a shift in perspective. It shifts from first-person narration to third-person narration. The final line, by presenting the perspective of Theseus, offers the outsider’s viewpoint: “Would you believe it, Ariadne?” said Theseus. “The Minotaur scarcely defended himself” (Borges 131). Here, Asterion stops talking and is instead

talked about, and we are presented with a different truth, one in which Asterion is the Minotaur and nothing more.

The story is thus effective in showing that the truth that is often used as a standard for comparison, for valuation, for naming and for judgement is the truth of a subject. It cannot escape the subjectivity of its speaker. This condition does not invalidate it but merely situates it as one among many. The people see Asterion as the Minotaur, the monster. However, by offering the reader Asterion's truth, the story displaces the people's truth from its status as the only possible truth. In doing so, the story presents the strange with agency that allows it to not merely be an object of perception but to be a subject that perceives. It poses the question of what the strange sees when it looks back at that which classifies it as strange. By placing the reader, along with Theseus and the humans in the story, as an object to be observed and characterised by the monster, Borges complicates categories and their seemingly fixed nature.

The Ghost in *Hamlet*

Yet another way in which the strange is utilised to disrupt what appears to be true can be seen in Shakespeare's usage of the ghost in *Hamlet*. Though the play is set in the real world, Shakespeare incorporates the fantastical element of the ghost in order to question the reality that is presented. In *Hamlet* and in other Shakespearean plays, the unnatural often acts as a foil or as a catalyst, motivating actions that transform the real. In the case of *Hamlet*, the ghost is introduced in the exposition itself and provokes the actions that drive the rest of the plot.

Hamlet, written by Shakespeare around 1600, has to be read against the background of Elizabethan England and the prevalent Christian ethos of the time. Though the play is set in Denmark, Shakespeare's characters are guided by the convictions and moral standards of 16th-century England. The structure of feeling of the period was strongly influenced by the Christian belief system, and it is crucial to acknowledge this context in order to fully understand the foreboding significance that the apparition held for the Christian characters and for Shakespeare's audience.

The appearance of a person after his or her death is in direct contradiction to the dictates of Christian belief and hence cannot imply anything but the ominous. Here, the ghost is that of the dead king, which makes matters all the more complex and perilous. The fear that the ghost evokes in the characters is quickly followed by dread concerning what its appearance implies for the systems in place as is evident in Horatio's line, "the apparition bodes some strange eruption to our state" (Shakespeare 1.1.65-70) The presence of the unnatural questions and threatens the natural and leads both the characters and the audience to look upon the apparition as a portent:

As harbingers preceding still the fates
And prologue to the omen coming on,

Have heaven and earth together demonstrated

Unto our climatures and countrymen (Shakespeare 1.1.120-125)

The strangeness of the ghost also evokes the theme of appearance versus reality, characteristic of Shakespearean plays and the Renaissance era. The ghost has no place in reality, yet its presence proves itself to be undeniable to even the most cynical of characters. Its very presence, even when silent, is a provocation that raises questions regarding the authenticity of what appears to be real.

Moreover, the strangeness of the ghost attributes it with the unique potential to act as a catalyst for action. The divine right of kings, upheld by the society both within and outside the play, asserts that the monarch is ordained directly by God and is, therefore, not subject to any earthly authority. Set in this context, Hamlet's reasons to seek retribution against the king would not have been justifiable, and any action in this direction would have been judged as a crime against both the State and God. However, with the appearance of the ghost, such systems are toppled, and Hamlet is "prompted to revenge by heaven and hell" (Shakespeare 2.2. 545- 550) and not simply by his own vulnerable convictions. The tragedy of the play lies in Hamlet's inability to act in spite of this injunction.

The strange, therefore, allows for action that otherwise would not have been permissible. "Unquestionable certainties" are questioned by the appearance of that which is unnatural. Such a challenge provokes questions regarding ethics, duty and morality. By presenting Hamlet as a character condemned to navigate these questions, the play realises its tragic potential.

To conclude, our readings of the three texts demonstrate the way in which 'the strange' in literature acts as a fantastical other that has the potential to question established perceptions of the self and the world. As a transgression against the normal, 'the strange' is potent both as a literary tool and as a social allegory. In presenting 'the strange', fantasy offers itself as a site of productive provocations that engage the intentionality and imagination of characters both within and outside of the text.

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Feeding into the Fantasy: A Study on a Manosphere Podcast and the Reiteration of the Feminine Mystique

Abstract

The rise of new media saw with it a surge in 'manosphere' content aimed at young and disenfranchised men. An offshoot of the online manosphere subculture is the 'Alpha male' content, commonly in the form of podcasts, that gained notoriety among its demographic and the rest of the online world for its misogynistic overtones. This study seeks to conduct a qualitative analysis on select episodes of a video podcast known as Fresh&Fit Podcast and aims to explore how such content operates on concepts such as 'hegemonic masculinity' and contributes to a reiteration of the 'feminine mystique'. Additionally, this paper focuses on how such content perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes and fantastic claims that impact and influence its audience. It also investigates the effect such fictitious claims can have over the primary audience and their conception of reality through the 'social comparison theory' conceptualized by Leon Festinger and the theory of 'narrative transportation', introduced by Richard Gerrig. Furthermore, this paper endeavours to juxtapose this analysis with digital content creators who offer alternative perspectives, thus contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the diverse impacts of digital media.

Keywords: Manosphere, alpha male podcast, Alpha, hegemonic masculinity, feminine mystique

Introduction

With the rise of new forms of digital media, like video and audio podcasts, there is a surge of 'manosphere' content directed at the young impressionable men. The manosphere is a collection of many sub communities, that largely operate online, where the common denominator is online misogyny and a brand of male supremacism. A recent addition to the manosphere is the alpha male podcasts, which rose to the forefront and popular discourse due to influencers like Andrew Tate, who managed to garner a large following of primarily young men. These male influencers teach their demographic harmful stereotypes regarding men and women that negatively impacts their worldview.

This study seeks to conduct a qualitative analysis of select videos of such an alpha male podcast called *FreshandFit*, with an aim of exploring its misogynistic overtones, how the concept of hegemonic masculinity figures in such podcasts, and to discern its contribution to a reiteration of the feminine mystique, a term used by Betty Friedan to

denote the mythical construct of patriarchy about women. Additionally, this paper lends its focus to assessing how such content perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes and fantastic claims influence and impact its consumers. It examines how the boundary of reality and fantasy functions, and investigates the effects the alpha male content can have over the audience through certain theories of social and media psychology. By using the theory of narrative transportation introduced by Richard Gerrig and the social comparison theory conceptualized by Leon Festinger, this paper seeks to understand quasi-factual acceptance gained by these content. Furthermore, this paper endeavours to juxtapose this analysis with digital content creators who offer alternative perspectives, thus contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the diverse impacts of digital media.

Background

Defined as a "loose collection of websites, blogs, forums and YouTube channels, published and/or consumed by its participants", the 'manosphere' is an umbrella term to accommodate various digital platforms that have been popularized recently, through platforms that host shorter video formats such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube (Lilly 39). Origins of what is currently known as the manosphere are traced back to the men's liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which has since spawned numerous subcultures, that largely operate online, such as Men's rights activists (MRAs), Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), Pick Up Artists (PUAs) and Involuntary Celibates, commonly known as incels. The central ideology of the manosphere is the Red Pill concept, borrowed from the film *The Matrix* (1999), in which the protagonist Neo is given the choice of taking the blue or the red pill; the blue pill enables the person to live a life of delusion, while the red pill provides insight into the harsh realities of life. The Red Pill ideology, peddled by the manosphere influencers, claims to enlighten the consciousness of men to the societal brainwashing and feminist misogyny that is undermining the existence of men (Ging 3).

With the rise of new forms of digital media, such as podcasts, manosphere content has become far widespread and found a new niche as the 'alpha male podcast' subculture. The concept of alpha and beta males as used by these influencers are pseudoscientific terms, used largely in the context of fields like primatology to refer to the social structures and hierarchies of certain species of animals, with a dominant animal or the 'alpha' on top of the hierarchy, with the betas subordinate to the alpha, popularized in the 1960s after the publication of L. David Mech's *The Wolf: Ecology and Behavior of an Endangered Species*, in which he studies the behaviour among wolves. The terms, revised and disproven by Mech himself in 1970s, were later taken in by evolutionary psychologists and later by Pick Up Artists, a part of the manosphere, to refer to men who are at the top of the social status hierarchy as 'alpha males and others as betas, but remains disproven whether they apply to human societies at large (Burnett 2016; Makoy 2023). While the

strong dominant alphas are men with increased access to power, financial gain and a wider selection of mates the betas are men who are weak, subordinate and with a fewer chance of acquiring mates, as the popular narrative regarding them goes (Kaufman 2015).

Related works

Since its inception, significant research and studies have been conducted surrounding the manosphere communities. Lilly (2016) offers an extensive study of the manosphere and its subcultures, how traditional gender constructs and discourses are reproduced and how feminism is represented as oppressive in their rhetoric. Bujalka et al. (2022) presents a new approach to the Manosphere, by identifying and studying how content creators in these online communities, in the form of an "online protection racket", financially exploits their consumer base cyclically; by constructing a threat and providing a solution for it. Bachaud and Johns (2023) study the misappropriation of evolutionary psychology in the manosphere, using a qualitative analysis of a an extensive dataset, ranging from Reddit posts, forum threads, e- books, to YouTube videos. They observe the misuse of evolutionary hypotheses, such as the 'dual mating strategy' in the manosphere rhetoric, to support their misogynistic views. Studies have also shown how the manosphere have evolved across the interweb and the formation of newer communities, linked to each other and often sharing a large number of consumers, and how their anti-feministic and misogynistic rhetoric relates to the violence on female users online and how hegemonic masculinity figures in such platforms(Ging 2017; Ribiero et al. 2021; Vallerga and Zurbiggen 2022).

Previous research has focused on communities like incels and the rise of online misogyny, especially in online platforms such as Reddit (Farrell et al. 2019) and Twitter (Hopton and Langer 2021), but a considerable gap of academic research exists in the case of alpha male podcasts. A study shows that alpha male podcasts ferociously target an audience of young men and utilizes concepts such as hegemonic masculinity to perpetuate harmful notions regarding men and women to these impressionable men (Marsales 2023). This paper aims to situate itself among the body of research done regarding the manosphere and to contribute to the significant lack of research pertaining alpha male podcasts, in particular. Moreover, it endeavours to include elements of social and media psychology, bringing an interdisciplinary approach to the study of alpha male podcasts, and manosphere as a whole.

Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative method of analysis that utilizes a sample for analysis consisting of video clippings of podcast episodes taken from the YouTube channel of *FreshandFit* Podcast. With the transcripts of the video clips a textual analysis is conducted, whereby the key arguments of the podcast id identified. A comparative analysis with Betty Friedan's concept of Feminine Mystique is conducted in the study to

explain how such podcasts engage in the reiteration of fictitious, sexist rhetoric, along with traditional gender roles. It strictly focuses on the misogynistic ideas perpetuated by such alpha male podcasts and attempts to theoretically approach the popularity and acceptance gained by such platforms propagating unfounded notions. To understand the reason of their foothold on different platforms along the interweb and social media, this study employs the theory of narrative transportation and social comparison theory, thereby facilitating an approach into the understanding of such content from the angle of social and media psychology.

Fresh and Fit Podcast

Fresh and Fit Podcast, a North American podcast platform founded by Myron Gaines (Fit) and Walter Weekes (Fresh) in October 2020, has since gained footing on multiple social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Spotify, among others. The description to their YouTube channel, which boasts about 1.54 million subscribers, claims to be "the #1 men's self improvement podcast in the WORLD!", which "provide the TRUTH to men on females, finances and fitness". They primarily concentrate on dating or relationship advices, fitness programs and their content has received much criticism for its misogynistic arguments, leading to YouTube demonetizing their videos on August, 2023 (Saanvi 2023). This paper focuses on remarks made by one of the podcast hosts, Myron Gaines, who displays a more aggressive tone than Weekes.

The misogynistic rhetoric pushed by this platform is similar to what has been circulating in the manosphere, such as how women manipulate men to satisfy their own sexual needs (Vallerga and Zurbiggen 2022). They believe in a gynocentric world order, where women's "lives are easier" and men lead harder lives as they have to go out into the world and provide for them, as Gaines states in an episode clip titled *Here's How Girls Respond to This Misogynistic Phrase!* (00:10:35-00:10:45). In a similar vein, he remarks that "[women] have a bunch of privileges and rights and access that men will never get" in a video entitled *This is Why Women Hate You* (00:02:24-00:02:28). The podcast makes similar claims about women, and men, without providing any supportive evidence.

Considerable research has established the notion of hegemonic masculinity is openly endorsed by manosphere influencers (Ging 2017; Vallerga and Zurbiggen 2022). The concept of hegemonic masculinity, initially proposed by R.W. Connell (1995), endorses the idea of male superiority and female inferiority in a social hierarchy. Hegemonic form of masculinity trumps over other forms of masculinities such as 'subordinated' and 'marginalized'. Applying the idea to the sphere of the 'alpha male' proponents, an alpha male is the paragon of hegemonic masculinity, while the 'beta' is a form of subordinated masculinity. The podcast asserts that in order to be considered alpha or a high value man, a man should be confident, assertive, demand respect from others, be a leader, show sexual dominance and above all, provide for women. But, the way in which Gaines, the host,

words these qualities is problematic. In several of his videos, he proclaims,

"The real reason that women want [men] to be confident is because when you're confident, it asserts assumed superiority over her. Confidence is acting like yourself and not giving a f— about what she thinks" (*Women are Aroused by This Trait in Men*

00:00:53-00:05:51).

"Respect; one of the mandatory ingredient [for it is]..fear..whether it's physical violence or of loss. But, the point is women need to be scared" (*Here's How You Maintain A Long Term Relationship* 00:05:26-00:05:43).

"Men are conditioned to protect and provide for thousands of years...Men aren't looking for a teammate who can do what they do" (*Why Females Keep FAILING To Understand This* 00:02:10-00:02:20).

"You don't become a self-made millionaire by being agreeable and nice and polite and pleasant. You get there by being...cutthroat. Which is what? A masculine trait!" (*Men Prefer These Kind of Women* 00:01:40-00:02:01).

"A man's duty is to protect, and provide and woman's duty is to provide sex. Women

aren't built to lead" (*Here's How Girls Respond to This Misogynistic Phrase!* 00:08:14-00:15:36)

What Gaines proposes should be masculine qualities is inherently patriarchal and ultimately damaging to men themselves. Being cutthroat or making their partner fear them or their loss and bearing the sole responsibility of 'providing' in an increasingly unaffordable world negatively impacts men. In order to achieve clout, influencers like Gaines, use such buzzwords and rhetoric in spite of the detrimental effect it can have on fellow men and women.

The Feminine Mystique- A Comparative Analysis

Betty Friedan conceptualized the 'feminine mystique' in her 1963 book of the same name, thereby inventing a term to the "problem that has no name" (15). "The feminine mystique", according to Friedan, "says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity" (37). In the latter half of the twentieth century, women in the United States were encouraged to find fulfillment in their 'biological' role as mothers and housewives and discouraged from pursuing a higher education (Churchill 2023). The myth of the feminine mystique aided in cementing this societal assumption of feminine fulfillment through "sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love" (Freidan 37) and a reintegration of traditional gender

roles. A comparison of the remarks made by Gaines in his platform and Freidan in her book sheds light on how alpha male podcasts engage in the re-articulation of the same arguments propounded by the myth of feminine mystique. As the Feminine Mystique states,

"in the second half of the twentieth century in America, woman's world was confined to her own body and beauty, the charming of man, the bearing of babies, and the physical care and serving of husband, children, and home" (Freidan 31).

"The new mystique...makes certain concrete, finite, domestic aspects of feminine existence -as it was lived by women whose lives were confined, by necessity, to cooking, cleaning, washing, bearing children-into a religion, a pattern by which all women must now live or deny their femininity" (Freidan 37-38).

In a similar pattern, comments made by Gaines in multiple episodes echoes these arguments. In the video, *Kick Her Out If She Breaks THESE 5 Rules*, he claims that a woman who is not serving her male partner or "making [him] food, keeping the house clean and upholding her feminine characteristics on what she's supposed to do", she is "useless" (00:00:12-00:00:34). Likewise, in a video titled *6 Step Checklist to Determine If She's Long Term Material*, he asks his audience,

"Does your girlfriend cook and clean unprompted? Does she shut up in front of your friends? Does she ask for you permission to do things out of respect? Does she forego hanging out with friends in public settings such as nightclubs for you? Does she give you sex regardless of how she feels? And finally, does she give up her social media for you?" (00:00:12-00:00:36).

The implications of a woman's worth as expressed here, is as a personal maid, passive, subservient, sexually submissive to men. The feminine mystique, perpetuated by the magazines of the time, taught women to,

"pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights-the independence and the opportunities that the old- fashioned feminists fought for" (Freidan 11).

Regarding women who opts for careers, Gaines asserts in his video *Men Prefer These Kind of Women!*, "[Men] don't like boss babes, independent women... It's propaganda to keep womensingle and it keep [women] from getting married because men want a woman that's gonna be a beautiful wife and mother first. F— your career... That is a fact" (00:05:26-00:05:46).

The side by side comparison of the two samples shows that the podcast clearly makes use of the same rhetoric that patriarchy has historically used to keep women under control. By assuming that women want to remain in the domestic sphere and deeming women who want careers as unfeminine and undesirable, this line of patriarchy demands women to remain docile. In both the discourse of the construct of feminine mystique and the alpha podcasts, women who are subservient to men, who 'knows when to shut up' and dedicate their lives to become perfect wives and mothers are seen as ideal and women who seek anything beyond that narrative are labelled as undesirable, unworthy and unhappy. The ideal a woman should strive for is depicted in both narratives as someone who can keep a man by being servile, sexually submissive and silent.

Theoretical Approaches

Studies have shown that the excessive intake of content supporting online misogyny in these echo chamber-like platforms and forums of the manosphere have gained popular support from its consumer base (Ging 2017; Vallerga and Zurbiggen 2022). Violence towards women and "unchecked misogyny", Ging states, manifest in the form of "death and rape threats", among others, made against female online personae across manosphere platforms as a result (9). The question remains of how these young men cannot distinguish between what is fiction and what is reality. In her book, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality: Seeing Through Media Influence*, media psychologist Karen Dill mentions the theory of transportation and social comparison that can explain the influence fictional narratives exert on people. This paper attempts to understand how the intake of disproven or fictitious content can gain such vigorous support from its largely young audience. Thus, narrative transportation theory and social comparison theory are employed in the study in that regard.

The Narrative Transportation Theory

The theory of narrative transportation, as proposed by Richard Gerrig in his book *Experiencing narrative worlds: On the psychological activities of reading* (1993) in the context of novels, suggests the immersion into a narrative is akin to physical travel, whereby a reader is transported into another realm, "by some means of transportation", and returns to "the world of origin, somewhat changed by the journey" (10-11). While expanding on Gerrig's metaphor of travel, Timothy Brock and Melanie Green "conceptualized transportation into a narrative world as a distinct mental process, an integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings", and that the effects of the transportation may effect the "real-world beliefs" of the individuals who underwent it (701). The immersion in a narrative, as they suggest, may make the individuals "less aware of real-world facts that contradict assertions made in the narrative" and that the transportation is not limited to readers, and can include listeners or any other "recipients of narrative information", and that a stirring speech may also elicit transportation (702). Furthermore, they propose that the effect of transportation into a narrative "causes people

to be less motivated...to stop and critically analyze propositions presented therein" and that it may lead to assertions, even false ones, being readily accepted (Green and Brock 703).

The transportation theory may provide an explanation for the perceived popularity of manosphere campaigns, as persuasion of the audience, of an impressionable nature, is implicitly possible as suggested by Brock and Green. The intermixing of reality and fiction, as is often employed by narratives on the internet, blur the boundaries between factual, real information and misinformation, a process that is termed as 'derealization' by Christian Fuchs in his book *Internet and Society: Social Theory in the Information Age* (139). A study has shown an increased requirement of teaching media literacy to students to tackle the massive amount of misinformation and fake news in the digital era, which can result in radicalization and terrorist activities in its extremities, and to counter narrative transportation through such content (Gretter et al, 2017). The same can be applied to unfounded claims propagated by manosphere platforms in the interweb that perpetuates online misogyny, which in its extremes have fatal repercussions in the form of gender-based violence offline and online as is evidenced by mass shootings in the North America carried out by self proclaimed incels, rape and death threats and doxing, which puts female internet users in the line of danger (Ging 2017; Lorenz 2022; Fugardi 2023). The repetitive and manipulative articulation of misogynistic narrative undertaken by alpha male influencers, like Gaines, can have similar effects of nurturing extreme behaviours in their content-consumers. Due to a process of derealization that results in the blurring of the boundaries of real and fake information, coupled with the effects of transportation, consumers of such content can increasingly find it difficult to find the distinction between reality and fantasy, which may lead them to insistently believe in the fantastic as the real. An insistent belief in the sexist narrative of the alpha male podcasts can have real world consequences in the form of gender-based violence on and off the internet, and in extreme cases may nurture radical attitudes like that of the mass shooters.

Theory of Social Comparison

Social comparison theory developed in the 1950s from the publications of American social psychologist Leon Festinger. It suggests that people assess their own self worth, actions, opinions, among others, by comparing themselves within a peer group. For comparison to occur, the group members should hold similar opinions, beliefs or share a social reality (Crusius et al. 2). These comparisons may be motivated by many reasons, such as self-evaluation, self-improvement and self-enhancement or it could be to affiliate with others and people may engage in comparison with anyone from a friend or family member, to imagined others, social media personalities. Depending on the goal of the comparisons, it can either be upward comparison or downward comparison. Upward comparisons happen when an individual compares themselves with a person who have better achievements and capabilities. While on the positive side it can enhance the

motivation for self-improvement, it may also lead to a low self-esteem in the individual. Downward comparison occurs when the individual compares themselves with someone less fortunate or inferior, which can lead to a boost in self-esteem (Miller et al. 1-2). The Self Evaluation Maintenance (SEM) model, proposed by Abraham Tesser, suggests that the relevance of the other's performance, that the individual is comparing themselves with, to the individual's own self-image is what determines the importance of the comparison. If the other's performance is highly relevant to the individual's self-image and they outperform the individual, it can negatively impact their self-esteem. (Tesser 4-5).

The theory of social comparison is widely employed in the study of the relation between social media, mental health, body image and self-esteem (Vogel et al. 2014; Han 2022). While the issue of self-esteem, body image and social media has been studied widely in regard to the female body, the body of works focusing on the male body and self-esteem has been insubstantial, to say the least (Hobza et al. 2007; Jones 2011; Yockey 2016). A study of body- image ideals and issues in male students at boarding schools yielded the results that apart from comparisons with media images of men, male students "expressed the influence of being exposed to alpha – male influences" among them and the apparent social power it brings, beyond the muscular physique (Jones 10). Applying the same to the content viewers of the alpha male podcasts, they inevitably compare themselves with these influencers. Alpha male influencers like Gaines position themselves as superior (as alpha) to the consumers of their content, propagating opinions and advices they make out to be worthy of the consumers' time and attention, so they (who are beta now) can aspire to be like them. Providing guidance in matters like acquiring better financial condition, social status, physique and a higher selection of mates, by claiming they have achieved it prior, makes them appealing to a group of individuals who have not yet seen this brand of 'success'. These impressionable, insecure and disenfranchised collection of men thereby engages in upward social comparison, where they assess their self and social worth in relation to these influencers. This could lead either to a boost in their motivation to improve or in a lowered self-esteem, both of which will naturally lead them to constantly engage in such content in hopes of improving further. The videos and the messages in them get disseminated by this constant engagement availing these influencers of monetary benefits and a consumer base to sell the idea of a 'masculinity in crisis' and its solution of becoming a 'high value man', through their online courses, books and other publications, which is a common theme in the manosphere (Bujalka et al. 2022). The promise of becoming an alpha or a 'high value man' is the holy grail for the young consumers with low self esteem. (Marsales 8). In the likely event of the influencers not living up to their promise, these users are among the most probable to turn to platforms such as incel message boards and forums, leading them down a path of self-hatred and radical behaviour towards women. These male influencers, thus, essentially confines their consumer base to these echo chamber-like

platforms and to these thoughts of insecurities, 'high' and 'low' values and narrow definitions of success.

Results

The Feminine Mystique states,

"in every generation, many men have suffered misery, unhappiness, and uncertainty because they could not take the image of the man they wanted to be from their fathers...More and more young men in America today suffer an identity crisis for want of any image of man worth pursuing, for want of a purpose that truly realizes their human abilities" (Friedan 71).

Decades have passed since Friedan published her book and the question of the worthy, positive male role model remains. The alarming growth of support, from a largely young male audience, for manosphere influencers such as Andrew Tate and Gaines attests to the fact that there is a strong need for positive male role models (Emba 2023). What these influencers are executing is what Dill terms as a mediated social interaction that she explains as, "two real people didn't interact, but rather someone watched a television show or movie and learned through a representation about what other people are like" (7). The consumers of alpha male content are fed a representation of what a high value man is like or how a woman should be and they inculcate these notions, no matter how far-fetched they are, because they have little to no real life interaction with the subjects being represented.

The comparison of the ideas presented in the feminine mystique and the remarks of Gaines yielded the result that alpha male podcasts are engaged in the wilful reiteration of harmful and fictitious gender stereotypes, that have no scientific basis. They project a brand of hegemonic masculinity that seeks to legitimize the subordination of women and those they deem as low value men or betas. Due to these ideas being reproduced frequently in the echo chambers of the manosphere, there is a high chance the impressionable audience imbibes these beliefs. To the question of why such content receives a quasi-factual acceptance, the theories used were able to provide a certain level of clarity. Previous researchers establish that even false assertions can be accepted by individuals through the effect of narrative transportation. When age-old beliefs regarding the genders, a fantasy created by the patriarchy like the feminine mystique, is represented in the guise of facts in a frequent manner, it is more readily accepted by an audience disillusioned by a world where they cannot find a space for themselves. Dill states in her book "reality of a fictional story is not whether it is a fantasy or a creation; it is whether it is believable and attractive" (13). By making their content so and targeting impressionable young men, their claims are more easily spread. Moreover, the disintegration of the traditional idea of men being the providers of the family with the progress made by feminist movements, have furthered the identity crisis and disillusionment experienced

by these young men, which pushes them into spaces offered by the manosphere influencers. Social comparison is unmistakably a major factor of the constant engagement and reengagement these influencers they receive on their content. By producing a narrative of a 'crisis in masculinity' and because of the promise of a solution to the crisis, the disillusioned men immerse themselves in the content in the hopes of improving. This lends to a cycle of dissemination and inculcation of the fantastic ideas perpetuated by the manosphere and alpha males.

While the increasing growth and support of such harmful rhetoric is concerning, there is a significant rise of content that can counter these notions. An online article published by the British GQ Magazine discusses content creators who promote a trend of 'positive masculinity' that opposes the toxic brand of masculinity promulgated by men like Gaines and Tate. The article brings to the forefront male media personalities like Ben Hurst, Jamie Clements, Ben Bidwell, to name a few, who tackle the stigma attached to male mental health, sexual expression, showing vulnerability, among others (Ewens 2023). A recent study shows how platforms such as Reddit can offer a way out of the manosphere, by concentrating on two forums *r/IncelExit* and *r/ExRedPill*. These subreddits operates in hopes of helping men to de-radicalize themselves as well as proving to be a safe space for men to interact with each other (Thorburn 2023). While the manosphere rhetoric is overtaking the internet, such content creators and platforms provides potential hope that such harmful notions can be tackled.

Limitations and Suggestions

This study does not delve into either academic theories being used, but rather focuses on giving an overview outlining the possible areas for further research in the study of content like alpha male podcasts, in particular and the manosphere as a whole. An extensive amount of research is not attempted in this study, as it concentrates on a limited amount of remarks made by an individual influencer, thereby leaving a considerable gap for potential research involving multiple influencers, larger samples and different approaches for analysis. Other masculinities discussed by the manosphere, such as 'sigma' male, and a rise of sigma male influencers is a concern for further study. There is a significant lack of user responses on YouTube being studied in the context of the manosphere, to which this paper is complicit as it intends only to provide possible explanations for the sustenance of such misogynistic and harmful content. This study does not take user feedback and comments on the YouTube videos it analysed into concern, which can be explored further. The visual aspects of the video podcast episodes (and other manosphere content), such as its thumbnails or the linguistic patterns adopted in displaying its captions, can be a subject of scrutiny, as this paper is limited to a textual analysis. While the study of the phenomenon of the manosphere was confined to a North American academic sphere, transcontinental research is seen emerging with studies done in the contexts of nations like Sweden and Bulgaria (Wiklund 2020; Stoencheva 2022).

As such, the study of the same in an Indian context, especially in the Kerala context is highly relevant, in light of the emergence of controversial media personalities like Akhil Marar, Mohammed Nihad or 'Mrz Thoppi' and their loyal fan base who celebrate such obscene, misogynistic ideas and the recent surge in the use of the terms 'alpha' and 'sigma' males in Malayali internet content. A wider range of research is possible as a growing amount of misogynistic and homophobic rhetoric is overtaking the realm of Indian social media, including platforms like Reddit, Instagram, YouTube, among others, which stems from the popular idea of 'masculinity in crisis' as popularised by manosphere content. The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic and social media algorithms in bringing such manosphere influencers, like Andrew Tate and Gaines, into popular discourse is another area of concern.

Conclusion

Previous research have traced the beginnings of the manosphere to the men's rights movements that happened after the advent of second wave of feminism. The loss of the primary 'provider' role, among other factors, necessitated newer role models for men; this is what the alpha male influencers like Gaines exploit. Under the guise of providing guidance and advices for self-improvement, they relentlessly perpetuate harmful notions regarding women and men, thorough concepts like hegemonic masculinity and a reiteration of the feminine mystique. Their agenda is facilitated by the ease of availability of digital content. By making use of digital media such as online podcasts, blogs, forums, and others, manosphere influencers have the advantage of their content being spread throughout the interweb, more than ever. Comparing the transcribed content of the Fresh and Fit podcast to the explanation of the myth of feminine mystique constructed by the patriarchy, lends insight into how such content creators contribute to the spreading of misogynistic and sexist ideals, that ultimately affects men and women.

Similar to exploiting the gap left for positive role models, these content creators also take advantage of the blurring boundary between reality and fantasy, that has intensified considerably in the digital age. The question of why this content is taken as factual and reengaged by its audience is examined in this paper. Narrative transportation can be a possible explanation of why content, that has no evidentiary basis disseminated by manosphere influencers, is being spread among young men as the gospel truth. It has been proven with prior research that even false assertions are readily believed by people, so it is no surprise that misogynistic and patriarchal beliefs that have existed for generations that are being represented in a new manner, in the form of dating or relationship advice, 'facts' regarding women by people like Gaines, are accepted. As social comparison is a ubiquitous phenomenon, a process in which everyone at a time in their life engages in, it is also examined as another possible explanation of why such content acquires the quasi-factual aura from its consumer base. It provides insight into how these content gets constant engagement and reengagement, leaving the influencers with a loyal following

that they can exploit through a perpetuate cycle of ontological insecurity and security, as a study shows (Bujalka et al. 202). The influence of such content creators, if left unchecked, can prove dangerous, as the manosphere have come under fire for its extreme views and the fatal incidents that happened as a result. This is where the importance of counter-narratives come in and research has shown that there is a growing trend of influencers and social media platforms that provides the same. It is imperative that the phenomenon of the manosphere be further studied to understand it better and to quash its negative influence. There are several limitations to the research conducted in this paper and as such, an outline of the scope for further study is given.

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"Topple the White Patriarchy" : Rebranding Feminist Gothic Narratives for the 21st Century

Abstract

Recent Netflix productions centering the supernatural figures Sabrina and Wednesday take works that historically operated in the genre of gothic comedy, and shift them towards dark fantasy, with a grittier violence, and simultaneously a strong emphasis on racial and gender diversity. Netflix as a streaming platform has a special appeal among teenagers since its algorithm allows suggestion of content specifically catered to the viewers' interests; it also offers support for different devices and encourages repeated viewings, which in turn leads to renewed interest in teen series and stories that appeal to marginalised groups.

Sabrina is a character with a long history, first appearing in Archie's Madhouse comics in 1962, followed by several renditions. One of the most notable predecessors of Chilling Adventures is Sabrina the Teenage Witch, which has a different aesthetic with a likeable and clueless Sabrina in a comical setting. Chilling Adventures takes a darker approach, exploring Sabrina's relationship with her friends, family, and coven as she navigates both the mortal and magical worlds. Using interconnections between feminist theories and theories in horror studies, we examine how Chilling Adventures of Sabrina represents and challenges patriarchal structures, issues of agency, and gaslighting.

Wednesday has parallels to Chilling Adventures in how it has rebranded a popular series that began in comics, celebrated as popular viewing in the 1990s, and at their core both presented unconventional families. Focusing this latest iteration of the Addams Family universe on the eldest daughter, Wednesday, emphasises the feminist focus of this story, and the show makes explicit engagement with racial dimensions to the Addams family story that were unexplored in earlier versions of the stories. This version casts a Latina actress to play the role of Wednesday, and through time-slip narratives, explores histories of racist violence and prejudice in North America. Further, while the series director Tim Burton has been rightly criticised for anti-Black racism, the initially two-dimensional Black characters in Wednesday develop complex storylines over the first season, and grow in their appeal to audience sympathy.

These shows build an appeal to an adult audience through nostalgia for the 1990s, and target new teen audiences in making shows that are more violent and serious in tone, and that implicitly reject earlier forms of their own stories by expanding on issues of

representation and inequality. Ultimately, we put forward how these shows explore narratives that help girls and young women question oppressive systems.

Keywords: White Patriarchy, Feminism, Gothic

Introduction

Recent Netflix productions have centred on the supernatural figures Sabrina Spellman (*Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, developed by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, 2018-2020, hereafter *Chilling Adventures*) and *Wednesday Addams* (*Wednesday*, created by Alfred Gough and Miles Millar, 2022). These two shows take works that historically operated in the genre of gothic comedy, and shift them towards dark fantasy, with a grittier violence, and simultaneously a strong emphasis on racial and gender diversity.

Sabrina is a character with a long history, first appearing in Archie's Madhouse comics in 1962, followed by several renditions. One of the most notable predecessors of *Chilling Adventures* is *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003), which has a different aesthetic with a likeable and clueless Sabrina in a comical setting. *Chilling Adventures* takes a darker approach, exploring Sabrina's relationship with her friends, family, and coven as she navigates both the mortal and magical worlds. Using interconnections between feminist theories and theories in horror studies, we examine how *Chilling Adventures* represents and challenges patriarchal structures, issues of agency, and a contemporary feminist understanding of gaslighting.

Wednesday has parallels to *Chilling Adventures* in how it has rebranded a popular series that began in comics, was celebrated as popular viewing in the 1990s, and, like *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, at its core presented an unconventional family. Focusing this latest iteration of the Addams Family universe on the eldest daughter, *Wednesday*, emphasises the feminist shift to this story, and the show makes explicit engagement with racial dimensions to the Addams family story that were unexplored in earlier versions. This production casts a Latina actress to play the role of *Wednesday*, and through time-slip narratives, explores histories of racist violence and prejudice in North America. Further, while the series director Tim Burton has been rightly criticised for anti-Black racism, the initially two-dimensional Black characters in *Wednesday* develop complex storylines over the first season, and grow in their appeal to audience sympathy.

These shows are targeted to an adult audience through nostalgia for the 1990s, and seek to catch new teen audiences in making shows that are more violent and serious in tone, and that implicitly reject earlier forms of their own stories by expanding on issues of representation and inequality. Ultimately, we put forward how these shows explore fantasy narratives that help girls and young women question oppressive systems today.

In her work on female heroes in fantasy fiction, Phillips (2023) argues that there is radical potential when the female hero eschews the "isolating individuality" typical of male heroes, and instead "demonstrat[e] relationality" and create community (p. xii). This

is an effective move that we see in both *Chilling Adventures* and *Wednesday*, and it is from the racially diverse, actively feminist group of *Chilling Adventures* that we take our title: their stated goal is to “Topple the white patriarchy”. Brünig argues that it is specifically sexual violence that brings about community in the recent television series *Chilling Adventures*, *Charmed* and *Riverdale*, but she critically notes that, even though they are visually diverse communities, the ways that sexism and racism intersect are left unexpressed in these shows: consequently “Despite its intersectional look, this hollowly diverse feminism is thus racialized as white” (p. 667). *Wednesday*, on the other hand, does centre race in its narrative, in ways that we will discuss below, and thus might provide a tonic to such weaker forms of community building.

Helford's edited collection *Fantasy Girls* (2000) examines a boom in science fiction and fantasy television centred on girls and women from the 1990s, to ask: “Though we now have female warriors, ship's captains, witches, aliens, and superheroes, they remain overwhelmingly white (or at least portrayed by white actresses), heterosexual, and silent on such issues as class disenfranchisement. [...] Does it give us anything more?” (p. 5). Her collection particularly focuses on shows that Mayne and Dow called “prime-time feminism” (qtd. in Projansky & Vande Berg, 2000, p. 15) such as *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Xena the Warrior Princess* and *The X-Files*. Collectively, many of the essays in this collection argue, as Projansky and Vande Berg note of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, that there is a “tension between feminism and containment” (p. 16), and as Ono says of *Buffy*, that there is a consistent marginalisation of people of the global majority (p. 8). Twenty years on from Helford's work, do we find a different treatment of race and gender, and a fuller intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991) understanding of identities and power relations? We argue that many such tensions continue to exist, even as a greater focus on racial and gender diversity are emphasised, and as the feminist issues raised are updated to account for the challenges faced by women and girls in the 21st century.

Sabrina

Sabrina the Teenage Witch was an early introduction to feminism for many girls (Mills et al. 2019). Along with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed*, it was an introduction to free-thinking, independent young women (Grant & O'Meara, 2019), albeit very “Girl Power” kind of girls, feisty without being off-putting (Hay, 2021). However, *Chilling Adventures* shows young women being more than that, being “politically active, outspoken teens who are conscious of the patriarchal system around them” (Henesy, 2021 p. 1446). *Chilling Adventures* positions feminist discourse in media culture within a resurgence of activism and renewed media interest in feminist stories (Gill, 2016). We will highlight some key aspects of *Chilling Adventures* that illustrate how this series presents hierarchical and patriarchal powers, discrimination between men and women, and even fantasy versions of real life tools to maintain the status quo like

gaslighting and community pressure. *Chilling Adventures* puts the patriarchal figure of the Dark Lord, namesake of the Satan of Judeo-Christian tradition, at the top of the hierarchy with the dean of the Academy of Unseen Arts, Father Blackwood directly below the Dark Lord himself, thereby establishing an irrefutable structure of men having power over others, but particularly over women. Another instance of power imbalance can be seen in the fact that although all the members of the coven have untold powers, witches (women) are strongly pressured to take classes on the "womanly arts" like midwifery, while warlocks (men) are allowed to take classes like conjuring, that result in more powerful abilities.

In *Chilling Adventures*, the structure of the community itself, the coven, guides relationships between its members towards enforcing compliance with the status quo. The ceremony of the Dark Baptism is one of the many ways in which compliance is enforced. The Dark Baptism comes on Sabrina's sixteenth birthday, marking the moment when she has to leave the mortal world behind to become a full witch. From the outset, she questions the forced choice and seeks advice in order to "make an informed decision". It is telling that, in Chapter Two: The Dark Baptism (Aguirre-Sacasa 2018), a sister witch responds to her questions about why she cannot have both the freedom to continue being a mortal and the power of being a witch, that "the thought of you, of any of us, having both terrifies [The Dark Lord]. He is a man, isn't he?" The narrative sets the antagonist firmly as a patriarchal figure "terrified" of empowered women whomight disrupt the network of oppression. Father Blackwood, the High Priest of the Church of Night, is invited to talk to Sabrina to reassure her and answer and dispel any doubts she may have towards the ceremony. It is important to note that this conversation happens in Sabrina's living room, surrounded by her family. Both Sabrina and Father Blackwood are seated facing each other as equals, which brings a feeling of safety, comfort, and mutual understanding. They talk about the nature of the agreement Sabrina is entering into, and Father Blackwood reassures her by reminding her that "free choice is the bedrock on which [the] church is built upon" and says that any language suggesting otherwise is merely symbolic. In this situation, Father Blackwood acts as a mentor, a guide, and someone on Sabrina's side. This is later revealed to be an illusion created by Father Blackwood. On the day of her Dark Baptism, the situation is not as egalitarian as it was in their previous conversation. In the middle of the woods, in front of the entire coven, including her family, Sabrina is made to disrobe and kneel before Father Blackwood, and to sign her name in fealty and complete submission to the "Dark Lord, or from any figure he has placed in authority over you". An increasingly confused and concerned Sabrina can only answer "this is not what you said before" before running away.

The reaction to gaslighting is encompassed in the phrase "that is not what you said before", as defined by the American Psychological Association (2023); gaslighting is "to manipulate another person into doubting his or her perceptions." It is a tool of the

patriarchy in that by denying Sabrina's lived experience of having been reassured by Father Blackwood that she would retain her free will, she is denied the opportunity to assert her agency by making an informed decision as she wanted. It is particularly significant that her aunts were present during Sabrina and Father Blackwood's conversation and had been through the Dark Baptism themselves. By not contradicting Father Blackwood, they are as complicit in their own subjugation (Grant & O'Meara 2019) as they are of Sabrina's. Tudor (1997) has argued that creating a scenario that is fantastical enough to provide distance from the real world can open up a perspective for a reader (or viewer) to re-evaluate their pre-conceived notions. In the case of *Chilling Adventures*, notions about free will, submission, and oppression can be examined in a new light. Even if *Chilling Adventures* is primarily the story of a girl navigating two worlds – one real and one magical – its examination of patriarchal systems of oppression, and Sabrina's fight against them, offer viewers a chance to recognise these systems in their own lives.

Wednesday

The *Addams Family* (1964) parodied and undermined the conservative norms of the nuclear family unit of the 1950s (Morowitz 2007), and the sequel films of the 1990s continued to challenge mores and propriety, both in the passionate love of Gomez and Morticia, and the culturally critical voice of their daughter Wednesday. Famously, in *Addams Family Values* (1991), Wednesday hijacks a Thanksgiving play to stage the revenge of the Native Americans, and expose the slaughter and cruelty that the American holiday is based upon. This film was the breakout performance for Christina Ricci, who made Wednesday's role rise prominently in popularity. Unlike these earlier television and film versions of the character, Wednesday brings us out of the family setting, and for the most part isolates Wednesday from the Addamses as our central focus – evident both in the show's title, and in the boarding school narrative taking her out of the family home. This in itself is a feminist move to refocus the story on a heroine.

A second key change to this Netflix adaptation is that we are given a different cultural background to the Addamses. Morowitz explains that in the 1960s television series, "The Addams family may be seen as 'Euro-trash', Gomez (John Astin) and Morticia descending from Spanish and French aristocracy respectively" (pp. 43-44). Thus, race has not been a part of the stories told in television and films about this family in quite the prominent way that it is in *Wednesday*. Not only is the actor for Wednesday herself Latina in this version, unlike previous stars in the role, but the time slip narrative that plays a central part in this story brings to the fore the intersectionally racist and sexist subjugation that her Mexican ancestor Goody Addams experienced, and effectively positions Wednesday as the inheritor of that trauma. Wilson (2011) critically notes that time slip narratives for a younger audience will often minimise the effects of sexism in the past, or anachronistically present a strong-willed woman who can supposedly overcome the

sexism of her time (pp. 74, 98). In the case of Goody's story, however, we are made to bear witness to the cruel and inescapable violence of a seventeenth-century Puritanical purging of otherness, and there is no shying away from the USA's blood-soaked foundations in racism and sexism.

A final point of intersectional feminist development comes in *Wednesday* in the characters that surround our protagonist, and particularly the roles that Black characters play in the story. Initially, Bianca Barclay and Lucas Walker are presented as antagonists – in one case a rival in fencing and love, and in the second a leader of a group of boy bullies who are roundly defeated by Wednesday – and their representation led to a return of earlier criticisms placed against director Tim Burton for his poor record on representing racial diversity. Burton has previously called including racial diversity in films and television merely “political correctness” (qtd. in Butler & Izadi 2016, n.p.), and defended how whiteness dominates his cinematic vision. However, in later episodes of *Wednesday*, we are granted an insight into the complexities of both Bianca and Lucas, understanding their individual struggles better, and the nuances that build up their characters. This is particularly evident and powerful in a scene where the two characters talk over coffee, separate from all other main characters in the show, an insight into their lives that forms part of the shift of the show from centring on Wednesday herself to becoming an ensemble cast, and telling us more varied stories. Ultimately, Bianca and Wednesday reconcile, and Wednesday further finds friends and allies at the school in her roommate Enid and in the beekeeper Eugene (played by MoosaMostafa). While this grouping does not have the strong political agenda of Sabrina's circle of school friends, it does more greatly centre the racial diversity of this narrative, and individually for both Bianca and Wednesday, gives space to explore the history of racism and the ongoing effects of misogynoir (Bailey & Trudy 2018) in contemporary North America. *Wednesday*, through these stories, and particularly through the fantastical affordances of the time-slip narrative, raises critical questions about the forceful construction of whiteness and white Christian patriarchy as dominant features of the western world today.

Conclusion

As we've seen, thus, these two Netflix adaptations of earlier gothic comedies, push on issues pertinent to contemporary feminism. In the case of *Sabrina*, this retelling emphasises challenging patriarchal structures, identifying and calling out gaslighting, and in some forms celebrating and supporting intersectionality through solidarity. In the case of *Wednesday*, it is about unearthing the stolen narratives of marginalised communities – histories that were not merely lost, but those that were forcibly erased by dominant and oppressive social forces, such as white Christianity – and not only tokenistically including racial diversity, but allowing it to be expressed with the full roundness of personality and character. That Netflix commissioned these two shows, and that they have been so popular with teen audiences, indicates a growing appetite for such

stories of feminist and intersectional social critique. That both of these shows approach these social issues through fantasy powerfully indicates the potential that fantasy as a genre has for speaking to contemporary social issues: it can create critical distance from reality, from which to challenge real social structures, and it can bring the past and present into dialogue, to expose the roots of social injustices and inequalities.

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Reflections on Earthly Deeds : Mythical Consequences in *Along with the Gods : The Two Worlds*

Abstract

Along with the Gods: The Two Worlds is a 2017 South Korean fantasy action film directed by Kim Yong-hwa. It blends Korean mythical beliefs with fantasy, portraying the afterlife intertwined with earthly actions. This film is based on a webtoon by Joo Ho-min, "Along with the Gods," which was inspired by the Korean Joseon dynasty Buddhist paintings and early Buddhist texts of the Ten Kings of Hell. The film follows the story of Kim Ja-Hong, a firefighter, who is guided through the afterlife by three guardians and has to undergo seven trials over forty-nine days to reincarnate, with each trial representing a different sin he committed in his life.

Beyond its fantastical elements, *Along with the Gods: The Two Worlds* explores universal themes. It delves into the human experience, the power of redemption and highlights on one's actions and their potential consequences in life. This film is deeply rooted in Korean mythology and folklore, featuring gods, demons, and other supernatural beings, where myth serves as a powerful metaphor for the moral and ethical implications of our actions. Mythologies and folklore are traditional stories, beliefs, that are often passed down by elders and storytellers as a way to teach younger generations about ethical values and cultural wisdom. They illustrate the consequences of our actions and teaches valuable lessons about right and wrong.

This paper analyses the role of mythologies in imparting moral education and guiding individuals toward virtuous living as witnessed in the film *Along with the Gods: The Two Worlds*. By portraying the rewards and punishments faced by the characters based on their virtues and vices, the film emphasizes the importance of considering morality in one's life. The film encourages to reflect on decisions and actions, reminding them that one's choices have lasting effects not only on themselves but also on those around them. Utilizing mythologies as a narrative device, the film instils a sense of responsibility and encourages individuals to strive for a more ethical and virtuous existence.

Keywords: Mythologies, Moral values, Fantasy

The movie *Along with the Gods: The Two Worlds* is a masterpiece that interweaves elements of fantasy with deep reflections on human actions and their consequential impacts. Directed by Kim Yong-hwa, this South Korean film presents an ethereal landscape where the afterlife is meticulously portrayed as an intricate realm governed by

trials and judgments. The film is based on the webtoon series by Joo Ho-min, *Along with the Gods*, which was inspired by the Korean Joseon dynasty Buddhist paintings and early Buddhist texts of the Ten Kings of Hell. It features Ha Jung-woo, Cha Tae-hyun, Ju Ji-hoon and Kim Hyang-gi as the main cast. The film centres on the unexpected death of the firefighter Kim Ja-Hong who is guided through the afterlife by three guardians. He undergoes seven trials over forty-nine days to determine the fate of his soul. As he navigates through the fantastical realms of the afterlife, he encounters gods, demons, and other mythical beings, all while uncovering the truth about his past life and the sins he committed. Along the way, Ja-Hong forms deep bonds with his guardians and learns valuable lessons about sacrifice, redemption, and the power of love. The protagonist must ultimately confront his inner demons and face off against powerful forces to earn a second chance at life.

Myths are traditional stories or narratives that often involves supernatural beings, gods, heroes, and symbolic elements. They are deeply rooted in cultural or religious traditions and serve various purposes within a society. Myths typically explain natural phenomena, the origins of the world, human behaviour, and the relationship between the divine and mortal realms. They often carry moral lessons, cultural norms, and explanations for the unexplainable aspects of life. These narratives are often transmitted orally across generations, adapting and evolving while retaining their core elements. Myths can encompass creation stories, tales of heroic deeds, explanations for the existence of certain cultural practices or natural phenomena, and stories that establish the moral or ethical codes of the society. They are integral to understanding the worldview, values, and traditions of a culture, providing a framework for how people perceive themselves and the world around them.

The film portrays the consequences of one's actions in life, drawing from both mythological ideas and its narrative nuances. The film aligns with mythological concepts by presenting the afterlife as a place where individuals face repercussions for their earthly deeds. It mirrors traditional beliefs about accountability and the judgment of one's actions after death, staying true to the idea that moral choices have consequences beyond life. Mythology often outlines the general idea of judgment and consequences; the movie creates a structured system of trials, each representing specific aspects of a person's life and choices. This meticulous representation goes beyond mythological concepts, providing a more elaborate and visual interpretation of the consequences tied to different actions. The film emphasizes the possibility of redemption and second chances, which might not always align with strict mythological ideas. While myths often portray a fixed judgment, the movie weaves in elements of hope and the potential for personal growth and redemption, offering a nuanced perspective on the consequences of one's actions that might deviate from traditional beliefs. The film's depiction of fantastical realms is steeped in Korean mythologies, featuring a diverse array of otherworldly landscapes

inhabited by guardians, demons, and deities from traditional folklore. Through the visuals and intricate storytelling, it presents a tapestry of the afterlife that resonates with cultural beliefs and spiritual traditions. This portrayal not only offers a cinematic spectacle but also serves as a conduit to explore deeper themes of accountability, redemption, and the interconnectedness of actions and their repercussions beyond mortal life.

In the film, fantasy acts as a reflective canvas upon which the consequences of earthly actions are vividly portrayed. The imaginative landscapes and supernatural trials the protagonist encounters symbolize the complexities and consequences of his past life. By constructing a visually stunning and immersive world of trials and otherworldly realms, the fantasy genre breathes life into the mythological concept of judgment after death. Integrating fantasy elements in film, especially when depicting two distinct worlds inhabited by gods and mortals, offers a rich tapestry to convey moral and mythological themes with depth and resonance. The juxtaposition of these realms allows filmmakers to explore complex ethical dilemmas and age-old human struggles in a visually compelling and imaginative manner. By introducing gods embodying virtues or vices and mortals navigating their intertwined fates, the storytelling gains a heightened sense of symbolism and relatability. This portrayal allows audiences to witness the consequences of earthly deeds tangibly and engagingly. Fantasy serves as a transformative vehicle, allowing the audience to engage with the abstract notions of karma, redemption, and the interconnectedness of human actions in a visually compelling manner.

The fantasy genre's universal appeal serves as a powerful conduit for conveying moral messages embedded in mythical narratives. Its allure lies in transcending cultural, geographical, and temporal boundaries, making it an ideal vehicle for imparting timeless moral lessons. Fantasy's imaginative realms and fantastical elements engage diverse audiences, drawing them into worlds where the boundaries of reality are fluid. This escapism allows for the exploration of complex moral dilemmas in settings removed from specific cultural contexts, enabling audiences from various backgrounds to relate to the underlying themes. Moreover, the fantastical nature of the genre offers a safe distance from reality, allowing for the portrayal of moral conflicts and ethical choices in a heightened, metaphorical manner. This abstraction enables storytellers to address sensitive or challenging topics without being confined to the limitations of realistic settings. Ja-Hong, the deceased protagonist in the film embodies a character deeply influenced by selflessness, familial responsibility, and sacrifice, impacting his journey through the afterlife. His earthly deeds shape his trials in the afterlife, reflecting the moral complexities of his choices. Ja-Hong's selfless sacrifices for his family become a cornerstone of his afterlife trials, emphasizing the moral lesson of sacrifice and familial devotion. His journey becomes a reflection of the moral virtues of integrity, sacrifice, and responsibility, showcasing the profound impact of his actions on his journey through the

afterlife. The fantasy setting in the film allows for a vivid visualization of the characters' internal moral conflicts. The mythical beings, guardians, and otherworldly landscapes become symbolic representations of their struggles, providing a visual narrative that intensifies their moral journeys. This fantastical realm becomes a mirror reflecting their past actions and guiding their paths toward redemption and growth. The three afterlife guardians- Gang-Lim, Haewonmak, and Lee-Deok-Choon play pivotal roles as mentors and guides in Ja-Hong's journey. Their characters are deeply intertwined with Korean mythology, representing concepts like justice, compassion, and sacrifice. Each guardian contributes to Ja-Hong's growth, providing him with valuable insights and challenging his beliefs.

As the narrative unfolds, the fantasy elements of the film, such as supernatural creatures and other worldly realms serve as metaphor for moral dilemmas and the consequence of one's actions. Ja- Hong's character development is intricately linked to these fantastical elements, highlighting the interplay between mythical and the moral in storytelling. Moreover, the film introduces a complex system of reincarnation and divine judgement, drawing inspiration from various religious and mythological traditions. This world-building aspect adds depth to the characters roles, they navigate the intricate balance between fate and free will, sin and redemption. In the context of fantasy and mythology character development takes on a transcendent dimension. The characters in the film are not only shaped by their personal histories but also by the cosmic forces at play in the afterlife. This fusion of the fantastical and the mythic creates a unique narrative space where characters grapple with universal themes of morality and afterlife.

The seven trials in the afterlife depicted in the film intricately intertwine mythological elements with profound moral lessons. Each trial, deeply rooted in Korean mythologies, symbolizes a distinct aspect of ethical dilemmas. Drawing from cultural beliefs, these trials offer allegorical representations of earthly deeds and their consequences, mirroring universal moral principles. The film delves into the consequences of violence, deceit, indolence, injustice, betrayal, filial impiety, and unfulfilled dreams.

They serve as a framework that reflects not only cultural values but also universal ethical teachings, emphasizing virtues like honesty, empathy, justice, loyalty, and familial respect. For an instance in the scene of the Trial of Murder, Ja-Hong confronts situations where his actions, intentional orunintentional, led to someone's death. This trial examines their responsibility and accountability for the lives they've affected. During this trial, characters are shown scenes from their past where their actions, directly or indirectly, resulted in someone's demise. They're forced to relive these moments and confront the consequences of their choices. The trials, guided by guardians and mythological beings, embody the journey of the soul through moral reckonings, highlighting the interconnectedness of actions and their enduring impact in the afterlife, illustrating the complexities of human morality within the cultural and mythical context.

The film draws heavily from Korean afterlife beliefs, particularly the concept of the afterlife journey, which spans forty-nine days of trials in seven hells. This belief is rooted in Korean Buddhism and folklore, where the deceased undergoes judgment and trials before reincarnation. By incorporating these beliefs, the film provides a culturally resonant depiction of the afterlife journey. Beyond mere entertainment, the film serves as a vessel for ethical teachings and moral complexities prevalent in Korean stories, emphasizing virtues, accountability, and the consequences of actions. Through the fantastical lens, the film portrays the repercussions of earthly deeds in the afterlife trials. Each trial confronts the characters with the consequences of their past actions, compelling them to confront their flaws, seek redemption, and reckon with their choices. The trial of betrayal examines the characters' loyalty and trustworthiness. They encounter situations demanding a choice between loyalty and betrayal, testing their commitment to their beliefs and relationships. The trial of indolence evaluates diligence and effort. Characters confront instances where they may have lacked commitment or persistence, stressing the value of perseverance and hard work. The trial of filial piety centres on familial bonds, particularly characters' reverence and nurturing of their parents. It challenges their devotion to their family and highlights the significance of honouring and caring for parents. The trial of violence confronts characters with their past violent actions or tendencies. It tests their ability to overcome anger and aggression, emphasizing the need for peace and reconciliation. The trial of deceit honesty and truthfulness. Characters face situations where they might have deceived others or themselves, emphasizing the importance of integrity and facing the truth. The final trial, the trial of murder, evaluates characters' actions that directly or indirectly caused someone's death. It tests their responsibility for others' lives, emphasizing accountability for one's actions. These trials serve as allegories for ethical dilemmas, showcasing the weight of decisions made in life. This exploration of moral consequences transcends the supernatural realm, echoing universal themes of accountability, integrity, compassion, and the complexity of human nature. The film emphasizes the significance of ethical choices, the pursuit of justice, and the ever-present possibility of redemption, resonating as a universal testament to the human yearning for moral growth and absolution. In *Along with the Gods: The Two Worlds* the usage of myths serves as a powerful tool to prompt viewers to rethink their actions. By drawing on cultural and mythological elements, the film invites audiences to reflect on fundamental experiences and moral dilemmas. The ancient myths embedded in the narrative act as mirrors, reflecting universal themes of redemption, justice, and the afterlife. This reflection becomes a catalyst for introspection, prompting viewers to reconsider their own choices and values. The film's skilful incorporation of myths doesn't merely entertain but act as a poignant guide, encouraging individuals to reassess their actions and contemplate the consequences, fostering a deeper connection between a fantastical world on screen and the real-world choices of the audiences. Thus, myths become not just stories but essential tools for passing down cultural heritage and

prompting reflections on the shared values that guide human actions across generations. For an instance, the myth about not shaking legs as it may bring negative consequences to one's parents is prevalent in various cultures, particularly in some Asian societies. The belief suggests that shaking one's legs is considered disrespectful or inauspicious as it might bring misfortune or harm to parents or the family.

Elders often pass down this belief as a form of cultural etiquette or superstition, emphasizing the need for proper manners and respect towards elders and ancestors. It serves as a way to instil discipline and mindfulness in behaviour, teaching individuals to be mindful of their actions and their potential impact on family harmony and fortune. Myths have served as moral compasses, imparting lessons, values, and ethical guidelines to societies. They serve as powerful allegories, illustrating the consequences of actions, the importance of virtues like courage, wisdom, and justice, and the pitfalls of hubris, greed, and dishonesty. By presenting characters facing moral dilemmas and showcasing the outcomes of their choices, myths offer valuable lessons. These myths often serve as cautionary tales, warning against immoral behaviour or arrogance while promoting virtues that contribute to the greater good.

The study concludes by acquiring that through the fantasy film *Along with the Gods: The Two Worlds*, mythologies play a crucial role in imparting education and guiding individuals toward virtuous living. The film depicts the power of storytelling and how ancient myths continue to shape our understanding of morals and virtues. By merging fantastical elements with valuable life lessons, the movie encourages viewers to explore their own values and strive for goodness in their actions. This integration of mythology in the film also highlights the universal themes present in ancient stories that are still relevant today. The characters in the movie, both human and godlike, face dilemmas and challenges that mirror the struggles we encounter in our own lives. Through these narratives, the film reminds us of the importance of empathy, bravery, and compassion, guiding us towards a more enlightened and virtuous existence. Overall, this study highlights the significance of mythology in our cultural heritage, its relevance in contemporary society, and how this film serves as a powerful reminder of mythologies in shaping our beliefs and values.

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Probing the Prism of Mimetic Desire

Abstract

*René Girard's mimetic theory developed with his understanding of desire and became a comprehensive explanation of interpersonal relationships. Mimetic desire intensifies when our shared desires inflame our conviction in the object's value. Access to the object is made possible by the revelation of desire's mimetic character and the consistent presence of a mediator. Desire, for Girard, is mediated through the triangular mode. Girard claims that the scapegoat mechanism is the main way to prevent total escalation, in which conflict is addressed by mobilizing against an arbitrary other who is excluded and blamed for all the chaos. The human condition is accounted by the unsteady operations of desire and fantasy, that result from a person's basic division between "Self" and "Other". Mimetic desire operates as a subconscious imitation of others' desires. Humans acquire language knowledge and the efficiency to study through imitation. Neurologists frequently nudge us that the brain is an enormous imitation machine. To establish a science of man, it is vital to contrast human imitation with animal mimicry and accurately define human modes of mimetic behavior. He disassociates himself from Freud's psychoanalysis, which defines desire as libido or sexual instinct. A philosophical perspective highlights the scripts of desire on the social stage. The 1993 work of the Australian author David Malouf, *Remembering Babylon* can be read as one such work that paints on a broad canvas the terrains of the working of human's desire for mimesis. The present paper explores how the main protagonist of the novel is torn between his indigenous and non indigenous identity in line with Homi Bhabha's notion of colonial mimicry. This theory critically examines whether mimetic desires genuinely reflect our own aspirations or if they are just imitations.*

Keywords: Mimetic desire, scapegoat mechanism, psychoanalysis, imitation.

The French-American literary critic, religious scholar, anthropologist and philosopher René Girard, proposed the notion of mimetic desire in his work *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1961) to understand how humans, a highly social creature, generate desires in connection to people around us. The fundamental notion of desire is a desire according to the other. Girard claims that the revelation of metaphysical desire is the greatest common denominator in the European novelist tradition. When the hero desires an object through a mediator, it results in metaphysical desire, as opposed to spontaneous desire. A triangular desire explains a desire that centers around a subject, an object, and a mediator. When one pursues desire through a mediator, competition arises, manifesting as anger, jealousy, and envy.

Girard found that neither the object nor the subject are the primary sources of desire. It might be feasible to achieve autonomy if the subject's desire is innate. Then, desire could be something original and individual. If desire could determine the object, a spontaneous attraction towards certain objects would govern it, such as materialistic needs. In contrast to these opinions, Girard contends desires that mediate what other people desire rather than being spontaneous, individual, or primarily provoked by objects. Thus Girard's fundamental hypothesis concerning desire schematizes the triangle. The subject craves the (real or imaginary) desire of another who serves as a mediator for the object of desire.

Necessities can serve as catalysts for desire, but they cannot fully generate it. Satisfaction of necessities requires fulfillment, but how they get fulfilled depends on cues from other people with similar needs. Mimetic desire is essential to the fashion industry. When a new fashion trend emerges, it appears strange at first. However, as more and more people adopt a particular style—usually first adopted by “high-profile” people—they act as mediators, and the majority of people stop finding it strange and begin to regard it as the “natural” desirable way to dress.

The three interrelated movements of mimetic theory are mimetic desire, the scapegoating mechanism and revelation. Girard characterizes desire as mimetic because he believes that imitation plays a crucial role in shaping our desires. In essence, he contends that we acquire our desires by imitating those of others. According to Girard, this is a grand illusion. Individual's experience that they are authentic individuals. Everyone is deficient, nobody is autonomous, and everyone mimics what they desire from outside of themselves. This is what modern individuality suppresses ceaselessly. Because we observe others doing, we justify our impulses by attributing them to our egos. Thus, individualism conceals the harmful connection that exists between violence and mimesis. Mimetic desire inevitably sparked rivalry and violent conflict. The intensity of mimetic desire escalates under its own steam. Given that all desire is mimetic, every object in the universe is either sought by several people or not desired at all. This ineluctably breeds competition, and rivalry breeds violence, popularly known as mimetic rivalry. Mimetic aggression arrested the scapegoat mechanism.

The scapegoat mechanism is the third stage where Girard asserted that all communities worldwide began in precisely the same manner: as a loose coalition of people, as mimetic rivalry intensified, and ultimately as the actual murder of a human being. All those rules, rituals, and traditions would never have developed if there had never been the actual murder of a human being. The object of mimetic imitation switches from the cycle of violence towards mimetically blaming a single target that society has arbitrarily selected. Every epistemic universe is built upon the resolution of mimetic violence through scapegoat mechanisms. The mimetic conflict can only be resolved by killing a single victim.

Consequently, this explains two characteristics that are common to all religions: ritual sacrifice and prohibitions. Girard claims that all prohibitions ultimately concern the limitation or economising of desire. Ritual sacrifices work through the mechanism by which the violence of a mob is mimetically quelled through the agreement where the disorder was caused and resolved by the victim. His theological perspective, which makes a distinction between the holiness that defined the Judeo-Christian heritage and the sacredness of early religions. Girard believes that the Judeo-Christian bible represents a radical departure from the widespread practice of scapegoating, prohibition, and sacrificial repetition.

Malouf's novel, *Remembering Babylon*, stages a rewriting of an imaginary life and consider how the writing of this later work eludes the imperial narrative terrain that have discussed above. The novel, *Remembering Babylon* is an attentiveness to the complex relationship between language, landscape and identity, in respect to the cultural contours of space. And yet, it explores the structural significance of boundaries through a marginal figure of excess that does not merely elude the productive economy of binary oppositions, but that comes to bear the growing realisation that this recuperative economy of normative difference is highly arbitrary, conventional, and tenuous in the extreme.

Gemmy, the "wild boy" in this novel, does not represent a primordial state of being, and thus figure of reconciliation, beyond the complexities of articulating and negotiating difference through social and cultural exchange, but embodies a transitional site of potential otherness whose identity remains an ongoing process of dialogue and self-understanding. The borderland territory mapped out by the figure of Gemmy is, invested with a desire to experience alterity, a desire to escape the constraining, subjugating logic of binary forms of differentiation. And yet the strength of the novel lies in its refusal to render this sense of otherness or alterity in metaphysical terms. This borderland territory does not represent a site of innocence beyond the imperative of learning to articulate difference through contact with otherness. The figure of Gemmy works in the novel to develop a sense of alterity that remains within the bounds of language and its productive relationship to landscape, drawing the settlers into the realisation that conceptual forms of self- and other-understanding inscribe certain limits that can well be revised and reviewed.

Having somehow escaped a harsh life in England, washed up on the shore of the Australian coast and gradually accepted by an aboriginal community with which he spends sixteen years, the "black white man" (Malouf, *Remembering Babylon* 10) stumbles on a small white settlement and is adopted by the family of Jock and Ellen McIvor. Described further as "a parody of a white man" (*Remembering Babylon* 39), Gemmy threatens the normalising terms by which the settlers define their patch of earth, the very boundaries that enclose it with self-understanding. This figure of alterity does not fit into their preconceived assumptions of difference, precisely because his wayward and

unsettled figure has the potential to disrupt such stereo-typical forms of understanding. Gemmy himself is harmless, a waif of a figure that is all too ready to obey and concede. Rather, “it was the mixture of monstrous strangeness and unwelcome likeness that made Gemmy Fairley so disturbing to them” (Remembering Babylon 43). This is a sense of undecidability.

“Brought you slap up against a terror you thought you had learned, years back, to treat as childish: the Bogey, the Coal Man, Absolute Night. And now here it is, not two yards away, solid and breathing: a thing beside which all you have ever known of darkness, of visible darkness, seems but the merest shadow...” (Remembering Babylon 42) Suddenly the Other throws a shadow, is given the opportunity to express its non-identity with itself, as the terms of self- and other understanding are brought back to the realms of finitude, not dissolved by a metaphysically informed reproductive economy of the same.

From the beginning the settlers attempt to normalize Gemmy's threatening strangeness by recording his story in written form, but in a highly fanciful and constraining fashion that can only approximate the fitful, stammering, and incoherent languages Gemmy speaks through his repertoire of abrupt sounds and gestures. The local parish minister and self-styled botanist Mr Frazer elicits Gemmy's history as the school-teacher George Abbot writes down the story, though in a largely inventive manner influenced “from tales they already knew, since he was by no means the first white black man to have turned up like this after a spell among the blacks” (Remembering Babylon 16).

Abbot records what is described as “the minister's Colonial fairy tale,” one that compulsively strives to draw Gemmy into an established code informing the significance of not only the binary difference between black and white, but also the liminal figure of cross-cultural experience – a triadic structure that works to contain both difference and its transgression within an assimilating framework of history and geography. In other words, I want to stress, the structure of the novel foregrounds and demonstrates what I earlier called the figure of the “frontiersman” as an integral aspect of how static differences between self and other are maintained. Unlike *An Imaginary Life*, where liminality is presented through a metaphysical notion of somehow moving beyond the frontier, beyond the labor of historical and geographical understanding, here it is given a significance of necessity, which works to transform the romantic symbol of reconciliation into a critical appreciation of its figurative force.

Gemmy, as in the novel *Remembering Babylon*, eludes this triad structure, precisely because he is unable to project or communicate a semblance of identity, both to himself and others. And yet this inability is not portrayed by a romantic (spiritual) or modernist (psychological) economy of lack (that would find a compensatory fulfillment in either Nature or the Aesthetic), but rather as a movement within the complex, interactive

relationship between language, landscape, and identity.

This wavering, indeterminate movement is embodied by the figure of Gemmy, and is transmitted to the settlers, which makes them feel very uneasy:

But where could you start with an odd, unsettled fellow who, beyond what the boy Lachlan had heard him shout, had not a word you could make sense of in the English tongue; a pathetic, muddy-eyed, misshapen fellow, all fidgets, who seemed amazed by them – as if they were the curiosities here – and kept laughing and blinking. (Remembering Babylon 7)

In this way the settlers are confronted with a heightened sense of the arbitrariness of the boundaries they have surrounded themselves with, within the limits of which they go about transforming the landscape so that it comes to be “just a bit like home” (Remembering Babylon 10).

Suddenly, with the appearance of Gemmy, the settlers develop an increased fear of what lies outside the boundaries, and this is related to a growing fear of what lies within the boundaries as well – the growing realisation that not all of them think alike. The “unknown” is drawn into this uneasiness, an “unknown” that does not merely inscribe the other side of the fence, but also the inside. In this fashion the narrative-work provides an interesting view of self-understanding in respect to the physical and figurative force of geographical boundaries – how boundaries and geographical locations are themselves never static and immutable, but are always on the move: “It was disturbing, that: to have unknown country behind you as well as in front” (Remembering Babylon 8). And as noted, the inside also:

“Most unnerving of all was the knowledge that, just three years back, the very patch of earth you were standing on had itself been on the other side of things, part of the unknown, and might still, for all your coming and going over it, and the sweat you had poured into its acre or two of ploughed earth, have the last of mystery upon it, in jungle brakes between paddocks and ferny places out of the sun.” (Remembering Babylon 9-10).

The “unknown” becomes aware of itself as a figure of knowledge and understanding, and begins to deconstruct the silent assumptions and presuppositions informing the spatial texture of its conceptual associations. In other words, self-understanding is drawn into the spatial contours of its forgetfulness, into that which exceeds the symbols of assimilation. Just as Gemmy’s identity eludes the ordering force of symbolic associations, eludes the assimilating force of Mr Frazer’s inventive story about Gemmy, the settlers are drawn into the spatial contours of their finitude. Remembering Babylon, then, develops a constructive sense of how the term “nature,” or “the unknown,” cannot simply be presupposed as an untouched terrain lying outside the figurative force of language, but gains its significance within a complex experience of networks of signification, as well as the physical activity that renders landscapes habitable.

Malouf's novel *Remembering Babylon* is embedded in and at the same time articulate the concerns of an Australian political culture as it reviews not only its history, but the way in which it assumes that history can be recorded and rendered digestible. Part of this involves a critical view of the relationship between language and landscape, in terms of how Malouf's writing foregrounds the reproductive capacity of this assemblage, questioning any form of identity symbolically relieved from the fracturing force of contact with indeterminate otherness. The novel addresses this, but remains caught-up with a mimetic tradition which forgets the power of language as an emblem or symbol of self-explanatory truth. *Remembering Babylon*, as said, draws the reproductive assemblage of language, landscape, and identity back to the realms of finitude, so that there can be no escape from having to face, to negotiate, the potentially fracturing force of self- and other-understanding. Reconciliation cannot be assumed symbolically or recuperated by a metaphysical economy of self-centered understanding of difference assumes, but must be worked towards as a practical exercise in learning, in coming to terms with difference as an ever-emerging articulation of self and otherness.

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“Challenge your Status Quo” : Exploring Digital Dystopian Fantasies in *Lapsis*

Abstract

Noah Hutton's low-key SF flick *Lapsis*(2020) depicts a dystopian future in which quantum computing has replaced run-of-the-mill communication technologies and ushered in a paradigm shift with everything from parking calendars to the most sophisticated algorithms being run on this newly harnessed power. Whereas in classical computing, bits hold data encoded as ones and zeros, in quantum computing, data is measured in qubits, with each qubit having three possible states—one, zero, or an indeterminate state involving the superposition of one and zero. The movie, which gives us premonitions of an AI-dominated future and the realization of Moore's law, works as a wry satire against the monopolization of upcoming forms of technology by avaricious Capitalists. The present paper attempts to analyse the film in the light of neo-Marxism which focuses on the oligarchic elements of Capitalism. Unlike traditional Marxism which believed that industrial capitalist societies would naturally give way to workers' class consciousness, neo-Marxism contends that industrialism would only lead to the accentuation of inequalities, with digital technologies and AI being the latest manifestations of this downward spiral. Using neo-Marxist ideas as a springboard to initiate a discussion on the gig economy, the paper argues that the film alerts us to a future in which human labour becomes obsolete. In doing so, it examines the reservations the film expresses regarding the potency of a neo-Marxist struggle to regain human autonomy in the face of ever-increasing automation. It discusses how the film short-circuits the possibility of a socialist utopia attained through a “cognitarian” revolution by invoking the naivete implicit in visualising technology as the Other that can be brought under human control.

Keywords: automation, quantum computing, gig economy, neo-Marxism, digital technology

Noah Hutton's SF film *Lapsis*(2020), which presents the problems facing the gig economy in a slightly humorously light, is, at bottom, a serious rumination on the dehumanizing aspects of monopolistic and oligarchic companies. Hailed by the director himself as “a blue-collar sci-fi” (*Blunt*), the film plays out as an intelligent critique on neo-Marxism's potential to frame a counter-narrative to advanced Capitalism in a world overrun by technological gadgets. Whereas classical Marxist thought deals with across-the-board class inequalities and the exploitation resulting from class hierarchies, neo-Marxism deals mostly with the monopolistic and oligarchic nature of Capitalism.

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It is not to be supposed that neo-Marxism entails an outright rejection of Marx's ideas. For instance, Jacques Derrida, in his *Spectres of Marx*, even while critiquing Marxist theory for its messianic tone and inability to live up to contemporary reality, acknowledges the importance of Marx. He says: "There will be no future without this. Not without Marx, no future without Marx, without the memory and the inheritance of Marx: in any case of a certain Marx, of his genius, of at least one of his spirits" (32-33). Despite the pseudo-Marxist ideologies purveyed by the state apparatus, Derrida finds in Marxism an irreducible kernel of truth. It is this kernel that neo-Marxists take upon themselves to preserve and defend vehemently. However, unlike classical Marxism whose central failing has been the promise of liberation at a particular point in history, neo-Marxism does not overtly subscribe to the prospect of utopias appearing at any historical terminus. Moreover, it incorporates several novel theorizations on technology that are adapted to the contemporary world. It is in addressing the role played by technology in modern societies that neo-Marxism really makes a break with classical Marxism. It argues that capital has penetrated into the entire society by technological means to such an extent that the political repercussions arising thereby cannot be ruled out.

While dealing with the question of technology, neo-Marxism is extremely cautious to avoid the traps classical Marxism set for itself in the past. Karl Marx's declaration in *The Poverty of Philosophy* that "The handmill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist" (109) has been interpreted by many neo-Marxists as an aphoristic rendering of technological determinism. To be a technological determinist is to believe firmly that technological change has a greater role to play in social change than any of the other variables. Although there is not much in Marx's writings to warrant a deterministic interpretation of technology, economists like Alvin Hansen have categorically concluded that Marxism entails a technological interpretation of history.

Neo-Marxism, in a move to distance itself from Marxism, attempts to turn technological determinism on its head by invoking the urgency of regaining human autonomy in response to the exponential growth of technology. It takes for granted the deleterious effects accruing from automations and matches the idea of technology as dependency against human control as emancipation within a dialectical schema. Whereas classical Marxism is fairly enthusiastic about the ability of technology to produce radical social change, neo-Marxists, following the revisionist Marxism of Herbert Marcuse and others of the Frankfurt school, claim that the popular picture of a neutral and value-free technology is inherently flawed and that technology is never above social and political differences.

Many neo-Marxists nowadays claim that instead of bringing about liberation as promised, digital technologies have enslaved the masses. The most pronounced effect of

this digital servility, they argue, is seen in the progressive attrition of human autonomy. They seek to prevent the impending doom of humankind at the hands of intelligent machines by calling upon policy makers and scientists to adapt technologies to the long-term benefits of the human race rather than investing in forms of technology over which their human masters will have minimal control. One problem with this approach is the dualism it gives rise to. By viewing technology as positioned at the vanguard of totalitarian Capitalism, neo-Marxism creates a rift in human-technology relations and obscures the fact that technology is a constitutive force for human beings. It ignores the importance of conceptualizing technology as an essential part of our ontology and not as something that remains distinct from it. In this respect, it is yet to formulate a counter-response to Capitalism that does not involve regression or technophobia. By reducing computing technologies to the status of mere purveyors of capitalism, neo-Marxism emphasizes the pressing need to separate humans from technology in a manner that makes us question whether it is not snidely reactivating classical Marxism's preoccupation with technological determination. If so, neo-Marxism, though outwardly unwilling to acknowledge the superior role played by technology in effecting social change, is actually trying to foreclose the possibility of machine takeover in the name of regaining human autonomy.

It is exactly the failure of this neo-Marxist ideal of extricating humans from technology that *Lapsis* portrays through a proletarian revolution that is quietly foiled at the end despite all indications to the contrary. Combining elements of wry humour, slapstick, and the pastoral, the film weaves a narrative that is a bit slow-paced yet very compelling throughout. The film depicts an immediate future where the "gig economy" enjoys an unprecedented boom, thanks to the quantum revolution. The "gig economy" refers to markets revolving around short-term, on-demand, occasional, and task-based labour. What differentiates the gig economy from previous categories of short-term labour is its breadth of scope and scale, embrace of various kinds of industry, low-barrier entry, and the dependence on digital technologies including app-based digital platforms that "actively facilitate direct matching between providers and customers on a short-term and payment by task basis" (Broughton4).

The film's protagonist is an ex-delivery driver Ray Tincelli (Dean Imperial), whose beefy physique complemented by a frowsy appearance gives vibes of the 70s mobster type. A died-in-the-bone luddite, Ray is inducted into the world of quantum computing by his friend Felix (James McDaniel), who is engaged in a number of shady dealings. It is not the lure of windfall gains that persuades Ray to take up cabling as such, but the debilitating condition known as "Omnia" suffered by his half-brother (Babe Howard). A form of chronic fatigue, Omnia leaves him with barely any energy between normal chores and confines him to the bed most of the time.

When the film begins, Ray is shown as struggling to keep his delivery gig at the

airport. It is clear from the outset that Ray represents the obsolescence of the working classes who refuse to swim with the changing tide of technology. The film gives us the first glimpse of Ray's redundancy in the new world when he gets a ticket for not parking his vehicle in accordance with the instructions mentioned in the new parking calendar. Ray, who claims that he checked the standard calendar for parking instructions, gets a curt reply from the traffic enforcer: he is told that it is only quantum calendars that give the correct dates and that he should buy a new system to stay ahead of the game.

Felix hooks Ray up with a "cabling medallion" on condition that he receive a cut of the profits periodically and without fail. Consequently, Ray attends a walk-in interview along with a somewhat shy guy (cableers are supposed to turn up for the interview in pairs). He is reassured by one of the girls at the interview site that everyone passes easily. The simplistic nature of the interview comprising an introductory video on quantum cabling followed by an easy-to-crack written test and a physical check acts as a send-up of the recruiting protocols of many of the present-day sweatshops whose focus is on quantity rather than quality. It is revealed later that under the pretext of a physical examination the company was actually compiling a detailed genetic profile of its employees to guard against possible infractions during cabling spells.

The medallion, which is nothing more than a GPS-activated digital device showing the employees' point level and other relevant personal information, becomes the hub around which the plot rotates. It assigns employees cabling routes and gives information regarding the rewards a particular route will fetch them. It also notifies them when to take breaks between work and attempts to boost their performance through pseudo-motivational messages like "Challenge your status quo" and "Time to continue your adventure" (*Lapsis*). Whereas novices are assigned territory that is relatively easy to hike, more experienced cableers have to sweat blood to complete their routes. Hiking through dense forest cover and potentially hostile territory, the cableers are followed by a reptilian-looking robot whose plodding gait invites parallels with the parable of "the hare and the tortoise." The catch is that once the cableers are passed by these automated carts, they have to catch up or reconcile themselves to kissing their rewards goodbye. The fact that the enervating schedule makes most of the cableers fall asleep on the way and get passed by the carts in the process works in favour of the company which can then disown its "erring" employees. The company also prosecutes its workforce that attempts to sabotage the draconian rules that guide its operations. Security personnel can haul employees away to forbidding dungeons and hold mock-military trials whose outcomes are mired in conjecture.

On the first day of his job, Felix is taken in a taxi by some of the other employees to the garage of a suburban home located at 54 Mayberry where the company keeps its cabling gear. When Felix expresses surprise at the company choosing such an offhand approach to its storage needs, he receives the disarming answer that the company keeps its transport

costs low by renting garages near work sites through an online bidding system. When the batch reaches the Allegheny State Park where a transistor having the proportions of a monolith squats in the middle of a patch of grass, Ray is assigned the name "LapsisBeeftech." Although Ray does not think twice about the quizzical name he is given, he receives a number of unfriendly stares from fellow cablers. On one occasion, the cablers he camps with at night renege on their promise to invite him to breakfast on knowing that he is "LapsisBeeftech". On another, an old cabler grows enraged over realizing he was having supper with "LapsisBeeftech" and proceeds to fulminate against him. The film does not reveal the significance of the name at this stage, but the cobbling together of "lapsis" with its implications of a "lapse" or "mistake" and "beeftech" which smashes together "beef" signifying "materiality" and "tech" meaning "technology" is bound to give the viewers a few premonitory tremors.

Ray has to string miles of cable through the boscage despite having received no practical training in this regard. His incipient rotundity, with its implications of a high-calorie diet and the lack of much-needed exercise—the trademarks of the burgeoning middleclass—causes him to take temporary breaks, but the automated cart follows him around with a doggedness verging on the voyeuristic. Having entered his brother in "Barr-Crider", a facility specializing in the treatment of "Omnia", Ray decides to move heaven and earth to complete his route and earn enough money to save his brother and break out of his middleclass lifestyle. The film does not reveal much about Omnia other than that it induces chronic fatigue in those affected by it. More of a lifestyle disease than a regular ailment, Omnia inverts the middle-class pattern of frenetic consumerism and aggressive mobility. It might be that Noah Hutton wanted his viewers to visualize the flip side of the demands of hyperactivity and insomnia our media-saturated world makes on us with its round-the-clock persistence. It is also no wonder that clinics like Barr-Crider resort to phony treatments with esoteric names like "magnesium acoustics" to cure Omnia, which might after all be the side effect of the human constitution reacting against the procrustean regimen of long bouts of work followed by hard partying and relentless calorie-burning exercises.

As the latest iteration of grunt work, the cabling industry is reliant on cheap labour for meeting its ostensibly professional needs. The company keeps its employees in line by forcing them to sign a Non-Disclosure Statement and by threatening them with non-payment and possible incarceration should they dare to go against its established practices. Though Ray does not learn the basics of quantum computing even after completing his first route, he gets to learn that the company prospers by exploiting its cheap and expendable workforce. Ray's question to the girl who sets him up with the written test during the interview is very relevant here. He asks her if quantum cabling is safe for humans and is not quite convinced when she answers perfunctorily that it is absolutely without any known health hazards. The film does take its viewers back to the

implications of Ray's question time and again. Signboards giving warnings of very powerful magnetic fields near the transistors flash past us with fleeting ominousness. But the fact that no one other than Ray actually pauses to ruminate on their significance indicates the extent to which the employees have been indoctrinated by the company. Another momentous discovery that Ray makes is that his medallion which already contains thousands of points once belonged to the real "LapsisBeeftech" who might be one of the reasons the employees have to work under constant surveillance.

Ray makes still more startling discoveries when he stumbles into Anna (Madeline Wise), a veteran cabler who spends half the year cabling and the rest living life on her terms before returning to work the next year. Anna and Ray have a debate on the unscrupulous methods employed by companies like CABLR for maximizing their profits. Ray, who believes that a healthy competitive environment is essential for the job market to boom, is given the lie by Anna when she makes the revelation that all the cabling companies in operation are in fact owned by a blanket company and that the semblance of completion is really a cover-up for a blatant monopoly. The surge of cabling has also given birth to an assortment of other businesses prominent among which is the lineup of "Gen stores" selling essential supplies to cablers in return for cash or accumulated points. The darker side of the boom is represented by a group of juvenile delinquents who ambush the cablers for their expensive gear and money. They are the offspring of disgruntled seasonal workers whose jobs have been put at risk by the advent of cabling.

Things come to a head when Ray makes the serendipitous discovery that an audio trigger found in the original programming code can switch off the automated carts without alerting the authorities. He breaks his brother out of Barr-Crider, and along with Anna, instigates the workers to revolt against the system of surveillance and press for more employee freedoms and benefits. The scene where all the cablers gather in a sort of pastoral setting to discuss the modus operandi of their rebellion is emblematic of Marx's injunction to the workers of the world to unite. Led by Anna and Ray, they proceed to turn off the automated carts by playing an auditory sequence recorded on Ray's medallion (the one that belonged to the original Lapsis).

The cablers have a brief moment of success when all the automated carts are shut down and they are freed of the rigour of their schedule. They slip into a self-congratulatory mode and the authorities are also alarmed. With the system having broken down, NooriCapahardi, the new CEO of CABLR, summons John, the original Lapsis who began his career as an ordinary cabler and then ascended the managerial hierarchy by selling out his co-workers. He now runs a company called "Half Moon Naturals" specializing in natural remedies for ailments like Omnia. John confesses his ignorance regarding any auditory triggers that can switch off the automated carts he helped to design and the Noori shows him an aerial photograph of Anna whom she says might be

behind the sabotage. John, who is revealed to be Anna's father, lies that he does not know her. The evening news rhapsodizes on the success of the workers' revolt against CABLR for securing greater protections even as the share prices of cabling companies nosedive on the Wall Street. Basking in the glory of all this is Anna, Ray, and his brother, all three of which now engage in banter followed by a facetious pillow fight.

At this stage, the audience expects the management to have accepted defeat and knuckled under to the cablers' demands since there is no possible way in which they can leverage the situation now. What Hutton reinforces here is Marx's belief in the dynamic role played by the proletariat as an agent of historical transformation. It seems as though the internal contradictions of the Capitalist system represented by quantum cabling that at the same time promises more jobs and threatens the automation of work processes, have lashed the workers into fury and awakened their class consciousness to stage a seizure of power. But then the camera shifts to the highway where an automated cart that somehow evaded the attention of the cablers crawls back to the garage at 54 Mayberry where the same householder who balked at Ray's use of the charging port plugs it in. As the cart lights up, ominous music strikes up and the screen cuts to black with the implication that the neo-Marxist revolution whose wheels have been set in motion is at best short-lived.

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Fantasizing as a Strategy of Resistance in Anjum Hasan's *Lunatic in my Head*, Sangeetha G's *Drop of the Last Cloud* and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess*

Abstract

Though people generally associate resistance with revolutionary upheaval and open combat, James C. Scott's theory of everyday resistance opened the scope of resistance to include even subtle and innocuous acts of protests and subversion that may not essentially lead to a change in the system of oppression. Engaging in resistance enables people to reclaim a sense of self and is a psychological defense when faced with traumatic realities. Everyday resistance can also include acts like flight and evasion because when the subordinates evade or attempt to escape the hegemonic system, it impairs the operation of power. Fantasizing has been found to be a strategy of everyday resistance because it is basically an attempt to escape from an unpleasant reality when an open confrontation or rejection is impossible. If fantasies help people survive when no other option is available it can amount to an everyday resistance tactic because when subversion or opposition is not possible escape can be a viable option. The three novels taken for study are drawn from three different cultural contexts. While Anjum Hasan's work has its setting in Meghalaya, Sangeetha G's novel is set in Kerala and Burnett's work in London. The protagonists of the three works face various kinds of oppressions and do not have the agency to openly resist the system. The novels explore situations where the characters fantasize another life and identity to survive their unpleasant realities. Though these fantasies do not change their reality they do help them survive the reality. Since in certain situations existence itself can amount to resistance, if fantasies make existence possible it can be seen as an act of resistance.

Keywords: power, James C. Scott, everyday resistance, fantasy, evasion, psychological defense

Though people generally associate resistance with revolutionary upheaval and open combat, James C. Scott's theory of everyday resistance opened the scope of resistance to include even subtle and innocuous acts of protests and subversion that may not essentially lead to a change in the system of oppression. The efficacy of the act in bringing about a change in reality is not considered to identify an act as one of resistance. As Scott claims, "even a failed revolt may achieve something: a few concessions from the state or landlords, a brief respite from new and painful relations of production and, not least, a memory of resistance and courage that may lie in wait for the future" (Scott, *Weapons* 29).

While discussing the everyday resistance strategies employed by peasants in a feudal society in Malaysia, Scott identifies acts like "foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage etc." (Weapons, 29) as the ordinary weapons of the subordinate groups. What makes these acts relatively safe is either the anonymity of the actor or the invisibility of the act. Since they do not require the subordinate groups to openly challenge power, they are adopted more often by all classes of people.

Everyday resistance can also include acts like flight and evasion because when the subordinates evade or attempt to escape the hegemonic system, it impairs the operation of power. Everyday resistance is not just the collective act of subversion the subordinates indulge in, but also the individual innocuous acts adopted by people in their everyday confrontation with power. Engaging in resistance enables people to reclaim a sense of self and achieve a psychological release when faced with traumatic realities. Franz Fanon asserts that active resistance as opposed to passive suffering has a substantial role in helping people survive oppression. Judith Lewis Herman in her book *Trauma and Recovery* suggests the same when she says that it is the victim who fails to resist oppression unlike the subject who in some way actively engages in resistance, who becomes subjected to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Resistance disregarding its results is positive because it enables people to reclaim a sense of self and agency.

Fantasizing has been found to be a strategy of everyday resistance because it is basically an attempt to escape from an unpleasant reality when an open confrontation or rejection is impossible. Fantasies are stronger than daydreams because they are more goal oriented and willful but both are potential strategies of resistance. Though they do involve mental if not physical transgression they are at the same time adjustment strategies adopted in stressful situations and can be seen as a psychological defense as well. Daydreams can be seen as *la perruque*, a term Michel de Certeau uses for time-theft. De Certeau explains the concept by taking the example of an employee who uses his/her office time to write a love letter. Daydreams become *la perruque* when an employee uses the office hours for daydreaming while pretending to be at work. While an open violation of the rules would invite the wrath of the superiors, the transgression through fantasies and daydreams would allow one to maintain one's mental equilibrium without getting marked as a rebel to the system. Daydreams/Fantasies can be cathartic and can enable a mental escape of the spatial and temporal limits of oppressive reality. As Scott declares, fantasies are artful negations of domination (Scott, *Domination* 44). Talking in the context of a stratified social order Scott points out that not only individuals but even subordinate groups can have collective fantasies of a more favourable and pleasing reality. Such collective fantasies of a more egalitarian social order may even in course of time lead to collective revolts or to a resistant subculture.

Even if fantasies do not lead to a visible change in any system or reality, if it helps people

survive when no other option is available it can amount to an everyday resistance tactic because when subversion or opposition is not possible escape can be a viable option. Studies reveal that daydreams can work as stress relievers allowing people to emerge with a clearer and lighter mood. "Daydreaming allows your mind to wander and forget about reality for a short time. This attribute alone can help you keep your sanity when you are going through some rough times. By allowing yourself to escape from stressful situations, you can return to the situation with a new attitude and possibly even a solution to the problem that may be causing the stress." (Hagy). Besides being stress relievers, daydreams/fantasies can help one manage conflicts by allowing one to prepare oneself for a situation by visualizing future scenarios.

Anjum Hasan's *Lunatic in my Head* (2007) presents situations that expose how fantasies become strategies of resistance. The plot is set in Meghalaya and explores the issues of belongingness and reverse racism the *dkhars* (outsiders) face in Meghalaya. Infiltration from neighbouring countries has been a serious cause of concern for the natives which has resulted in xenophobic violence. If it is the North-Easterners who have been victims of racism outside their states, the non-natives face similar discrimination in the North-East. Paramjit Bakshi, in his article "I, Dkhar" while highlighting the absence of any laws to protest and safeguard the interest of the minority community in the North-East, points out how the outsider remains forever the outsider despite all their efforts to imbibe and mimic the cultural practices of these states. "My features brand me an outsider and no amount of intermingling will make me an acceptable local. Even if I were to attend church, wear a *tapmohkhlieh* (a traditional Khasi shawl) and chew Kwai (local betel nut) habitually, some strangers would just have to say 'wat krendkhar' (keep quiet, outsider) and I would have no acceptable retort" (Bakshi 144).

Anjum Hasan's novel attempts to bring to the forefront these less discussed issues of reverse racism in the North-East by placing three non-native settlers in Meghalaya at the centre of the narrative. Sophie Das, the eight year old girl born to non-native parents is one of the three main characters. Sophie offers an interesting specimen of study. She portrays how a character battling multiple marginalisations on account of her race, gender and age confronts the issue of xenophobia. Sophie's situation of powerlessness doesn't allow her to openly fight against the discrimination that embitters her family ambience. Her father who has lost his job as a Professor of English finds it difficult to find another fitting position in colleges or universities owing to his identity as a *dkhar*. Since Mr. Das finds it difficult to be satisfied with anything less than a professorship, he is not ready to take up a job in private schools. The financial requirement of the family forces Mrs Das to run the house by taking tuition classes. Mr Das's joblessness and the addition of a new baby to the financially decrepit family causes further dishevelment and disharmony in the family. It is only because of the kindness shown by the Khasi landlady Kong Elisa that the family manages to continue staying as tenants despite the pending rents. But such instances of

kindness, as shown by the Khasi landlady, are otherwise rare. Despite her young age, Sophie is sensitive to the tension looming large in the family. Fantasizing becomes Sophie's resistance tactic that allows her to survive her depressing reality. Sophie who is displeased with the state of her family fantasizes a new identity for herself where she imagines herself as a character from a book she was reading, who is in control of her surroundings and has power to influence the lives of people around her unlike Sophie who is devoid of the power even to control her own life. "She imagined herself like Anna- in charge of the house, deciding things like who could cut off the cat's whiskers. She hoped the baby would come soon. That, at least, would be something. She longed to hold it and stand in the garden, like she had seen her neighbours do on summer afternoons with their babies." (Hasan 48)

Sophie elaborates the plot of her fantasy by adding details about how she was adopted by Mr and Mrs Das. It comforts her to imagine that she doesn't belong to this broken and insipid family but rather to a more pleasant and stable family. Sophie also narrates her fantasies to her friends as if they were real which makes them appear more convincing to herself.

During lunch break, Sophie announced to Deepthi and Ibahun that she was adopted... "My father is not my real father. He's my uncle. He doesn't know my name is Anna. And I know who my real parents are... My real mother is dead, said Sophie, "she died long back, but my father is not dead," He comes to our house sometimes. He always wears a raincoat, even when it's not raining."

"What's his name?" asked Deepthi impatiently through a mouthful of fried rice. "Uncle Syiem", said Sophie, reeling off the first name that came to her mind.

Uncle Syiem was a benign septuagenarian, a friend of her parents. He ran a bookshop in Police Bazaar and had never been seen wearing a raincoat. (Hasan 88)

The discrimination Sophie faces as a non-native also makes her want to escape from the depressing reality of being an outsider and a person of no consequence. One such situation that makes Sophie extremely aware of her condition happens when Sophie is asked to accompany Kong Elisa to a Khasi wedding. Sophie feels very uncomfortable at this prospect right from the outset because she is aware of the oddity of finding a *dkhar* girl accompanying a Khasi woman. Even as a child, Sophie is able to make out the purport of the strange glances people throw at the duo. Sophie's apprehensions are proven true when the Khasi girls who serve tea at the wedding purposefully neglect her for being a *dkhar* girl. Sophie finds the Khasi girls giggling for having shown the *dkhar* her rightful place. The incident causes Sophie to feel ashamed of having become the object of the Khasi girls' ridicule.

She was ashamed that people decided not to give her food at a party, that they brazenly pointed her out as a joke to be enjoyed, or looked at her with that slight expression of distaste around their mouths. Her throat hurt with the weight of unshed tears. She tried to ignore the two girls and look elsewhere, focus on the faces that were neutral, involved in their own talk and laughter. (Hasan 98)

After the embarrassing incident at the wedding Sophie feels that nothing would be more fulfilling than being a Khasi. She imagines how the reality would have been different if she were a Khasi girl. Sophie's fantasies allow her to combat the depressing reality of her life and she is found to modify and chisel them as per her needs.

Towards the conclusion of Hasan's novel, there is a favourable change in Sophie's situation. Her father becomes more practical and takes up a teaching position in a school bringing more financial stability to the family, her mother is no more pregnant and therefore resumes her duties in the household, Kong Elisa is dead and Sophie no longer has to attend uninvited Khasi weddings. Sophie's reality becomes more manageable and therefore she doesn't have to dwell much in the imaginary world she conjures. Looking at the hills where she imagined her real home she finds her fantasy fading. "She looked at the hill and the house in the foreground. It was not her house. In its place was a large three-storied green building with bright red grilles on its windows and a flat roof." (Hasan 328). Therefore in the context of the novelfantasy emerges as a resistance tactic a *dkhar* girl adopts within her limited space of power and freedom to confront the problems of her life.

Sangeetha G's novel *The Last Drop of Cloud* (2023) is the coming of age story of Gomathi, a Nair woman in early 20th century Kerala when Nair matrilineal families were eroding giving place to modern nuclear families. Gomathi's birth is declared inauspicious by an astrologer causing her to be seen as an ill omen even by her mother. Being an unwanted child, Gomathi is sent away to live under the cruel tutelage of her paternal grandmother who treats her no better than an errand girl. It was the period when the freedom that defined women's sexuality in Nair families was getting replaced by Victorian morality and prudery. Gomathi who had faced nothing but rejection since her birth tries to gain validation and acceptance from others by leading a life of self-denial and moral uprightness. By living for others as an ideal woman of infallible qualities she is forced to forgo her love for Madhavan and marries Govindan, the man chosen by her grandmother. Unable to find love in her marriage, Gomathi starts weaving a world of fantasies where she imagines herself in Madhavan's company. These fantasies enable Gomathi to negotiate her life in the unpleasant real world in which she is trapped. "With him, she visited new unseen lands, met people of different shapes and sizes, saw mountains of the northeastern region...The young love-seeking girl within Gomathi had found a new world." (Sangeetha 96)

In fact it is these fantasies that help Gomathi maintain her sanity when she was falling into depression. "There was a remarkable improvement in Gomathi's mental state and general health. She looked cheerful and was taking care of herself." (Sangeetha 96). Though the romantic fantasies Gomathi conjures do not alter her reality, they definitely alleviate the pain of her hopeless reality. "She had been living two lives-one in the real world and one in dreams. The happiness she derived from those dreams helped her survive in the real world." (116)

Frances Hodgson Burnett's novella, *A Little Princess*, also depicts how a little girl, Sara Carew, uses fantasies to face the problems of her real life. In the first half of the novella when Sara is portrayed as a lonely daughter of a rich father, her fantasies centre on dreams of having a live doll for a friend and such other plots to battle her loneliness. Later when Sara's dad dies leaving her penniless, she is immediately shifted from the luxurious chamber allotted to her at Miss Minchin's to the dark attic space and is demoted to the status of an errand girl. Even when her life situation undergoes such drastic changes Sara is not broken and demoralized. She alters her fantasies to heal the new wounds of her life. She starts to imagine herself as a princess in disguise or a prisoner in Bastille and such other scenarios that make her life interesting and make her feel as if she is living a story. She also shares her fantasies with Becky, the servant girl, and her friend Ermengarde. When she shares the fantasies with them they become more convincing to herself.

Fantasy can be taken as an everyday resistance act only as long as the people who use the fantasies have the reins of control in their hands. Though uncontrolled fantasies can become a psychological disorder like schizophrenia, in the case of the protagonists of the novels taken for study, it has only a positive impact in helping them adapt to the bitter reality of their lives. In Sophie's case too it helps her temporarily escape the depressing reality of her life. Though escapism may not be a healthy resistance tactic, Scott considers escapism as an effective strategy if it enables survival when other doors are closed. Fantasizing thus can become a psychological disorder only when it is uncontrolled and interferes with everyday life activities. Therefore, as Scott highlighted it is the context and the purpose that enables one to identify an act as one of resistance.

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Performance of Religious Rituals and the Making of Histories : A Critique of *Muthappankalam*

Introduction

Religious rituals are a remarkable constituent of the spectrum of cultural performances. They are reflective and reflexive of the culture. Culture, as Richard Schechner points out, is a paradigm of process. It is hence fluid and multi-vocal. Academics from various disciplines, including ritual studies, addressed rituals as hegemonic instruments of diverse socio-cultural institutions. This function is carried out by creating mystic or fanciful events. The paper "Performance of Religious Rituals and the Making of Histories: A Critique of Muthappankalam" analyses the performance of muthappankalam, a religious ritual practiced among certain Hindu communities in Kerala as a means of ancestor worship. The article particularly looks into two instances of muthappankalam performed in two coastal villages in the Thrissur district of Kerala. Both of them were performed as commissioned by two families who belong to a fishermen community called Araya.

Objective

The current study aims to examine the role that the performance of muthappankalam plays in the history-making process regarding the families or community concerned.

Research Methodology

Ritual analysis from a performance perspective facilitates understanding the myriad effects of a ritual and the means of generating cultural paradigms since the major concern of performance studies is what a performance does more than what it is. The ritual's process, structure, and function are analysed using the performance lens.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that while helping to maintain solidarity among the family or community, the practice of muthappankalam contributes to the construction of a mystic past for the family or community concerned. This mystic past is carried over to generations through the annual performance of the ritual. Consequently, it erases the 'actual' past or history of the family or community and constructs a new one that begins only from the Chera period. Moreover, this 'newly' constructed mystic past upholds social hierarchy. Thus, the ritual ensures the conscious or unconscious internalisation of social hierarchy and the lowered status of the community concerned.

Keywords: Cultural Performance, Religious Ritual, Mystic past, History-making, Muthappankalam

Introduction

Religious homogenisation among Hindus in contemporary India is on a faster track than ever before. Kerala also witnesses the same. Though it is more explicit and political now, it is undeniable that the process was always active at various levels. This process takes place through numerous elements such as homogenisation or standardisation of rituals and rites, restoration or renovation of old temples and construction of new temples at the spaces used for 'extra-temple' worship, employing Brahmin priests to regulate and guide temples and related activities irrespective of communities who own them, assimilations in ceremonies and festival activities etc. The long term impact of all these attempts is the reconsolidation of social hierarchy in accordance with the *Varna* system. Religious rituals have a significant role in the unacknowledged normalisation of this system.

Religious rituals are a remarkable constituent of the spectrum of cultural performances. They are reflective and reflexive of the culture. Culture, as Richard Schechner noted in the preface to Victor Turner's *The Anthropology of Performance*, is a "paradigm of process" (8). It is hence fluid and multi-vocal. Academics from various disciplines, including ritual studies, addressed rituals as hegemonic instruments of diverse socio-cultural institutions. This function is carried out by creating mystic or fanciful events. The current study analyses the performance of *Muthappankalam*, a religious ritual practiced among certain Hindu communities in Kerala as a means of ancestor worship. The article particularly looks into two instances of *Muthappankalam* performed in two coastal villages in the Thrissur district of Kerala. Both of them were commissioned by two families who belong to a fishing community called Araya and performed under the guidance of Mannan priests. The ritual is analysed from a performance perspective to understand the role that the practice of the ritual plays in the history-making process regarding the families or community concerned.

Muthappankalam: Structure, Process, and Function

Muthappankalam is the *Kalamezhuthupattu* offered to the ancestor 'deities' in central Kerala. *Muthappan* is a general term used to denote an ancestor. The ritual is performed as part of annual events held at family temples or ancestor homesteads among certain communities of lowered status. Though different communities can commission the ritual, the right to perform it is vested in certain marginalised communities such as Mannan, Velan, etc. The whole performance is uniquely comprised of different art forms such as drawing, music, dance, and 'drama.'

The ritual begins with *koora kodukkal*. *Koora* is a long cloth, either red or white in colour, given to the priest by the eldest member of the family that commissions the ritual.

The priest spreads it above the *panthal* (canopy) in the east-west direction under which the *kalam* is to be drawn. *Kalam* is the image of the ancestor that is drawn on the ground using natural powders of five colours: white, black, red, green, and yellow. The artists may prepare desired colours by combining these powders. The image can either be a portrait (*roopakkalam*) or a symbolic geometric representation (*padmam*). If more than one ancestor is worshipped in a single *kalam*, then the *kalam* will be a combination of the two. Both the instances taken for analysis here are combinations of *roopakkalam* and *padmam*. An oil lamp with burning wicks is placed on one side accordingly. A coconut on a small heap of paddy in a plantain leaf is kept near to the lamp. A panicle of areca palm is placed on the coconut. The *panthal* is decorated with tender coconut leaves, garlands, mango leaves, and all. Once the drawing is completed, four more oil lamps are placed on each side of the *kalam*. Then eight small heaps of rice and paddy in plantain leaves are kept around the *kalam*. It is an offering to the Guardians of the Directions (*Ashtadikpalakar*). *Muthappan's* possessions, cane stick and anklet, are also kept on small platforms (*peedam*) accordingly. Betel leaves, tobacco, and areca nuts are also offered.

The Second stage of the ritual is *kalampooja*. Once the arrangements are done accordingly, the priest gives a panicle of areca palm to a person from the family for a symbolic cleaning of the surroundings of the *kalam*. This person is the one who is supposed to be possessed by *Muthappan(s)*. He is called *kalathil kaimal* or *komaram*. After getting the priest's blessing, he sweeps all sides of the *kalam* and sprinkles water to 'purify' the space. Then he performs the first stage of *pooja* as directed by the priest. The *pooja* is performed to give life to the image. After this, the *kalamkaiyyelkkal* is performed. It is the formal handing over of the *kalam* to the *kalathil kaimal* by the priest. Then he gives *dakshina* to the priest and the priest blesses him. Then the next stage of the *pooja* is performed using water (*theertdham*), sandal paste (*chandanam*), flowers (*pushpam*), incense (*dhoomam*), and lighted wicks (*agni*). *Thiriyuzhichil* is also performed. Instruments like *chenda* (native drum) are also played in the background.

The third stage is the performance of *Thottampattu*. The priest and his team sing the invoking song with the accompaniment of native instruments. Blessings of most of the major deities in the Hindu pantheon and their regional incarnations are sought in the beginning section of the song. Then the narration moves on to details of the context of *Muthappan(s)*'s birth, childhood, and education. After narrating *Muthappan(s)*'s naming ceremony, the *pooja* is repeated for once. Then they narrate *Muthappan(s)*'s childhood, his enthusiasm for learning, his journeys to become a master of occult science, his return to home, and the installation of various deities at their homestead as their family deities. Then the final stage of *pooja* is performed.

The final stage of the ritual is possession. Once the song comes to a closure by inviting *Muthappan(s)* to possess someone to accept the offerings and bless the family,

instrumental music gets intensified and the final stage of *pooja* is performed at once. During the *pooja*, the *komaram* (oracle) gets possessed by *Muthappan(s)*. The possessed person erases the *kalam* and delivers a dance-like performance in frenzy and is called *Muthappanthullal*, meanwhile, he also dismantles the canopy and removes the *koora*. He may use the cane stick and anklet during the dance. The 'drama' part begins by this time. Men who gathered there settle him down by pouring water onto his head. They make him wear a new white cloth (*kodimundu*) on his demand. Then the person in trance sits on the ground. He is served with tender coconut to drink and betel leaves, tobacco, and areca nut to chew. When he attains a comparatively stable position, *Muthappan(s)*'s favourite dishes are kept in front of him on his demand. He calls the elder member of the family to talk. The family member presents their needs and worries to their ancestor. *Muthappan(s)* ensure them that they will take care of everything and their wishes will be fulfilled. They express their satisfaction with the arrangements that the family made for him. They distribute the *prasadam* (dishes offered to them) to the family members and some random spectators. With a final session of frenzied dance with the cane stick and anklet, *Muthappan(s)* leave *komaram*'s body. Thus the ritual ends.

In Schechner's view, ritual is "a way for people to connect to a collective, to remember or construct a mystic past, to build social solidarity, and to form or maintain a community" (87). He has also observed the functions of rituals as to entertain, to create beauty, to mark or change identity, to make or foster community, to heal, to teach or persuade, and to deal with the sacred and the demonic (46). Religious rituals often play multiple functions that can both be explicit and implicit. *Muthappankalam* is performed to make the family's ancestor(s) happy and it is believed that their satisfaction will safeguard the living members and usher prosperity upon the family. Members of the family gather for this annual ritual and unanimously work for the success of the occasion. This contributes to the solidarity of the family. The ritual provides a sense of security, both psychological and spiritual. It is the primary or explicit function of the ritual. The song, *Thottampattu*, serves as a reminder of the prosperous past of the family. Through this, a moment of pride is mediated to the participants. Being a backward community, this moment plays a significant role in their identity formation.

A temporary reversal of power hierarchy regarding caste can also be seen in the ritual. The families who commissioned the ritual belong to a fishing community called Araya and the priests are from the Mannan community. Araya is a backward caste and Mannan is a scheduled caste. In the ritual, the former has to seek blessings from the latter by touching their feet and the latter plays the most significant role in the spiritual and mindful existence of the former. The Dalit priest becomes 'guru' of the family. Thus the ritual temporarily empowers the Dalit community.

A crucial function that is carried out through the ritual is the construction of a mystic past. This mystic past is carried over to generations as a consequence of the annual

rendition of the same. This takes the form of a problematic oral history of the people which is 'recorded' in their memory. In effect, it replaces their 'actual' past from their memory and makes them believe that this mystic past is the real one.

Historical Implications

The song(s) of contemporary *muthappankalam* has three parts. The first part is to invoke all the major deities of the Hindu pantheon and their regional incarnations, the ancestors, and the gurus. It begins with the Hindu concept of *thrimeoorthi* (trinity of supreme divinity) who is in charge of *srushti* (creation), *stdhithi* (preservation), and *samharam* (destruction). All of the living creatures along with the sky and the earth are also invoked. During this session, each of the major deities is mentioned in connection with the present temples concerned in central Kerala. They include Kodungallur Bhagavathi temple, Mukundapuram temple, Thiruvanchikkulam Shiva temple, Thriprayar Rama temple, Palappetti Bhagavathi temple, Irinjalakkuda Koodalmanikyam temple, Thirunavaya temple, and Thirumandhamkunnu temple. Along with them, deities such as Veerabhadran, Kandakarnan, Vethalam, Anthimahakalan, Vettaykkorumakan, Hanuman, Kappiri, Nayadi, Brahmarakshassu, and Serpent deities like Maninagam, Karinagam, Nagayakshi, and Nagarajavu are also mentioned.

One of the two instances taken for analysis was performed at a homestead in the village of Padinjare Vemballur in Kodungallur taluk and the other was performed at a family temple in the village of Nattika in Chavakkad taluk. Folklorists and scholars opine that the roots of the ritual can be traced back to the Sangam period (3 BCE to 3 CE). During the period, the regions concerned were under Chera rule and the kings were followers of Buddhism. It is also noted that Buddhism prevailed in Kerala during the reign of Ashoka (264-227 BC). Hinayana Buddhism was in practice until the sixth century and by the seventh century it was transformed into Mahayana Buddhism. Later, Vajrayana Buddhism evolved. Being one of the most important port towns in the south-western corner of the subcontinent, Kodungallur is a significant place regarding history, culture, and religions. The region was a major centre of Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam in Kerala. All of the temples mentioned in the songs are as per their current status. Kodungallur temple is one of the major Bhadrakali temples in Kerala. In the song also, the deity is addressed as Bhadrakali, the daughter of Lord Shiva. At the same time, there is another prevalent myth regarding the deity – the Kannaki myth, which is closely related to the Jain-Buddhist past. Historians have observed that the temple was a Buddhist shrine and later it was integrated into Hinduism (C 32-33). Koodalmanikyam temple was a Jain temple and the Jain deity Bharateshwaran was assimilated as Bharata of the Hindu pantheon. Jainism was prevalent in South India until the seventh century. Shaiva and Vaishnava religions began to take over the position after this period (Panickassery 82). Ancestral worship and Mother (Goddess) worship have existed even before the flourishing of these religions including Shaktism in the region. Thirunavaya

temple was also a Buddhist shrine (Panickassery 94).

The second session of the song is the narration of *Muthappan's* birth and heroic life. Once the family achieves enough wealth, the ancestors wish to have an heir. Though both the families commissioned the ritual belong to a fishing community, nothing related to fishing or the sea is mentioned in the song. Instead, it is mentioned that they achieved prosperity through agrarian activities. The child(ren) was born to the couple(s) after several years of their marriage. Once they are born, the midwife blesses them so that they may see six Mamankam² and may live up to 128 years. Mamankam is observed as one of the contributions of Buddhism (Panickassery 94). One song is about one child (*Guru Muthappan*) and the other is about two (*Raman* and *Velappan*). There were three ancestors in the first *kalam*, but the narration doesn't tell anything about the life of the ancestors except *Guru Muthappan*. The parents celebrate their naming ceremony by inviting all of their relatives and the villagers. Before naming the kids, their father seeks suggestions from the elders, 'whether it should be Aryans' name, or Chozhans' name, or any other foreigners' name.' The elders confirm that what is most appropriate is to give them their own ancestors' names. Thus they name them *Guru* (first song), *Raman*, and *Velappan* (second song). This indicates that the people who lived in the region were familiar with Aryan, Chola, and other foreign people.

They are sent to an *ankakkalari* (school) at the age of seven. They were made to write "Harisree ganapathaaye" as an initiation ritual of learning. It is significant that in the early schools, i.e., during the Jain-Buddhist era, the initiation ceremony wasn't carried out by writing 'harisree' but with 'naanam monam.' It is the short form of 'namosthu jinathe'.³ Kerala witnessed drastic social transformations during the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries. That contributed to the formation of a unified Hindu religion based on the *Varna* system and the evolution of a hierarchical caste system during the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries. By establishing control over regional rulers, Brahmins became the sovereigns. Learning centres were set up in the model of Jain-Buddhist schools, but only Brahmins were allowed to learn. The lowered strata of society were restricted from getting educated under the Brahmin-centric rule. Hence it is obvious that *Muthappan* who belongs to the lowered strata got educated from either a Jain or Buddhist centre of learning. As per the song, *Muthappan(s)* learn the scripts of languages such as Aryan, Chola, Vattezhuthu, Neelezhuthu, and Malayalam. As they were not satisfied with the language learning, they learned *Kalarippayattu* from there itself. They return home after mastering the martial art. When their parents ask them about the lessons they have mastered, they sing the songs of Thirumandhamkунnu bhagavati, three deities of Thirsshivaperur⁴, Thiruvanchikkulam Mahadevan (Shiva), Kali of Kodungallurkkavu.

²Mamankam was a twelve-yearly medieval festival held on the banks of Bharathappuzha at Thirunavaya of the present Malappuram district.

³A closely related usage, 'naaneem moneem' still exists in the region which roughly means intelligence and consciousness. It is generally used to describe someone who doesn't know basic things.

⁴Vadakkumathan temple, Thiruvampady temple, and Paramekkavu temple are denoted here.

Among the abovementioned temples, Thiruvanchikkulam Temple was built by the Cheras in the Kodungallur region. Historians have observed that Thrissur Vadakkumnathan temple and Kodungallur temple were Buddhist shrines. Kodungallur region was the capital of the Chera Empire and it was known as Mahodayapuram. Jain and Buddhist schools were also located in the region. Ilanko Adikal, the author of *Chilappathikaram*, lived in Thrikkanamathilakam in the same region⁷. He was a Jain and the work was originally written in Tamil. The language mentioned as Aryan here can be Sanskrit or Pali or both. The Chola/Chozha language is Tamil. *Vattezhuthu* was the ancient form of Tamil and Malayalam script. Later it was developed into *Kolezhuthu* and finally the modern Malayalam script in Kerala.

At the age of sixteen, *Muthappan(s)* expressed their enthusiasm to learn *mantra* and *tantra* for which they went to Pandya kingdom by leaving *Cheraman cherumalayalam* (Chera Empire). After mastering *mantra* and *tantra*, they met the deity *Ottamulachi* of Kalladikode (Palakkad district). They tell her that they are still not satisfied and wish to capture 21000 deities for special worship. She tests them to know whether they are skilful enough for that. Being happy with their determination and courage, she blesses them granting their wish. She instructs them to place the deities accordingly following *adhama* for those who are supposed to be treated in that way and *utthama* for those who are supposed to be treated in that way. In *adhama* custom of worship, liquor, and meat are used as offerings, and animal sacrifice is also performed. Neither liquor nor meat is used in *utthama* custom and sacrifice is performed symbolically. *Adhama* custom can be seen in Vajrayana Buddhism which was also known as Tantric Buddhism. Therefore, it can be argued that the tantric tradition of the lowered strata has its roots in Vajrayana Buddhism.

Muthappan(s) then visit pilgrim sites such as Pazhani, Madhura, Rameshwaram, and Gokarnam. On the way back, they visit Azhvanchery Thamprakkal to receive rightful honours. They return home and set up a sacred platform (*mullathara*) and a sacred grove (*kavu*) for the deities as directed by *Ottamulachi*. These deities turned out to be their family deities. Azhvanchery Thamprakkal was the feudal lord of Athavanad, and the titular head of Namboothiri Brahmins of Kerala. This indicates the community's submissiveness to the feudal system and the lordship of Azhvanchery Thamprakkal. It confirms the internalised social hierarchy based on caste. The hierarchical caste system in its modern form evolved after the decline of Chera rule and attained glory during the reign of Kulashekaras in the ninth century. The oral history of the family that is constructed and transmitted through the ritual doesn't acknowledge anything about either *Muthappan's* ancestors or their hereditary occupation. As per the narrative, *Muthappan*, the prodigy, was born and brought up in *Cheraman cherumalayalam*, but the conveyed image of the contemporary is as in the era of Kulashekaras. And it is all about Hindu and Hinduised deities, temples, pilgrim centres, and customs.

⁷Thrikkanamathilakam is also known as Vanchinadu and Kunavayir kottam. The term 'kottam' is used to denote non-Brahminic centres of worship.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that while helping to maintain solidarity among the family or community, the practice of *Muthappankalam* contributes to the construction of a mystic past for the family or community concerned. This mystic past is carried over to generations through the annual performance of the ritual. Consequently, it erases the 'actual' past or history of the family or community and constructs a new one that begins only from the Chera period. Moreover, this 'newly' constructed mystic past upholds social hierarchy. Thus, the ritual ensures the conscious or unconscious internalisation of social hierarchy and the lowered status of the community concerned.

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Evocative Fantasy in Stephen King's The Eyes of the Dragon

Abstract

Stephen King, a master of the macabre, surprised the literary world with his 1984 novel, The Eyes of the Dragon, a captivating tale set in the realm of high fantasy. This departure from his signature style of horror fiction marked a remarkable testament to King's versatility and narrative prowess, demonstrating his ability to seamlessly navigate the immersive landscapes of fantasy literature. The novel delves into the kingdom of Delain, where an intricate tapestry of political intrigue, magical enchantments, and timeless archetypes unfolds. King masterfully employs a narrative style reminiscent of classic fairy tales, weaving a captivating tale that resonates with readers of all ages. The evocative fantasy elements in The Eyes of the Dragon serve as the bedrock of its narrative, elevating the story to a compelling standard in high fantasy literature. King's masterful world-building immerses readers in the kingdom of Delain, where magic permeates the air and mythical creatures roam the land. The novel's exceptional reception underscores its significance in King's career and the broader fantasy genre. Hailed for its captivating storytelling and profound exploration of timeless themes, The Eyes of the Dragon stands as a testament to King's ability to transcend genre boundaries and craft an immersive tapestry that captivates readers.

Keywords: Evocative fantasy, Versatility, World-building, Stephen King, Delain

Imbued with a mystical allure, the kingdom of Delain emerges as a vibrant tapestry where enchantment intertwines seamlessly with the fabric of monarchy, creating an intricate landscape that merges sorcery with governance. From its ancient oaks whispering of secrets to the rivers laden with untold mysteries, Delain stands as a testament to the fusion of mysticism and tradition, its essence pulsating with a palpable undercurrent of magic. "Delain, a kingdom as old as the mountains, a land where the wind whispered through the forests of ancient oaks, and the rivers flowed with secrets." (3) The very air of Delain hums with an undercurrent of magic, a palpable energy that pulses through the veins of the land and its inhabitants. At its core, Delain's monarchy forms the nexus around which power, politics, and familial ties converge. King Roland, a benevolent ruler, grapples with the delicate balance between political tensions and the shadowy presence of Flagg, whose origins and intentions remain shrouded in mystery. "Flagg was a mystery, a puzzle, a figure of dark rumors and half-truths. He had come to Delain as a boy, an orphan with no memory of his past, and King Roland, moved by pity, had taken him in and raised him as his own..." (18) Yet, Flagg's enigmatic presence casts a

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long shadow over Delain, his motives veiled by a shroud of darkness that threatens to unravel the kingdom's delicate equilibrium. Delain itself becomes a living entity, its timelessness and fusion of magic and tradition shaping the very essence of the kingdom. "Delain was a land of magic, where the air crackled with unseen forces, where the wind whispered secrets, and the rivers flowed with dreams." (17) The land's agelessness permeates every aspect of Delain's existence, from its ancient architecture to the deep-rooted customs that bind its people. Magic is not merely a force in Delain; it is an integral part of its identity, woven into the very fabric of its existence. Through King's meticulous crafting, Delain transcends being a mere backdrop; it becomes an entity in itself, shaping characters and serving as a vessel for exploring timeless themes within the evocative and immersive world.

Through King's meticulous crafting, Delain transcends being a mere backdrop; it becomes an entity in itself, shaping characters and serving as a vessel for exploring timeless themes within the evocative and immersive world. "Delain was a land of mystery, of secrets, and of magic, and it was here that Peter Cantrell was born, the boy destined to become the last dragon." (1) Delain is not merely a setting for the story; it is an active participant, its magic and history shaping the destinies of its inhabitants and influencing the narrative's trajectory.

From the moment we step into Delain, Stephen King's vivid descriptions captivate, painting a kingdom rich in history and deeply intertwined with magic. As King eloquently states, "Delain was a kingdom of great antiquity, famous for its beauty, its peace, and its wizards" (7). This long history is woven into the kingdom's very fabric, evident in its architecture, customs, and the inhabitants' profound connection with the land. Magic, unlike in many fantasy tales, isn't confined to mere myth; it actively shapes the lives of Delain's people, entwining with everyday existence, as demonstrated in this passage "The air was filled with magic, and where the people were kind and gentle" (10). King skillfully introduces the monarchy as a symbol of power and continuity within Delain's political landscape. King Roland, a wise and just ruler, maintains a delicate balance amid political factions and the ominous presence of Flagg, whose influence looms large. King's portrayal of King Roland highlights his wisdom and compassion, stating that he ruled Delain "with fairness and justice" (9). This monarchy becomes central to the narrative's conflict, a struggle for power between noble Peter and ambitious Thomas Cantrell. Unlike traditional fantasy, King navigates nuanced themes of morality within Delain. Loyalty, betrayal, and the complexity of familial ties intertwine with the fabric of society, adding depth beyond simplistic notions of good and evil. This exploration of moral ambiguity is further enhanced by the presence of Flagg, a mysterious figure whose motivations remain shrouded in secrecy. As King aptly observes, "There is nothing simple about good and evil. There are shades of gray, and in those shades exist the hearts of men" (206). Delain transcends being a mere backdrop; it becomes a living entity shaped by history, magic, and human emotions. Echoes of the past linger, influencing the present and hinting at the

future. Magic infuses the kingdom, creating an ethereal ambiance of wonder and enchantment. King effectively captures this essence, stating that Delain was a "place of dreams and enchantments" (12). Through vivid sensory details and evocative imagery, King crafts an immersive atmosphere. His prose captures Delain's beauty, its magical essence, and the underlying tensions that simmer beneath the surface. The sky swirls with vibrant colors, the air carries the sweet scent of wildflowers, and an underlying suspense threads through the narrative, transporting readers to this fantastical realm. As King poetically describes, "The sky above Delain was a canvas of swirling colors, a mesmerizing display of crimson, gold, and violet" (12). King's ability to weave these details together creates a captivating and unforgettable world.

Through the stark contrast between Peter and Thomas, brothers locked in a battle for Delain's throne, *The Eyes of the Dragon* weaves a captivating narrative exploring the depths of human nature. Peter, portrayed as noble and inherently good-hearted, embodies qualities of integrity and righteousness. His character arc traverses the complexities of growth and maturity as he navigates the challenges thrust upon him, showcasing resilience and a sense of honor. As King aptly describes, "Peter was a boy of great courage and compassion" (20). His character arc demonstrates that even in the face of adversity, Peter remains true to his principles, highlighting the power of inner strength and unwavering goodness. Contrastingly, Thomas, Peter's brother, epitomizes ambition and the relentless pursuit of power. His character arc evolves through ambition-driven decisions, revealing the darker facets of human nature. Thomas's path weaves a narrative rich in moral ambiguity, exploring the consequences of unchecked ambition and the erosion of familial bonds. As King poignantly observes, "Thomas was not without ambition, but he had a heart, too, and it was this heart that was to lead him astray" (39). Thomas's journey underscores the pitfalls of excessive ambition, demonstrating how it can lead to betrayal, deceit, and the loss of one's humanity. Flagg, the enigmatic antagonist, embodies a pervasive malevolence that casts a shadow over Delain. His role extends beyond a conventional villain; he manipulates events from the shadows, exerting a sinister influence over the kingdom's fate. Flagg's cryptic motivations and elusive nature render him an ever-present, menacing force, adding layers of complexity to the narrative's intrigue. As King ominously introduces Flagg, stating that he was "a man of darkness, a man of evil" (21), his presence serves as a constant reminder of the lurking danger that threatens to unravel the kingdom's stability and harmony. The interplay between these central characters forms the crux of the story, driving conflict and development. Peter and Thomas, starkly different in their virtues and flaws, symbolize contrasting aspects of human nature and the moral choices one faces. Their contrasting paths highlight the complexity of human nature, demonstrating that even within the same family, individuals can make vastly different choices that shape their destinies. Flagg's presence and manipulations serve as a catalyst for the brothers' divergent paths, propelling the narrative towards its climax in a gripping exploration of power, morality,

and the human psyche. Through the intricate interplay of these characters, King delves into profound themes of good versus evil, the corrupting influence of power, and the enduring strength of familial bonds. *The Eyes of the Dragon* emerges as a captivating tale that resonates with readers long after the final page is turned.

The magical elements in *The Eyes of the Dragon* intricately weave into the narrative's fabric, shaping both the characters and the storyline. King's sophisticated magical system permeates Delain's reality, driving pivotal events and character arcs without merely being a fantastical addition. Magic becomes a defining aspect of societal structure, elevating the kingdom's dynamics with an elusive mystique. The wizards' presence, their revered powers, and secrecy create a delicate balance between the monarchy and arcane wielders. King portrays this reverence, stating, "The wizards of Delain were a secretive lot, and their powers were both feared and respected" (11). Magical artifacts serve as symbols of power, driving the plot with their historical significance and enchantment. For instance, The Eye of the Dragon, a pulsating talisman capable of immense power, intensifies conflicts and motivates characters' actions. King vividly describes it as "a fiery jewel that pulsed with an inner light" (29). These artifacts heighten the story's stakes, adding intrigue and suspense as characters vie for control. Magic's influence reflects themes of power and morality, mirroring characters' choices and vulnerabilities. Such moral complexity underscores the responsibility wielders carry. Within the narrative arc, magical forces catalyze pivotal moments, with spells, enchanted objects, and cunning manipulations shaping the storyline. Magic's unpredictability injects tension, as seen when King writes, "Magic could change the course of history in the blink of an eye" (42). This uncertainty propels the plot, keeping readers engaged. As a culmination, the integrated magic system shapes the narrative's direction and tests the characters' resolve, infusing Delain with an ethereal allure that guides the story. King concludes, "Magic was the essence of Delain, and it would shape its destiny" (247). This integration elevates the tale into a profound exploration of human nature, power's allure, and hope amid a world where magic reigns.

As symbols dance across the pages of *The Eyes of the Dragon*, they reveal their role as conduits for deeper meaning, deepening the narrative's thematic exploration. These symbols transcend mere storytelling devices; they embody allegorical significance, inviting readers to interpret layers of meaning woven into the fantastical tapestry. For instance, the dragon—a prominent symbol throughout the tale embodies more than a mythical creature. It represents power, legacy, and the passage of time. As King eloquently states, "The dragon was an ancient symbol of power, and the kings of Delain had always claimed to be descended from dragons" (7). The dragon's presence and eventual fate echo the shifts in authority and the cyclical nature of dynasties within Delain. This allegory invites reflection on the fragility of power and the inevitability of change. Additionally, the colors red and gold, recurring in various contexts, carry

symbolic weight. Red symbolizes passion, courage, but also danger and conflict. As King describes, "The red flags of Delain snapped in the wind, and the red dragon on the royal standard seemed to breathe fire" (9). Gold, on the other hand, signifies wealth, prosperity, but can also denote greed or the pursuit of power. As King observes, "The golden crown of Delain was a symbol of power and authority" (10). These colors' recurrence underscore themes of ambition, peril, and the complexities inherent in desires for dominance. Furthermore, the Needle--an iconic structure in Delain--acts as a metaphor for ambition and aspiration. Its towering presence embodies both the desire for upward mobility and the potential dangers of unchecked ambition. As King aptly describes, "The Needle was a tall, slender tower that pierced the sky, and it was said that anyone who could climb to the top would be granted their heart's desire" (14). This symbol serves as a cautionary reminder of the risks involved in the pursuit of power. The Eye of the Dragon, a coveted artifact, represents not only immense power but also the allure and consequences of seeking control. As King poignantly states, "The Eye of the Dragon was a powerful object, and whoever possessed it would be granted great power" (20). It symbolizes the temptation of authority and the moral dilemmas associated with its possession. Its significance lies not just in its magical prowess but also in the ethical quandaries it presents to characters.

Withal, the mystique surrounding Flagg encompasses symbolic layers. He personifies malevolence, manipulation, and hidden agendas. He becomes an embodiment of the darker inclinations within individuals, representing the shadowy facets of human nature and the enigmatic forces that lurk within society. King further elaborates on Flagg's enigmatic nature, stating that "Flagg was a man of mystery, and his motives were always unclear" (39). This enigmatic nature adds to his symbolic power, making him a representation of the unpredictable and often dangerous forces that can shape human destiny. These symbolic elements, woven meticulously into the narrative, invite readers to engage beyond surface storytelling. They serve as allegorical touchstones, enriching the thematic depth of the fantasy realm by inviting contemplation on power dynamics, human ambition, moral choices, and the transient nature of authority. King's masterful use of symbolism elevates *The Eyes of the Dragon* from a mere fantasy tale to a profound exploration of human nature and the enduring power of hope in a world where magic holds sway.

The tapestry of fantasy is not merely woven with fantastical threads; it is imbued with emotional resonance, eliciting profound responses, and nurturing a deep connection between readers and the narrative. The fantastical aspects within stories like *The Eyes of the Dragon* serve as conduits, eliciting a spectrum of emotions that resonate with readers on multiple levels. For instance, the awe-inspiring imagery of a mythical dragon embodies not just a creature but an emblem of power and legacy. This portrayal taps into readers' sense of wonder, fascination, and admiration, creating an emotional connection

that extends beyond the mere fantastical nature of the creature. As King eloquently describes the dragon's presence, "The dragon was a magnificent creature, with scales of shimmering gold and eyes that glowed like embers" (12). This vivid description ignites the reader's imagination, evoking a sense of awe and wonder that draws them deeper into the story. Moreover, the narrative's use of symbolism and allegory enhances emotional engagement by inviting readers to interpret deeper meanings. Symbols like the Eye of the Dragon or the Needle trigger curiosity, intrigue, and anticipation, igniting readers' imagination and emotional investment in unraveling their significance within the story's context. King masterfully introduces the Eye of the Dragon, stating that it was "a powerful object, and whoever possessed it would be granted great power" (20). This enigmatic artifact becomes a symbol of desire, ambition, and the potential for both good and evil, further deepening the reader's emotional engagement. Additionally, the moral dilemmas faced by characters in their pursuit of power, or the complexities of human nature portrayed through characters like Flagg evoke empathy, concern, or even apprehension in readers. The emotional intricacies embedded in their choices and actions resonate with readers' own ethical compasses, fostering empathy or disdain towards characters, thus deepening their emotional investment in the narrative's outcome. This description sets the stage for a character who evokes fear, distrust, and a desire to see him brought to justice, further heightening the reader's emotional involvement in the story. Withal, the narrative's ability to seamlessly blend emotional depth with fantastical elements fosters a unique bond between readers and the story. The emotional resonance drawn from themes such as power struggles, ethical quandaries, and the allure of magic enables readers to relate to the characters' experiences despite the fantastical setting. As King eloquently observes, "Magic was a double-edged sword, and it could be used for good or evil" (38). This exploration of the duality of magic adds a layer of moral complexity to the narrative, inviting readers to contemplate the potential consequences of wielding such power. In the long run, the amalgamation of fantasy elements and emotional depth within *The Eyes of the Dragon* creates an immersive experience that resonates deeply with readers. The interplay between fantastical elements, symbolic resonance, and relatable emotions engenders a profound engagement, drawing readers into a captivating world that stirs their imagination, curiosity, and empathetic connection with the characters and their journeys. As King poignantly concludes, "Magic was the essence of Delain, and it was the magic that would shape its destiny" (247). The intricate weaving of magic into the heart of the narrative transforms *The Eyes of the Dragon* from a mere fantastical escape into a captivating exploration of the human condition, the seductive allure of power, and the unwavering resilience of hope in a world imbued with enchantment.

The captivating world of fantasy unveils a tapestry of intricate elements that interweave seamlessly, crafting a narrative that elevates beyond mere storytelling. Rich in symbolism, driven by compelling characters, and seamlessly entwined with fantastical

elements, this tale elicits a wide spectrum of emotions in readers. Symbols like the dragon and the Eye of the Dragon transcend their mythical essence, stirring awe, curiosity, and empathy among readers. These symbols act as conduits, inviting interpretation and nurturing a profound emotional link to the story's thematic depths. The Eye of the Dragon, a symbol of immense allure and power, sparks curiosity and anticipation. King's adept introduction of this artifact, describing it as "a powerful object, and whoever possessed it would be granted great power" (20), transforms it into a symbol of desire, ambition, and the potential for both good and evil, intensifying the reader's emotional investment. Moreover, the interplay between the fantastical and the emotional in the narrative landscape forges a unique resonance. Moral quandaries, power struggles, and nuanced characters like Flagg pull readers into a relatable yet fantastical realm, intensifying emotional engagement. As readers grapple with the moral complexities of characters' choices and the fantastical elements shaping their world, they become deeply immersed in the story's outcome. In the final reckoning, the lasting appeal of fantasy lies in its capacity to evoke emotions while transporting readers to imaginative realms. Seamlessly integrating symbolic depth and relatable emotions enables fantasy literature, like *The Eyes of the Dragon*, to captivate diverse audiences, fostering enduring connections beyond the confines of its fantastical narrative. King's narrative mastery, seamlessly weaving magic into the fabric of the tale, elevates it from a simple fantasy to a profound exploration of human nature, power's allure, and the enduring force of hope in a world governed by magic.

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