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Editor: Alfonso J. García-Osuna



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**IAFOR Journal of Arts & Humanities**

**Volume 8 – Issue 2 – 2021**

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## **Resilience in Times of Need**

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### Abstract

In these transformative times of interrupted lives, humanity has had to take a step back and subject its frantic, rushed existence to a profound analytical glance. The COVID pandemic has caused millions to suffer and the elderly are more vulnerable than ever; moreover, many families are left to mourn alone, not always able to gather around their departed loved ones at the time of grief. This has led many to believe that humanity has lost control of its environment and its destiny. Yet, if recent predictions by sociologists come true, the current, seemingly never-ending pandemic might have some positive results. The anguish it causes may be, in fact, teaching us to appreciate the value of the natural world that we are depleting, to understand “the other”, and to recognise the planet-saving significance of the phrase “less is more”. And while the world’s populations slowly realise that their social environment has changed permanently, the pandemic’s beneficial upshot might be that people will be mindful of things beyond their immediate concerns and will begin to see the “bigger picture”. In view of the speculative disarray inherent to our present condition, this paper proposes existentialism as a system of thought with the intrinsic power to guide individual and social awareness; it thus analyses our present in an interpretive and pragmatic light while it draws on the existentialist theories of Søren Kierkegaard and Simone de Beauvoir. Both philosophers are querying and inquisitive and both timelessly relevant, sensible and direct about what they see is at the core of human existence.

*Keywords:* COVID-19, existentialism, interrupted realities, Simone de Beauvoir, Søren Kierkegaard

Existentialist thought is galvanised by a fundamentally ontological concern: that of making being and reality more intelligible. This comprehensive perspective makes existentialism a malleable system of thought whose relevance to diverse social environments is clear. As such, the present paper proposes existentialism as a system of thought that needs to be considered from a broader perspective, an -ism which, to be fully understood, must issue forth from academia, step out of the page and be directly and methodologically applied to the way in which non-academicians from all walks of life view diverse social and cultural contexts. Understood in a pragmatic manner, existentialism becomes a formula for how to live and understand life and the different roles people play. It provides a lens through which we familiarise ourselves with our world and with the societal pressures that shape our human condition. It is a philosophy that can metamorphose into a set of practical guidelines that, if adhered to, could allow individuals to become liberated from the weight of collective thought and be free to act as mindful beings.

In line with certain distinctive attributes of existentialist thought, the individual, without necessarily ignoring the deity's backstage presence, must not fear the fear that comes with being human. Rather, it is in the pain and discomfort inherent to that condition that the human being is able to delve deeper and reach higher all at once, living and experiencing the whole range of human emotions intensely. Kierkegaard explains his religious attitude in *Fear and Trembling* (1843):

... anyone who loves God needs no tears, no admiration; he forgets the suffering in love. Indeed, so completely has he forgotten it that there would not be the slightest trace of his suffering left if God himself did not remember it, for he sees in secret and recognizes distress and counts the tears and forgets nothing. (Kierkegaard, qtd. in Strawser, 2006, p. 60)<sup>1</sup>

Kierkegaard here seems to suggest that, while we would be wise in adopting a critical stance to Christianity on an institutional level – and that “[b]elieving in Christianity means accepting fundamentally absurd doctrines, especially those that define its founder” (Robinson and Zárate, 2013, p. 89) – our hearts should be faithful to a redeemer who remains by our side through hard times. (Adam Kirsh [2020] notes that “a Christian, for Kierkegaard, isn’t something you are born; it is something you have to become through terrific inner effort”). So, it is evident that difficulties integral to the human condition are not there to be resolved by a higher force or spirit, waiting for that which makes us become passive, uninvolved, and complacent. Rather, we are in charge of our own destiny and are individuals in a world where we must act as free agents and consciously deal with issues both on a personal and a societal level.

The more liberal faction of existentialist scholars (Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus) disengaged from the limiting conditions and structure of the Christian Church as an institution. They gave added agency to the individual as compared to more conservative existentialists who adhered to a more conventional behaviour influenced by societal norms. Thinker-philosophers like Søren Kierkegaard and Simone de Beauvoir, more specifically, broke away from conformity by questioning largely undisputed “truths”, or norms, relating to institutional structures on both societal and personal levels (in terms of, e.g., conventional lifestyles versus a striving towards

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<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard likewise expands on his idea of existential suffering in *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844) and *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849).

greater individual independence, authenticity, the withdrawal from strict worship procedures and renunciation of standard family setups, including marriage as an institution).<sup>2</sup>

They recommended, without being prescriptive, a path forward where individuals should strive to find their own footing while still being functional within the parameters of civil society. Kierkegaard and de Beauvoir proposed that the individual strive for personal freedom and an existence which, even if it may be solitary and anxiety-ridden at times, opens up alternatives and allows for a lifestyle where a true self may be found, discovering thus the meaning of existence. In existentialist thought, the personal blueprint is the fundamental feature of cognition. That is to say, it offers a context where human suffering is not internalised inertly following normative, religious or social prescriptions, but is an important reactant for personal growth. On the whole, it is more of a ‘free-flowing philosophy’ than a doctrine, and it has often been misunderstood as “philosophy of complete nihilism and utter despair” (Olson, 1962, p. 13). Disregarding this misconceived idea, we argue that existentialism should be construed as a way of being and relating to this world, one that is flexible and allows for interpretations, or as the Encyclopaedia Britannica puts it, for existentialists “existence is always particular and individual” and “is opposed to any doctrine that views human beings as the manifestation of an absolute or an infinite substance”. Existentialism, in a word, “... does not require adherence to any normative moral principle” (Aho, 2020, xiii).

While not a philosophical doctrine as such, existentialism does provide a relatively specific and identifiable set of guidelines, like the need for authenticity, the necessity of acquiring the freedom to choose our own path in life, the acceptance of the inherent anguish that comes with having the choice to decide a personal future, and the need to take responsibility for personal mistakes. In this regard, Jennifer McWeeny provides a relevant contemporary Beauvoirian observation, writing in her Council for European Studies article “A New Existentialism for Infectious Times” that

The French existentialists who formed their ideas in the belly of World War II knew what it was to be afraid of mortality and an unknown future. Theirs is a philosophy born out of the desire to give meaning to their lives within the trembling softness and vulnerability of the human condition that come to light in times of global crisis. ... Much like de Beauvoir and her famous entourage, we, too, are contending with an unexpected and catastrophic visitor. The coronavirus pandemic therefore allows us to enter the historical experience of these French thinkers more deeply than we have before. More importantly, it shows how existentialism can empower us at the very moment when we feel most helpless and passive, when we are waiting uneasily for an outcome that we cannot know in advance. (McWeeny, 2020)

Relevantly, according to de Beauvoir the individual “is seeking with anguish to find his place in a world upside down” (de Beauvoir, 2004, p. 4). Kierkegaard offers that “empowerment” necessary in times of trouble that is mentioned by McWeeny. As an existentialist that has not disengaged with his faith, Kierkegaard introduces the symbolic concept of the “Knight of Faith”, one who embraces life fully and courageously. He compares him to the “Knight of Resignation”:

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<sup>2</sup> Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, often considered the first modern couple, are here a perfect example of how a union that lasted for life was able to thrive and prosper as a result of the free conditions under which the couple operated – committed to an open marriage and relationship which saw them able to focus almost undividedly on a shared philosophy and liberal ideas that were developed further and lead to the publication of important works such as “The Second Sex” first published in Sartre’s *Les Temps Modernes* (1949).

When around one everything has become silent, solemn as a clear, starlit night, when the soul comes to be alone in the whole world, then before one there appears, not an extraordinary human being, but the eternal power itself, then the heavens open, and the I chooses itself or, more correctly, receives itself. Then the personality receives the accolade of knighthood that ennobles it for an eternity (Kierkegaard as quoted in Hong, 1978, p. 76).

And further,

The knight of faith is the only happy man, the heir to the finite while the knight of resignation is a stranger and an alien. (Kierkegaard, qtd. in Westphal, 2014, p. 420)

Kierkegaard's personal environment accounts for many of his existentialist's characteristics and parallels the suffering and anguish that the present pandemic is causing around the world. Brought up in a strict protestant environment, his father was a stern clergyman and his mother a "plain" woman in the eyes of society. The family suffering would leave a lasting impact on both father and son: 5 of the 7 children of Michael Kierkegaard died before age 34, and the only ones eventually left standing were the father Michael (his wife died early as well), Søren and one of his older brothers. Shame, guilt and suffering became lingering sentiments that would weigh on Michael Kierkegaard's conscience, who, it is speculated, may have interpreted the tragedy as a punishment for his own premarital sins. But the sense of impending doom would also haunt Søren Kierkegaard throughout his life. Pain, suffering and dread, as well as ingrained feelings of insecurity were prevalent, even when he was celebrated as a public persona. Dread and anxiety accompanied him as a dark shadow and shaped his entire outlook on life, famously leading him to break off an engagement and choose a solitary existence rather than marital "bliss".<sup>3</sup> Initially determined to follow in his father's footsteps, and connected to the former through a complex mix of repulsion/attraction,<sup>4</sup> an increasingly affluent Kierkegaard living off his family inheritance ultimately never stepped into the role of Lutheran pastor and would always lead "a poet's existence" (Kierkegaard, 2004, p. 53). Gradually oriented towards philosophy, he was drawn to Hegelian dialectics, to the image of an "ideal" society where "the will of each individual and society's laws must coincide, because, ultimately, human beings are defined by their relation to others" (Robinson and Zárte, 2013, p. 30).

In a statement that becomes increasingly relevant in a pandemic world, Kierkegaard declares that a true Christian must

... grasp the secret of suffering as the form of the highest life, higher than all good fortune ... For this is the severity of the religious, that it begins by making everything more severe. ("Concluding unscientific postscript", qtd. in Carlisle, 2019, p. xv)

With much in common with Kierkegaard and with an equally questioning mindset, de Beauvoir sees existentialism as something organic that moves with the times. As such, it can be embraced today as a means of methodically organising the data of experience as we enter ever more

<sup>3</sup> Clare Carlisle writes of Kierkegaard that "in many of his books, he focused on the themes of romantic love and fidelity and engagement and marriage, and he kept returning to these questions through his philosophical writing" (Warburton, 2021, n.p.).

<sup>4</sup> Carlisle identifies as "distinctive features of Kierkegaard's character ... his attitude of ambivalence. He was ambivalent towards his father; he was ambivalent towards Christianity; he was very ambivalent towards being an author" (Warburton, 2021 n.p.).



deeply into the COVID world, questioning the possibility of a post-pandemic future. In her 1947 core text *Qu'est-ce que l'existentialisme?* (translated into English as *What is Existentialism?*) she writes that this concept or philosophy:

... claims to be a practical and living attitude toward the problems posed by the world today. It is a philosophy yet does not want to stay enclosed in books and schools; it intends to revive the great tradition of ancient wisdom that also involved difficult physics and logic, yet proposed a concrete human attitude to all men. (de Beauvoir, 2004, p. 3)

Its relevance to the present situation is further defined by Aho, who declares that existentialism applies to the concrete actions and choices of the *existing* individual and to the human situation as it is *lived*:

Although existentialism cannot be reduced to a unified doctrine or school of thought and its major representatives differ widely in their views, the common thread that ties these thinkers together is their concern for the human situation as it is lived. This is a situation that cannot be reasoned about or captured in an abstract system; it can only be felt and made meaningful by concrete choices and actions of the existing individual. (Aho, 2020, xi)

In drawing from Kierkegaard and de Beauvoir's texts and visualising how their insights, attitudes and worldviews directly relate to society today, informing the way extraordinary transformations are understood, we may better grasp the idea that we are no longer in control of the future. The very pillars of our beliefs in humanity, its consistent journey of progress and improvement, the stability of its hegemony over the planet, its persistence and perpetuation, are being ground to a pulp by a microscopic enemy. The statement by a 32-year-old Kierkegaard resounds today with heartrending immediacy: "life has become a bitter drink to me, and yet it must be taken in drops, counted one by one" (Kierkegaard, 2004, p. 47).

Modern-day populations feel more vulnerable – both physically and mentally – than ever before. Clinical psychologist Sarb Johal notes this same sense of disarticulation in moments of crisis:

[f]or existentialists, an existential crisis is considered to be a journey, a necessary experience and a complex phenomenon. It comes from an awareness of your own freedoms and how life will end for you one day. That journey may reveal to us that where there was structure and familiarity, now there is mystery, unfamiliarity, a sense of discomfort, and a feeling like somehow, things don't fit so well anymore. (Johal, 2021)

Things do not fit so well anymore, there is a mystery and an unfamiliarity in reality today because the enemy is unseen and yet deadly and unrelenting. As Francesco Tava notes, "[w]e live in a time of anxiety – where anxiety is fear without an object, fear without a clear source of that fear" (Assiter and Tava, 2020). A new and frantic defence of personal safety and security today has priority over human connections; our only escape route appears to be away from the world and into detached confinement.

From an existentialist frame of reference, these times of reflection and isolation may render us more authentic, as suggested by Johal, who writes that "an existential crisis might move you

towards greater authenticity, which may also bring anxiety as you struggle for meaning”. He also argues that “Covid is an existential crisis that comes with an awareness of your own freedoms” (Johal, 2021).

It seems like the world came to a halt when COVID-19 struck, making the headlines and sending shock waves around the globe. Everything would soon be “turned upside down”, as in Kierkegaard’s phrase. Absurdist images proliferated of overcrowded hospitals, severely tested health professionals, quarantined people in southern Europe providing verbal support and encouragement to each other from balconies as police patrolled the streets below, ambulances rapidly crisscrossing urban arteries, and hastily excavated dumping sites turned mass graves to store the bodies of the deceased. With them came the parallel coverage of silent mourners, unable to be with their loved ones at the sudden unexpected end of their life journeys, and the resulting grief and despair – as well as stories of extreme emptiness. Incredulous, the world watched. Reality became unrecognisable, and we no longer recognised ourselves, slowly losing touch with who we were before and discovering a new version of ourselves.

Johal notes that we are now experiencing a new kind of anxiety; one that feels “different, deeper, and beyond perhaps your usual fear or anxiety about day-to-day troubles. This feels more existential.” (Johal, 2021, n.p.). De Beauvoir had already summed it up perfectly in her timeless *Wartime Diary*, when haunted by the traumas of WWI, she gave voice to her exasperation:

I felt myself caught in a trap, tossed about in space and time, without a future, without hope.... A great cataclysm had passed through, not one that devastates the earth and leaves everything to be rebuilt, but on the contrary, one that leaves the world intact but destroys humanity. (de Beauvoir, qtd. in McWeeny, 2020, n.p.)

In the end, we may find a new sense of wisdom: Fear must not be feared. Rather, it is a feeling that must be embraced as a way to move to the next level of a rather existentialist new way of life. To undergo the transition from a world ostensibly under control to one of profound uncertainty no doubt requires a conversion to a new consciousness, to an inner self that prioritises its existentialist dimension. An important stage in the process involves overcoming our fears, and where there is nothing to fear, individuals will be alert, more discerning and more acutely aware of what it means to “be”.

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## **Hemingway and Mussolini: A Study in Contrasts**

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### **Abstract**

The advent of the twentieth century brought with it a deep sense of historical discontinuity. The period confronted writers, artists and political players with an essential dilemma: how to revise personal perspectives in light of the new social, cultural and political contexts brought about by this rupture with the past. In this regard, Ernest Hemingway and Benito Mussolini are relevant exemplars. While this study does not concern itself with Mussolini's journey from leftist socialist activist to fascism, it will examine Hemingway's oft-forgotten early journalistic career and his growing political awareness, an undertaking for which Mussolini provides a pertinent touchstone. This evolving discernment eventually turned Hemingway into an avowed anti-fascist and provoked his bitter opposition to Mussolini's policies. While Hemingway did not generally engage in protracted political discourse when young, as events in Europe took shape in the 1920s and 30s and fascism became a growing political force, the writer began to expatiate his opposition to it. His views appeared in diverse venues: private correspondence, poetry, a short story and journalistic work. This commitment to the values of democracy continued throughout the Spanish Civil War and World War II.

*Keywords:* Fascism, Hemingway, Italy, journalism, Mussolini

As a young man, Ernest Hemingway is not known to have expressed explicit political beliefs. He enjoyed hunting, fishing, and socializing with friends. Yet as the United States' role in the world grew in importance with the country's entrance in World War I, Hemingway sought to cooperate in the war effort and participate in the events that were unfolding in Europe. He had poor eyesight in his left eye, probably from birth (Dearborn, 2017, p. 53). As a result, he joined the American Red Cross in 1918 to serve as an ambulance driver, since his poor vision prevented him from serving in the U.S. military (Dearborn, 2017, p. 35). As he experienced life overseas for the first time, Hemingway became more aware of the events in Europe, and he began to think more deeply about political developments there. As a result, his political acumen sharpened, and he promoted burgeoning challenges to the growing influence of totalitarian regimes that emerged in Europe after World War I (Dearborn, 2017, p. 366).

After two weeks as an ambulance driver, Hemingway's duty with the Red Cross quickly shifted to working with the rolling canteen service, which included providing snacks and cigarettes to the men in the front line on the Italian-Austrian front (Villard and Nagel, 1989, p. 267). The U.S. was serving as an associate power in support of the Allies, which included the Italians, who had joined the Allied cause in 1915 after being previously aligned with the Germans and Austrians.

While discharging his duties, Hemingway was caught in a mortar attack as he visited Italian troops in the trenches. Carrying an injured man to an aid station, the young Ernest was hit in the leg by bullets and shrapnel shot from the Austrian side. He recuperated in a Red Cross hospital in Milan (Dearborn, 2017, p. 64), and while recovering from his wounds, he toured the northern part of Italy including the Lake Como region.

Hemingway got to know the northern part of Italy well, and he also had a romance with a Red Cross nurse, Agnes von Kurowsky, who served as the model for the nurse Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms* (Dearborn, 2017, p. 258). Hemingway learned to speak a poor form of Italian, which he later incorporated into his speech and letters. Ultimately, Agnes ended their relationship, being several years older than he was and feeling that he was too young for marriage (Dearborn, 2017, p. 78). Her termination of their engagement came as a shock to Hemingway, but he moved on quickly. In 1921 he married Hadley Richardson, from St. Louis, Missouri, and they moved to Paris shortly after their wedding. Here Hemingway took up a position as a European correspondent for the *Toronto Star* newspaper, for which he had previously worked in Toronto (Dearborn, 2017, p. 87).

After he moved to Paris at the end of 1921, Hemingway was a roving reporter covering European affairs. His first encounter with Benito Mussolini came in June 1922 when he was on a trip to Milan with his first wife, Hadley. He used his press credentials to obtain an interview, which he published in an article for the *Toronto Star* entitled "Fascisti Party Half-Million" (Diliberto, 2011, p. 117). The interview took place in Italian with Mussolini choosing words that he thought Hemingway would understand. Hemingway described Mussolini as a "big, brown-faced man with a high forehead, a slow smiling mouth, and large expressive hands" (Hemingway, *Dispatches*, 1985, p. 172). He told Hemingway that the Fascisti were a half million strong and a political party organized as a military force. While Mussolini claimed he was not opposed to any government, he stated that "we have force enough to overthrow any government that might try to oppose or destroy us" (Hemingway, *Dispatches*, 1985, p. 172). The Fascisti emerged as a highly conservative movement, but it must be remembered that Mussolini had previously been the editor of the Socialist daily paper *Avanti* in Milan. He was

fired as a result of his support for Italian intervention on the Allied side in World War I; he would then go on to found his own paper, *Popolo d'Italia*.

The interview reveals that much of the growing interest in Fascism in Italy came from disaffected working-class men following the end of World War I. They felt that they had gained little from their participation in the war, and Mussolini and his followers promised them better opportunities. The Fascisti were at first a group who opposed Communist demonstrations, then they became a political party, and finally they emerged as a political and military party enlisting support from a broad cross section of workers. At the end of the article Hemingway mused about the future of Mussolini and his followers, wondering what he intended to do with his “political party organized as a military force.” (Hemingway, *Dispatches*, 1985, p. 173)

In another article from June 1922, Hemingway discussed the “black-shirted, knife-carrying, club-swinging, quick-stepping, nineteen-year-old potshot patriots” who were members of Mussolini’s political party. He argued that the Fascisti were keeping Italy in a constant state of class war. Mob violence against wealthier Italians had grown commonplace after the First World War. This included mobs of people throwing people out of first-class compartments on trains and occupying their seats. The black shirts emerged as young members of the Fascisti who organized themselves under Mussolini to end this type of mob violence. In doing so, they were protected by the police. They enjoyed going after communists and physically attacking them. Mussolini took advantage of the availability of these young men and used them to commit physical violence on behalf of his political party. On their part, the Communists created their own red-shirted shock troops as a response to the aggressions of the black shirts (Hemingway, *Dispatches*, 1985, 174-75). This political infighting showed the divisive nature of Italian politics and foreshadowed the events to come in the 1930s. While as a young man Hemingway was largely apolitical, as Europe began to divide more clearly into diverse political factions he began to be interested in the divisions and his neutrality waned.

Hemingway next directly encountered Mussolini when they both attended the Lausanne Conference in 1923 (Dearborn, 2017, p. 129). By this time, Mussolini had become the Italian Prime Minister, following his party’s rise to power in the fall of 1922. The conference was designed to settle the disputes between Greece and Turkey that stemmed from the end of World War I and the break-up of the Ottoman Empire. The signatories included the countries of the Allied forces that won the war, including Britain, France and Italy, as well as the two countries in conflict, Greece and Turkey. While he was not officially there to cover the conference for the *Star*, Hemingway wrote a feature article for the paper in which he referred to Mussolini as “the biggest bluff in Europe.” Hemingway criticized the emptiness of Mussolini’s statements, commenting “study his propensity for clothing small ideas in big words. Study his propensity for dueling” (Hemingway, *Dispatches*, 1985, p. 255).

Hemingway realized that Mussolini’s airs were no more than affectation. As he stated, “really brave men do not have to fight duels, and many cowards duel constantly to make themselves believe they are brave” (Hemingway, *Dispatches*, 1985, p. 256). Mussolini called the members of the press to a meeting, where Hemingway found him reading a book, which he claimed was a French-English dictionary which Mussolini was holding upside down. Hemingway later claimed that Mussolini was not a fool, and he was also a great organizer; yet he wrote, “it is a very dangerous thing to organize the patriotism of a nation if you are not sincere, especially when you work its patriotism to such a pitch that it offers to loan money to the government without interest. Once a Latin has sunk his money into a business, he wants results and he is

going to show Signor Mussolini that it is much easier to be the opposition to a government than to run the government yourself” (Hemingway, *Dispatches*, 1985, p. 256).

In Italy, Mussolini consolidated power through his control of the military. When he was offered control by king Victor Emmanuel, Mussolini at first politely declined, but eventually acquired control for himself and the Fascisti party. Although Mussolini claimed at first to be a republican, essentially an opponent of the monarchy, he backed away from that stance when he assumed power. As Hemingway commented in a feature article published in September 1923, “Mussolini . . . renounce[d] his old republicanism just as Garibaldi did. He has done so temporarily and he has a genius for making something he is doing temporarily appear to be permanent.” Yet, Hemingway continued, “the Fascisti party to exist must have action. It is getting a little satisfaction now out of Corfu and the Adriatic. If it needed a republic to hold it together, it would get a republic” (Hemingway, *Dispatches*, 1985, p. 298).

In 1923 Hemingway published a poem entitled “They All Made Peace – What is Peace?” in *The Little Review*. He commented that “MUSSOLINI [emphasis original] has . . . a bodyguard and has his picture taken reading a book upside down.” He continued, “I used to know Mussolini. Nobody liked him then. Even I didn’t like him. He was a bad character” (Hemingway, *They All Made Peace*, 1923, p. 8). Again Hemingway tells the story of Mussolini reading a book upside down. This poem also demonstrated Hemingway’s growing interest in politics and his dislike of fascism.

By 1924, Hemingway had grown tired of his work as a traditional journalist, becoming more interested in writing fiction. His career in fiction got off to an inauspicious start, however, when his wife Hadley, who was traveling to join him in Lausanne with a valise full of the rough drafts of his fictional stories, had the valise stolen at the Paris station as she went to buy a bottle of mineral water. While he was able to reconstruct some of the pieces he was working on, he never forgave her for the loss (Dearborn, 2018, p. 129).

While Hemingway has been commonly viewed as an apolitical novelist, it is clear that by the 1920s he began to take sides in the growing debates about Communism and Fascism. These views were not public, but they were clearly expressed in his private correspondence. In this regard, Hemingway’s letters are an invaluable resource for understanding his private thoughts, his personality, and the inner workings of his mind. In a letter to his friend Ezra Pound regarding a potential trip to join the famous poet, he asked Pound, “[c]an I . . . preserve my incognito among your fascist pals? Or are they liable to give Hadley castor oil? Mussolini told me at Lausanne that I couldn’t ever live in Italy again” (Baker, 1981, p. 77). Clearly, Hemingway’s criticism of Mussolini had reached the fascist leader.

As Hemingway wrote to his friend Robert McAlmon in December 1924 warning him on a trip to Italy not to “get bumped off by wild adolescent Fascisti.” (Spanier, v.2, 2013, p. 190) He similarly commented to his friend Howell Jenkins in February 1925, “By Gad Mussolini is running a disgraceful business. Lead pipe government and everyone who squeals gets bumped off” (Baker, 1981, p. 150). Here, Hemingway is clearly disparaging Mussolini’s style of rule – a fiercer criticism than merely commenting on his pretense of reading a book while holding it upside down.

By 1925, Mussolini had begun to consolidate power and he and his forces would violently assail anyone who questioned his leadership. In Germany, Adolf Hitler began to admire Mussolini and used his tactics in the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch in Munich. Hitler was initially



unsuccessful, but ultimately rose to become the German chancellor in 1933. While Hemingway's views on fascism were not on public display during this time, he clearly felt a growing opposition to its strong-arm tactics. As Hemingway commented to friend Ernest Walsh in August 1925, "I can't live in Italy, outside of fifty other reasons, because the political situation makes me so furious that I'm upset and in trouble all the time" (Spanier, v.2, 2013, p. 386).

Hemingway was in a self-imposed European exile for much of the 1920s, largely in response to what he saw as the vanity and shallowness endemic to the United States. It was also much cheaper to live there than in the U.S. – which was an important factor since he was living mostly from his wife's inherited income. This was also the era of prohibition in the U.S., which would be an encumbrance for anyone who enjoyed alcohol as much as Hemingway did. In writing to Ezra Pound in September 1925, Hemingway asked, "Why get excited about U.S.A.? It means nothing to me. Why the hell should it mean anything to any intelligent person? You are so indignant about it that it always sways your judgement." He went on to discuss his views on Mussolini, whom he disliked and Pound supported. "I hate Benito [Mussolini]. That doesn't prejudice me in favour [sic] of all the stupid bastards who hate Benito too" (Spanier, v.2, 2013, p. 395).

Hemingway had an intellectual and political rivalry with Pound that is revealed in his letters. His hatred of Mussolini had not dimmed, but it had become much more private than it was before. He felt that just as the United States deserved its president, Calvin Coolidge, Italy deserved Mussolini (Spanier, v.2, 2013, p. 62). In a letter to Pound in November 1926, Hemingway saw his political differences with Pound as a drain on their relationship. He wrote "I will not mention politics again in a letter. Only don't you ever call me on [Italian] politics. Yes I know the lire is stabilized and all about the improvements in the TRAIN SERVICE [emphasis original]" (Spanier, v.3, 2015, p. 160). Pound was clearly advocating for the benefits of Mussolini's leadership, but Hemingway was not interested in engaging in that discussion.

In a short story published in the May 1927 edition of the *New Republic* entitled "Italy, 1927" [later published as "Che Ti Dice la Patria"] Hemingway criticized fascism using fiction. The story was based on a ten-day trip he had made to Italy earlier that year. In the story he talks about an encounter with a young fascist on a bicycle who stopped Hemingway and his friend complaining the number on their car's license plate was dirty. The young fascist said "I cannot read it. It is dirty." He then charged the men twenty-five lire for having a dirty license plate. Hemingway replied, "It's only dirty from the state of the roads." "You don't like Italian roads?" asked the fascist. "They are dirty," Hemingway replied. "Fifty lire," said the fascist. "Your car is dirty and you are dirty too" (Hemingway, *The Complete Short Stories*, 1987, p. 229).

As Hemingway finished *A Farewell to Arms*, his classic novel about World War I, he realized that it would be difficult to have it published in Mussolini's Italy. This was due in part to his open clashes with Mussolini, as well as his inclusion in the novel of the Battle of Caporetto, which was a humiliating loss for the Italian forces and had been cleansed from the national memory by Mussolini, whose interest was in promoting only the positive aspects of Italian history. Mussolini did indeed ban the book from being published while he was in power because of the discussion of the Battle of Caporetto (Dearborn, 2018, p. 508). Regarding the impending publication of *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway wrote to his editor, Max Perkins, in October 1929 "Caporetto has been abolished in Italy – It is not allowed to be referred to and it is not mentioned in histories of the war." He later added, "if anyone wanted to make trouble

for the book it would be the Italians.” (Spanier, v.4, 2018, p. 113). Hemingway was also concerned as about the Italian government possibly suing for libel, so he emphasized that the book was fictional, although it was based on his experiences on the Italian front. “All I know is that the book is fiction and I have not used the name of anyone I have ever known or seen,” Hemingway emphasized (Spanier, v.4, 2018, p. 114). The film version of the book, which was produced in 1932 by Paramount, was also banned in Italy because of its portrayal of the battle (Spanier, v.5, 2020, p. 264).

Hemingway and Hadley divorced in January 1927, and that summer he married Pauline Pfeiffer, who was an editor at *Vogue* magazine in Paris. While visiting Spain in August 1931, Hemingway wrote to his Catholic in-laws, Paul and Mary Pfeiffer, about the situation there. Hemingway was a big fan of Spanish life and culture, especially bullfighting, so much so that he gave his first son the name of a famous Spanish bullfighter as his middle name. He wrote that, “Spain is in fair shape – Separation of Church and State inevitable – Believe that is only logical conclusion in the modern world – Believe the Pope would be glad now if he had never decided to go in with Mussolini” (Spanier, v.4, 2018, p. 561). Hemingway was discussing arrangements that would be finalized in December 1931 as the Lateran Treaty, making Catholicism the sole religion of Italy. Hemingway may not have been correct in his assumption that the Pope would not later support “going in” with Mussolini, but it reflected Hemingway’s stance on religion and, of course, his negative view of the Italian dictator.

Hemingway wrote a piece for *Esquire* magazine for their September 1935 issue entitled “Notes on the Next War: A serious topical letter.” This article examined the political situation in Europe, especially looking at the governments of Hitler and Mussolini. Hemingway was concerned about a future European war especially because of the leadership in Germany and Italy. He wrote, “the first panacea for a mismanaged nation is inflation of the currency; the second is war. Both bring a temporary prosperity; both bring a permanent ruin. But both are the refuge of political and economic opportunists” (Hemingway, Notes, 1935, p. 19). He mentioned an earlier conflict between Italy and France over Italy’s desire to gain colonies in North Africa – an area largely under French control. Yet, he wrote, “that difference has now been settled by Mussolini’s shift of ambition to East Africa where he has obviously made a deal with the French to abandon his North African plans . . . to make war on a free sovereign state under the protection of membership in the League of Nations” (Hemingway, Notes, 1935, p. 19). Hemingway felt that patriotism ran strong in Italy and “whenever things are going bad at home, business bad, oppression and taxation too great, Mussolini has only to rattle the saber against a foreign country to make his patriots forget their dissatisfaction at home in their flaming zeal to be at the throats of the enemy” (Hemingway, Notes, 1935, p. 19).

Hemingway felt that Mussolini had altered Italy’s historical memory, especially about the Battle of Caporetto, which had been a terrible defeat for the Italians in World War I. Hemingway remarked, “he still remembers Caporetto, where Italy lost 320,000 men in killed, wounded and missing, of which amount 265,000 were missing, although he has trained a generation of young Italians who believe Italy to be an invincible military power” (Hemingway, Notes, 1935, p. 19). Thus, Mussolini made ready to invade Ethiopia to acquire colonies for Italy and make it a greater international power. Much like Hitler, Mussolini was envious of the British and the French and their large colonial possessions. As Hemingway commented about Mussolini’s actions, “he plans to use planes against a people who have none and machine guns, flames projectors, gas and modern artillery against bows and arrows, spears, and native cavalry armed with carbines. Certainly the stage is . . . set . . . for an Italian victory

and such a victory will keep Italians' mind off things at home for a long time" (Hemingway, Notes, 1935, p. 19).

Hemingway also looked at the conflict between Italy and Ethiopia from an international perspective. He understood that other European countries supported Mussolini's actions largely for their own purposes, and stated that "England is glad to see Italy fight Ethiopia. First she may be whipped which, they figure, will teach her a lesson and lengthen the peace of Europe. Secondly if she wins that removes that annoyance of Abyssinian raids along the northern frontier province of Kenya[.]" He felt that Germany also supported Mussolini's aims in Ethiopia, writing that "Germany is glad to have Mussolini try to gobble Ethiopia. Any change in the African status quo provides an opening for her soon-to-be-made demands for return of her colonial possessions." Hemingway felt strongly that there would also soon be a European war, as he argued that "Germany, under Hitler, wants war, a war of revenge, wants it fervently, patriotically and almost religiously" (Hemingway, Notes, 1935, p. 156).

Although it is a common perception that Hemingway wanted to project an extremely masculine image, he was, nevertheless, opposed to the world delving into another war. He argued that "they wrote in the old days that it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country. But in modern war there is nothing sweet nor fitting in your dying. You will die like a dog for no good reason" (Hemingway, Notes, 1935, p. 156). With his personal experience of World War I, Hemingway knew the horrors of war and questioned those who would plunge the world into another conflagration. Even though World War I had been horrific, Hemingway feared its memory would not be enough to deter another one. He wrote, "no catalogue of horrors ever kept men from war. Before the war you always think it's not you that dies. But you will die, brother, if you go to it long enough." As he reminded his readers, "in a modern war there is no Victory. The allies won the war but the regiments that marched in triumph were not the men who fought the war. The men who fought the war were dead" (Hemingway, Notes, 1935, p. 156). While he saw the inevitability of a war in Europe, he counseled Americans to avoid joining any future combat: "But of the hell broth that is brewing in Europe we have no need to drink. Europe has always fought, the intervals of peace are only Armistices. We were fools to be sucked in once on a European war, and we should never be sucked in again" (Hemingway, Notes, 1935, p. 156).

In January 1936, Hemingway wrote a special article for *Esquire* magazine entitled "Wings Always Over Africa." In referring to those men who were fighting for Mussolini, Hemingway wrote a "soldier can be so fired by propaganda that he will go to battle wanting only to die for Il Duce and convinced that it is better to live one day as a lion than a hundred years as a sheep" (Hemingway, Wings, 1936, p. 31). Yet, as he commented, "it seems doubtful that Italy can get enough money to fight through until the next rains are over. Remember that the Ethiopians live in Ethiopia and eat only one meal a day, while every Italian in the field needs a gigantic and expensive transport organization to keep him there and feed him the food he is used to" (Hemingway, Wings, 1936, p. 174). He analyzed the troop situation, commenting that "Mussolini's generals have wisely employed Somali and Danakil troops as the spear head of the Italian advance and a great part of the regularity of their advance must be credited to their wise mistrust of European infantry in Africa." The Ethiopians were on the defensive and trying to hold onto their national sovereignty. He added, "the Ethiopians are retreating and stalling and the Italians are advancing, ... spending all their available money to keep their army in the field" (Hemingway, Wings, 1936, p. 174).

Hemingway recognized the futility of war and the damage that it brought to most of those who were involved. “The only people who loved war for long were profiteers, generals, staff officers and whores. They all had the best and finest times of their lives and most of them made the most money they had ever made” (Hemingway, *Wings*, 1936, p. 174). For the Italians at home, those who lived through the last war needed to remember not the truth, but rather Mussolini’s version of it. Yet for those who talked about the last war as it was, he wrote “many of these people have been beaten because they opened their mouths. Some were killed, others are in prison on the Lipari islands, some have left the country. It is a dangerous thing in a dictatorship to have a long memory” (Hemingway, *Wings*, 1936, pp. 174-75). At this stage his political views began to be more apparent, as he criticized the non-democratic nature of Mussolini’s government. He continued, “no dictatorship can last, really, except by force and that is why no dictator or potential dictator can afford to go through any period of unpopularity which will at once force him to the use of force to stay in power. A successful dictator uses clubs and has constant newspaper triumphs. An unsuccessful dictator . . . goes out as soon as his army or police switch on him” (Hemingway, *Wings*, 1936, p. 175).

By the mid-1930s Hemingway became more interested in the political situation in Spain. He had been traveling to Spain since the early 1920s, primarily for the bullfights. When the civil war began in 1936, foreign countries entered the war: the Germans and Italians on the side of Francisco Franco’s Nationalists, and the Soviet Union aided the side of the Spanish Republic. Hemingway was a strong supporter of the Republic, not surprisingly because of his clear and often stated opposition to fascism. He wrote to his mother-in-law, Mrs. Paul Pfeiffer, in August 1937 about his interest in Spain and his fears about Hitler and Mussolini: “...in a couple of days less than two weeks I go back to Spain where, if you get your politics from direct or indirect, you know I am on the wrong side and should be destroyed with all the other Reds. After which Hitler and Mussolini can come in and take all the minerals they need to make a European war” (Baker, 1981, p. 459). Hemingway was one of those individuals who foresaw the coming of World War II and the desire of Hitler and Mussolini to expand their power beyond their native lands. He was on the opposite side of this ideological struggle from his in-laws and his second wife, Pauline Pfeiffer Hemingway, and their political differences, as well as his growing relationship with Martha Gellhorn, led to the break-up of his second marriage.

When Hemingway left Spain to return home, he promised that he would go back, something that his mother-in-law wished that he would not do. As he wrote to her, “I am sorry about going back to Spain and I think what you wrote about staying here and taking care of the boys is very sound. But when I was there I promised them I would be back and while we cannot keep all our promises I do not see how not to keep that one. I would not be able to teach my boys much if I did” (Baker, 1981, pp. 460-61). Hemingway’s growing interest in politics and anti-fascism became even more evident during his time in the Spanish Civil War, yet another instance of his avowed opposition to Mussolini’s policies.

The Republican forces ultimately lost the Spanish Civil War, and the next European war came swiftly as Hemingway and other anti-fascists had predicted. As German forces raced through Poland in the fall of 1939 and then invaded western Europe in the spring of 1940, Hemingway grew more concerned with the fate of Europe. In May 1940 he wrote to his editor, Maxwell Perkins, from his home in Cuba, to complain about the British: “what a degenerate people the English are. Their policies have been suicidal since the last war. They gave us the worst bitching anybody did in Spain where we fought both Hitler and Mussolini for them for and could have kept them tied up there indefinitely . . . if only they had given us any aid at all –

any at all.” (Baker, 1981, p. 505). Hemingway was still mulling the loss for his side in Spain and what might have been had the British decided to give up their neutrality in the war and aid the Republican side.

During World War II, Ezra Pound made several broadcasts in support of Mussolini; these led to his indictment for treason in the United States due to the pro-fascist and anti-Semitic nature of those addresses (Dearborn, 2018, p. 491). Hemingway knew about these speeches and, as he wrote to his friend Archibald MacLeish, “sooner or later he will have to be tried, of course, and I want to hear him so I can know what it is all about when such time should come.” He later wrote to MacLeish “will you please send the photostats of Ezra’s [sic] broadcasts that you have? Whenever the damned business comes up we will probably be called on . . . and I think I should know what it is all about” (Baker, 1981, pp. 544-45). Hemingway returned to Europe in 1944 ostensibly to cover World War II as a journalist, but in truth he spent much of his time engaged in irregular warfare around Paris. He again took the opportunity to oppose fascism directly as he had during the Spanish Civil War, where he was officially a journalist but nonetheless participated in sundry military actions.

After World War II, Hemingway returned to his farm, Finca Vigia, outside of Havana. He continued to write, but his military adventures were over. In a letter to Bernard Berenson of March, 1953, Hemingway reminisced about his dealings with Ezra Pound and Mussolini: “I liked Pound very much. He had this great pretense to universal knowledge and he got to be unbearable. But the things he did know about he knew very well and he had a lovely heart until he turned bitter. Fascism is always made by disappointed people. Mussolini I knew fairly well. When you had known a wicked old man like Clemenceau, Mussolini was not very interesting. Then, too, it was impossible not to remember him as a coward in the war and as a crooked journalist . . . But he did not come to too bad an end when you think of his cheap cynicism and how he really hated Italians” (Baker, 1981, p. 815).

In 1955 Hemingway sought Pound’s release from St. Elizabeth’s hospital in Washington, D.C., where he was being held for his support of Mussolini. Pound was found to be eccentric, querulous, and egocentric by those who examined him at St. Elizabeth’s (Lynn, 1987, p. 163). Hemingway wrote to Harvey Breit in October 1955: “will gladly pay tribute to Ezra but what I would like to do is get him the hell out of St. Elizabeth’s have him given a passport and allow him to return to Italy where he is justly valued as a poet. I believe he made bad mistakes in the war in continuing to broadcast for that sod Mussolini after we were done fighting him” (Baker, 1981, p. 849). Hemingway felt that it would be cruel and unusual punishment to continue to keep Pound in confinement. Ultimately, Pound was released from confinement in 1958, having been held for thirteen years after the end of World War II.

Hemingway ended his life three years after Pound’s release. His suicide followed many years of poor health and serious depression. His high level of alcohol consumption made it difficult for him to write, and when his beloved Finca Vigia was taken over by Castro’s government and Hemingway was forced to leave Cuba, his depression deepened. While Hemingway is primarily remembered as a Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize-winning fiction writer, he was much more than that. Beginning in the 1920s, Hemingway harbored at first a distrust and then a growing hatred of fascism. A survey of his letters and journalism clearly indicates that Hemingway was an early anti-fascist and a strong supporter of democratic forms of government.

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**Graphic Queering of Mental Illness: Nagata's *My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness* as Counter Discourse**

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### Abstract

Eating disorders have been understood predominantly as a female malady and impulsively associated with notions of femininity. This paper holds this view to be restrictive in that it overshadows other aspects that contribute to this complex phenomenon. It discusses Kabi Nagata's *My Lesbian Experience with Loneliness* as a text that opens up underexplored dimensions of the condition by separating it from gender and relating it to sexuality instead. Given the fact that the queer community is comparatively more vulnerable to mental illnesses like eating disorders, the paper locates the text within the backdrop of the historical pathologisation of sexuality and its correlative desexualisation of the pathologised. Using Crip theory as a point of departure, the article aims to unearth the commonalities between queer studies and disability studies to identify overlapping areas. It positions Nagata's text as a counter discourse by identifying heteronormativity as the illness-inducing phenomena rather than relating homosexuality to a state of being ill or disabled. Nagata's choice and employment of the graphic medium's rhetorical devices are analysed to justify the medium's as most suitable to "show" the invisible states of queerness and mental illness. It concludes with demonstrating how the medium acts as a therapeutic confrontational mode of expression, offering the memoirist agency to rewrite/redraw her experience, thereby creating new meanings of the same.

**Keywords:** crip theory, eating disorders, graphic medicine, heteronormativity, queerness, sexuality

## Introduction

Eluding the grasp of comprehensive causative roots, eating disorders are everywhere an increasingly growing concern. Despite a growing aggregate of pertinent data, their evasive essence still transcends prescriptive definitions. Recent research reveals predominant models as generally ineffective frameworks, evincing the need for a more inclusive, open and multimodal approach. On theorising about gender and its relationship to eating disorders, Anu Mary Peter traces the explanatory models available today: the biomedical model, the psychological model and the cultural model. The biomedical model is said to be reductionist in its approach, narrowly considering only genetic, neurochemical or neurobiological pathways, while the psychological model is faulted for being more focused on symptoms and therapy. The cultural model on the other hand gives an excessive significance to cultural triggers and overlooks other aspects. While the medical model ignores the sociological construction of the gendered illness, other models sometimes tend to magnify and build upon just that. Peter, therefore, arrives at the Biocultural model promulgated by Lennard J. Davis and David B. Morris, identifying it as the most suitable *modus operandi* for enquiry on eating disorders today. Its value is based on the belief that “[b]iology, as a science, cannot exist outside culture; culture, as a practice, cannot exist outside biology” (2007, p. 418). One such arena that embraces this interdependency and multidisciplinary methodology is Graphic Medicine, which is “the intersection of the medium of comics and the discourse of health care” (Czerwiec et al., 2015, p. 1). As a biocultural informant, Graphic Medicine offers alternative perspectives of illness that often fail to get acknowledged in predominant biomedical discourses. It subjectively encompasses lived experiences by acknowledging and validating the social, emotional and behavioural aspects of an illness. It thus serves as a perfect platform to understand the sociocultural factors that influence and impact eating disorders.

From a humanities perspective, almost all research on eating disorders builds on the fact that the major sufferers are women, thus endeavouring to explicate the invariable link between gender and eating disorders. The gastronomic politics associated with the female body, investigated through a feminist lens that scrutinises internalised body image ideas fed by society, remains the prevalent perspective to date. Anu Mary Peter’s research endeavoured to differ by criticising the socio-cultural theories, which despite enlightening upon “external triggers, such as the thin body ideal,...”, pointed out that “... gendered biocultural analyses could unload the common misinterpretations that fixed anorexia as the epitome of women’s obsession with beauty” (Peter, 2021, p.75). Her research exhaustively demonstrates how “graphic narratives on eating disorders are visual attestations of the fact that eating disorders are caused by a plethora of factors and not merely because women are weak-willed and are obsessed with the concept of thinness perpetuated by the fashion and beauty industries” (Peter, 2021, p. 99). She bolsters her findings by citing other researchers like Becky Thomson (1992), whose study revealed how women hailing from environments that did not favour thinness still developed eating disorders, and how those who do hail from such environments had reasons other than thinness for their own eating disorders.

This paper is indebted to the findings of Peter, which it uses as a springboard in two ways. First, it builds upon the fact that eating disorders are not invariably associated with notions of femininity and gender. And second, it claims that directing much attention to the attributes of the gendered illness has overshadowed other elements that might inscribe it, like sexuality. While eating disorder has been “conspired as a female disorder” (Mallya, 2020, p. 1) by feminist critiques like Wolf and Orbach, who claim that “90 to 95 per cent of anorexics and bulimics are women” (2002, p. 181), and that it is “a condition of the females who are invested

in not eating and have become scared of food and what it can do to them” (2005, p.xi), men, who make up 25% of the sufferers, are at a higher risk of dying as they are often diagnosed later than females, according to the national eating disorder association. Lesser awareness and attention is what is characteristic of eating disorders in queer communities. While gender has been the predominant standard of classification of sufferers, other yardsticks like race, ethnicity and sexuality have been under-represented. A 2018 study revealed that more than half of LGBTQ youths aged between 13 and 24 had been diagnosed with an eating disorder. The NEDA website also acknowledges the queer community as a potential victim group who might be susceptible to the illness, identifying and listing various threats that they face, like discrimination, bullying, rejection, internalised negative messages etc., to be probable triggers of the disease. While cultural representations of eating disorders in literature, film, art, etc. have been studied by humanities scholars, due to the nature of the illness as a bio-psycho-socio-cultural one, invariably all of them confine themselves to the gendered understanding of it. Amidst such monotony, this paper positions *My Lesbian Experience With Loneliness* by Kabi Nagata as a clarion call that instead brings to our attention the interrelated dynamics of sexuality and eating disorders.

It was only as recent as 1973, after multiple editions, that the American Psychiatric Association de-pathologised homosexuality and removed its diagnosis from *the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (Drescher, 2015). Until then and long before that, homosexuality or any form of what we today identify as queer was seen as a deviation and often perceived as an illness. The state of differentiation from a “normal” body ontologically caused a body to be identified as disabled, a body with an illness; it followed that a non-heterosexual orientation was the sign of infirmity. Today, scholars like Eribon question if one can read Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization* as a “history of homosexuality that dared not speak its name” (2001, p. 33). Mad studies have toyed with the possibility of interpreting “madness” as a code for heterosexual deviation. Clinical models in the late 19th and early 20th centuries medicalised homosexuality as “insanity” by labelling any non-heterosexual desire as perversion and “lunacy” (Terry, 1999, p. 77). Feminist explorations of madness have also contributed towards unveiling the practice of gendered pathologisation like that in the case of hysteria. Thus, situating amidst the history of pathologized queerness, this paper seeks to delineate Nagata’s text as a counter-discourse, that in reversing the tables, deploys heteronormativity instead as an illness-inducing phenomenon and thus a disabling state in its own right.

### **Mental Illness and the Graphic Medium**

Before explicating how the text counter-fixes heteronormativity as illness, the paper will first begin with studying the untabooing of mental illness through the graphic medium, which I feature as a pre-requisite to reach the objectives of this paper. Mental illness has been historically shrouded in mystery, persistently misunderstood and misrepresented. The sufferers of mental illness have been depicted as violent, vulnerable, dangerous, imbecilic and disposed to barbarity, making them unfit to handle any significant agency. Such stereotypical representation only encourages a culture of exclusion and avoidance (Felman, 2003, p. 13). Graphic memoirs on illness, on the other hand, find their roots in narrative medicine, rewriting illness and disability by subjectively demedicalising it, making bodies “become both a site of reception (of illness, its treatments, and its stigmatic attributions) and of active autopathographic re-inscription” (Thembeck, 2009, p. 205), thereby affecting popular cultural attitudes about illness and building empathetic scholarship. Graphic novels on mental illness play all the more important a role by visualising the invisible. They perceive and give voice to the marginalised within disability studies, whose models often neglect mental disability while

favouring physical disability analyses. This verbo-visual medium facilitates the communication of intricate experiences which sometimes become impossible to convey using only one of the two, that is to say, either images or words. As the experiences are quite abstract, individual and overly complex for conventional rhetoric, the pathographer utilises “metaphorical showing” to get as close as possible to lived experience and capture the chaotic psychological states, mimetically rendering the sufferer’s idiosyncratic feelings.

Unlike traditional memoirs, the graphic medium banks on the iconography of the comic style to enable the freedom to illustrate the absurdly abstract through hyperbolic images. It is also able to project a cartoony version of the self that aids in distancing, simplification and generalisation. Infused with humorous underpinnings, the medium resists conventional illness narratives that facilitate sentimental and pity-evoking oratory. It is thus de-threatening and serves to humanise mental disability.

Nagata conjures the imagery of “dissolving into thin air” to facilitate our understanding of the eating disorder as something that robs her character of her identity. In another instance, she dims the outline of the character in a panel to show how “her contours seemed uncertain” (Nagata, 2017, p. 43). Her identity crisis is further intensified when she picturises the split nature of her identity by drawing multiple versions of herself. One version of her wants to stop the disordered eating habits, but the other is labelled “helpless”; at other times “hopeless” and “tired”; another version of herself is labelled as a “me who wants to please parents”. These contradictory selves put her at loggerheads with herself, crippling her from existing as a whole. To emphasise the dissonance between lived experience and outwardly perceived understanding of the troubled state, she draws two identical images of her in a child’s pose and labels the two separately as “can’t try” and “being lazy” respectively. This deconstructs the prevalent notions of how much control people have over their mental disability, in an age where mental illness sufferers are treated as pathologized individuals. The different shapes of the speech bubbles, one with jagged edges and another cloud-like, shows the dichotomy between what the sufferer goes through and what society thinks about their suffering. Demands in the latter shape, like “don’t eat so much”, “why would you do that”, are posited incongruent to the inner turmoil in the former shape such as, “depression”, “anxiety”, and so forth.

The background strokes, typical of the manga style, here presented as swirls and fumes, often take a dark hue and appear to loom ominously around her when she confronts negative feelings, giving us an insider’s perspective of her psyche during those events. When she talks about the “dark, painful space with nothing below my feet” (Nagata, 2017, p.17), depicting herself to be floating in the black abyss of space, she hints at the experience of realising that there is no place to which she belongs. Her alienation is thereby presented in a pertinent image. The same black trope reoccurs in a panel when she learns that her mother’s assumptions about her have been shattered. To show how falling apart in front of her parents has felt like, she differentiates the stark lifeless black and white panel from the rest of the panels which are in pink and white. Another characteristic feature lent by the medium for effective communication is that of emanatas. Emanatas are a short lines or stokes, a “set of abstract symbology emerging from, usually, the head, the sensing part of the body, to indicate mental processes” (Davies, 2016, p. 8). In the next panel, the artist withdraws from the panel, indicating her efforts only through emanatas to show how, even though she tries, her efforts are invisible to the others.

## Queering Mental Illness

When analysing Nagata's metaphorical depiction of her mental illness, an interesting pattern emerges, which allows the metaphors to be read as signs of not only mental disability, but also queerness. In attempting to visualise the invisible, the semantics connote more than one structure: mental illness, queer anxieties, compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness. For instance, the fine line between sanity and insanity propagated by an ableist society is seen reflected in her when she envisions an invisible cup full of water on her head which she dares not spill (Nagata, 2017, p. 18). It could also be an unconscious mirroring of her troubled sexuality and the "spilling out" can be read synonymous to her "coming out". The walking on thorns allegory (Nagata, 2017, p. 28) likewise could easily apply to both her repressed sexual identity and her disability. When she says, "it was almost like I'd made my way out of a deep cave" (Nagata, 2017, p. 42), it may similarly refer to both the confrontation with her sexuality and the management of her mental disability. Thus, the next section of the paper will draw upon the binding ties between disability and queerness and sketch its politics as embedded in the selected text.

Nagata appears to be overcoming her eating disorder in more than one place in the narrative, but to her utter dismay, it always returns. She thinks that having a job or her passion for manga would grant her the luxury of normalcy. However, it was not to be, for "[she] was always uncomfortable, one way or another" and "was flustered and in pain" (Nagata, 2017, p. 28), acquainting the reader with an underlying cause to her disability that transcends external factors. Only after the confrontation with and acceptance of her sexuality is she able to portray her disability as untroubling. The prevalent homophobia within her social circle has impeded her acceptance of a lesbian identity. Parallel to the untabooing of mental illness in the text is the untabooing of homosexuality. Out of the fear of disappointing her parents, who stand as synecdochic figures for society at large, she remains desexualised until she is forced to find reasons for her disability. At the unconscious level, she has been conditioned to remain childlike, an asexual state that everybody approves of, a state where nothing is expected of an individual, a state where she is still loved and accepted. She has unconsciously denied herself any knowledge about sexuality and sex because doing so would only lead her to face her sexuality as an unapproved one.

In a heteronormative society, coming out to oneself can be traumatic. Therefore, her eating disorder has been covertly portrayed to be caused by compulsory heteronormativity. This aligns congruently to the compulsory able-bodiedness of the society that is non-incorporative of the mentally disabled, as happens with physically disabled individuals. When her employer learns about her obsessive eating habits, for example, he simply fires her without even identifying the real issue; the employer is not even vaguely accommodative. Even at home she is portrayed as absent from the dining table, which permits only "normal" consummatory etiquettes, while the sounds of her binge eating are depicted as haunting the atmosphere. She is pressured to fit the pattern of a salaried employee and her mental health is utterly ignored. Wanting to please her parents is the natural outcome of a heteronormative and able-bodied society's control of power over the potential deviants. This frames her as an outcast at the subconscious level and marks her as guilty for not conforming. Guilt is a very powerful and insidious tool that hegemonic agencies employ to discipline in disguise. Crippled from being unable to identify the oppressive structures acting upon her, she succumbs to believing her oddness to be innate and cultivates a culture of self-loathing that makes her believe that she does not deserve to eat. Her starvation of love and hunger for compassion translates into denying herself food or, conversely,

overeating. The reasons she posits for her suffering thus blur the overlapping causes generated by the forces of a hyper-masculinist capitalistic, heteronormative and able-bodied society.

At this juncture it is necessary to resort to the concepts of Crip Theory. Crip Theory, put simply, invests on the intersectional commonalities between queer theory and disability theory due to their similar approach. McRuer, the pioneer of the theory, builds on how both fields critique the naturalness of compulsory heterosexuality and able-bodiedness, thereby problematising notions of normalcy. Both attack binary understanding and criticise the absence of a third option that could have the potential to become the centre, calling for a diverse inclusivism susceptible to fluidity. Both unsettle the rigid demarcations between “the public and the private, the social and the biological, difference, stigma and deviance, and the construction of identities” (Sherry, 2004, p. 769). Crip theory’s lens allows the envisioning of “the ways in which disability has been evoked in the construction of queerness and queerness has been evoked in the construction of disability” (Sherry, 2004, p. 770). A time in history when analysts might have looked through such a lens was during the AIDS epidemic, when Sontag discovered that “homophobia, disablism and First World paranoia combine...” (Sherry, 2004, p. 770). Disabled and queer people have thus been both prone to a history of oppression and pathologisation (Mcruer, 2006).

As mentioned earlier, non-heterosexual desire has been framed as a state of unhealthiness, while the sexuality of disabled people has been negated or dealt with apathy. They may have been demonised or described with an exaggerated sense of sympathy, but they have always been framed as “the other”. The “othering” diagnostic analyses can be traced to feminist models in both cases. Similarly, both terms “crip” and “queer” have been reclaimed to metamorphose into tokens of pride. Thus, Goodley claims that “queer and disability studies have the potential to unsettle one another and find shared vocabularies” to empower. Queer disabled people become doubly suppressed as they form a “minority within a minority” (Abbott & Howarth, 2005; Bennett & Coyle, 2001; Elderton, Clarke, Jones, & Stacey, 2014; Stoffelen et al., 2013), bearing a layered stigma. “In the same way that social model theorists have pointed to the dominant culture as responsible for the creation of disabling environments and attitudes, some queer theorists have pointed to the way in which the dominant culture and its family environment are responsible for creating inequalities in public access to various forms of pleasures and possibilities” (Sherry, 2004, p.775), making the social model of disability fit seamlessly when applied to the queer context as well.

Nagata becomes doubly marginalised as being a queer person with a mental disability, who, unlike other people who are marginalised on the basis of ethnicity or race, has also “... a parental burden of guilt and shame”, as Shakespeare (1996, p. 106) has pointed out. Her loneliness is seen to have reached extreme states, ones where falling apart actually soothes her. She even seeks the comfort of the hospital bed for sympathy and care. Friends can become unavailable to her as well, as she faces the possibility of their hatred should they come to discover her queer identity or her eating disorder. Her quest to find a “place to belong” (Nagata, 2017, p.13) is made impossible by a hyper masculinist capitalistic society that essentialises heteronormativity and ablebodiedness/ ablemindedness. Her worthiness even in private circles is primarily measured by her capacity to earn. The wall metaphor that she creates emphasises this distance between her and other people because of these barriers.

When she hires an escort, even though the entire narrative has led up to that particular point (which can be taken to be the climax), she is unable to reciprocate the comfort that she receives. Her ideas about the encounter are heavily doused by the dogmas of a heteronormatively

sanctioned society and its fantastical definitions of desire. She is unsure of how to react and about what counts as “appropriate” in something that is taboo. Though she yearns for it, she is made anxious by human contact. She is seen to be highly conscious of her bald spot from her hair-pulling disorder, and yields to the pressure of being judged or rejected even within the queer community due to their presumptive able-bodiedness beliefs. She also submits to the constraint of needing to look feminine as a lesbian, where she learns that even among lesbians “men’s clothing and no makeup is kinda frowned upon” (Nagata, 2017, p. 79).

Discernibly, ideals of femininity and masculinity, propagated by the duo-philic patriarchal heteronormative regime, seep into the apparently fluid queer sexualities too, reflecting how Nagata queers the queer. So not only has her repressed queer identity influenced her mental disorders, but the disability also has in turn made the sexual experience difficult. Scholars have often pointed out how the sexual desire of crippled queer has been dismissed as trivial or misunderstood for friendship (Kafer, 2003), sometimes even ridiculed, criticised or punished for expressing it. (Hodges, 2005). Nagata’s depiction of her first sexual encounter serves as a response to this prevalent notion. Hiring an escort, as mentioned above, becomes the fulcrum of the plotline, events prior to which lead up to this particular chapter; even the cover page sports scenes from this main chapter. However, deconstructing initial assumptions about the cover, the experience is portrayed as far from being erotic in spite of its explicitness. The narrative structure positions this as the un-closeting event where she confronts and owns up to her truth; an act of regaining that which has been denied, something so basic, yet so important: “i needed to step into a place i’d thought i could never go” (Nagata, 2017, p. 81), “i needed to affirm the things i hadn’t been able to”; “i wasn’t hiring this woman for fun, i thought i had to do it for something far more important” (Nagata, 2017, p. 80). This represents her resistance to the heteronormative norms and her refusal to be crippled by the fear it propagates. This parallels with her denial of compulsory able-bodiedness that required her to become a salaryman. She chooses her passion and redefines stability by prioritising mental health and satisfaction over financial wellbeing. Thus, her liberation is simultaneously coarticulated by her sexual encounter and her choice of manga as a profession. Overcoming one is facilitated by the other and vice versa, to show how interlinked the two oppressive structures are.

### **Rewriting/Redrawing Experiences**

The deployment of a manga publication as a metafictional strategy treats Nagata’s memoir as a testimonial to her rebuttal of the stealthy forces of political oppression. The creation of the graphic memoir mirrored within the plotline serves as an effective outlet that enables her to confront her traumatic past. This is evident when she says, “writing about all this now, it makes a lot more sense” (Nagata, 2017, p. 55), as the telling offers her a cathartic opportunity to revisit her tormented state with a newly enabled distance, giving her a clearer perspective. The individualised account of her sexuality and disability overwrites the fictionalised, romanticised and glamorised grand narratives of heteronormativity and/or able-bodiedness/able mindedness, further facilitated by the generic conventions of memoir, where the voice is raw and unapologetic. Having unfettered her hidden identities, she feels liberated in no longer needing to adhere to the dictating norms of the various hegemonic power structures: “i realised that the reason i had trouble meeting people was my compulsion to try to make myself look better” (Nagata, 2017, p.123), “if i worry about my relatives dying from shock, i wont be able to draw anything interesting” (Nagata, 2017, p.130). Nagata embraces her otherness, as manga content provides the impetus to positively subvert her victimisation into a creative entity that sustains her, thereby envisaging the sufferer as an artist. When she is unable to write about anything, she writes about herself, where the pathographic space becomes life-saving as it empowers her

agency: “death ...was put on hold for the first time” (Nagata, 2017 p. 124). Scholarship in Narrative Medicine views illness narratives as a sense-making strategy, an opportunity to understand and organise chaotic experiences into easily accessible and digestible elements. (Shraf & Vanderford, 2003, p.25). Along those lines, Nagata, by literally “redrawing” herself, grabs at the possibility of ascribing a new identity to herself. Initially unable to love herself, she arrives at illustrating the chibi protagonist version of her as “cute”, indicating her willingness to perceive things afresh. If her story is understood as a quest for identity, then its successful reception, both within the narrative and in real life, further legitimises her acceptance amongst the transformed audience. The narrative serves not only as a purgatory tool but also affectationally co-heals the readers into experiencing and overcoming the ordeals of the memoirist.

### **Conclusion**

Medical humanities could have never been more relevant than today, amidst a pandemic, where we try hard to make sense of things and come to terms with adversity in relatable ways, increasingly blurring the lines between objective fact and subjective experience. This paper has positioned Nagata’s text as a counter-discourse in more than one way to necessitate the reimagining of mental disability. The author cum artist has sufficiently proved how multiple layering of victimisation can happen simultaneously and gives us an insider’s perspective of her psyche by maximising the verbo-visual medium’s capacity to allow one to think beyond normative ways of knowing. Eating disorder has been approached from a biocultural perspective, wherein the interdependent relationship between queer and disabled identities associated with it were explored. It throws light on the multifarious possibilities and manifestations of eating disorders and renders them de-stigmatised. This paper, on wanting to investigate the probable triggers of eating disorders as expressed in cultural products, has limited itself to studying one graphic memoir, as it analyses the link between sexuality and disability. Scope for further research would include unearthing other possible influences like race, ethnicity, and so forth, as reflected in other art forms. The intricacies of disabled queer identity politics could also be explored in detail to reveal how and why the two fields ought to be studied in a more syndetic manner than they are now.



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## **Yinyangism: Rethinking Western Dualism Regarding Sex and Gender**

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### Abstract

Much has been written in the West about sex and gender in the last one hundred years. It is perhaps to be expected that characteristic Western dualist approaches on this topic be quite different from the Chinese organic approach implied in *yin* and *yang*. Owing, evidently, to different socio-cultural worldviews, gender inequality, feminism and patriarchy are the subjects of very different definitions in the West and in China/Asia. Where the former underscores opposition between the genders' different realities and advocates for "diametric equality", the latter emphasises complementarity and is thus more predisposed to consider gender difference in what might be called "symbiotic inequality". Thus, it would be misleading to assume that researchers around the world readily accept Western paradigms regarding this issue. Using a sociological method, this essay aims to establish that concepts like patriarchy and feminism are not subject to unanimous presumptions based on Western models, and are therefore not practical concepts with which to design universal analytical processes or to create a dominant ethos. It further proposes the introduction of "yinyangism" as a new, more apt conceptual framework that will consider the male-female relation as a complementary one. The aim is to have yinyangism studied as a more productive stage in the evolution of sex and gender discourse, one whereby the natural differences between the male and the female will be recognised not in adversarial terms, but complementary ones. The resulting social environment will be one where individuals of different genders are not necessarily expected to perform the same objective functions in society, but rather have their mutual inequality act as a reservoir of differentiated skills that complement each other in different ways and actually produce a "mutual" or "symbiotic" equality.

*Keywords:* feminism, gender inequality, patriarchy, politics, yin-and-yang

## The Worldview on Gender Equality and Inequality

Any statement that men and women are naturally unequal and that it is a misconception to think that they can be categorically homologous will receive virulent chastisement in the present political environment. Such an assertion will be considered a vestige of a patriarchal past that society must resolutely continue to reject. However, while this modern viewpoint is attractive for seeking better structures of fairness between males and females, gender equality must be properly understood rather than misconceived. In short, the simplistic deployment of Western adversarial ideologies that propose the inexistence of difference needs to be questioned, and the Asian, yin-yang version of “inequality” needs to be arbitrated as a credible tool of analysis and not dismissed as a value judgment on women’s inferiority.

If one were to view the gender equality issue through the magnifying glass of the yin and yang principle, equality would not issue from sameness, but from the recognition of an essential *difference* and the deployment of analytical processes that would defend and rationalise the need for meaningful social environments that promote complementarity. This worldview contains certain principles that upend misconceptions that have dominated public discourse for the last hundred years and now require rethinking.

The trend nowadays is to consider sameness (in quality or quantity) as equality, while difference (in quality or quantity) as inequality, so male and female will only be considered equals when their fundamental attributes are regarded as identical. But the elephant in the room is that the male is different from the female, whether viewed from a biological or a psychological perspective. This should not be taken as a suggestion that access to certain social, economic or political spheres should be denied to one gender or the other. On the contrary: because each gender lacks something in relation to the other, it makes complementarity possible in *all* spheres of human endeavour, since each can supply what the other lacks. In yin and yang, it is precisely in these mutual differences and complementarity that their equality lies. In other words, male and female are different and thus “unequal” in relation to the other: the male is unequal to the female just as the female is unequal to the male. Their true equality stems from shared differences and consequent complementarity rather than from any sameness. A very concrete image of the impossibility of standardising the genders is the existence of men’s sports leagues and even chess tournaments separate from women’s competitions. Furthermore, transgender individuals that began life as men and are now women are commonly prohibited from competing in women’s competitions because of “unfair advantage”. Women athletes consistently have complained quite bitterly about rules that allow transgender women to compete in women’s sports (Spitznagel, 2021, n.p.).

So, the complete picture is rather that female is unequal to male in some respects just as male is unequal to female in other respects: yin and yang. Realistically, it is only against this obvious background of lacks and properties that equality and complementarity can exist. In the West, this is undoubtedly an unexplored framework in gender discourse, one that would provide a fresh socio-cultural worldview; it applies to both heterosexual (cisgender and transgender) and homosexual contexts.

In our modern world, feminism and allied movements, buoyed by massive funds and devoted foot soldiers, have deployed considerable resources and strategies to bring male and female to a compulsory parity. The LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual) movement (which now includes “gender fluid” designations and some yet-to-be-

coined “identities”) has also joined the fray to demand that “equality” should also be extended to all the genders and identities it can contrive.

The concepts of feminism and patriarchy, as understood today, do not give a comprehensive, unbiased picture of the best ways to understand gender relations. A major problem is that the ideology that structures them introduced an acrimonious vocabulary of *progressive* vs. *reactionary*, a lexicon that represents an implied vertical value judgment that underpins the choice between the progression to a more moral society and the regression to a past devoid of basic rights for women. But reality is multidimensional in character, much too complicated to be assessed with absolute polar opposites in order to have the desired viewpoint occupy ethically favourable positions.

“Yinyangism” (a neologism derived from the “yin” and “yang” of ancient Chinese philosophy) holds that the male is unequal to the female in some respects just as the female is unequal to the male in other respects and that there are complementary differences rather than sameness; it is in this interdependence that their equality and complementarity lie. This insightful approach is not found in the current discourse on patriarchy and feminism. “Yinyangism” is in line with the vision of complementarity indicated in a 2018 report by Oxfam, “Reward Work, Not Wealth” (p. 13), which states that “it will not be enough to integrate women further into existing economic structures. We must define a vision for a new human economy, one that is created by women and men together, for the benefit of everyone and not just a privileged few”.

### **Understanding Feminism, Gender Equality and Gender Inclusiveness**

Public debates on feminism, gender equality and gender inclusiveness have proliferated in the last 50 years. Some of these brought some clarity to the discourse while others befuddled it. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) declared in a document in 2012 (no. 1, p. 2) that, “Gender equality is not just about economic empowerment. It is a moral imperative, it is about fairness and equity, and includes many political, social and cultural dimensions”. Oxfam’s “Reward Work, Not Wealth” (p. 12) reported in 2018 that the average woman in the United States is said to earn 70-80 cents for every dollar earned by a man on the same job. It added that men are paid more than women counterparts and are concentrated in higher paid, higher status jobs whereas women are over-represented in low income and least secure jobs often as a result of socio-cultural norms, attitudes and beliefs.

Jacobsen highlights the problem of socio-economic inequalities when he points out that,

It is also the case that at many times there have been formal restrictions against women’s full participation in paid employment, including work hours regulations (quite common from the turn of the 20th century up through the 1920s and 1930s), marriage bars (requiring women to resign when they married) and banning of women from certain industries and occupations (often because they were banned from receiving the necessary training, such as bans on women’s entering law school). (2011, p. 8)

This perspective was recently underscored by a scandal that broke out in Japan in August 2018. Authorities at Tokyo Medical University were manipulating entrance examination results since 2006 to favour men and reduce female population on the grounds that men are more available for medical practice than women who might resign after childbirth. This reinforces the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) view (2012, p. 5, no. 23) that

irrespective of family commitments, many female professionals find it difficult to climb the career ladder. In fact, inequalities increase the higher up the pay scale you go, so that while on average in OECD countries women earn 16% less than men, female top-earners are paid on average 21% less than their male counterparts. This suggests the presence of a so-called ‘glass ceiling’. Women are also disadvantaged when it comes to decision-making responsibilities and senior management positions; by the time you get to the boardroom, there are only 10 women for every 100 men.

Significant efforts have been made to correct the errors of patriarchy. Jacobsen (2011, pp. 1–2) notes that the nineteenth century recorded the rise of the women’s suffrage movement and campaign for equal treatment of women and men under the law in Western countries. In 1893, New Zealand became the first country to give voting rights to women while many other countries followed suit in the first part of the twentieth century: Denmark in 1915, the United States in 1920, Liechtenstein in 1984 and Kuwait in 2005. However, many other forms of legal discrimination against women still persisted until the United States passed the Equal Pay Act in 1963, which made it illegal to pay women and men different wages for equal work. Some other countries followed suit much later: Ireland in 1976 and Japan in 1987.

Posadas et al. (2017, p. xiii), who maintain that tackling gender inequalities requires a comprehensive approach (bearing in mind that it is worse among rural women and girls and among minority groups), say that,

The past 50 years have seen marked improvement in the lives of girls and women around the world. Across the globe, more girls and women are educated than ever before, more girls are in school than boys, and women make up nearly half of the global labour force.

Nevertheless, it has been pointed out that while programs for gender equality focus on the female condition and advance their interests, this sometimes negatively impacts the male condition. The United Nations (2013, p. 182) points out in “Humanity Divided: Confronting Inequality in Developing Countries”, that

we observe worrying gender reversals in some countries, with males’ average years of education and secondary enrolment rates now falling below that of females. There has been little systematic global analysis of the causes for this. To understand this phenomenon, a shift in analysis from women’s to men’s behaviour is more necessary than ever. In particular, it requires an investigation of norms of masculinity and their response to changes in women’s outcomes.

Furthermore, there is an unresolved debate in feminist discourse whether “equality” and “equity” are synonymous or is “equality” the giving of equal treatment to everyone whereas “equity” is giving proportional – and hence, different – treatment according to relative circumstances.

Just as yinyangism goes well beyond proportional distribution and quotas (and thus not synonymous with “equity”), even the use of quotas may not have a clear outcome as indicated in a report (no. 23) by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2012, p. 5): “The Norwegian experience shows that quotas can be effective in improving the gender balance at board level. However, the overall economic consequences of mandating quotas have yet to become clear”.



In addition to recent contributions from Davos 2019, Oxfam's "Reward Work, Not Wealth", (2018, p. 10) which connects economic gender inequalities with global economic inequalities, points out that,

There are now 2,043 dollar billionaires worldwide. Nine out of 10 are men [...] While billionaires in one year saw their fortunes grow by \$762bn, women provide \$10 trillion in unpaid care annually to support the global economy [...] The richest 1% continue to own more wealth than the whole of the rest of humanity [...] In Nigeria, the richest man earns enough interest on his wealth in one year to lift two million people out of extreme poverty [...] In Indonesia, the four richest men own more wealth than the bottom 100 million people. The three richest people in the US own the same wealth as the bottom half of the US population (roughly 160 million people). In Brazil, someone earning the minimum wage would have to work 19 years to make the same amount as a person in the richest 0.1% of the population makes in one month.

Gender inequalities existing in different forms around the world have been targeted by certain policies and movements for gender equality. This includes the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and African Union's "Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa" in 2004 (art. 5) which pledges to "Expand and promote the gender parity principle" both nationally and continentally. In the documents, *Gender Equality and Sustainable Development* (2014) and *Gender Equality as an Accelerator for Achieving Sustainable Development Goals* (2018), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women strongly argues for equal integration of women in socio-economic dynamics.

As Jacobsen (2011, p. 1) notes, gender inequality is seen across the world while for others like Jayachandran (2015), it is more visible in developing countries. Verloo and Lombardo (2007, pp. 23-24) identify three major viewpoints about gender equality: (i) achieving sameness; (ii) affirmation of difference from the male norm; (iii) transformation of all established norms and standards of what it means to be male or female. For them, the way forward to gender equality as sameness is to include women in socio-political dynamics without undermining existing male norms so men and women can have equal rights, opportunities and privileges. This approach is criticized for not directly challenging patriarchy. For equality as difference, the female is placed at par with the male and patriarchy is directly challenged, but it goes a step further to be biased in favour of women. For equality as transformation, modern society itself is brought under scrutiny and the proposed solution is to deconstruct all political structures and discourses and welcome multiculturalism and gender mainstreaming.

About divergences in approach, Jacobsen (2011, pp. 5–6) brings to the fore "the standard question of whether to focus on gender equality in outcomes or in opportunities". The difference here is that a society where economic outcomes are equal is one in which women and men participate equally across all sectors of economic activity, whether paid or unpaid, and make same salaries, whereas a society where opportunities are based on choice has men and women receiving same amount of education and training but at liberty to decide what careers they will go for, each of which has its own salary structure. In this latter scenario, one can then find more women going for certain professions than men, and vice versa, or "choosing to spend more time in household production rather than in paid work, and thus ending up with different average earnings than men". Thus, differences in economic status do not always originate in gender discrimination.

While for Makaliu, as Ogwude (2013, p. 278) notes, patriarchy “is the social system in which the role of the male is the primary and the *locus* of social structure, makes objects of women as property to be possessed, for the economic, sexual and social stability of the man”, feminism arose in reaction to injustices in patriarchy. For Fiss (1994, p. 413), “Feminism is the set of beliefs and ideas that belong to the broad social and political movement to achieve greater equality for women. As its governing ideology, feminism gives shape and direction to the women’s movement and, of course, is shaped by it”. Feminism’s broader scope today includes female self-affirmation, abortion rights, the LGBTQIA movement, divorce, single parenting, and even liberal politics.

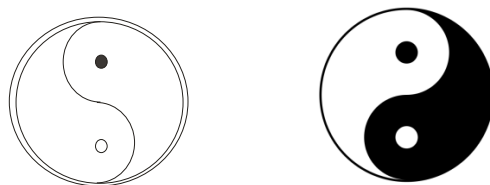
Feminist consciousness, which has male sympathizers, did manifest in some forms in all cultures from ancient times, but its modern form is rightly credited to the West. Feminism set a high premium on gender parity but has various schools of thought and different levels of commitment. Some core viewpoints still run through all feminisms as can be seen in the writings of influential feminists like Elizabeth Johnson, Simone de Beauvoir, Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, S. Dalton, Bressler, Gill Plain, Susan Sellers, George Eliot and Margaret Fuller. Some critics consider feminism a shape-shifting and self-conflicted ideology. One might see a female politician ask people to vote for her *because she is a woman* but protest when people treat her *as a woman*. As Verloo and Lombardo (2007, p. 22) underscore, gender equality is a contested notion and open to all manner of interpretations.

### Social Implications of Yin and Yang

Ancient Chinese *yin and yang* is a theoretical framework of dualism and complementarity that deserves a closer study, as its implications for gender discourse are evident.

#### Figure 1

*Symbols of Yin and Yang*



Yin and yang is a worldview of dualist complementarity, unlike its Western counterpart which is a worldview of hostile polarity (opposites in conflict/rivalry). Feminist discourse, especially in its most radical manifestations, shows a Western proclivity towards polarisation, fashioning a rhetoric that envisions mutually exclusive groups with circumscribed likeminded members that are externally hostile to the other group which, by its very nature, is inimical to its interests. Yinyangism, by contrast, assumes that the overall patterns of relations among human beings is too scopic to be subjected to such narrow analyses.

Yinyangism underscores the fact that male and female are not “same”, but are different and complementary, rather than opposites in conflict, involved in a historical rivalry. This is a social paradigm that can be valid across different societies. It also applies to proportional relations (less than, equal to, greater than) between male and female in respect to social positions, jobs and opportunities.

In yinyangism, female is not the opposite of male if the word “opposite” includes “conflict.” Female and male are rather different complements co-existing within the same social reality. Gender equality is not equality stemming from sameness – sameness is a pipe-dream – but from the realisation that difference makes complementarity and real equality possible. Therein, each gender celebrates differences as a beneficial aspect of nature.

Gender equality understood as sameness is a battle feminism can win in the short term, but it must lose the war in the long term for obvious reasons. There are pockets of rational resistance that understand that feminism that is polarising will not prove itself as the best alternative to create a just equality. Yinyangism reveals a critical problem inherent in polarisation: it tends to energise *both* opponents. As critics like Ridgeway (1997, p. 218) point out, even when feminism seems to be winning, it is only because patriarchy is re-aligning to reassert itself in other forms.

In essence, yinyangism is about being for the other, about making the other whole so that one can be whole. Social progress requires mutual interconnections. In this regard, the woman is the strength of the man where he is weak just as the man is the strength of the woman where she is weak. This is where equality and social progress lie.

It is known that the degree of polarisation in societies correlates with an increase in social injustice. There is a growing number of researchers that analyse what is called the “reversal of the gender gap”, in education and other social spheres. As the focus on educating women has increased, women now significantly outnumber men in college classes and in the number of degrees earned (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013, pp. 1–2). Men are, essentially, “dropping out”. The reasons for this are not yet clear, but the corresponding opposite trends cannot be a coincidence. It seems that humanity can use a different model for gender relations, not a bipolar one that institutionalises new-fangled injustices. Moreover, feminist polarisation with its discourses against patriarchy is very likely contributing to the disappearance of the family as it has been understood for centuries. This link and its social upshot are still to be properly studied, although many women writers like Venker and Schlafly (2011) offer coherent analyses and rational support of family, defending it against the onslaught of radical feminism.

### **Conclusion**

Neither the defenders of patriarchy nor feminism offer a comprehensive, realistic and sustainable framework for future gender discourses and relationships. Yinyangism could be a new and powerful worldview that recognises the many benefits of a complementary relationship between the sexes. Within this principle, equality stems from mutually shared differences and complementarity rather than from obligatory sameness and artificial rivalries. Perhaps we have a moral obligation to consider yinyangism as a compelling alternative.

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**Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*: A Testimony to Life in the Margins**

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### Abstract

Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* focuses an expository spotlight on the marginalized voices that proliferate in large metropolises and that have been, to a large extent, imperceptible to mainstream academe. Thayil depicts the history of a section of Bombay's underbelly that was an important nerve center in the drug business before the city's name change to Mumbai. Although the great variety of drugs described in the novel helps set the overall tone, its diagnostic focus is on the people and on the motives behind their particular life choices. Thayil presents the haunting reality of the life of marginalized and oppressed individuals through the use of raw, grotesque imagery. Given Thayil's approach to his subject, this paper aims to analyze *Narcopolis*' composition and characters with the objective of locating Bakhtinian tropes of carnivalesque and grotesque realism. Another point of inquiry is Thayil's use of an experimental language that mixes words from diverse vernaculars spoken in Bombay, a practice that adds a charge of authenticity to the narrative's realist complexion. With Thayil's debut novel becoming a voice for the voiceless, this paper explores his rendition of how people survive in the margins, largely concealed from critical scrutiny.

**Keywords:** carnivalesque, experimental Grotesque Realism, History, language, marginalization

India is a developing nation and its metropolitan areas, like in many other countries, have been points of convergence for the economic forces that power the nation's growth. Bombay (now known as Mumbai) has been one of the epicenters of India's ascent onto the global stage. Moreover, Bombay has been a melting pot for the diverse cultures of India for many decades. Multitudes migrate into this city of dreams full of hope and with a negligible amount money. The constant influx embeds different cultures and languages into a city that is increasingly overcrowded, adding many beneficial new traits to the prevailing culture, but also affecting it in ways that are not favorable.

The advancements in infrastructure and technology generally serve the needs of the privileged class that, because of its economic advantages, enjoys the exposure that allows it to become the face of the metropolis. But there exists an underclass that lives in the shadows, anonymous and increasingly pushed to the margins. Jeet Thayil brings the life of the marginalized to the forefront in his debut novel, *Narcopolis* (2012).

Thayil is very familiar with Bombay, and he uses his experiences there to paint a realistic picture of the city. He was deported from New York at the age of sixteen due to his problems with drugs, only to encounter the same environment in the streets of Bombay. In an interview, he mentions that "I went to school there as a boy. I went to St. Xavier's. My family left for Hong Kong when I was eight where my father was working as a journalist. Then I went to school in New York and then came to Bombay in 1979 and joined Wilson College. In all, I've lived in Bombay for almost 20 years" (Jaiman, 2012, p. 35). Thayil, who lost two decades of his life to drug addiction, utilizes his acquaintance with the world of drugs in a way that allows his characters to enact a rarely discussed history of Bombay, delivered in a graphic mode that gives a strong impression of authenticity.

*Narcopolis* fits into the recent literary wave of "Dark India", a body of literary fiction which seems to have found a niche in the market, writing as it does of the underbelly of Indian society: its slums, poverty, deprivations, depravations, and destitutions. (Pius, 2014, p. 54)

The timeline of the novel begins in Bombay in the 1970s and reaches the Mumbai of the 2000s. The story begins in Rashid's opium den, in Bombay's Shuklaji Street, where all the major characters converge. While the city can be said to be the protagonist, the cast of supporting characters includes Dimple the *hijra* (eunuch, intersex, asexual or transgender person), who worked as a prostitute before joining as a pipe maker in Rashid's *khana*, Dom Ullis, the narrator, Rumi, the failed businessman, Salim, the happy-go-lucky pickpocket and drug mule, Xavier Newton, the visiting artist, and Mr. Lee, the Chinese refugee. There are several other characters; all are elements of a novel whose general ambiance has the characteristics of an opium dream.

The novel revolves around the life of society's underclass and the diverse types of drugs that were available to its members even though the city faced food scarcity. It also involves the communal riots that took place in Bombay in 1992, thus offering a wide view of Bombay's transformation to Mumbai from the perspective of this ignored segment of the population.

### Theoretical Framework

Thayil's *Narcopolis* is a testimony to the life of the marginalized, with Bombay and its mottled history as the background. As Thayil points out, "To equal Bombay as a subject you would



have to go much further than the merely nostalgic will allow. The grotesque may be a more accurate means of carrying out such an enterprise” (Bose, 2012, p. 42). This points to the prominent Russian literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin and his concept of the carnival. The present study aims to conduct a close reading of the novel from a Bakhtinian perspective by drawing on the concepts of carnivalesque and grotesque realism. Pearce notes that “‘carnival’ is a term that has been extensively plundered by contemporary literary and cultural theorists to help explain texts and events in which the world is temporarily turned upside down” (2006, p. 433). Carnavalesque is the main trope in Bakhtin’s scholarly work entitled, *Rabelais and His World* (1965). Danow (1995) defines carnival and carnivalesque:

The first refers to an established period in time when certain cultures engage in a spirited celebration of a world in travesty, where the commonly held values of a given cultural milieu are reversed, where new “heads of state” are elected to “govern” the ungovernable, and where the generally accepted rules of polite behavior are overruled in favor of the temporarily reigning spirit of Carnival. When a similar spirit pervades a work of literature, it partakes of or promotes the carnivalesque: That is, it supports the unsupportable, assails the unassailable, at times regards the supernatural as natural, takes fiction as truth, and makes the extraordinary or “magical” as viable as a possibility as the ordinary “real”, so that no true distinction is perceived or acknowledged between the two. (p. 3)

Grotesque realism is an integral part of the carnivalesque. Bakhtin (1984) claims in *Rabelais and His World* that “The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation” (p. 19), but this degradation is not necessarily negative. Simon Dentith (1995) describes the grotesque body in *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* as:

The grotesque body celebrated by Bakhtin, which appears in artistic forms and periods way beyond Rabelais and the sixteenth century, is a body in which becoming rather than completion is evident, a body whose openness to the world and the future is emphatically symbolized by the consuming maws, pregnant stomachs, evident phalluses and gargantuan evacuations that make it up. (p. 66)

The concept of grotesque realism is essentially a part of the carnival world; hence it is expedient to explore them together. A probe into the language and setting of the text is also fitting in order to confirm its authentic depiction of this social reality. Thayil has used a variety of words from different languages spoken in and around Bombay, thus capturing the diverse nature of the city in his text. In his essay “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse,” Bakhtin (1981) denotes this as polyglossia, as when multiple languages are used in one area at the same time. The experimental language used by Thayil is an essential parameter that helps the narrative stay true to the portrayal of the characters.

### **Carnavalesque and Grotesque Realism in *Narcopolis***

Dimple is unmistakably the central character of the novel. The story of Dimple would make even a stone-hearted person quiver as the reader is introduced to her life of unending misery. Made a eunuch at birth, she is turned into a woman at the tender age of eight or nine after she is left by her mother in the hands of a priest who eventually sells her to a brothel. The account of the castration is disturbing, yet the casual tone of Dimple while narrating the ordeal is even more disquieting. The grotesque imagery of the castration presented as an ordinary occurrence, involving whisky and opium as anesthetics and hot oil as antiseptic, highlights the fact that the

recurring pain in the life of the marginalized has made them numb towards their tragic past. “Characters like Dimple appropriate the state of marginalization by accepting the reality in unique ways. The act of being subject to amputation at a very early age is taken positively by Dimple” (Jose, 2019, p. 235). However, this near-death experience was also Dimple’s rebirth as a *hijra* woman.

Grotesque realism mainly focuses on the concept of degradation, but as Bakhtin explains, this degradation does not only refer to the negative but also presents the possibility for regeneration or rejuvenation. In *Rabelais and His Works*, he points out that “Degradation here means coming down to earth, the contact with the earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better.” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 21) Dimple’s frigid attitude towards this horrific incident elucidates the idea that she has accepted her status of being outside the social constraints of gender. Moreover, she shows resilience in her attempts at uplifting herself by trying to educate herself with the help of the books she could find. This reflects her yearning for growth in life.

Another incident in the novel which has a similar undertone is Salim’s act of rebellion. Salim, a pickpocket, also worked as a drug mule for Lala. Apart from working for the old criminal Lala, he also falls prey to constant sexual abuse at the hands of his employer. Salim endures everything silently until the city is engulfed in the flames of the communal riots of 1992. Dimple describes this time fraught with riots as the end of the world, and this iteration of the situation rids him of all his fears. After his conversation with Dimple, Salim goes on to meet Lala. However, when Lala rapes Salim, he uses his knife to cut off Lala’s penis and bludgeons him to death. Again, it is the calm and collected description of the incident which further enhances the impact of its grotesque realism. With the dissolution of fear, Salim overcomes his erstwhile inner nature as his retaliation leads him to a transformation from victim to robust character who stands against his oppressor. “Death is seen as the indispensable link in the process of the people’s growth and renewal” (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 93). In the carnival there are always two sides working like binaries. The concept of death is connected to birth, the end of one will be the beginning of another. In Bakhtin’s (1984) view, “death is not a negation of life ... in the system of grotesque imagery death and renewal are inseparable in life as a whole” (p. 50).

Bakhtin defines carnival as a space where everyone is accepted without any bias based on social status or hierarchy. Rashid’s *khana* offered a similar sense of hospitality to anyone who came there to smoke opium. All the major characters in the novel found their way to the opium den in the dark alleys of Shuklaji street. Although divergent like the colors of the rainbow they were all brought together in their common affinity for pain and in their branding as misfits or outcasts. This further prompted them to the realms of unconsciousness and hallucinations offered by addiction. In other words, opium and other drugs provided a similar escape to the characters of the novel as the one which was sought in the carnivals during the age of Rabelais. While the carnival came with the possibility of letting go of the societal roles and being whomever one wished to be, the addiction offered something more for people like Dimple. When Dimple is asked why she took drugs she responds:

Oh, who knows, there are so many good reasons and nobody mentions them and the main thing nobody mentions is the comfort of it, how good it is to be a slave to something, the regularity, and habit of addiction, the fact that it’s an antidote to

loneliness, and the way it becomes your family, gives you mother love and protection and keeps you safe. (Thayil, 2012, p. 230)

The smoke of ecstasy opened a doorway to a world where they found themselves free to be whatever they imagined to be, free from being judged and ridiculed for not fitting into the social strata of the successful. In that moment of unconsciousness, they felt their dreams to be their reality. As the barrier between the real and the imaginary vanished, they transcended into a world of freedom and a world without pain.

Although carnivals also symbolized freedom and celebration, the difference is that they were sanctioned by the Church and the state. “Carnivals were, in fact, closely connected with the feasts of the Church, as carnival marked the last days before Lent” (Morris, 2003, p. 198). This means that no matter how revolutionary it may have seemed, the carnival was monitored by the same powers that it mocked. The regular payment by the opium den of fifty thousand rupees to the Custom and Excise officers, even as the city was facing food scarcity during the communal riots, serves to reinforce the idea that the drug business is a top priority for the authorities. Terry Eagleton (1981) has rightly termed carnival as “a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art. As Shakespeare’s Olivia remarks, there is no slander in an allowed fool” (p. 148).

The communal riots which took place in Bombay in 1992 also find a space in Thayil’s depiction of the metropolis. The streets were left in a post-apocalyptic state filled with rubble and strewn with burnt vehicles alongside unattended dead bodies. The dogs and the police were the first to vanish from the streets, and the great city was in the grasp of utter chaos. The disruption of the established order in society is the elementary nature of the carnival spirit. Even though the riot has a darker connotation than the carnival, it still turns the state of affairs “inside out.” Stallybrass and White (1986) also share the opinion that it “makes little sense to fight out the issue of whether or not carnivals are intrinsically radical or conservative, for to do so automatically involves the false essentializing of carnivalesque transgression” (p. 14).

### Religion

Alongside the people, God and religion are also important in Thayil’s work. He has subtly planted references to Jesus Christ throughout the novel. The masterpieces of the artist Xavier Newton include his infamous Christ paintings which also form a reference point in Thayil’s second novel *The Book of Chocolate Saints*. One of the paintings included in the *Time* magazine portrays a puny figure of Christ covered with thorns the size of railroad ties against a blood spatter. Another reference to Christ is made in the book by S.T. Pande where the Messiah is made to look like a performer and apothecary. But it is during Dimple’s close examination of the sculpture of the crucified Christ on the cross that Thayil takes away any sort of divinity or power ascribed to the God of Christians. “his lips were pink and blue, . . . hair was unwashed and his eyes were tired . . . no hint of a smile on his face, no suggestion that his life was anything more than a titanic struggle” (Thayil, 2012, p. 201). She even sees some words leave his mouth which she deciphers as “Love me because I’m alone and poor like you. (Thayil, 2012, p. 201). Bakhtin (1984) in his work on Rabelais mentions that:

The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity. Thus “Cyprian’s supper” and many other

Latin parodies of the Middle Ages are nothing but a selection of all the degrading, earthy details taken from the Bible, the Gospels, and other sacred texts. (pp. 19–20)

Thayil downgrades the image of the Almighty to that of a mere mortal. The ironic image of a helpless god is further proof of the deplorable condition of the marginalized in the society, exemplified in their god. This resonates with Salim's remark when he says "we're only happy when our heads are touching the floor and we're praying to the god of garad" (Thayil, 2012, p. 199).

Thayil even puts forth the idea of Christianity as a form of escape for the ones trying to find a haven while facing an existential crisis. Developing the Christian faith is among one of Dimple's ways out of her dreadful existence. This miraculously saves her life when she is stopped by a group of men in the streets during the communal riots. Her assumed identity that of a Christian owing to her dress and her approval when asked if she was a Christian, provides her free passage to the safety of Shuklaji street. Further evidence of this fact was when Jamaal, Rashid's son is stopped by the same group of men because of his kurta. It was only after Dimple screamed and Jamal addressed her as his mother, they let him go. Thayil depicts the horrific reality of the Bombay riots of 1992 here. He uses the carnivalesque to represent the plight of Dimple and Jamal who escape from being persecuted by masking their real identities.

### Identities in Crisis

Most of the characters in the novel are beset by a sense of identity crisis. Dimple, confused between gender roles, lives as a *hijra* woman who wears trousers so that she can feel like a man. Her attire is relevant to her changing identity. When Rashid brings her home, names her Zeenat and gifts her a burkha, she turns into a Muslim woman. While going to church she wears a dress and is transformed into Dimple. She switches between identities like she switches clothes. This recurrent change is her attempt at achieving a sense of belonging in the social structure. She even dreams of being a small girl who has a family and lives in a posh area like Malabar Hills. Dimple's attempt at being someone else resembles the people in the carnival desperate to free themselves from their normal selves and manifest their dreams into reality. "At carnival time, the unique sense of time and space causes the individual to feel he is a part of the collectivity, at which point he ceases to be himself. It is at this point through costume and mask, an individual exchanges bodies and is renewed" (Clark & Holquist, 1984, p. 302).

Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and His World*, describes carnival as "the people's second life" (1984, p. 8). This highlights the quality of the carnival as an event where people can disengage from their regular roles in society and become anyone else without any societal constraints. The turning of the "world inside out" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 11) results in people donning the character of someone they are not in their real life. In a way, the carnival provides an opportunity for people to explore an identity that might be censured in a "normal" scenario. Thayil uses carnivalesque elements to explain Dimple's condition as a *hijra* woman and her urge to switch between her roles in her search for a sense of belonging.

Another character who suffers from a dual identity is Rashid, who as the owner of an opium den is bedeviled by guilt triggered by his condition as a pious Muslim. He is fettered between his god of pleasure and his god of faith and unable to be faithful to either one. A stable identity is a requirement for belonging to the social group, and the carnival offers freedom from this burden. Robert Stam (1989) resonates a similar notion when he points out "Behind Bakhtin and Nietzsche is a collective rite whose folk origins antedate Christianity, a rite in which mask-

wearing revelers become “possessed” and transform themselves (whether through costume, attitude, or musical frenzy) into blissful alterity” (p. 89).

### The Grotesque

Thayil’s employment of the grotesque rests upon the creation of images intended to disturb the reader. Mr. Lee’s father, for example, is a writer whose existence in his own house is gradually confined to his side of the bed and his opium pipe. His transformation from the author who wrote against the communist government of China to an insect sucking on an opium pipe like a deadly succubus is shocking. A similar transformation is seen in Dimple and Salim after they get addicted to Chemical. The drug turns them weak and bony, making them look like rats. This is rather ironic, because the main ingredient that was used to give Chemical an extra kick was rat poison. In his thesis, Ariel Fuenzalida (2009) examines the works of Bakhtin and William Burroughs in order to establish a relation between their concepts. He notes that “Junk produces the insectoid body of the junkie somewhere in the space beyond the pleasure principle” (p. 45). “If all pleasure is relief from tension, junk affords relief from the whole life process” (Burroughs, 2001, p. 30). Here junk is used in reference to drugs.

Mike Featherstone (2007) describes the carnival tradition:

The popular tradition of carnivals, fairs and festivals provided symbolic inversions and transgressions of the official ‘civilized’ culture and favored excitement, uncontrolled emotions and the direct and vulgar grotesque bodily pleasures of fattening food, intoxicating drink, and sexual promiscuity. (p. 22)

In *Narcopolis*, Rashid resembles a glutton in the way he devours food, gulps down alcohol and smokes opium or any other available drug. While his *chandu khana* acts as a center for selling opium, his house is described from the angle of the kitchen. The smell of mutton or any other delicacy cooked by his wives is the main attraction. Moreover, the large meal he eats when Khalid comes to meet him is startling. Along with the fish from Delhi Darbar, food from his house consisted of *tandoori rotis*, *mutton biriyani*, *bheja fry* and *lassi* topped with a slab of hard cream. “He ate no biriyani but mutton, bought the meat himself three times a week. Because he could afford it, he ate meat every day, sometimes twice a day, sometimes mutton and chicken” (Thayil, 2012, p. 149). “Carnival images abound in the human body grossly exaggerated, performing feats that range from the gluttonous to the gross. There are many examples of the corruptible flesh being despoiled and debased, usually through association with grossly abundant food.” (Haynes, 2009, p. 16). The image of Rashid gulping down food matches the spirit of gluttony which prevails in the carnival atmosphere.

While Rashid is associated with the gluttonous side of the carnival, Xavier Newton lives a carnivalesque life in the true sense of the word. He is the rich anomaly in Thayil’s tale of the marginalized. Being a famous artist in London he can fend for himself, but his reckless lifestyle mirrors the life of the carnival. He arrives at an event to promote his new show in Bombay completely drunk with hands shivering like a leaf on a windy day. He roams Bombay’s streets in his muddy kurta stopping only for food and sex. He acts in complete ignorance of any sort of compliance with societal norms or values. He lives in a carnivalesque world of his own without a care in the world. Although he plays a fleeting role in Thayil’s first novel, he is one around whom the plot of Thayil’s second novel, *The Book of Chocolate Saints* (2017) revolves. Xavier’s tumultuous childhood plays a major role in the formation of his carnivalesque nature.

The novelist's representation of the crude and the grotesque includes various sexual encounters, from rape to acts of prostitution and a few instances of consensual sex. Prostitution was the primary source of income for Dimple before joining Rashid's *khana* full-time. Xavier treats her like a means to achieve orgasm and then does not even look at her the next day. The imagery of Dimple cleaning the bucket full of used condoms as she prepares the room for Xavier and the presence of Laxmi and Tai in the adjoining rooms with their customers is true to Bakhtin's idea of the grotesque. This encapsulates the miserable living conditions of people like Dimple in contrast to those of Xavier, who represents the high class that continues to oppress the lower classes.

Moreover, the sexual encounter between Mr. Lee and Pang Mei contains the idea of defiance that is a part of Bakhtin's carnivalesque and grotesque realism. Mr. Lee was an officer in the army and Pang Mei was the Commissar's assistant when they met each other for the first time. Even though they liked each other, it was not safe for them to meet each other in public so they secretly met in the office. However, there was still the risk of them getting caught meeting in private. As a precaution, she asks him to indulge in anal sex so that she could prove herself as a virgin in case of a medical examination. "It becomes a clever strategy for the individual bodies to choose the politically observed office place itself for expressing their denied sexuality. Pang Mei chooses alternate ways of sexual expression in order to avoid any future encounter of the state" (Jose, 2019, pp. 236–237). The precaution taken by Pang Mei underlines the idea of life after the carnival. While the carnival acts as a platform to enjoy freedom, there is still an ever-lingering unease, given that the carnival is ephemeral: it must come to an end and the world must return to its authoritarian balance.

Thayil's narration takes up the form of an exaggerated allegory in one of Dimple's dreams. She envisions the dream like a movie being projected on a screen. She sees a blonde girl who squats over an oversized hat and defecates something into it which is described as blood or human feces. The girl mouths the words "You were nameless and pagan. I gave you context. For two hundred years I gave you context and how did you reward me?" (Thayil, 2012, pp. 236). She is then surrounded by a group of ethnic ecclesiastical figures who are found wearing robes of white or saffron, some others in skullcaps and the rest in conical hats and purple Cossacks. One of the figures lifts his Cossack to reveal a brown belly and black penis. He then dips his hand into the hat and smears himself and the rest of them do the same. Then it switches to the scene of the penis penetrating the girl's anus while the words "Tradition" and "Value" flicker on the screen. In the end, the face of the priest covered with spit and sweat is revealed as he says "This is India."

Thayil uses various metaphors to present a grotesque parody of the state of postcolonial India. The girl represents the British colonialists and their two-century-long rule over the subcontinent. The blood or human waste in the hat corresponds to their role in dividing India, a decision was received without any hesitation by the heads of the religious communities of the nation. The final image of the priest glazed in spit and sweat ties up everything together to show the image of postcolonial India. Thayil's picturesque description of the abused state of India confirms the ambivalence of the carnivalesque, which uses the crowning of a clown king as a form of protest, beyond mere mockery.

Thayil has a special connection with the city of Bombay that is evident in the way he uses the city's name to begin and end his novel. The Bombay described by him in the novel is in complete contrast with the popular image of the business capital of India and the city of dreams. His Bombay is filled with the unknown dark alleys like that of Shuklaji street, populated by

the lowest of the low: drug addicts, prostitutes, pickpockets, and opium dens. Thayil describes the city as “cobbled alleys lined with cots on which the better-off pavement sleepers settled for the night, like the speckled water, the skeptic seething water, the grey-green kala paani, the dirty living sun-baked water lapped against the sides of the broken city” (Thayil, 2012, p. 37). Opium dens and brothels are the main business centers that never go out of business even when the city is burning. Thayil uses the elements of carnivalesque and grotesque realism as a parody to mock and, more importantly, question the rich history of the metropolis. In the words of Simon Dentith (2000):

For Bakhtin, parody is merely one of the forms that draw upon the popular energies of the carnival . . . parody indeed emerges from a particular set of social and historical circumstances; it is mobilized to debunk official seriousness, and to testify to the relativity of all languages, be they the dialects of authority or the jargons of guilds, castes or priesthoods . . . parody is both a symptom and a weapon in the battle between popular cultural energies and the forces of authority which seek to control them. (pp. 22–23)

### Experimental Language and Setting

One major element that infuses Thayil’s novel with its aspect of authenticity is the experimental treatment of language. Much like Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), Thayil presents a version of English that has assonance with the vernacular language spoken in Bombay, thus staying true to his characters and setting. Thayil unapologetically uses words from Hindi, Urdu, Marathi, Punjabi, and even Cantonese without providing any clarification for the reader. He remains true to his narrative by presenting it in a language that resembles the one that his characters would speak in real-life scenarios. The use of other languages like Gujarati and Malayalam is also mentioned in the novel. He makes use of the terms *ma*, *bhai*, *pyali*, *garad*, *hijra*, *jalebi*, *biriyani*, *chandu khana*, *bheja*, *chal*, and so on, adding an Indian flavor to the novel. This use of words from different languages is what Bakhtin called polyglossia.

In *Narcopolis*, Thayil integrates Hindi, Urdu, and Marathi, both in the conversations between the characters and within the narrative discourse. This code-switching is done with no in-line translation and such a constant use of diverse linguistic codes creates a centrifugal effect within the writing. The technique captures the hybrid reality of modern India; a linguistic mix which the book’s narrator calls ‘Bambayya,’ and it is at this level that the text also transmits the violence, sexual depravity, and grotesqueness that has been, up to the present, largely absent from contemporary Indian writing. (O’Connor, 2015, p. 11)

Owing to his personal experience, Thayil incorporates a tone of legitimacy into the novel. He portrays the dark alleys and streets of Bombay in the 1970s and the slums that were surrounded by high-rise buildings in the 2000s. The ubiquity of drugs acts as an important motif: beginning with opium and culminating in cocaine at the end of the narrative, the jump to each new drug represents a descent further into the gallows of mindless addiction. The references of the movies like *Hare Krishna Hare Ram*, *Desh Premee*, *Namak Halal*, *Shakti*, and so forth, and the superstars of that time which included Dilip Kumar, Amitabh Bachchan and Zeenat Aman, help in putting a timestamp of authenticity to the setting of the novel. The communal riots of 1992, which form an important part of the novel, again add to its credibility. In short, Thayil provides a dark yet believable account of life in the dark alleys of Bombay.

## Conclusion

The detailed analysis of Thayil's *Narcopolis* makes it clear that the novelist's primary purpose is to offer a convincing image of Bombay's dark underbelly. To accomplish his aim, the novelist makes use of carnivalesque and grotesque realism. As such, along with the multifaceted array of characters who deal with issues like identity and addiction, the portrayal of the city of Bombay beset by communal riots and the heinous condition of its dark alleys and slums give a grotesque and very realistic image of the city. The lives of the characters, their life choices and their environment strike a parallel with the carnivalesque context that Bakhtin addresses in his work on Rabelais. The use of Bakhtinian concepts of carnivalesque and grotesque realism is vital in attracting attention to the history of marginalized people in India's largest city. Additionally, the autobiographical elements and authentic use of language and setting give the novel a strong charge of authenticity. The carnivalesque and grotesque elements are not only components of style, but function as paragon for the Bakhtinian hope for the regeneration that follows degeneration. To add to the novel's character as repository for observed reality, Thayil neither advocates in favor of the use of drugs nor does he argue against it. He leaves it to the reader to decide on that front. *Narcopolis* is much more than a mere junkie novel and offers many opportunities for further research.



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# THE HUMANITIES AND FIRE

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*EDITOR'S CORNER*

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The humanities, grounded in the effort to analyse the features and qualities of human endeavours, are the mainstay of the Renaissance and the foundation for the Enlightenment. The humanities in many ways put humans at the forefront of creation, a place historically reserved for the divinity. This revolutionary new thinking generated important changes; in pushing the divinity to one side, human development, culture and history could only be understood as products of humanity's acumen and its calculated reactions to the environment. Kant very plainly consecrates humanity's role in the grand scheme of things: "Without man and his potential for moral progress, the whole of reality would be a mere wilderness, a thing in vain, and have no final purpose" (Messer, 2021, n.p.). Auguste Comte, who famously proclaimed that a new republic dedicated to the religion of humanity (*siècle exceptionnel*) would be inaugurated in 1855, "views his Grand-Être as a divinised humanity to replace the *corpus mysticum* of Christ" (Tabachnick & Koivukoski, 2009, p. 201), while Ludwig Feuerbach proclaimed that "Man has his highest being, his God, in himself; not in himself as an individual, but in his essential nature, his species [...] Man is the god of man: homo homini deus est" (Feuerbach, 1854, p. 275). Eventually, humanism would have the divinisation of humankind as its inevitable consequence. This new self-consciousness rationalised our troglodyte survival instincts and, concurring with an ever-expanding technological prowess, transformed nature from "creation" to "environment".

Unlike creation, environment is not subject to a divinely-inspired moral or ethical control that would limit its exploitation. Moreover, with the divinity marginalised and the human being brought to the forefront, nature was no longer God's acreage, to be cherished as a divine gift. Setting fire to a forest was no longer a sin against a god; it was blameworthy only if no material profit could be gained from it or if it infringed upon someone else's proprietary entitlements. For thinkers like Francis Bacon, humanism's bright light cast a dangerous shadow. Growing up in a context of humanist learning, Bacon was motivated by forces in the European mindset that were part of one of the most prodigious tidal waves in cultural history. But he recognised, as he rode its crest, that the tidal wave would have unintended consequences not only for people, but also for nature. As he wrote in his *Novum Organum* (1620), "Only let the human race recover that right over nature which belongs to it by divine bequest; the exercise thereof will be governed by sound reason and true religion". Bacon assumed that common sense would control our violence against nature and that the continued authority of religion would provide moral control, because while his humanistic reasoning might require anthropocentric concessions from his deity, his faith was still buttressed by an ecological ethic that understood nature as divine *creation* and not as *environment*. His aphorism # 23 is explicit:

XXIII. Non leve quiddam interest inter humanae mentis idola, et divinae mentis ideas; hoc est, inter placita quaedam inania, et veras signaturas atque impressiones factas in creaturis, prout inveniuntur.

XXIII. There is no small difference between the idols of the human mind and the ideas of the Divine mind—that is to say, between certain empty dogmas and the true stamps and impressions inscribed in the works of creation, as they are found in nature. (Bacon, 1889, p. 205)

We might recall that passages in the Bible reinforce an ethic that forbids the wanton destruction of nature, which is given a level of protection not always accorded to humans: "When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an axe to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees people, that you should besiege them?" (Deut. 19).

But humanism's unqualified success has outlived religious interdictions that curtailed humanity's unrestrained assault on nature. In view of the planet's present condition and based on scientific data, it is evident that humanity's career as planetary landlord is subject to precious few moral checks and balances, and has therefore come with countless adverse effects for every other organism with which it shares the planet. Many objective inquiries into the health of our home in the universe reach the same conclusive verdict: the world cannot be a healthy, balanced habitat if one prolific, powerful and violent organism prevails over all others. Unfettered by checks and balances, that formidable organism will behave as a pariah, a being that is enduringly harmful and potentially fatal to the biosphere. Remarkably, while so many intellectuals recognise that we are that being, they have yet to identify the solution, perhaps because it involves the disappearance, or at least the protracted and deliberate debilitation, of a particular, defining essence that makes us who we are. That essence is best illustrated by a fable. If the earth were a frog, we'd be the scorpion riding on its back:

A big green frog is sitting on the bank of a river croaking merrily, and the other frogs answer him. A scorpion runs up to the bank and says: "Frog, frog, carry me over to the other side as quickly as you can, for I cannot swim". "But won't you bite me?" asks the frog. The scorpion promises not to, pointing out that they would both drown if the scorpion killed the frog in the middle of the river. The frog considers this argument to be very reasonable and agrees to transport the scorpion. Halfway across the river the scorpion stings the frog, dooming them both. The dying frog asks the scorpion why it stung despite knowing they'd both perish, to which the scorpion replies: "I am sorry, but I couldn't help it. It's in my nature". (Tushkan, 1944, p. 320)

So, is there a chance that human beings will stop consuming the planet to death? Probably not. It is more likely that, as planetary resources dwindle, consumption of what remains will intensify and competition among nations, groups and individuals will become even more fierce than it is today. Tribal survival instincts are ingrained in humans, and they predispose us to certain ways of interacting with each other and with the environment. Hundreds of thousands of years of hunting and gathering in forests and savannas have hard-wired our brains to function in a distinct manner, worrying about our next meal, making better tools and weapons with which to procure more food, and hoarding as much as possible in anticipation of leaner times. Historically, impediments to the preservation of life have been colossal. Because of this, every action is justified in the endeavour to survive, and this determines the fundamental behaviour of every organism on earth, including us.

Evidently, preservation requires consumption, and consumption requires violence to other organisms. Higher levels of violence improve the odds of sustaining life, as the more you kill, the more you eat and stockpile. This is not necessarily harmful; it is only when one of those organisms develops an immense capacity to do violence that the biosphere can be subject to irreparable harm. We have that capacity and, unfortunately for the planet, the scorpion cannot help being a scorpion: we might not be able to alter our congenital disposition to do violence to the environment in the drive to consume. The spectacular failure of the COP25 (Madrid) and COP26 (Glasgow) climate talks are an eloquent statement in this regard, and the title of a recent *Time* magazine article seems to confirm our inability to change: "The World is on Track to Generate a Record Amount of Power From Coal in 2021, the IEA Says" (Dec. 17, 2021).

That said, it is important to note that there are academicians who remain hopeful about the future of the planet and of humanity's prospects. The humanities, after all, have brought the human being to the forefront of critical attention, but they have also reinforced the idea that

human beings are nothing without the nurturing society that gives context to life. Partly as a result of the new ethos ushered in by the humanities, the will of monarchs or autocrats, in general, no longer determines what is good and what is not. Today, many decrees, directives and regulations forbid activities that are harmful to society as a whole. Whatever benefits social cohesion is considered good, while whatever harms it is considered evil. But that social cohesion is understood as a *local* necessity. Beyond the borders of the imagined community, be it a municipality, a state or a nation, that necessity dissipates. We might look at failed states around the world with pity, but they don't really concern us. We let academicians worry about that... it gives them something to do.

The question is, can we expand the scope of that humanist spirit of cooperation to include not just all human groups on the planet, but the Earth itself, that self-regulating super organism that James Lovelock called "Gaia"? Again, that is improbable, as it requires humanity's abdication of much of its control over the planet's resources, and nothing short of a benevolent world government could attempt such an impossible endeavour.

But there *is* hope for the planet. At the risk of sounding like a misanthrope, I'd submit that, although we are doing great harm to the biosphere, that harm may be fleeting, for there is a post-human future, one in which the planet should once again flourish after a period of convalescence. We should remember that our habitation on the planet is fleeting, that the biosphere flourished for a long time before we appeared on the scene, and it will flourish again after we're gone. It is becoming increasingly evident that human extinction is the essential prerequisite for the next edition of the Garden of Eden.

If there is a slim chance that a new-fangled spirit of social cooperation will include Gaia, one that underscores the kinship with the non-human as critical to the preservation of human society, the work of researchers in the new field of environmental humanities (a.k.a. ecological humanities) must be highlighted as a logical guide to the development of an ethos of planetary survival. Its researchers place critical importance on interdisciplinary cooperation, such as proposed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology by the MacArthur Workshop on Humanistic Studies of the Environment, which was active from 1991 to 1995, and by Arizona State University's Environmental Humanities Initiative. Significantly, the Workshop envisioned a different, more organic role for the humanities. It starts by rising above the dualism that erects a barrier between human beings and everything else on the planet. The Workshop, in short, diagnoses the earth's ailments as the result of human beliefs, traditions, principles and assumptions.

Quite belatedly, the humanities had begun to move in the right direction before the Workshop launched its efforts:

As the humanities became democratized in the movement toward mass education, its scholars have gradually become more engaged in environmental issues and research. This was due in part to scholarly interest and in part to a quest for social relevance, but in almost all cases it was also a response to the growing awareness of environmental problems. Scattered, individual efforts between c. 1960 and 1980 led to the formation of scholarly associations and journals. Financial support for these activities, haphazard before c. 1990, has become more systematic. For example, in recent years major funding for the Environmental Humanities has been given by the Mellon Foundation to UCLA, Berkeley, the University of Virginia, and the University of Sydney. (The Emergence of the Environmental Humanities, 2013, p. 6)

So, essentially, only after 1990 did we begin judiciously to observe that our house had been burning since the Industrial Revolution. This is probably too little, too late: our train to a fiery hell has gained speed, and we can no longer jump off. We've set the planet on fire. The Amazon is being deforested by fire. Considerable areas in every continent are going up in flames. Even water is at the mercy of our fiery self-regard. Cleveland's Cuyahoga River caught fire in 1969, with flames reaching 70 feet high, and the Chicago and Buffalo rivers and Michigan's Rouge River have also frequently caught fire (McDiarmid, 2021, n.p.). In July of 2021 parts of the Gulf of Mexico around the Campeche Sound burst into flames (Andrei, 2021, n.p.). When you succeed in setting water on fire, flash-boiling unsuspecting marine life that was already stuffed with your toxic waste, you should assume that you've probably gone too far, and that things are just not looking up for you.

That humanist fire that illuminated the mind and freed us from the oppressive darkness of ignorance is no longer figurative. And we have nowhere to run.



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