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The Role of Technology in Second Language Acquisition (SLA): Vocabulary Learning via Mobile Phones

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received on: 25 Jan 2025</p> <p>Revised on: 23 Feb 2025</p> <p>Accepted on: 28 Feb 2025</p> <p>©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords – Mobile-assisted learning, SLA, vocabulary learning, mobile apps</p>	<p><i>With the beginning of twenty-first century and the fast changes in the modern era, technology becomes an essential part of every field of learning. Hence, it has changed the way in which vocabulary is approached in SLA. One of the vital types of the new technologies used for learning purposes is mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), where reference is made to learning a language with the help of smartphones and mobile applications. This has been identified as a very successful means of improving vocabulary preservation, comprehension, and general language proficiency. This study dwells on the contribution of mobile phones to enhancing vocabulary development. The paper fathoms the theoretical frameworks for guiding the use of mobile applications in vocabulary acquisition and the actual empirical studies to demonstrate the effectiveness of mobile-based vocabulary acquisition. It is a secondary data analysis that presents an overview of what has been said in literature so far regarding mobile vocabulary learning. The study enumerates the strengths and challenges of learning this way, and concludes with recommendations for how educators can optimize their strategy of mobile-assisted learning.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

The development of technology has changed the face of age, especially in the educational field. Educational technology becomes a need for every academic institution, especially in the process of acquiring of a second language. Acquisition of a second language, most often referred to as SLA (Second Language Acquisition), involves the gain in grammatical competence, knowledge of pronunciation, and, above all, the vocabulary of the respective language. Vocabulary can be considered

the axis around which other components of language revolve; not only because it forms the basis of all other linguistic competencies but also because it is crucial in terms of comprehension and expression skills (Nation, 2001).

During the last decade, mobile phones have become powerful tools in language acquisition, providing learners vast access to a wide range of digital material available at any moment. Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) indicates the use of mobile phones as a flexible and autonomous way of

language acquisition (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). Unlike traditional classroom-based vocabulary learning, which depends on imitation and memorization, MALL applies interactive learning strategies such as gamification, spaced repetition, and contextual learning. For example, spaced repetition optimizes long-term preservation by presenting words at the best intervals, while gamified elements such as rewards and challenges maintain learner engagement.

Furthermore, technological innovations such as artificial intelligence (AI) and augmented reality (AR) have further enhanced mobile vocabulary learning experiences. AI-based applications personalize learning by adjusting content to suit the learner's pace and level of skill providing targeted vocabulary exposure accordingly. On the other hand, AR-powered applications provide experiential learning environments wherein learners immerse themselves in new words under real-life contexts, making vocabulary learning more experiential and contextual (Godwin-Jones, 2017).

Though it has many benefits, there are other issues related to mobile vocabulary learning. That is to say, digital distractions, learning software integrity, and self-regulation can impact the effectiveness of mobile learning. Moreover, not all mobile applications contain quality learning content. Thus, learners and instructors need to be careful in selecting appropriate resources. Overcoming these challenges is essential to harnessing the full potential of mobile technology in learning languages.

This paper investigates the use of mobile phones in SLA learning of vocabulary through theoretical models, empirical research, and practical application. By reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of MALL, this study aims to give insight into how mobile technology can be employed to facilitate vocabulary learning, which in turn helps language learners become more skilled.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In an overview of the theoretical foundations of mobile-assisted language learning and word acquisition, pertinent empirical researches are duly examined to reveal the findings of previous studies concerned with the performance of mobile

applications in vocabulary retention and language proficiency.

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks

Understanding the impact of mobile technology on vocabulary acquisition requires a solid theoretical foundation. The following theories provide insights into how mobile apps can support and enhance language learning.

Krashen's Input Hypothesis

Stephen Krashen's theory published in 1982 is pivotal for explaining how language learners acquire words. According to Krashen, language learning is best served by the presentation of "comprehensible input" – that is, a somewhat higher level than current competence but understandable. Apps on mobile devices are an excellent means of providing this input because a lot of them demonstrate words in usage using a multimedia presentation, allowing the learners to see and hear the words put to meaningful use. Duolingo, Babbel, and Memrise are just apps that expose learners to new words being applied in various contexts, including the meanings and uses of words in actual situations. By offering genuine and comprehensible input, mobile apps create an environment in which learning vocabulary takes place more organically and spontaneously (Krashen, 1982; Sharp & Gallimore, 1988).

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

This theory presented in 1978 puts emphasis on the importance of social communication in cognitive development. In the case of mobile-assisted vocabulary learning, the theory argues that learners can foster their vocabulary learning through social communication. Many mobile applications have social aspects, such as peer evaluation, discussion forums, and collaborative work. These provide opportunities for interaction among learners. Social networking capabilities, such as those found on the HelloTalk and Tandem applications, allow learners to communicate with native speakers and classmates and therefore provide instances of real-time practice and feedback. The social element of mobile applications comes in correspondence with Vygotsky's vision, which recognizes the importance of learning in group settings and the proximal zone of development for language acquisition (Vygotsky, 1978; Pinter, 2017).

Cognitive Load Theory

John Sweller's 1988 Cognitive Load Theory dwells on certifying cognitive load in the process of learning. When it comes to vocabulary acquisition, mobile apps make sure that vocabulary is presented in a way that cognitive overload does not stand as a problem anymore. An example of this is that most mobile apps use spaced repetition algorithms where vocabulary is divided into subsets and spaced appropriately so that strengthening can occur and retention will be enhanced. This spaced learning strategy avoids cognitive overload for the learners and still exposes them to practice new words continuously in a manageable way (Sweller, 1988; Paas & van Merriënboer, 2003). Efficient placement of cognitive resources by these apps helps learners memorize vocabulary for the long term.

Multimedia Learning Theory

Mayer's Multimedia Learning Theory (2009) presumes that students would learn better if the information are presented in a double mode using verbal and visual media. Mobile apps utilize this principle by including text, audio, and graphics, which enhance the learning process. For vocabulary learning, this approach is greatly effective as the students are presented with multiple representations of words, hearing pronunciation, seeing spelling within sentences, and manipulating them through images or videos. The research has revealed that students exposed to multimedia in language learning programs have higher recall rates and healthier comprehension (Mayer, 2009; Moreno & Mayer, 2007).

Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) reveals the truth that students are more intrinsically motivated when they perceive autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Each of these plays a pivotal role in effective language acquisition, and mobile apps can easily support each of them. The majority of language-learning apps have adapted learning procedures, and learners can choose their learning sequence, set objectives, and proceed according to their preferences. Gamification elements such as levels, points, and badges provide a sense of competence and mastery; whereas social elements facilitate ties with peers. Autonomy facilitated

through mobile applications encourages learners to be responsible for their learning, which leads to greater motivation and engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Reeve, 2012).

2.2 Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) in SLA

MALL has marked a quantum leap in vocabulary learning for language learners. With immediate access to language resources and interactive practice options, the mobile phone forms a steadfast tool for SLA nowadays. Many distinguishing features of MALL become the driving force behind the massive success of MALL in the field of vocabulary learning. These features comprise instant access to resources, personalization, gamification, and interactive learning tools. Therefore, mobile phones become essential tools in SLA, particularly in enhancing the learning of vocabularies (Burston, 2014).

Gamification and Motivation

Gamification, the most thrilling feature of mobile apps, is relished by language apps such as Memrise and Duolingo. Challenges, points, levels, and rewards, which are typical of gameplay, are utilized in learner engagement. Accordingly, learning is no longer a chore and becomes more motivational. Motivation has been activated as learning becomes more like playing a game, not studying and dictating. As learning progresses through levels and as they get rewards, they are motivated by feelings of achievement and the desire to continue (Burston, 2015; Deterding et al., 2011).

Spaced Repetition

Spaced repetition is another powerful tool that mobile apps utilize to make vocabulary learning more enduring. Apps like Anki and Quizlet employ algorithms that repeat vocabulary words at progressively greater intervals, reminding people of words just before they are most likely to forget them. This approach influences the principle of the spacing effect, which is a psychological phenomenon that contends information is best retained when reviewed at spaced intervals. Research has consistently revealed that spaced repetition is an effective tool for long-term word preservation (Cepeda et al., 2006; Schmitt & Carter, 2020).

Contextual Learning

Mobile apps provide contextual learning that is vital to learning how the words are being employed in genuine contexts. Compared to traditional methods of vocabulary building based on rote memorization, mobile apps simplify how learners see and implement vocabulary in a context. Language apps like Babbel and HelloTalk, for example, have dialogues, conversations, and scenarios where vocabulary can be utilized by learners. This contextualization of learning makes students more proficient in recognizing how words are used in different contexts, and this facilitates the use of new words in communication to a large extent (Nishida & Kuramoto, 2018; Chik, 2014).

Self-Directed Learning

Mobile apps support independent learning, allowing learners to be in control of their vocabulary acquisition. By being able to learn at their own pace, learners have the freedom to choose what to learn, when to learn, and how to learn. This autonomy is particularly convenient for adult learners with busy schedules who would wish to learn at their convenience. Studies indicate that self-directed learning promotes more engagement and motivation, which results in better language learning (Godwin-Jones, 2011; Kukulska-Hulme, 2008).

2.3 Empirical Studies on Mobile-Based Vocabulary Learning

More and more recent researches support the effectiveness of mobile applications in learning words. Different empirical studies have examined the impact of mobile learning on vocabulary learning, retention, and motivation of learners.

Students who use mobile applications to learn vocabulary outperform those who use more conventional study techniques in memorization tests, according to Stockwell (2013). Stockwell's study compared normal classroom settings with mobile-assisted language learning. The results show that vocabulary acquisition is more effective and interesting when done using mobile applications, particularly when those applications provide multimedia content and interactive features.

Wu (2015) investigated how mobile learning could affect language learners' anxiety and motivation. His research concluded that vocabulary learners who

used smartphone apps to practice their language skills were more motivated and less anxious about it. According to the study's findings, language learners can practice alone in a less discouraging setting with mobile apps, which also lessens their worries about committing mistakes.

Sung et al. (2015) conducted a meta-analytical study of 36 articles about mobile-assisted language acquisition. They found out that mobile learning enhanced learners' vocabulary and overall proficiency in a language. The study emphasized that interactive features, such as tests, flashcards, and multimedia, are critical to improving learning outcomes.

Lin and Lin (2022) elaborated on the usage of social networking applications for learning vocabulary. It was found that students made significant progress in vocabulary learning through interactive debate and cooperative learning activities in mobile language-learning groups. As the research shows, social engagement is the key to learning vocabulary and mobile applications with social elements can enhance the learning process (Lin & Lin, 2022).

Tseng et al. (2023) had an experimental study on the learning of vocabulary through the application of Augmented Reality (AR) technology. The study found that students who used AR-based vocabulary exercises could remember vocabulary words more effectively than those who used paper-based flashcards. According to Tseng et al. (2023), the results of the study showed that AR applications provide context-based learning experiences that can help improve vocabulary learning.

III. METHODS

The study has adopted a qualitative approach of dwelling on literature of what has been concluded in previous studies. It is a secondary data analysis on the subject of mobile-assisted vocabulary learning. A thorough literature review is carried out to evaluate the efficacy of mobile technology in SLA, based on theoretical and empirical studies. The study tackles the findings of peer-reviewed articles, conference papers, and case studies of mobile learning applications and their effects on vocabulary learning. To guarantee research authenticity, various studies have been selected according to particular inclusion

criteria. These studies have been supposed to be connected with SLA and MALL. They have to provide empirical evidence of mobile technology's effectiveness as well. Nonetheless, they should be published within the last twenty years. Hence, the research reviews the recent studies in the field, and the findings are authentic and up-to-date. The research is a thematic analysis of main findings according to various themes like gamification, spaced repetition, self-directed learning, and the role of AI and AR in vocabulary acquisition. So, the study seeks to check different sources to provide an encompassing understanding of MAVL and its implications for learners and educators.

IV. FINDINGS

A deep analysis of formerly cited studies reveals the transformative effects of mobile-based technology on vocabulary acquisition in SLA. The findings can be listed as follows:

1. **Enhanced Retention Through Spaced Repetition:** Mobile apps, like Quizlet and Anki, apply spaced repetition algorithms to enhance vocabulary learning at the best intervals, which promotes long-term retention. Accordingly, learners who used spaced repetition apps retained vocabulary more effectively than those who used traditional study methods (Cepeda et al., 2006; Schmitt & Carter, 2020).
2. **Increased Motivation Through Gamification:** Elements of gamification, such as point systems, leader-boards and achievement badges, increase motivation and engagement. Research suggests that gamification gives a sense of achievement to students that makes them spend more time practicing vocabulary (Burston, 2015; Deterding et al., 2011).
3. **Personalized Learning with AI** is about AI-driven apps that adapt vocabulary exercises to the learner's proficiency level, provide personalized feedback, and increase or decrease the complexity of the task according to the learner's proficiency level. This way, the learners only focus on the words they

struggle with, which ensures the best learning results (Godwin-Jones, 2017).

4. **Contextual and Social Learning:** Applications like Babbel and HelloTalk offer real-world situations. Here learners can use vocabulary in authentic contexts. The applications' social networking features allow learners to interact with native speakers and peers. Learners can reinforce vocabulary acquisition through communication. (Lin & Lin, 2022).
5. **Challenges of Mobile Learning:** Notwithstanding the benefits mobile vocabulary learning can bring, it has certain challenges, such as digital distractions, fluctuating app quality, and the need for self-regulation. In addition, some students might find it difficult to maintain attention due to non-educational content available on mobile devices (Stockwell, 2013).

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Nowadays, mobile technology is transforming vocabulary acquisition in SLA. It provides students with flexible, interactive, and personalized vocabulary learning experiences. Learners use mobile applications to access resources, practice vocabulary in context, and learn vocabulary using techniques like gamification and spaced repetition to promote learning preservation. Yet, despite the benefits of mobile in SLA, learners can get distracted and over-rely on technology. To get the utmost effectiveness of mobile-assisted vocabulary learning, teachers and trainers of SLA should incorporate mobile apps into their teaching strategies to ensure that they are used in a balanced way to support traditional methods of SLA.

To maximize mobile learning's potential, an educator needs to:

- Encourage students to set realistic goals and monitor their progress using mobile apps is a good idea.
- Integrate face-to-face interactions with mobile learning to enhance social learning.

- Foster collaborative learning through social media apps.

That is to say, the teacher or trainer should suggest a combination of applications that utilize the exercises in vocabulary development and practical training based on real-life situations and encourage reflection on learning experiences to foster critical thinking in the students of SLA.

With the rapid advance of educational technology, mobile-assisted language learning has a bright future. The use of mobile devices for educational purposes is becoming increasingly popular, and the same trend is expected to persist. Thus, this study is a basis for future studies to be conducted to assist mobile applications in SLA.

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African Women Chiefs as Partners in Regional Governance in Cameroon: The Case of “Nkunkuma” Marie-Louise Zoa

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received on: 30 Jan 2025 Revised on: 27 Feb 2025 Accepted on: 05 Mar 2025 ©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords— Women Chiefs, Marie-Louise Zoa, Gender Equality, Regional Governance, Women Empowerment, Cameroon</p>	<p><i>The inclusion of women in regional governance processes has of recent gained tremendous attention in most African societies as a means to foster more inclusive and sustainable development. In Africa, men for the most part, have been the ones at the helm of affairs and decision-making while women are relegated to the background most of the times. This paper therefore explores the role of African women chiefs with particular reference to Her Majesty Marie-Louise Zoa, of Okoa community in the Centre region of Cameroon as a key partner in regional governance in Cameroon. Her unique contributions to decision-making, conflict resolution, community development, as well as her role as the custodian of cultural heritage of her community cannot be overemphasized. Through qualitative interviews, the paper examines the barriers and constraints women chiefs face, such as patriarchal norms, limited access to resources/education, and gender-based discrimination. The paper however contends that there is need for collaboration between African women chiefs and other stakeholders such as government institutions, civil society organizations, and international development agencies in order to foster inclusive partnership and regional governance. It further advocates for the recognition and empowerment of African women chiefs as vital partners in regional governance in Cameroon. By so doing, this will foster gender equality, promote women’s leadership, and provide avenues for meaningful participation of women chiefs in decision-making processes.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

The role of African women chiefs as partners in regional governance is an important aspect of promoting gender equality, and effective governance in Africa, given the fact that women in Africa occupy secondary or minority positions as far as leadership positions are concerned due to cultural and political ambiguities. Women (including Cameroonian women), according to Muoghalu and Abrifor (2012),

are discouraged from participating in public life from childhood through adulthood by authority figures such as husbands, fathers, mothers and other relations due to cultural image of a virtuous woman defined as quiet, submissive who should be seen and not heard. Because of the patriarchal nature of the African society, most women still believe and accept the traditional perspectives that view women as inferior to men, second class citizens, weaker sex,

to be seen and not heard, child bearers/ primary care-givers, and so on. In most cases, they feel the game of politics is an exclusive reserve of men and dare not venture into it and those who manage to venture are usually contented with the back seats (Ngara et al., 2013).

In the same vein, Ugwuegede Patience Nwabunkeonye (2014) opines that religious practices are sometimes used as powerful instruments of stereotype against Nigerian women political aspirants/politicians from active participation in politics. For instance, in Northern Nigeria, the purdah system (i.e. house seclusion of women) of the Islamic doctrine strictly bars women from participating in politics either as voters, political aspirants or even participating in campaigns/other electoral activities. However, when it comes to the issue of political leadership and formulation of government policies women's role in Islam is limited to supportive and advisory (Nwankwo and Surma, 2008). Also, the Christian doctrine on her part does not accord women much role in public life.

However, in some traditional African societies, women have held formal positions as queens, queen mothers or female chiefs. For example, the Akan people of Ghana have a tradition of "Queen mothers" who play important advisory and decision-making roles alongside male chiefs. Similarly, some societies in Nigeria have had powerful female rulers: Iyalode of the Yoruba people, Queen Amina of Zauzau, Princess Inikpi of the Igala Kingdom and a lot more. In Cameroon, the Nso dynasty in the North West region, was founded by Ngonnso, the queen mother. All these, are evidences that African women chiefs play important roles in leadership and their contributions to regional governance cannot be overemphasized.

These women chiefs, also known as queen mothers or female traditional leaders are very few, but play significant roles in preserving and safeguarding the artistic and cultural heritage of their people in various chiefdoms/kingdoms in the African continent as well as in their communities thereby contributing enormously to regional governance. From time immemorial women have been the keepers of traditions, custodians of oral histories, and creators of exquisite art forms. They have often served as priestesses, diviners, and mediators between human

and spiritual realms. These religious leadership and expertise have been crucial in maintaining community cohesion and practices.

Although over the years, women have been relegated to the background on issues of the overall community development especially in developing nations like Cameroon, one could say that, this is borne out of the sentimental attachment on the feminine gender. Historical evidences show that African women and Cameroonian women in particular have for long been playing crucial roles in the political life of their countries, and this has contributed in no small measure in shaping the political system of their nations. For example, the Aba Women's Riot in Nigeria in 1929 was a major anti-colonial uprising led by women. Also in Cameroon, the *Anlu* and *Takembeng* women's secret groups of the North West Region were very much influential in re-shaping the political situation in Cameroon in the 1990s. These women's activism according to Bertha Epie-Eyoh (1993), demonstrates that "women have always been the backbone of every political rally or political march in support of democracy or in demonstrations against repression"(184). These are indicators that, for development of any kind to be successful, a vantage position should be accorded to the women, as they constitute a larger proportion of the population in Cameroon. In this regard, they should not be left out on issues of decision-making that bothers even on their lives as a people.

Today, women are participating more actively in leadership roles through regional governance, and community development than ever before as a result of political re-awakening and awareness. More often than not, they are besieged with challenges of which discrimination is more rife. Majority of the men more on chauvinistic dispositions are preoccupied with the notion that decision-making is exclusively for the men folk while women are to be instructed on what to do. This idea of seeing the women playing the number two role at homes has come to play itself out in the political life of the people. However, with regards to the ever dynamic nature of things globally women are now seen in other communities as avant-garde most especially in developed nations. Nevertheless, African women chiefs such as "Nkunkuma" Marie-Louise Zoa have recorded some measure of appreciable leadership

roles in regional governance and political achievement thereby, meeting her leadership objectives though with limited support and resources at her disposal.

Her Majesty Marie-Louise Zoa otherwise referred to as "Nkunkuma" Marie-Louise Zoa is the female traditional ruler of Okoa community in the centre region of Cameroon who serves as the custodian of artistic and cultural heritage of her people. Okoa is located in the outskirts of the city of Yaounde, at Soa in the Mefou Afamba Division of the Centre Region of Cameroon. This community has a long history of colonization and slavery where many people fled from slavery from various parts of the continent and took refuge in Okoa. According to Her Majesty (HM) in an interview August 2023, a lot of Tutsis fled the Rwandan genocide and took refuge in Okoa where many of them later became integrated in the community and have become great farmers and land owners. The Okoa community is noted for her hospitality as she is host to people from diverse parts of the nation from the North, South, North West, South West regions and many more. This accounts for the reason the community harbours people from various ethnic groups. According to Cedric Mimfoumou (2019) the indigenous people of Okoa, are the Etengas, while settlers like the Maka'a, the Nanga-Eboko and the Ndong people have over the years become full-fledged indigenes of this community.

Leadership of the people of Okoa has been under the tutelage of Her Majesty Marie-Louise Zoa for over 40 years. She ascended the throne in 1982 at the age of 20, four years before the demise of her father, the former chief of Okoa. In a typical patriarchal society where leadership is mostly in the hands of men, we come across a female traditional ruler who is vested with the powers and authority to lead a whole chiefdom. The question that arises here is: Why the choice of a female successor despite the fact that she has male siblings? In a response, she says: "I cant really explain my father's decision but I believe it was divine since my father was a great visionary. Power comes from God, and parents understand their children better and can predict their future. I have brothers and sisters but my predecessor chose me." (Interview with Marie-Louise Zoa, August 26, 2023). At her young age of ascending the throne as a

female Chief, it is obvious that she would have definitely had some challenges leading her people. She however, declares that:

The chiefdom is not the chief alone. The chief is just at the helm of affairs. That notwithstanding, I was so young and understood very little about the cultural norms and practices of my people, but I was so so fortunate to be mentored by my father four years before his demise. Unlike the case in most chiefdoms where succession is done after the death of the former chief. This transition period, gave me the opportunity to learn a lot from my predecessor, the notables and the royal entourage. I accompanied my late father, in performing several rituals and duties of the Chief. So these four years were a period of learning for me to better equip me for the duties that await me. It is thanks to this procedure and the wisdom bestowed upon me by my ancestors that I have been able to successfully rule over my people for all this length of time (interview with Marie-Louise Zoa, August 26, 2023).

This indicates that succession in traditional African kingdoms and chieftaincies varies across different cultures and societies. In many traditional african kingdoms, the kingship or chieftaincy is hereditary and the succession often follows either patrilineal or matrilineal lines. The throne is passed from father to son or from ruler to their sister's son. On rare occasions do we find succession handed down from father to daughter as is the case with Marie-Louise Zoa. This indicates that the succession process is often complex, nuanced, and adapted to the unique circumstances and traditions of each kingdom or chieftaincy. As such, the role of women chiefs in leadership and governance cannot be overemphasized.

The traditional African women chiefs though very few are of great influence on the African continent and in regional governance in many ways such as representing the women in their communities in the political and developmental arenas as well as preserving the cultural heritage of her people.

II. REPRESENTATION AND VOICE

African women chiefs represent the interests and concerns of women within their communities. They provide a unique perspective on issues that affect women, such as gender-based violence, maternal health, education, and economic empowerment. By amplifying women's voices, women chiefs ensure that the needs and priorities of women are incorporated into regional governance processes such as education for all children especially young girls, curbing girl-child marriage and re-enforcing certain traditional marriage practices. Her Majesty Marie-Louise Zoa, serves as a peace mediator in issues affecting women in her area especially in cases of domestic violence where women are molested by their male counterparts. Most of these disputes are settled within the traditional ambit of the local authorities without necessarily bringing in either the forces of law and order or going to court. She is known for her ability to mediate disputes, foster dialogue and promote reconciliation. In regional governance, her participation can contribute to the creation of an inclusive and peaceful society by incorporating gender-sensitive approaches to conflict resolution and peace building. Her presence is a strong symbol of the feminine power which gives voice to the voiceless in her community.

Her majesty's activities in her community Okoa, reiterates the fact that women in traditional societies play a major role in peacemaking and conflict resolution as they constitute a greater percentage of inhabitants in Cameroon. These women in their traditional roles, have been known to pilot most of the affairs of the land from the pre-colonial era till date. Their role in conflict resolution, prevention, peacemaking, peacebuilding and reconciliation cannot be over-emphasized. This is because apart from performing their biological and social roles of caring, giving birth and bringing up humans as mothers, women have the potentials of partaking in activities geared towards peaceful resolution of conflicts as well as in peacebuilding. The traditional African women leaders usually assume the role of peacemakers in families, communities and the society at large as is the case with HM Marie Louise Zoa. As a peace mediator in her community, she ensures that women are united across party, ethnic and class differences to foster peace in most troubled

communities. Their unity and determination stems from their everyday experiences and concerns such as protecting their children, finding food, clean water or shelter, protecting themselves from violence and particularly sexual and gender-based violence associated with conflict. These and many more are the concerns of HM (Marie-Louise Zoa) and her notables, to ensure that there is maximum peace in her community.

While most women are left out of the arena of regional governance probably because of their femininity and cultural biases against the womenfolk, "Nkunkuma" Marie-Louise Zoa, has been very instrumental in the domains of skill acquisition and women empowerment. Her production of a specially designed Ekang traditional attire with the use of local materials like raffia, cowries, wild fruits, "Obom" (bark of a rare wood species), woven together with leopard polyester material is of great significance. As an entrepreneur, she trains young girls and boys in the production of these special traditional attires (caps, necklaces, jackets, gowns etc) worn by notables, and dignitaries reflecting the culture of her people. This skill acquisition centre equally serves as means of youth empowerment and financial independence. Within Cameroon and elsewhere, her recognition as a designer of this special Ekang traditional attire, has conquered the hearts of many as these outfits are in high demand across the nation and why not internationally. Her artistry has enabled her to sustain traditional art forms and serves as an income generating avenue for the Ekang youths in the industry as well as the community at large. By promoting and marketing African art and crafts through her traditional attires, Her Majesty does not only contribute to the preservation of her cultural heritage but equally empowers herself and Ekang youths economically. Her participation in several art exhibitions and conferences won her the 2019 best participation prize during the Mvet-Oyeng festival in Ambam, Cameroon. She has equally earned several other awards to her honour where she presented her culture to the outside world. Her activities and leadership roles are in tandem with regional governance processes since she impacts positively in her community and uses her position as a medium for peace negotiation and economic empowerment. This portrays that women chiefs serve as role models and

advocates for gender equality and women empowerment. Her presence as an activist in regional governance in Cameroon, provides a platform to address gender disparities and advance women's rights thus challenging gender stereotypes.

Civil wedding ceremonies in Cameroon are often the prerogatives of the mayors or deputy mayors. However, the law also allows for traditional chiefs to be designated by the state to officiate civil marriage ceremonies. This makes marriage ceremonies more accessible especially in rural areas where government offices may be absent. It equally allows for the incorporation of traditional customs and involvement of respected community leaders in the marriage process. These can make the civil wedding more meaningful and culturally relevant for the couple and their families. Her Majesty, Marie-Louise Zoa is one of the government representatives designated to officiate civil weddings in her community. This places her within the ambit of regional governance as she works hand in glove with the state to ensure that distance is not a barrier for would-be couples in her rural community. Her palace accommodates both the traditional and civil arenas for wedding ceremonies. The practice of designating traditional chiefs as civil registrars in Cameroon is a unique approach that combines the legal requirements of civil marriage with the traditional authority and cultural significance of the local community.

III. COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Most African women chiefs actively engage in community development initiatives, focusing on areas such as healthcare, education, sanitation and economic empowerment. They recognize the importance of investing in human capital and work towards improving the well-being and livelihoods of their communities. Most of these African women chiefs collaborate with their regional governance stakeholders, including government officials, civil society organizations, and international development agencies to foster community development in their areas of jurisdiction. Through these partnerships, they share best practices, exchange knowledge, and advocate for policies that address the specific needs and challenges faced by women and the communities at large. Collaboration with regional governance bodies such as the government, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), individuals and groups of

persons/elites, enables women chiefs to access resources, build capacity, and influence decision-making processes in their communities. By so doing, women chiefs contribute to the formulation and implementation of policies that promote sustainable development and social progress in their communities.

Her Majesty Marie-Louise Zoa in this domain of community development and in collaboration with the municipal council has allocated a large portion of land for the construction of a market, a health centre, and a primary school to cater for the immediate needs of her community. According to her, underground work is underway in search of funds from government agencies, NGOs and private investors to actualize these projects and many more. The African Roots and Heritage Foundation (NGO) is one of such organisations catching up with the pace to construct a library and a research centre at Okoa community. These are all policies put in place by Her Majesty to foster and promote sustainable development and social progress in her community.

As part of economic sustainability and community development, "Nkunkuma" has constructed an ecotouristic site on the Mefou river closer to her palace popularly known as "Pieds dans l'eau" (Feet in Water) which serves as both a restaurant and a touristic site for many people within and outside the community. At pieds dans l'eau, tourists have the opportunity to enjoy the Ekang traditional meal known as "ndomba" (an Ekang dish made from fresh river fish "pepper-soup" prepared with local spices) with their feet immersed in water. This site is surrounded by the beauty of a natural forest landscape with its flora and fauna, and the serenity of the atmosphere coupled with the rippling sounds of the running stream as against the hustling and bustling life in the cities. On these quiet waters, is a strong sense of communion with nature, reminiscence of the natural and authentic beauty of the community of Okoa.

IV. PRESERVATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE AND THE RESTITUTION OF AFRICAN SACRED OBJECTS

Most African women chiefs serve as custodians of the culture and traditions of their people. They equally play a vital role in preserving and promoting cultural practices, indigenous knowledge, and traditional values within their communities. By

actively participating in regional governance, women chiefs can advocate for the recognition and inclusion of cultural diversity in policies and programs, contributing to the preservation of African cultural heritage.

The traditional African women chiefs have been of great influence on the African continent in many ways and one of such is through the preservation of oral traditions where they have acted as custodians of cultural heritage. For centuries, African societies relied so much on oral storytelling as a means of transmitting historical accounts, myths, legends and moral teachings from one generation to another. These women were central to this process of passing down these narratives from one generation to another, thus ensuring their continuity and relevance. Her Majesty Marie-Louise Zoa as one of the richly endowed traditional African women leaders has stood the test of time and leaves no stone unturned by bringing up the young princesses in her chieftdom in the ways and customs of her people. These young girls beautifully clad in traditional attires take turns in attending to Her Majesty in both private and public functions. By so doing, they are gradually immersed in their traditional roles and practices as they learn the history, myths and cultural practices of their people thus ensuring their continuity and relevance. Despite all these, globalization has become a threat to the survival of some of these Ekang cultural practices such as bride price, widowhood, and funeral rites just to mention a few.

Throughout Africa, women have been at the forefront of cultural rituals and ceremonies which are essential in the preservation of their cultural heritage. From initiation ceremonies to marriage rituals, widowhood and funeral rites and many others, women have played central roles as priestesses, performers, dancers, singers, and organizers. These rituals often serve as a means of transmitting cultural values, social norms, and spiritual beliefs. African women's active participation in these rituals ensures the continuity of traditions and the preservation of cultural heritage within their communities. Her Majesty Marie Louis Zoa, is taking major steps towards the revalorisation of the bride price practice in her community which to her is of great significance in the African marriage system. Marriage for African peoples according to John Mbiti (1969) is:

The focus of existence; It is the point where all the members of a given community meet. The departed, the living and those yet unborn. All the dimensions of time meet here, and the whole drama of history is repeated, renewed and revitalized (133).

This indicates that marriage in Africa is not just about husband and wife but it involves a whole community. Bride price which is one of the major unifying factors in African marriages according to Her Majesty, is gradually losing its sense of originality, as it has been commercialized in recent times in most African communities.

Various societies have different demands for the bride price according to their cultural heritage. For the Ekang people of Okoa, bride price consists of kolanuts, palm wine, palm oil, and a few cowries. According to Her Majesty Marie-Louise Zoa, "it is worth-noting that in recent times, this is no longer practicable as most families have attached a lot of material benefits to it and most young girls in some communities no longer feel comfortable with this practice" (interview August 26th, 2023). This is because psychologically, the practice has created "an ownership mentality in men" which according to Stephen Baffour Adjei, "could lead men to see their wives as their purchase over whom they exercise unfettered authority including physical and psychological abuse"(qtd in Chika Oduah 2019). Many African scholars, feminists and critics have condemned this practice, describing it as dehumanizing because it seems to commodify women. Despite these criticisms, a lot of African women still believe that bride price gives them a sense of identity and self-worth in marriage. However, Her Majesty Marie-Louise Zoa seeks to reinstate the originality and symbolic significance of bride price practice in her community. This to her, is one of the key aspects of her cultural practices and heritage that she desires to preserve and encourage among the young ones.

Africa is a vast continent with distinct cultures, languages and people with different crafts and traditions and as such, African art though dynamic has changed in form, function, and meaning over time. However, the concept of indigenous African art has remained static. This is because pre-colonial sacred objects have an aura of untainted

timeless past reflecting the way of life of the African people (Mbu, 2023). These sacred objects carry with them the people who venerate them thus a disconnection of the people from their cultural heritage propels a spiritual disconnection from the sacred things that bind them together. Colonization had a major impact on Africa's culture, history, and African art which some critics argue that contemporary African art, including description, materials, subjects, and purpose, were greatly influenced by the culture of the European countries that colonized Africa. The historical disappearance of African artefacts and their eventual display in museums in Europe and America is one of the things that has raised current debates on their restitution which becomes one of the ways to reconnect the people back to their roots. African arts and cultures in their diverse forms are highly valued and respected respectively in the global world today. This diversification of African arts and cultures, forms a colourful cultural heritage distinct of the people only. This is in line with what Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy (2018) describe in their book on *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics* as an interrelation of two dynamics. They opine that:

The intellectual and aesthetic appropriation combined with the economic appropriation of the cultural heritage of the other, which, within the cities of the conqueror, within his houses, his circles of experts and on the art market acquire a value, another life disconnected from their origins. Intentional alienation and deculturation of subordinated populations whose psychological equilibrium has been broken, sometimes definitively, through the focal objects-objects of orientation that have been passed down from one generation to the next (7).

This indicates the cultural alienation of a people from the sacred objects that bind them together, thus, the reason for a high demand for the restitution of these cultural artifacts by Africans. All these demands are indications that a people's cultural heritage seen in the sacred objects is priceless and, therefore, needs to be preserved in their appropriate quarters to ensure that

spiritual connection among the people who venerate them.

Besides these debates are also general concerns about the preservation of these artefacts upon return to their original abodes in Africa, where many Kingdoms are doing their best to preserve their cultural heritage. Some people argue that, due to wars and poverty within Africa, the continent is not yet institutionally ready to protect and retrieve these objects. Kiefer quotes Julien Flank, the owner of Galerie Flank in Paris that exhibits tribal art from Africa, Oceania and the Americas in an interview where she says,

Returning the objects is possibly a good point, entering into dialogue is the best thing that we can do. But who are we going to return the objects to? I'm not sure today the museums in Benin are ready in terms of conservation, condition of the buildings to welcome these objects" (Euronews 2018) (00:01:24 - 00:02:47).

Some African countries like Ghana and Nigeria have gone ahead to debunk this argument by Julien as some of their returned looted cultural artifacts, are currently found in museums in the Benin Kingdom in Nigeria and the Ghanaian Museum where they are carefully preserved.

Although Okoa chieftom does not have a history of plundered artefacts by colonialists, Her Majesty is keeping with the pace of time given the fact that debates on the restitution and preservation of African artefacts have taken center stage in both Western and African discourses. On her part, Her Majesty Marie-Louise Zoa is collection of the sacred objects found in her chieftom are in safe keep as she looks forward to constructing a museum where these artefacts can be well preserved and displayed for both public and private consumption. This would go a long way in preserving the history, and cultural heritage of her people thereby reiterating the fact that African artefacts should be left in the hands of the African people for they constitute part and parcel of the life of the people who venerate them.

V. CONCLUSION

The extent of women chiefs' involvement in regional governance varies across African countries and communities. Some regions have made notable

progress in recognizing and supporting the participation of women chiefs, while others may still face cultural, social, or legal barriers. However, the increasing recognition of the value of women's leadership and the promotion of gender equality and women empowerment provide opportunities for women chiefs to play a more prominent role in regional governance, contributing to more inclusive and effective governance systems in Africa. African traditional women leaders have continued to play a pivotal role in preserving and safeguarding their artistic and cultural heritage. Through their involvement in artistic expression, cultural rituals, and entrepreneurial endeavours, Her Majesty Marie-Louise Zoa has demonstrated a strong sense of leadership and zeal as the custodian of the Ejang cultural heritage. Her contributions are crucial for maintaining the richness and diversity of the Ejang culture while at the same time, deconstructing patriarchal narratives that only men are heads of chiefdoms in African communities. Her reinforcement of certain government policies in her community have helped in shaping and maintaining order in Okoa. Her presence in the political arena gives a strong voice to the people whom she represents. As such, discriminatory socio-cultural laws of inheritance/succession should be positively reviewed by stakeholders (particularly traditional/religious rulers) and government should adopt and strictly enforce policy frameworks and empowering programmes for women chiefs to enhance economic sustainability and community development. Recognising and supporting the work of traditional African women rulers is essential for fostering cultural continuity, women empowerment, and sustainable development across the African continent.

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Plains of Promise: An Ecocritical Exploration of Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received on: 03 Feb 2025 Revised on: 05 Mar 2025 Accepted on: 10 Mar 2025 ©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords— Willa Cather, <i>O! Pioneers</i>, Ecocriticism, environment</p>	<p><i>This paper explores Willa Cather's O Pioneers! through the lens of Ecocriticism, emphasizing the profound relationship between the characters and the American Midwest landscape. By personifying the Nebraska plains, Cather presents the land as a dynamic force that significantly shapes the pioneers' lives, struggles, and triumphs. The analysis focuses on how the environment influences the novel's central themes of perseverance, transformation, and resilience. Through a detailed examination of Alexandra Bergson's journey, the study highlights her pioneering spirit and defiance of traditional gender roles, showcasing her deep connection to the land. The paper also investigates Cather's narrative techniques, including the use of third-person omniscient narration and vivid descriptive language, which vividly bring the landscape to life. Symbolism in the novel, particularly the significance of the Divide and the changing seasons, is analyzed to underscore the cyclical nature of life and renewal. This ecocritical approach reveals how O Pioneers! not only portrays the physical challenges of frontier life but also reflects the broader human experience of growth and adaptation in harmony with the environment, offering a nuanced understanding of Cather's literary masterpiece.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

"I might as well try to will the sunset over there to my brother's children. We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it - for a little while" (Cather)

Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913) stands as a monumental exploration of the American frontier and its relationship with the pioneers who shape and are

shaped by it. Set in the harsh, yet fertile plains of Nebraska, the novel chronicles the lives of European immigrant families striving to tame the land. Central to this narrative is Alexandra Bergson, a determined and resilient woman whose deep connection with the land drives her success. Cather's portrayal of the environment transcends the role of mere setting, transforming it into a living, breathing entity that interacts with and influences the characters.

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This paper examines *O Pioneers!* through the lens of ecocriticism, a literary theory that focuses on the relationship between literature and the natural environment. Ecocriticism allows for an exploration of how the natural world in literature is portrayed and how characters engage with it, as well as the ideological implications of this interaction. In *O Pioneers!*, the land is not passive; it exerts influence on the pioneers, particularly Alexandra, whose journey of perseverance and transformation mirrors the cyclical and unpredictable nature of the environment. By examining Cather's narrative techniques, symbolism, and depiction of the natural world, this paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of the novel's ecological dimensions and its reflection on the human experience of growth, struggle, and renewal.

II. THE LAND AS A CHARACTER: PERSONIFICATION AND POWER

One of the defining features of *O Pioneers!* is Cather's depiction of the Nebraska plains as a living, active presence in the lives of the characters. Through vivid descriptions and symbolic imagery, the landscape becomes a character in its own right, one that exerts a powerful influence over the pioneers. From the opening pages, Cather introduces the land as both vast and indifferent, an untamed force that demands respect and resilience from those who seek to cultivate it. The novel's protagonist, Alexandra Bergson, develops a symbiotic relationship with the land, recognizing its potential and enduring its hardships with unwavering determination.

Cather's use of personification transforms the land into a force that interacts with the characters on an emotional and psychological level. The Nebraska plains are described as "naked and gaunt," echoing the desolation and isolation that the pioneers experience. Yet, for Alexandra, the land represents more than just a challenge; it is a source of inspiration and strength. She sees promise where others see despair, embodying a pioneering spirit that is deeply attuned to the rhythms of the natural world. In the book *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies: Transatlantic Conversations on Ecocriticism*, Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer define

ecocriticism as a methodology that not only studies nature's role in literature but challenges cultural assumptions of human dominance over nature (14). This connection is underscored by Cather's use of third-person omniscient narration, which allows readers to glimpse Alexandra's inner thoughts and her deep, almost spiritual, bond with the land.

Ecocriticism, as a critical theory, emerged in the late 20th century and is rooted in the study of how literature represents the relationship between humans and the environment. Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the founders of this discipline, defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xix). This approach diverges from traditional literary studies by placing the natural world at the center of its analysis, asking questions about how literature reflects environmental concerns, human interaction with nature, and ecological ideologies.

III. ORIGINS AND KEY THEORIES IN ECOCRITICISM

Ecocriticism is strongly influenced by broader ecological and environmental movements that gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s. In *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), Lawrence Buell argues that ecocriticism should challenge the anthropocentrism pervasive in literature, focusing instead on how texts reflect environmental ethics and the implications of human activity on the natural world. According to Buell, literature must "place nature at the center of the narrative" to promote environmental consciousness and to question exploitative attitudes toward the environment (Buell 7). This shift in focus marks a critical move away from seeing nature merely as a backdrop in literature, highlighting the interconnectedness of human and non-human systems.

IV. ECOCRITICISM IN FRONTIER AND REGIONAL LITERATURE

Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* illustrates the intricate relationship between the characters and the land they inhabit, portraying nature not just as a setting but as a dynamic and often overpowering force. Critics such as

David Stouck highlight how Cather imbues the land with agency, making it “a character in its own right, whose will must be reckoned with” (Stouck 92). This concept aligns with the ecocritical idea that the environment plays an active role in shaping human stories, rather than being a passive backdrop.

In the context of *O Pioneers!*, the landscape is central to the narrative and deeply intertwined with the identity of the novel’s protagonist, Alexandra Bergson. Alexandra’s success in cultivating the Nebraska plains reflects her understanding of the land as a living entity that must be respected and nurtured. This relationship between Alexandra and the land can be interpreted through Annette Kolodny’s concept of the “feminine land,” which argues that women in frontier literature often share a symbiotic relationship with the natural world, embodying nurturing and creative forces (Kolodny 145). Alexandra’s defiance of traditional gender roles is reinforced by her ability to cultivate the land successfully, suggesting that human success depends on understanding and cooperating with the rhythms of nature.

The Divide, the central geographical feature in *O Pioneers!*, serves as a symbol of both challenge and opportunity. In Alexandra Bergson’s hands, the land is transformed from a barren expanse to a fertile domain, yet this transformation is a dialogue between her vision and the land’s innate qualities. The plains are personified, acting as an indifferent yet potent force, shaping the rhythms of life. As Hubert Zapf argues in “The State of Ecocriticism and the Function of Literature as Cultural Ecology” (from *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies*), literature can serve as a form of cultural ecology, participating in the interplay of human and nonhuman forces (14). Alexandra’s interaction with the land exemplifies this concept, where her emotional and intellectual connection with the soil becomes an act of survival and self-expression.

V. GENDERED ECOCRITICISM AND THE FEMININE LANDSCAPE

Critics like Marilee Lindemann explore this dynamic in *O Pioneers!*, arguing that Cather’s depiction of the land as fertile and nurturing parallels Alexandra’s role as a

provider and protector (Lindemann 93). In this sense, Alexandra’s connection to the land subverts traditional gender expectations, as she occupies a traditionally male role of landowner and farmer while drawing on qualities often associated with femininity – nurturing, intuition, and resilience.

VI. SYMBOLISM AND CYCLICAL THEMES

Cyclical Time and Environmental Renewal in *O Pioneers!* Another central concept in ecocritical analyses is the idea of cyclical time and renewal, which contrasts with the linear, progress-oriented narratives often found in industrialized, capitalist societies. Cather’s use of seasonal imagery and natural cycles in *O Pioneers!* reflects an understanding of time as cyclical, with each season representing both death and renewal. As Patrick D. Murphy notes, ecocriticism often focuses on “the importance of cycles – of seasons, of life and death – in shaping how humans interact with the natural world” (Murphy 78). In *O Pioneers!*, the changing seasons are not just markers of time but indicators of the challenges and opportunities that come with each new phase of the land’s renewal.

The cyclical nature of the environment in *O Pioneers!* suggests that human success and survival depend on adaptability and respect for the land’s inherent rhythms. Alexandra’s willingness to invest in long-term growth, rather than seeking immediate profit, is a testament to her understanding of the land’s cyclical processes. This theme aligns with ecocritical concerns about sustainability and the importance of working within natural limits rather than exploiting resources for short-term gain. Lawrence Buell’s assertion that “literature should foreground the environment as an agent of human welfare and challenge the dominant narrative of environmental conquest” (Buell 8) is evident in Cather’s depiction of the landscape as both a source of sustenance and a force that must be respected.

VII. NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES AND VIVID DESCRIPTIONS: BRINGING THE LANDSCAPE TO LIFE

Cather’s narrative style plays a crucial role in bringing the Nebraska plains to life. Her use of third-person

omniscient narration allows for a broad and nuanced portrayal of the characters' relationship with the land. This narrative technique enables readers to understand not only the physical hardships of frontier life but also the emotional and psychological impact of the environment on the characters.

Cather's descriptive language is another key element of the novel's ecological dimensions. Her vivid descriptions of the landscape, with its "endless miles of brown earth" and "the warm breath of the wind," evoke a strong sense of place that is central to the novel's themes. The land in *O Pioneers!* is not static; it is constantly changing, and Cather's language reflects this dynamism. Through her descriptions, readers are able to experience the land as the characters do – as a force that both shapes and is shaped by human action. As Beatrix Busse discusses in her essay on ecolinguistics in *Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies* (131), language plays a crucial role in shaping our understanding of nature. Cather's descriptive language vividly brings the landscape to life, personifying it in ways that mirror the characters' inner emotional states.

In *O Pioneers!*, Willa Cather uses the land as a central, living force, one that shapes the lives, identities, and destinies of the novel's characters. The characters' relationship with the land reflects their inner struggles, hopes, and resilience. Through their varying attitudes toward the harsh conditions of the Nebraska plains, Cather explores themes of survival, adaptation, and the inevitable connection between human existence and the environment. The characters' ability to adapt to the land reflects their personal growth and worldviews, making the land both a literal and symbolic battlefield where human and natural forces intersect.

VIII. ALEXANDRA BERGSON: THE PIONEERING SPIRIT

Alexandra Bergson, the novel's protagonist, is the character most deeply attuned to the land and its potential. She demonstrates a unique understanding of the Nebraska plains, treating the land with a combination of respect, vision, and patience. From the beginning, Alexandra recognizes the value of the land in a way that others, including her brothers, do not. As

David Stouck suggests, "Alexandra's relationship to the land is one of symbiosis; she nurtures it, and in return, the land provides her with strength and purpose" (Stouck 92). This partnership is the key to her success, as she knows that long-term vision and perseverance, not immediate gains, are the best way to cultivate the plains.

Alexandra's relationship with the land mirrors Cather's own upbringing on the Nebraska frontier. As a young girl, Cather moved with her family to Red Cloud, Nebraska, where she experienced first-hand the harsh realities of pioneer life. Her writing reflects her understanding of the land's duality—its promise of prosperity but also its harsh, unforgiving nature. This connection between Cather and Alexandra reflects a deep respect for the land, making Alexandra an embodiment of Cather's pioneering spirit. As Susan J. Rosowski notes, "Cather's heroines often mirror her own internal struggles, including Alexandra's defiance of gender roles and her determination to forge a connection with the land" (Rosowski 57).

Alexandra's role as a steward of the land reflects ecological themes of sustainability and balance. Unlike her brothers, she approaches farming with an understanding that the land must be nurtured over time, aligning her with ecofeminist perspectives that emphasize women's roles as caretakers of both nature and community (Kolodny 145). Her success as a farmer and landowner defies traditional gender expectations, suggesting that environmental stewardship transcends gender and demands a more holistic understanding of the natural world. "We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it – for a little while" (Cather np). Alexandra's character is essential to the argument that human success and well-being depend on a harmonious relationship with the environment—a theme that resonates in contemporary discussions of climate consciousness and sustainable practices.

IX. CARL LINSTRUM: A NOSTALGIC ATTACHMENT TO THE LAND

Carl Linstrum, Alexandra's childhood friend, represents a character who is deeply tied to the land

through memory and nostalgia, yet unwilling to remain on it. His return to the Nebraska plains later in life reveals a man who is not fully at peace with his past. While he shares Alexandra's deep affection for the land, he cannot endure its harshness, and his ambitions lie elsewhere. As Carl says, "There was nothing to stay for," revealing his sense of alienation from a land that could not sustain him (Cather 78).

Carl's ambivalence about the land speaks to the broader theme of human dislocation in frontier literature. He is torn between his nostalgia for the plains and his realization that his survival, both materially and emotionally, cannot be sustained there. This ambivalence ties into the ecocritical concept of alienation from the land—a central concern in environmental criticism, which often examines how modern humans have become disconnected from nature, choosing industrialized progress over sustainable living (Murphy 61).

X. ALEXANDRA'S BROTHERS: LOU AND OSCAR BERGSON

Lou and Oscar Bergson, Alexandra's brothers, are the characters most resistant to the land and its conditions. Their approach to farming is pragmatic and short-sighted, seeking immediate gains rather than the long-term investment that Alexandra advocates. Their frustration with the harshness of the plains leads them to question Alexandra's decisions, viewing her patience and vision as foolhardy. As Murphy notes, "Cather uses Lou and Oscar to represent the masculine, industrial mindset that seeks to dominate and exploit the land, rather than work in harmony with it" (Murphy 79). This exploitative attitude contrasts sharply with Alexandra's more sustainable approach and ultimately leads to their discontent and failure to prosper in the same way she does.

Their unwillingness to adapt to the land reflects a broader critique of industrial and capitalist approaches to environmental exploitation. This critique aligns with ecofeminist arguments, which often emphasize the link between patriarchal systems of power and environmental degradation. Lou and Oscar's desire to extract from the land without investing in its

long-term health mirrors the ways in which industrial societies prioritize short-term economic gains over ecological sustainability.

XI. EMIL BERGSON: A TRAGIC DISCONNECTION

Emil, Alexandra's youngest brother, is portrayed as a character disconnected from the land, despite growing up on the family farm. Unlike Alexandra, who finds purpose and identity in her work on the land, Emil longs for a different life, one that takes him away from the Nebraska plains. His disconnection from the land is both physical and emotional, as he dreams of education and life in more cosmopolitan settings. Emil's tragic love affair with Marie Shabata, who is also disconnected from the land due to her unhappy marriage, ultimately leads to his death—an event that underscores his inability to survive in an environment he neither respects nor fully understands.

Emil's fate reflects the ecocritical theme of dislocation and the consequences of failing to adapt to the natural environment. His dreams of escape symbolize the broader human desire to dominate or leave behind the hardships of rural life, often at great cost. Emil's disconnection from the land represents the alienation many modern individuals feel from nature—a theme that continues to resonate in contemporary environmental literature and criticism (Buell 5).

In *O Pioneers!*, Ivar represents a deep connection to nature, serving as a symbol of ecological wisdom in contrast to society's industrial and materialistic mindset. As a Norwegian immigrant living on the margins, he is often dismissed as eccentric or mad due to his rejection of conventional lifestyles. Ivar lives in harmony with the land, valuing animals and plants as vital entities and shunning materialism. His character critiques modernity's disregard for nature, symbolizing the ecological consciousness that is marginalized by industrial progress, as seen in his disdain for machines and mechanized farming.

Ivar found contentment in the solitude he had sought out for himself. He disliked the litter of human dwellings:

the broken food, the bits of broken china, the old wash-boilers and tea-kettles thrown into the sunflower patch. He preferred the cleanness and tidiness of the wild soil. (Cather III - 11)

Ivar's spiritual connection to nature is also significant, blending Christian mysticism with a pantheistic reverence for the natural world. This unorthodox spirituality emphasizes the sacredness of nature, contrasting with the exploitative attitudes of other characters. His compassion for animals and rejection of violence reflect an ecological ethic of respect for life, underscoring Cather's vision of sustainable and humane living. Ivar's beliefs align with contemporary ecological concerns, advocating for a more respectful and symbiotic relationship with the environment.

Finally, Ivar's isolation reflects society's rejection of natural wisdom in favor of industrialization and profit-driven practices. His marginalization mirrors a cultural alienation from nature, where individuals who promote conservation or sustainable living are often dismissed. Cather's portrayal of Ivar critiques this societal tendency, with his character serving as both a symbol of ecological consciousness and a critique of the prevailing ethos that prioritizes short-term industrial gains over long-term environmental sustainability.

XII. CONCLUSION

Regarding ecocriticism and climate consciousness, Cather's novel offers a critique of unsustainable land practices, warning against short-term exploitation in favor of a more measured, long-term relationship with the environment. Alexandra's role as a landowner and farmer, one who respects the land's cycles and invests in its future, mirrors contemporary concerns about climate change and environmental degradation. Cather's own experience with the Nebraska landscape, therefore, positions *O Pioneers!* as an early literary example of climate consciousness, one that advocates for a more thoughtful and respectful approach to human-environment interactions.

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Trauma, Guilt, and the Fragmented Psyche: The Psychological Impact of the Iraq War on American Soldier

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received on: 09 Feb 2025</p> <p>Revised on: 08 Mar 2025</p> <p>Accepted on: 13 Mar 2025</p> <p>©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— Iraq War, trauma, PTSD, fragmented psyche, American soldier</p>	<p><i>This paper seeks to investigate the psychological effects of the Iraq War on the American soldier through a literary analysis of Kevin Powers’ novel, The Yellow Birds. Adopting the psychoanalytical approach that has roots in literature, specifically the theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, this study dwells on the main themes of trauma, guilt, suppression, and psyche fragmentation. That is to say, the protagonist John Bartle, who is the mouthpiece of the novelist Powers, stands as a case study to trace post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and moral wounds, revealing the deep psychological effects of war trauma. Depending on Freud’s theory of “repression” and Lacan’s conception of the “fragmented self”, the analysis elucidates Bartle’s conflict of integrating his war experience as an American veteran with his identity as a civilian. Moreover, the study incorporates the principal issues of reintegration post-war, highlighting the psychological aftermath via the perspective of literature. Thus, this papers aims to address the stark reality of veterans’ psychological problems and the need to get the acceptance and compassion from society.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

War has been a subject of literature since the emergence of oral literature, both as a historical record and as an investigation into the human psyche. The Iraq War (2003–2011) remains one of the most contentious and psycho-traumatizing theatres of conflict of the 21st century, cast with a deep shadow in all those who served there and lived its aftermaths as Iraqi civilians. Hence, the psychological challenges that the veterans had to face have been duly tackled in literature to present them as other victims of that war suffering from trauma, moral

injury, post-war conflict, social alienation etc., being at the forefront of the spectrum. A remarkable different contemporary war fiction can be found in Kevin Powers’ *The Yellow Birds* (2012), which offers a hauntingly deep exploration of a soldier’s battle with himself, as he struggles to connect his wartime experiences to his post-war self. The novel does deliver a searing portrait of the psychological cost of war, portraying it as a rich subject for psychoanalytical studies. So, this research paper makes Freud and Lacan’s theories as the pivot around which the study evolves. It probes the deep

area of the protagonist's unconscious mind reveal his psychological fragmentation, and explore how trauma, guilt, and repression reform his post-war personality.

The American veteran, John Bartle, serves as the case study to reveal the psychological aftermaths of the American soldier who had to be indulged in the Iraqi war and witness atrocities under the blurred meanings of "freeing the nation". Bartle is young soldier who joins the American troops in Iraq to have only a self-conceit and pride among his peers. Yet, he comes back totally shattered, psychologically speaking. He must struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and moral injury caused by war.

PTSD is defined by the American Psychiatric Association (2013) as: "a psychiatric disorder that may occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, or rape or who have been threatened with death, sexual violence or serious injury (APA, 2013). Powers's narrative reveals these symptoms clearly on the main characters, especially in their inability to escape haunting memories of atrocities and friends. Furthermore, moral injury, which is a concept explored by Litz et al. (2009), that refers to the deep psychological disturbance resulting from witnessing or participating in violent acts that disrupt one's ethical beliefs, is clearly detected in the novel. As different from PTSD, that resides in the psychological effects of fear, insomnia, isolation and so on, moral injury emerges by the feelings of guilt and shame, which makes it so hard to heal (Shay, 1994). The moral injury can be clearly traced in Bartle, the American veteran who has an overwhelming sense of guilt resulting in self-destructive tendencies inability to join the civilian life.

Freud's theory of repression stands as a basic framework for this study that tries to unravel the dilemma of Bartle's psychological state. The neurotic symptoms along with the psychological distress of Freud's studies are presented to understand Bartle's evolution in the novel before and after the war. Bartle's attempts to suppress his traumatic memories are deeply tackled. On the other hand, Lacan's theory of the "fragmented self" (Lacan, 1977) is presented to

identify Bartle's crisis of identity. Lacan's argument about trauma that disturbs the person's relationship with symbolic order, i.e., the system of language and associated meaning with reality, is clearly fathomed in Bartle's fragmented storytelling.

All in all, *The Yellow Birds* surpasses the mere narrative a story of a soldier's suffering; it can be viewed as a mirror reflecting the broader crisis of war's mental impact. This novel invites its readers to confront the harsh psychological aftermath of war. So, this tackled this novel to highlight the scars of war trauma. It questions the use of war that destroys civilians and soldiers. It also underlines the critical need for more understanding and support for those who have served in the military. The study helps us grasp the deep psychological weights shouldered by combatants.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Trauma and War Literature

War literature has been always used to reflect the mental and psychological challenges that warrants face. An early psychological examination of war is also provided by Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), which chronicles the internal conflict between a young Civil War soldier and his fears and self-doubt. Likewise, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* is a significant novel that stands as an early of this genre, effectively capturing the emotions of disenfranchisement, alienation, and survivor's guilt experienced by World War I soldiers. Remarque's depiction of war as a dehumanizing experience paved the way for later literary analyses of psychological trauma in war narratives. Paul Bäumer, the main character is the returning veteran who would become more and more cut off from civilian life and reshape the personality of veterans in the coming writings on war fiction.

Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939), narrates the astonishing story of a World War I soldier who is severely injured and left without limbs, speech, or sight, offers a more contemporary interpretation. Trumbo's book reflects profoundly war dehumanization of people and captures the isolation and mental disturbance of veterans who face troubles in reintegrating into society (Trumbo, 1939). Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990)

also elaborates on the mental and psychological struggles that soldiers' challenges have long been reflected in war literature. These literary works can be notable samples of war literature which is abundant and rich.

This tradition continues to survive in twenty-first century works that portray the aftermaths of modern war. For example, Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2012) juxtaposes the war experience of a young soldier with the shallow patriotism of American nation, underlying the emotional and psychological detachments between civilians and veterans. Moreover, Phil Klay's *Redeployment* (2014) is a series of short stories that depicts the psychological and moral effects of war that soldiers returning from Iraq suffer from. Along with *The Yellow Birds*, these novels are considered great examples of modern war literature that trace the long-term psychological consequences of war, highlighting the notion that war lasts far beyond the battleground (Klay, 2014; Powers, 2012; Fountain, 2012).

2.3 Psychoanalytical Approaches for War Trauma

Freud's (1920) studies on trauma stand as a basic framework for analyzing war literature. His studies on war trauma that follow WWI forms the basis for following studies. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud introduces the concept of repetition compulsion, in which individuals inadvertently relive traumatic experiences through, dreams, flashbacks and neurotic conducts. Lacan's (1966) brings the concept of "the Real" to psychoanalysis. This is constructed on Freudian theories and confirms that trauma is not fully explicable within the symbolic order and transcends language. Scholars such as Caruth (1996) emphasize that war trauma confines the narrative structures. She confirms that trauma is not a simple event that can be always remembered, it is an experience that returns unwillingly in the fragmented and haunting memories. This notion can be traced clearly in war literature, where authors adopt disjointed narratives, nonlinear storytelling and flashbacks to reflect the fragmented psyche of traumatized soldiers.

2.4 PTSD in Military Psychology

PTSD in military set of researches offers deep insight into the enduring impacts of combat introduction.

The American Psychiatric Affiliation (2013) recognizes PTSD effects as meddling recollections, passionate desensitizing, hypervigilance, and dissociative scenes. Hoge et al. (2004) shows that Iraq War veterans confront tall rates of PTSD, regularly battling to reintegrate into civilian life. These findings align with what is depicted within *The Yellow Birds* where Bartle illustrates evasion behaviors, neurosis, and enthusiastic separation.

Jonathan Shay (1994) extends on classical and cutting-edge injury hypothesis by presenting ethical injury, which happens when warriors breach profoundly held moral convictions. Not at all like PTSD, essentially driven by fear, ethical harm emerges from blame and self-condemnation. Shay compares advanced veterans to Homeric warriors, proposing that uncertain ethical clashes result in mental breakdowns. Litz et al (2019) clarify that ethical damage is particular from PTSD but frequently coexists in veterans' enthusiastic advance as in Powers' novel.

2.5 Guilt and Moral Injury in War Fiction

Feeling of guilt arises as a repeated theme in war fiction. It commonly serves as a driving power behind a protagonist's mental collapse. Litz et al. (2009) identification of "moral injury" as the mental trouble that is resulted from activities violating the one's moral set of values is central to *The Yellow Birds*. Bartle's narrative is immersed in guilt, as the protagonist tries hard to free his responsibility for his friend, Murph's tragic end. This can be compared with Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), where Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist, faces this struggle during World War II leaving him in a state of defeat and existential doubt. Like Bartle, Pilgrim symbolizes the shattered psyche of a soldier who cannot reconcile his past with the present.

Moral responsibility can also be traced in Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong* (1993), which explores the long-lasting effects of war trauma across generations. Scholars, like Luckhurst (2008), agree on the fact that war novels frequently portray characters burdened by ethical dilemmas, emphasizing that trauma encompasses not only physiological aspects but also profound moral and existential challenges. The psychological effects of moral injury in *The Yellow Birds* underline the struggle to find a post-war

recovery. Carter (2021) and Edwards (2024) dwelled on the challenges faced by soldiers, especially in terms of their moral injury and reintegration struggles. This will be thoroughly tackled in the coming chapters showing the ties with Powers' novel.

2.6 The Fragmented Psyche as Appeared in War Fiction

Both war novels by modernists and postmodernists employ fragmented narrative structures to replicate the fractured psyches of their characters. Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), for instance, employs minimalist prose that is sparse to convey the emotional numbing experienced by soldiers. Literary critics such as Vickroy (2002) and Whitehead (2004) contend that this is a feature of trauma fiction since it replicates the nonlinear and recursive structure of traumatic memory.

The interference of the past with the present in Powers' novel stresses the instability of the ego due to trauma, which in turn emphasizes Freud's (1920) notion that repressed memories inevitably resurface. The fragmented psyche as Freud elaborated on is the result of the annihilation power within the psyche that tends to destroy itself. The inner conflicts and egos can be principle drives for this destruction tendency of the fragmented psyche.

2.6 Studies on the Novel

In a study on PTSD of the same novel, i.e., *The Yellow Birds*, Faizal Yusuf Satriawan and Mundi Rahaya discuss the trauma of the main hero according to Gerald Davison's theories of trauma released in 2006. The authors correlate John Bartle's PTSD with the destruction and loss he faces in the Iraqi War. The symptoms that they experience are "avoidance" which is the same as "denial" or "undoing" and "re-experiencing" because he remembers what occurred when he comes back from war. The research is based on the psychologist Gerald Davison's works on PTSD. It states Murphy's death as the primary reason for trauma. There is another noteworthy study on this novel published in *Gema Online Journal of Language Studies*, 2020. Its title is "Survival Psychology in Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds*". The research digs into the two main characters, i.e., John Bartle and Daniel Murphy in the three phases of "pre-impact, impact and post-

impact". The research is about the pivotal incidents that result in the trauma of the soldiers upon their arrival to fight in Iraq (Alosman & Mydin, 2020). Another article published in 2021 Sagar and Shehadah tackled the PTSD in the novel according to psychoanalytical theories and Anna Freud's studies of defense mechanism.

This study is an extension of the earlier ones. Yet, it applies other theories of self-fragmentation and guilt that gives it the originality. So, it raises the fundamental question of the American soldier's fragmentation and sense of guilt resulting from witnessing the atrocities of the Iraq War.

III. METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a psychoanalytical literary critical framework in order to investigate the psychological effects of the Iraq War in Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*. According to trauma theories and psychoanalytic criticism, the study examines how the novel reveals the psychological breakdown and moral injury incurred by soldiers, the protagonist being Private John Bartle. By close analysis of the main passages, the research examines the PTSD of the protagonist, moral blame, and difficulties of reintroduction. The fragmented narrative style of the novel replicates Bartle's fractured psychological state, as non-linear narration mirrors the disorienting impact of trauma on memory and understandings of time. Freud's (1920) theory of repression is pivotal for the study as traumatic memories come the conscious mind involuntarily. This is applicable to analyze Bartle's character and behavior. Lacan's "fragmented self" is so significant as well for tracing the shattered self of the protagonist who is an American veteran. Recent studies, including psychological studies on PTSD (Litz et al., 2009) and moral injury (Shay, 1994), provides theoretical framework to apply to extend analysis of the psychological distress of the protagonist and how these issues contribute to larger narratives of military trauma.

The methods of analysis depend on the text to apply the theoretical theories on Powers's narrative. Powers's rely on symbolism, particularly the recurring motif of birds, is being analyzed for its

representation of Bartle's desire for freedom and his entrapment in psychological trauma and fragmented self. Moreover, the fragmented form of the novel is explored to show that the disintegration of the boundaries of time is usually experienced with PTSD, as in Bartle's blurring of past and present. The research also depends on literary writings of Carter (2021) and Edwards (2024) to reveal how Powers' narrative choices manage to portray the challenges faced by soldiers, especially their moral injury and challenges reintegrating. Thus, the research is analytical and descriptive as it analyzes the main character and presents description of its psychological dilemmas depending on psychoanalytical theories.

IV. MAIN FINDINGS

With the fragmented narrative and development of the character of Bartle, *The Yellow Birds* recalls significant psychological theories, including PTSD, moral injury, and reintegration challenges. Powers' portrayal of Bartle's psychological fragmentation is an instant reaction to the traumatic impact of the Iraq War, and his struggles become a metaphor for the emotional and psychological disturbance of soldiers coming back from this war in general.

4.1 Psychological Fragmentation and PTSD

The mind's fragmentation in *The Yellow Birds* lies deeply within the psychological effects of PTSD, a psychological disturbance that afflicts numerous soldiers who have returned from war, especially the soldiers who had been in the Iraq War. The fragmented nature of the presentation of the story in the novel echoes Bartle's fractured perception of reality itself, an expression of his own trauma. Powers (2012) employs the stylistic device of non-linear narrative to reproduce the psychological fragmentation of the soldiers. As per Carter (2021), "the novel's non-linear structure is an intentional reflection of the disorganized perception of time and memory breakdown typical of PTSD" (p. 239). Bartle's war trauma becomes outlined in his present life as the past keeps intruding in his mind. This interruption of continuity of time is a characteristic feature of PTSD, in which troops cannot differentiate between past and present because memories and feelings come surging back without any control.

Bartle's trauma is revealed in a vivid flashback related to the death of his friend Murph, which he witnesses amid a violent firefight in Iraq. Powers (2012) illustrates this point as Bartle remembers: "I understood that beauty was both in the things that we had and in the things we could lose" (p. 42). This sensitivity increases Bartle's sensitivity towards death and loss threat, a common occurrence among soldiers serving in active combat zones such as Iraq. Most American soldiers get to see their close friends like Murph die right before their eyes, giving an inflated sense of helplessness and guilt, and at times leading to the formation of repetitive intrusive memories and flashbacks. These disconnected recollections deflate the heavy stress of memories and contribute to healing trauma, which is a symptom of PTSD (Litz et al., 2009). Bartle's failure to move beyond these recollections and his continuous recalling of Murph's death, reveal how trauma detains soldiers in a cycle of psychological pain, unable to escape the psychological scars of war.

Moreover, Powers (2012) demonstrates the avoidance phenomenon in Bartle's character. In fact, avoidance is one of the main symptoms of PTSD. Bartle's detachment and inability to cope with those around him when he returns home are the direct result of his unwillingness to confront the trauma. He expresses that clearly as: "No one could understand what we had seen, and I had no way to explain it" (p. 178), demonstrating the isolation which soldiers feel having witnessed war atrocities. Avoiding confrontation with painful recollections is a psychological defense mechanism intended to prevent the subject from experiencing the overwhelming emotional effect of trauma. Yet, like Bartle, this avoidance can result in greater emotional splits and alienation from others.

4.2 Moral Injury and Survivor's Guilt

Moral injury and survivor's guilt are central to the psychological suffering of the veteran in *The Yellow Birds*. Both of these are the outcomes of PTSD resulting from perpetrating or witnessing violent acts that violate their innate sense of right and wrong. Moral injury is specifically applied to the US soldiers who have served in Iraq, where the ethics of struggle tend to conflict with the individual soldiers' moral standards. Bartle's feeling of remorse for his role in Murph's death is an exemplary instance of moral

injury. Bartle internalizes the belief that he had lost Murph on his watch and that this belief follows him in life. Powers (2012) reveals this belief when Bartle says about, "I didn't know how to tell her that it was all my fault" (p. 145). This is survivor's guilt in its heaviest burden, a feeling shared by all soldiers who are left alive when others die. Bartle's failure to fulfill his promise to Murph's mother, the promise of keeping her son safe, provides further depth to the sense of moral wound. Self-self-destructive behaviors, solitude, and an irreversible feeling of uselessness result from internalized guilt.

As Litz et al. (2009) stated, moral injury tends to cause a serious psychological violation, not only between the soldier and others but also within the soldier's own self. For Bartle, this moral injury is one of the causes of his alienation and depression, as he struggles to come to terms with what he did during the war with his pre-war sense of morality. Shay (1994) also contributes that moral injury heightens PTSD symptoms to a multiplied effect that psychically shatters as well as morally stains the soldier. Bartle's breakdowns and self-loathing are the direct outcome of this moral damage, thereby not permitting the integration into civil life at any meaningful level.

4.3 The Role of Memory and Temporality

Memory and temporality are pivotal to understanding the psychological split in Bartle's psyche. Powers (2012) has a deep look into traumatic memory is compromised for soldiers with PTSD. Accordingly, Bartle has said, "I could not tell what was past and what was real. It all blurred into a single thing" (p. 98). This displacement of temporal clarity is a diagnostic feature of PTSD: the inability to demarcate past traumatic experience from the present. This time-blurred way of seeing is characteristic of veterans returning from the Iraq War, where war intensity and immediacy of life-and-death situations make a lasting psychological impact. For Bartle, the war does not end on his return home; it is continually relived in his mind, and the past is indelibly connected to the present.

The time distortion in Powers' novel highlights the widespread psychological damage the soldiers endure. According to Carter (2021), "The novel's fractured structure mirrors the disintegration

of time in PTSD, in which time no longer moves linearly" (p. 240). For Bartle, this division of time does not permit him to move on, keeping him stuck in an emotional space that is just as much his here and now as it was during his tour in Iraq. This distortion of time is not just a stylistic technique but an actual reflection of the psychological reality of most combat soldiers returning from war, particularly those who fight in wars like the Iraq War, where the violence and loss one experiences can never actually be left behind.

4.4 Symbolism and the Psychological Cost of War

Powers uses symbolism to further emphasize the psychological cost of war as birds being a recurring symbol in *The Yellow Birds*. Birds represent the desire for liberty in all creatures as well as the sense of enclosure that soldiers, particularly Bartle, feel and long to escape from the psychological weight of his recollections. Rodriguez and Patel (2023) suggest that the birds symbolize Bartle's yearning for freedom, but also the inability to break free from the trauma that encircles his existence. The soldiers in the beginning symbolize the soldiers who are entrapped into war. Bartle observes: "It moved without a purpose, and I envied it" (Powers, 2012, p. 112). This statement illustrates Bartle's deep desire to escape the futility and confusion of his life after the war, yet, at the same time, frustration that he cannot do so. The vanity of the bird's life symbolizes Bartle's lost state in a world that no longer makes sense now that there is the war. For many soldiers, this sense of purposelessness is an instant result of the psychological charge of war, wherein the simplicity of life before war is lost and replaced with a single-minded experience of disappointment.

4.5 Reintegration and Isolation

Finally, this article probes the reintegration theme and the difficulty for soldiers to adjust to civilian life following the Iraq War. The emotional and psychological estrangement on Bartle's return home is a universal theme of *The Yellow Birds* that can be applied to all soldiers. The lack of ability to express what he experienced and felt to other people, combined with his sense of isolation, become a challenge for the majority of American soldiers to readapt to civilian life following war. Powers (2012) captures this isolation when Bartle comments, "No

one could understand what we had seen, and I had no way to explain it" (p. 178). This is the vast emotional gap between veterans and civilians, which is most often heightened by the society's incapacity to grasp and respond to the psychological needs of returning soldiers.

Thus, the novel evokes the inability of society to provide adequate reintegration assistance, which is a common problem experienced by most American veterans. Edwards (2024) further states that Bartle's silence when he returns is a sign of the large war veterans-civilian society gap, in which war crimes are unfathomable to non-veteran civilians.

V. CONCLUSION

To conclude, *The Yellow Birds* is a depiction of the psychological impacts of the Iraq War on American soldiers, particularly from the vantage point of PTSD, moral injury, and reintegration problems as revealed in the novel presenting the disturbed character of Bartle. In the fragmented narrative, symbolic imagery, and introspective monologues, Powers presents the deep emotional injuries and self-shattering inflicted by the war. The novel's portrayal of Bartle's split of the mind, inability to re-enter society and intrapsychic guilt mirrors the greater psychological heritage that many Iraq War veterans endured. Powers's novel serves as a stark reminder of the long-term damage inflicted by war and of the psychological effects of modern warfare.

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From Page to Screen: The Evolution of R.K. Narayan’s Literary Themes in Cinematic Interpretations

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received on: 01 Feb 2025 Revised on: 04 Mar 2025 Accepted on: 12 Mar 2025 ©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords— Literary, Adaptation, Modernity, Transformation, Cultural Discourse.</p>	<p>R.K. Narayan, one of India’s most revered literary figures, masterfully captured the complexities of Indian life through his fictional town of Malgudi. His works, characterized by simplicity and deep thematic resonance, explore universal themes such as tradition versus modernity, personal identity, and the intricacies of human relationships. This study examines how these literary themes transition from page to screen, analyzing the cinematic adaptations of Narayan’s works. Filmmakers, while striving to maintain the essence of Narayan’s narratives, often reinterpret characters and conflicts to align with evolving socio-cultural contexts. Notable adaptations, such as <i>Guide</i> (1965) and <i>Malgudi Days</i>, illustrate this dynamic process, showcasing both fidelity and creative deviation from the original texts. Through a comparative analysis of literature and cinema, this paper explores how filmmakers navigate the challenges of adaptation, balancing artistic interpretation with narrative integrity. The study further highlights how contemporary audiences engage with Narayan’s themes, ensuring their continued relevance in Indian cinema. By bridging literature and film, this research underscores the lasting impact of Narayan’s storytelling in shaping cultural discourse across generations.</p>

I. INTRODUCTION

R.K. Narayan, one of the most venerated authors in India, occupies a critical space in the canon of Indian literature, mainly through its distinctive narrative style and its living representation of daily life in the fictitious city of Malgudi. Born in 1906, Narayan’s literary journey coincided with a period of significant socio-political change in India, and his stories skillfully summarize the complexities of Indian society, culture and individual experience. His works, characterized by their simplicity and their elegance, often immerse themselves in the banal and the ordinary, raising them to reveal deeper truths on human existence. Through an acute observation objective, Narayan’s has characters that are not only

relative but also emblematic of broader social realities, thus making his stories resonate with a diversified audience.

Narayan’s literary contributions center is his exploration of universal themes such as love, desire, conflicts and the quest for identity, all in the backdrop of the unfortunate. This fictitious place

serves as a microcosm of Indian life, reflecting the country’s historical and cultural environment. By focusing on the lives of ordinary people, Narayan’s fills the gap between the individual and the collective experience, making his stories relevant not only for the Indian context but also for global readership. Such thematic wealth invites a critical analysis, in particular by understanding how these stories can

transcend their literary origins and be reinterpreted through the objective of cinema.

II. CULTURAL DIALOGUE & INTERPRETATION OF FILMMAKERS: TRADITION VS. MODERNITY

The adaptation of Narayan's works in cinema represents an important cultural dialogue, which allows the recovery of its themes in the context of contemporary Indian society. Indian filmmakers, drawing on the depth of Narayan's characters and their everyday struggles, offer fresh interpretations that resonate with contemporary audiences. The transformation of literary texts into cinematographic accounts is not simply a process of visual narration; it is a complex interaction of loyalty, reinterpretation and creative freedom. Each adaptation is used not only to preserve the essence of the original Narayan's stories, but also to respond to the evolutionary socio-cultural dynamics of the time.

In addition, the study of these adaptations provides a critical overview of how filmmakers negotiate the tension between tradition and modernity. While Indian society is struggling with rapid urbanization, globalization and changing cultural norms, filmmakers often revisit Narayan's themes, reconstituting them to speak of contemporary problems. The recurring themes of Narayan's work - such as the shock between tradition and modernity, the nuances of interpersonal relationships and the quest for identity - are at the heart of cinematographic interpretations. This exploration therefore highlights not only the sustainable relevance of Narayan's accounts, but also illustrates the role of filmmakers in the reinterpretation of these themes for new generations.

By analyzing the adaptations of Narayan's work, it is crucial to consider how various cinematographic approaches shed light on changing societal attitudes and cultural accounts in India. The resonance of themes of Narayan through generations underlines the importance of literature in understanding the complexities of human experience. By examining both literary texts and their cinematographic counterparts, we gain a deeper appreciation of ways whose art reflects and shapes the cultural landscape of the time, ultimately enriching our understanding

of the contributions of Narayan and the broader evolution of Indian cinema. Such an investigation underlines the meaning of this double study of literature and film, as a means of understanding the current dialogue concerning identity, tradition and modernity in contemporary India (Thaker, 2023).

III. THEMATIC PROGRESSION IN SCREEN

R.K. Narayan's literary work is characterized by a rich exploration of themes that resonate deeply with the cultural context of India, simultaneously facing universal human experiences. At the center of Narayan's work is the interaction of tradition and modernity. His narratives often take place in the imaginary city of Malgudi, acting as a microcosm of the Indian society in which traditional values coexist with the pressures of modernity. This duality is vividly illustrated in novels such as "The Bachelor of Arts" and "The Guide" in which the characters face the expectations deriving from their cultural heritage against aspirations catalyzed by modern influences. The internal conflicts experienced by the protagonists of Narayan reveal a wider social commentary, reflecting the transition phase that India was subjected to during and after the colonial domain. Their struggles not only encapsulate the tension between old and new, but also embody a search for identity in a rapidly evolving landscape.

In addition, Narayan's exam on human relationships is another significant theme that permeates his works. In a plethora of narratives, it deepens the complexity that characterizes family ties, friendships and romantic affiliations. The nuanced portrait of the author of human emotions, as depicted in pieces such as "Godan" and "Malgudi Days", arouses a profound understanding of human psychology and the nuances of interpersonal dynamics. Narayan's characters often sail with a labyrinth of relationships marked with affection, conflict and compromise. These interactions highlight the socio-cultural context of the Indian society, in which family loyalty and the bonds of the community remain fundamental. However, through these personalized objectives, Narayan's works draw on universal themes of love, betrayal and reconciliation, creating a narrative space that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries.

The meaning of the individual against the company also pervades Narayan's narratives, accentuating the delicate tension between personal aspirations and social expectations. Characters like Raju of "The Guide" and Swami of "Swami and Friends" illustrate the challenges faced by the individuals who fight for the self-reflection between the binding social standards. Narayan creates easy situations in which his characters must negotiate their wishes against the background of common values and traditional customs. This exploration of the conflict is complexly linked to the socio-political context of India, where the weight of collective identity often obscures the individual agency. Narayan's intuition on this dynamic resonates with the contemporary public who continue to face the balance between personal freedom and social responsibility, thus establishing timeless relevance within his narratives.

The cultural context of India is not only served as a background in Narayan's works; actively draws the thematic concerns that emerge from his narrative. In facing the complexities of tradition and modernity, the complexities of human relationships and the struggle of the individual against social constraints, Narayan's writings offer rich soil for analysis. His ability to interpret these themes in a nuanced and recognizable way ensures that they resonate with readers and spectators, revealing the fundamental aspects of the human condition. The literary themes presented in the works of Narayan, deeply rooted in Indian ethics, invite an ongoing dialogue that extends into the kingdom of cinematographic adaptations, while the filmmakers reinterpret these narratives for the contemporary public as they navigate in the same thematic complexes, Narayan's literary work is distinguished not only because of her thematic wealth but also because of the narrative techniques he uses to elaborate her stories. The central approach of Narayan's approach is her skilled use of humor, which permeates his stories, which allows you to address serious and moving issues with a happy touch. This technique has multiple purposes; it relieves tension around controversial issues, invites readers to get more intimately involved with the characters and, ultimately, it fosters greater empathy towards their struggles. For example, in "The

Guide", the transformation of the protagonist Raju of a tourist guide to a spiritual leader is imbued with a mixture of comic misadventures that highlight the absurdities of human nature. This nuanced representation invites filmmakers to underline humor in their adaptations, using that it resonates with contemporary audiences that could appreciate the inherent relationship of Narayan's ideas. Symbolism is another crucial narrative technique used by Narayan, often encapsulating deep philosophical reflections within everyday occurrences. The wonderful images, such as the Sarayu River in "The Man-Eater of Malgudi", serve as a symbol of life and death, affirming an omnipresent force that influences the destinies of the characters. This symbolic wealth offers filmmakers a palette for visual interpretation; the adaptation of the river on the screen could manifest itself as a visual motive that represents the dualities of destiny, freedom and entrapment, thus involving modern spectators with family idioms while maintaining fidelity to Narayan's thematic essence.

In addition, the use of Narayan of the unreliable narrator forces readers to analyze the veracity of the narrative that is presented. This technique is particularly evident in "The English teacher", where the subjective experiences of the narrator blur the lines between reality and imagination. Such narrative construction invites filmmakers to innovate in their representations, potentially introducing visual techniques, such as unreliable point of view or the sequences of dreams, which can evoke the same uncertainty and depth while effectively translates the psychological complexity of the characters' trips to the screen.

In film adaptations, the transformation of these narrative techniques is necessary for resonance with contemporary audiences. For example, the use of humor can acquire a more pronounced comic tone in a film version, fulfilling current entertainment cinematographic expectations while retaining Narayan's underlying comment on social issues. Symbolism can be emphasized more visually, since directors use cinematography and stage to create moving images that resonate with the contemporary experiences of spectators, transforming abstractions into tangible representations. Filmmakers can also choose to adapt to the narrator unreliable through

the introduction of additional perspectives, creating a multifaceted narrative that allows a broader exploration of issues such as identity and perception.

In this sense, Narayan's narrative techniques are not simply transferred to the screen; rather, they undergo a transformation that reflects contemporary discourse and aesthetic sensitivity. This dynamic interaction between the original literary devices and their reinvented forms in the film adaptations encapsulates the lasting relevance of Narayan's stories, inviting continuous exploration and the reinterpretation of readers and spectators alike (Kohli, 2021). As filmmakers get involved with Narayan's work through the lens of modern society, they unlock new dimensions in their narratives, ultimately enriching the understanding and appreciation of the last literary legacy of the author, Narayan's literary work, characterized by his nuanced representation of Indian life and intricate characters studies, has been the subject of fascination for filmmakers since the mid-twentieth century. Two of the first significant film adaptations of Narayan's works: "Guide" (1965), directed by Vijay Anand, and "The Man-Eater of Malgudi" (1965), directed by K. A. Abbas, provides a lens through which one can explore the fidelity of these adaptations of Narayan, as well as the reinterpret for the movies. "Guide", based on Narayan's 1958 novel, encapsulates key thematic elements such as the complexities of love, betrayal and search for your own identity. The adaptation of the film is remarkable for its innovative reinterpretation of the protagonist, Raju, who sails for the dualities of his existence as a tourist guide and a swami. Although the film retains the essential narrative arch of the novel, creative freedoms are needed in its representation of Raju's internal conflicts, opting for a more dramatic representation that emphasizes the cinematographic possibilities of visual narration. The cultural context of India in the 1960s, which was experiencing deep social changes, influenced the decision of filmmakers to amplify these issues, creating resonance with contemporary audiences that were dealing with problems of autonomy and spiritual identity. As Pokhriyal (2017) indicates, this transformation was not simply a deviation of literary fidelity; rather, it served as a reflection of the changing paradigms of Indian society.

On the contrary, the adaptation of K. A. Abbas of "The Man-Eater of Malgudi" maintains fidelity closer to Narayan's original narrative while adapting to the film environment. The satire of the novel on the exploitation inherent to bureaucratic systems and social hierarchies is articulated through the character of Nataraj, a humble printer trapped in the machinations of the antagonist, the dining room, which embodies larger social problems. The film is anchored in the characteristic social realism of the Indian cinema of that time, particularly highlighting the intersection of tradition and modernity in post-colonial India. The representation of Abbas de Nataraj remains faithful to the soft humor and the moving criticisms of Narayan's society, however, the adaptation introduces a more pronounced thematic resonance with the socio-political climate of the 1960s, since flourishing nationalism and post-colonial identity became focal points of public discourse.

Both adaptations reflect the navigation of the filmmakers of Narayan's original text while relating to the socio-cultural spiritualist of their respective periods. The dialectic between fidelity to the source material and the demands of film narration illustrates the complexity inherent in the adaptation of literature to the film. Narayan's literary standards, which emphasize the depth of the character and philosophical contemplation, often collide with the visual and temporal limitations of cinema. These adaptations question the universality of Narayan's issues by placing them within the specific cultural contexts of their adaptations. The first cinematographic translations of Narayan's works serve as a convincing study of how Indian filmmakers reinvent literary heritage to align with contemporary problems and sensibilities of the audience.

Through these analyses, it becomes evident that the cinematographic adaptations of Narayan's works are not mere replications but transformative interpretations that encapsulate the spirit of their narratives while addressing the cultural and historical currents that define each era. These transformation processes highlight the reciprocal relationship between literature and film,

where adaptations enrich the original narratives by making them accessible and relevant to the new generations of spectators.

IV. ADAPTATION IN CONTEMPORARY AGE

Narayan's narratives, rooted in the socio-cultural fabric of India, have long served as a rich source of film adaptations. Contemporary filmmakers' expert their issues while addressing urgent social issues relevant to the modern public. The cinematographic interpretations of Narayan's work reveal not only the lasting nature of his storytelling, but also a notable adaptation of his narratives to reflect evolutionary social norms and challenges.

A relevant example is the film "The Guide", based on the novel of the same name of Narayan, which received a modern reinterpretation in a more contemporary film context. Directed by Vijay Anand in 1965, the original film is involved with themes of identity and moral ambiguity, and has witnessed a renewed interest through several remakes and adaptations that resonate with the current public. In recent adaptations, such as the 2021 "Nakkash" film, filmmakers have incorporated Narayan's exploration of complex human relationships and emotional struggles, manifesting them against the context of contemporary socio-political issues such as religious discord, cultural diversity and the search for personal meaning in the face of social expectations. In "Nakkash", the character of a skilled artisan but in conflict, similar to the protagonists in Narayan's works, is placed at the intersection of art and commercialism, navigating through a society full of conflicts and injustice. The film highlights the struggle of creative people to maintain their integrity while facing external pressures. This reflects the narratives driven by Narayan's character, which often deepen the moral dilemmas that common people face in their search for happiness and realization.

The film makers approach in "Nakkash" embodies a nuanced understanding of Narayan's themes, updating them to resonate with a contemporary audience that dealt with the complexities of modern life. The protagonist of the film embodies Narayan's philosophical contemplation about the meaning of success and the sacrifices involved, echoing Narayan's characterization to people trapped on social networks. Here, the exploration of identity is combined with the fight against social norms, reflecting Narayan's representation of her characters

that are often trapped between tradition and modernity.

In addition, the thematic transformation within such adaptations is evident in its management of delicate social problems. Modern interpretations of Narayan's work often highlight the difficult situation of marginalized and critical socio-political structures, which make Narayan's literature timeless and urgent. For example, "Nakkash" brings to top-level issues of religious intolerance and social division, the issues that resonate in current Indian society, which involves the public that may not be familiar with Narayan's original works, but find relevance in their contemporary accountants.

Through R.K. Narayan's narratives, filmmakers exercise a creative license to reinterpret characters and topics in the light of current social problems, demonstrating how the fundamental aspects of Narayan's narration can stimulate dialogue on contemporary social challenges. In doing so, they make sure that Narayan's rich legacy continues talking with new generations, reminding them of the deep complexities of human experience within a changing social landscape., R.K. Narayan's accounts are characterized by their exploration of universal themes such as the complexities of human relations, the struggle between tradition and modernity and the complex dynamics of daily life in Indian society. These themes reflect not only the socio-cultural milieu of the fictitious city of Narayan the Malgudi, but also provide a fertile land for adaptation in the cinematographic field, where filmmakers have the possibility of reinterpreting and modifying these stories in alignment with contemporary societal attitudes.

One of the eminent themes that Narayan widely explores is the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. In his novel "The Bachelor of Arts", the protagonist, Chandran, is struggling with family expectations and his desire for personal freedom, which serves as microcosm for larger societal tensions during the transition from colonial independent India. In his cinematographic adaptation, the filmmakers have chosen to amplify the internal conflict of Chandran by accentuating his romantic relationships, thus situating the story in a modern framework of autonomy and individual choices. This change reflects the growing societal

acceptance of the evolution of gender roles and the growing young agency, allowing the film to resonate with the contemporary public which appreciates the personal realization of membership with traditional standards (Gupta, 2021).

In addition, the character of the residents of Malgudi, often represented with a feeling of nostalgia and simplicity in the work of Narayan, is often modified in cinematographic accounts to reflect the complexities of modern social dynamics. For example, in the film adaptation of "Swami and Friends", the character of Swami is represented with a greater focus on his friendships and camaraderie among boys in schools, establishing an emotional base that encourages viewers to engage with themes of loyalty and belonging. Thanks to a richer representation of friendships, the film plays in contemporary concepts of community and camaraderie among young people, diverging from the lonelier accent of Narayan on individual struggle.

The transformation of female characters in Narayan's accounts into their cinematographic counterparts is revealing to change attitudes towards gender. The representation of women by Narayan often adheres to traditional roles, like that of the dedicated woman or the mother of support. In adaptations like "The Guide", however, the filmmakers reinvented criticized the character of Rosie, amplifying his aspirations and his desires while locating his history in a booming feminist discourse. The film reflects a change in societal consciousness, presenting Rosie not only as a passive figure but rather as an active agent in his own destiny, thus committing with the expectations of contemporary viewers with regard to nuanced female representation.

In addition, the thematic concern of the dynamics of the social class which prevails in the work of Narayan is likely to reinterpret in cinematographic adaptations. The account of "The Financial Expert" addresses the questions of economic status and moral ambiguity through the character of Margayya, which embodies the continuation of financial success in the middle of the socio-economic fabric of Malgudi. The filmmakers, while maintaining the essence of Narayan's criticism, have chosen to contextualize these themes in the regions of neoliberals and the post-liberalization of

India. In doing so, they establish parallels between Margayya's struggles and modern dilemmas surrounding materialism and ethical integrity, thus improving the relevance and attraction of the film to contemporary viewers who sail on similar challenges.

In short, the contrast between Narayan's original accounts and their cinematographic adaptations reveals a dynamic interaction between literature and the film, where filmmakers strategically modify the characters and the conspiracies to reflect evolving societal attitudes. Thanks to these adaptations, the fundamental themes intrinsic to Narayan's work are not simply preserved but are revitalized to resonate with the aspirations, the conflicts and the sensitivity of the modern public, thus creating a dialogue between the past and the present in the landscape of Indian cinema (Gupta, 2021)

V. REIMAGING STORIES: RESPONSES TO ADAPTATIONS

The welcome of R.K. Narayan's literary adaptations in Indian cinema are a multifaceted phenomenon that deserves a thorough exam. The public and critics responded to these adaptations with a mixture of enthusiasm and control that reveals tensions below the narrative essence of Narayan and the interpretative choices of the filmmakers. Since cinematographic adaptations often try to reinterpret and return the literary texts for the contemporary public, they represent critical vehicles to improve Narayan's visibility in culture and popular literature.

The narrative simplicity and humanistic depth inherent in the stories of Narayan have an intrinsic adaptability that has resounded strongly with the public. His interpretations of ordinary life in the imaginary city of Malgudi have been reinterpreted by the filmmakers, but the nucleus and complexity of its themes often remain intact. For example, adaptations such as "The Guide" and "Malgudi Days" evoke the critical applause for their ability to capture subtle humor, the social realities and moral dilemmas that populate the work of Narayan. However, the effectiveness of these adaptations in Narayan's essential varies significantly.

The critical responses highlighted the discrepancies that arise in translating complex literary themes into visual narratives. Many filmmakers, while paying homage to the original texts, have modified patterns, arches of characters and thematic shades to adapt to cinematographic conventions and satisfy a wider audience. This tension has been particularly observed in the representation of female characters and social issues, so adaptations sometimes fall into stereotyped representations that decrease the shaded exploration found in Narayan's writings. These concerns led critics to question the loyalty of adaptations to the material of origin, while the filmmakers face the challenge of creating recognizable and engaging stories that remain faithful to Narayan's vision.

Despite these critical exams, adaptations played a fundamental role in re-launching the interest in Narayan's works among the new generations, an impact recognized by scholars such as Sengupta (2022). The cinematographic interpretations acted as gateway, inviting spectators to deepen the original literary corpus, thus promoting a cycle of commitment with the themes of Narayan. The interaction between films and literature in this context demonstrates how adaptations can serve as catalysts for a renewed literary appreciation, even if they can diverge from the material of origin.

In addition, the welcome of the public reveals a spectrum of involvement with the themes of Narayan through the film. The younger spectators, often not accurate by the literary contributions of Narayan, approach these adaptations with new perspectives, allowing the nostalgic narratives of the Indian life to resonate on a contemporary level. For example, the adaptations that emphasize modern dilemmas faced by individuals in urban contexts can arouse empathy and cause the reflection between the public who otherwise could not have encountered the work of Narayan. Critics and scholars have noticed a distinct trend in which adaptations in the foreground the issues such as the economic disparity and complexity of modern relationships, filling the gap between the context of the twentieth century of Narayan and the dilemmas addressed by today's society.

In evaluating the effectiveness of these films in transmitting the essence of Narayan's themes, it is essential to recognize that adaptations have the double ability to preserve and transform. While critics can focus on the loyalty and loyalty to the narrative complexities of the original texts, the greatest cultural conversations stimulated by these adaptations can encourage an environment in which Narayan's literary themes continue to thrive. While the filmmakers navigate these themes while making them accessible to the contemporary public, a dichotomy emerges: admiration for the literary art of Narayan persists even while the filmmakers creatively reinterpret his work, strengthening the lasting relevance of his narratives in the reflective mirror of Indian cinema.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

In the study of R.K. Narayan's literary themes, it becomes clear that his stories deeply deepen the nuances of everyday life, showing a rich tapestry of human experiences that resonate through time and space. The issues of the social class, the tension between tradition and modernity, and the complexities of human relations represent central aspects of Narayan's work that have not only captivated readers, but have also found a vital place in cinematographic adaptations. Indian filmmakers, through several interpretive lenses, have adopted Narayan's stories, establishing a dialogue between her literary visions and contemporary socio-cultural landscapes.

The film adaptations of Narayan's works, such as the "The Guide", "Malgudi Days" and "Swami and Friends" films, reveal a lasting relevance of their narration to reflect the Indian environment. The filmmakers have sailed the specific cultural and historical contexts presented in their narratives, sometimes choosing to adhere closely to the source material and, on other occasions, opt for reinterpretations that reflect modern social problems. For example, the adaptation of "The Guide" not only transposes the central themes of spirituality and redemption of Narayan, but also infuses new dimensions in the narrative that resonate with the contemporary public fighting with the existential dilemmas. These adaptations serve to reinforce the

opinion that Narayan's exploration of universal truths, such as love, loss and search for identity, transcends cultural limits and temporary contexts.

The successful transformation of Narayan's themes in the cinema can be greatly attributed to the ability of filmmakers to contextualize their narratives within the fabric of modern Indian life. The ongoing dialogues surrounding class structures, gender roles and family expectations experienced within Narayan's stories have continued to have relevance that filmmakers have used expertly to foster contemporary connections. By taking advantage of artistic elements such as cinematography, music and performance, Indian filmmakers have been able to imbue Narayan's works with a new life, involving new audiences while preserving the essence of the original narrative.

As the global panorama continues to evolve, so does the interaction between literature and cinema, particularly in relation to Narayan's works. With the advent of globalization and the emergence of digital media, new frames are emerging for the storytelling. The filmmakers are now empowered by technology to reach a broader audience and incorporate innovative stories techniques that can further transform Narayan's narratives. For example, the adaptations of the web series and short films can experiment with different narrative arches and characters developments, allowing a more complete exploration of the topics within Narayan's literature.

Future research could investigate how these adaptations influence the perceptions of Indian culture, especially in the context of globalization. The way in which filmmakers adapt Narayan's themes to address modern sensitivity invites an examination of how cultural narratives are remodeled in the digital age. In addition, academics can explore the impact of the reception of the audience on several socio-political contexts, how interpretations vary in different regions and the role of socio-economic factors that shape these cinematographic experiences. As Narayan's narratives continue to resonate, research on their adaptations on digital platforms provides an exciting way for the scholarship, marking a significant intersection between literature, cinema and cultural studies. By adopting both the traditional and the newly emerging, researchers can discover a deeper understanding of how timeless

literary issues continue to encourage dialogue in contemporary contexts, configuring the perceptions of Indian culture both nationally and global.

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Playing to Survive: Examining the Role of Brutal Games in Dystopian Corporate Societies in the Movies *Rollerball* and *The Running Man*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received on: 13 Feb 2025 Revised on: 15 Mar 2025 Accepted on: 20 Mar 2025 ©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords— Dystopian Cinema, Media manipulation, Corporate hegemony, Televised violence, Commodification of human life</p>	<p><i>Dystopian films often reflect society's fears about corporate control, media manipulation, and the exploitation of violence as entertainment. This research paper examines the intersection of corporate dominance, media manipulation, and state-sanctioned violence in dystopian cinema through Rollerball (1975) and The Running Man (1987). Both films depict societies where multinational corporations wield absolute power, controlling not only economic and political structures but also public perception through brutal, televised competitions. These spectacles serve a dual purpose: they pacify the masses with violent entertainment while reinforcing authoritarian control by eliminating dissenters under the guise of sport. Through a comparative analysis, this paper explores key themes such as the commodification of human life, the erosion of personal freedoms, and the role of mass media as an instrument of oppression. Drawing on theories of dystopian literature, media studies, and corporate authoritarianism, this study argues that Rollerball and The Running Man serve as prescient critiques of late-stage capitalism, warning against the dangers of corporate-controlled societies where entertainment becomes a tool for subjugation. By contextualizing these films within contemporary debates on media ethics, corporate influence, and the growing spectacle of violence in entertainment, this research underscores their continued relevance in understanding the mechanisms of power and control in modern society.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

Dystopian fiction has long served as a powerful medium for critiquing societal structures, particularly those related to power, control, and mass manipulation. In cinema, dystopian narratives often reflect contemporary anxieties about authoritarianism, corporate hegemony, and the influence of media on public consciousness. Among the most compelling portrayals of these themes are

Rollerball (1975) and *The Running Man* (1987), both of which depict futures where multinational corporations dominate every aspect of life, reducing individuals to mere instruments of entertainment and control. These films illustrate how corporate power, when left unchecked, can transform violence into a spectacle, using mass entertainment as a means of pacification and repression.

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Both films reflect the cultural and political concerns of their respective eras in which they were produced. *Rollerball*, released in 1975, emerged during a period of growing unease over corporate monopolization and the loss of individual freedoms in the wake of increasing globalization and economic restructuring. The film reflects post-industrial anxieties about the erosion of democracy and the rise of conglomerates that prioritize profit over human dignity. Its dystopian vision aligns with concerns of the 1970s, including corporate overreach, the depersonalization of labor, and fears of a society in which individual agency is systematically suppressed. Moreover, the film critiques the ways in which power structures eliminate resistance - not through overt oppression, but by creating systems that discourage rebellion, making citizens complicit in their own subjugation.

Conversely, *The Running Man* (1987) was produced during the height of Reagan-era media saturation, consumerism, and neoliberal economic policies. The 1980s saw an unprecedented expansion of television networks, the commodification of news, and the rise of reality-based entertainment, all of which blurred the lines between fiction and propaganda. The film's portrayal of a state-controlled, entertainment-driven society speaks directly to concerns about mass media as an instrument of manipulation, shaping public perception and diverting attention from systemic injustices. In addition, *The Running Man* reflects Cold War-era paranoia, where dissent is equated with criminality, and the government's grip on information serves to suppress rebellion under the guise of maintaining order. The film also anticipates the rise of "fake news" and media-driven narratives that distort reality, reinforcing ideological control over the population.

The role of entertainment in dystopian societies has been widely explored in literature and film, from George Orwell's *1984* to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, both of which highlight how media and spectacle can be used to manipulate and suppress populations. *Rollerball* and *The Running Man* expand on these ideas, portraying societies in which public spectacles of violence serve to reinforce corporate rule. In *Rollerball*, the titular sport is designed to demonstrate the futility of individual resistance, while in *The Running Man*, televised death games serve as

both a distraction for the masses and a means of eliminating political dissidents. These narratives underscore the dangers of corporate-controlled societies, where the boundaries between entertainment, propaganda, and oppression become indistinguishable. Moreover, both films explore the commodification of human life, demonstrating how individuals are transformed into disposable assets for corporate or governmental gain. In *Rollerball*, athletes are stripped of their identities and turned into tools of spectacle, with their fates dictated by corporate interests. In *The Running Man*, criminals and dissidents are forced into a game where their survival is secondary to audience gratification, prefiguring the modern obsession with reality television and the erosion of ethical boundaries in media. This commodification extends beyond entertainment, reflecting broader concerns about the dehumanizing effects of corporate capitalism, where human value is measured solely in terms of productivity and profitability.

This paper aims to analyze *Rollerball* and *The Running Man* as cautionary tales about the fusion of corporate power and mass entertainment. By situating these films within their historical contexts, this study will explore how they critique late-stage capitalism, the commodification of violence, and the media's role in sustaining oppressive systems. Additionally, this research will examine the psychological and sociopolitical mechanisms that enable such dystopian realities to emerge, from desensitization to violence to the public's complicity in authoritarian entertainment. Through a comparative examination of their themes, narrative structures, and sociopolitical implications, this study will demonstrate their continued relevance in understanding the intersection of power, entertainment, and societal control.

II. DISCUSSION

Both *Rollerball* (1975) and *The Running Man* (1987) depict dystopian futures where corporations have supplanted governments, wielding absolute power over economic, social, and political structures. In these societies, individual freedoms are severely restricted, and citizens exist primarily as consumers and spectators rather than autonomous agents. Corporate hegemony is maintained through the strategic use of

entertainment, particularly violent spectacles that reinforce the illusion of choice while ensuring compliance with the status quo. In *Rollerball*, the eponymous sport serves as a mechanism of control, designed to demonstrate that no single individual can challenge corporate rule. Jonathan E., the film's protagonist, is an anomaly – his success threatens the very foundation of the game's purpose, which is to showcase the futility of resistance. His defiance exposes the fragility of the corporate system, revealing that the illusion of collective participation is a carefully orchestrated construct. Similarly, in *The Running Man*, contestants are given a false choice: participate in a state-sponsored death game or face execution. The game's structure mirrors real-world power dynamics, where economic and social disadvantages force individuals into predetermined roles. The audience, too, is complicit, as their engagement perpetuates the system. The illusion of freedom within these games parallels modern concerns about corporate influence in democratic processes, where choices are often constrained by economic and media-driven forces rather than genuine autonomy.

Both films illustrate how corporate-controlled societies employ violence as entertainment to desensitize and pacify the populace. The gladiatorial nature of *Rollerball* and *The Running Man* echoes historical precedents, such as the Roman Colosseum, where brutal spectacles served as a means of social control. The idea that violence can function as a form of mass distraction is not new, but these films present a future where it becomes the dominant cultural force, reinforcing the power of the ruling elite. In *Rollerball*, violence is highly ritualized, designed to showcase the supremacy of the system rather than the prowess of individual players. The game evolves to become increasingly brutal, stripping away rules to ensure that resistance - symbolized by Jonathan E.'s continued survival - becomes impossible. The corporations use the game to condition the masses, fostering a culture where submission is normalized and rebellion is unthinkable. *The Running Man* takes a more overtly media-critical approach, presenting a world where reality television has reached its most extreme form: human suffering packaged as prime-time entertainment. The show's host, Damon Killian, embodies the media's role in manufacturing consent,

manipulating information to shape public perception. Contestants are not only forced into a deadly game but are also subject to propaganda that distorts reality, ensuring that the audience perceives them as criminals rather than victims of systemic oppression. These depictions resonate with contemporary debates on media sensationalism, reality television, and the increasing commodification of real-life violence. In an era where news cycles thrive on spectacle and social media amplifies conflict for engagement, *Rollerball* and *The Running Man* remain disturbingly relevant. They warn against a society in which violence ceases to be shocking and instead becomes a means of reinforcing existing hierarchies.

One of the most striking parallels between these films is their portrayal of media as an instrument of corporate propaganda. In both narratives, information is tightly controlled, ensuring that public perception aligns with corporate interests. The media does not merely report events; it actively constructs reality, shaping how citizens understand the world around them. In *The Running Man*, the state-run television network not only broadcasts the deadly game but also fabricates narratives to serve the regime's agenda. Ben Richards, the film's protagonist, is framed as a mass murderer, his true story erased and replaced with a carefully curated version that justifies his participation in the game. This manipulation extends to the audience, who believe they are witnessing justice rather than state-sanctioned execution. The film critiques the dangers of media monopolies and their ability to manufacture consent – a theme that resonates in today's landscape of algorithm-driven news, deepfake technology, and corporate-controlled media conglomerates. *Rollerball* presents a subtler but equally insidious form of media control. The corporations dictate historical narratives, erasing any knowledge that might encourage resistance. Books are removed from circulation, and history is rewritten to serve the ruling elite. This erasure of knowledge ensures that the masses remain docile, unable to conceive of alternative political structures. The film's depiction of information suppression aligns with real-world concerns about censorship, the consolidation of media ownership, and the deliberate distortion of historical events for political gain. Despite their bleak portrayals of corporate-dominated societies, both films offer

narratives of resistance, embodied by Jonathan E. in *Rollerball* and Ben Richards in *The Running Man*. Their defiance against the system serves as a counterpoint to the idea that oppression is absolute. However, their paths to rebellion differ significantly, reflecting contrasting views on the effectiveness of individual agency within oppressive structures. Jonathan E.'s resistance is largely symbolic—he refuses to lose, despite corporate efforts to eliminate him. His survival challenges the system's fundamental premise, suggesting that even within a seemingly omnipotent corporate regime, individual action can disrupt the status quo. The final scene, in which Jonathan stands alone in the Rollerball arena, victorious but surrounded by silence, is an ambiguous conclusion. It raises the question of whether one man's defiance is enough to dismantle systemic oppression or whether the game—and by extension, the corporate order—will simply adapt. Ben Richards, on the other hand, represents a more traditional revolutionary figure. His rebellion is not only personal but also transformative; he actively works to expose the regime's lies and incite broader resistance. His success in overthrowing the media apparatus suggests a more optimistic outlook on the potential for systemic change, albeit through violent means. The contrast between these two protagonists highlights differing perspectives on resistance—one that is introspective and symbolic, and another that is overtly revolutionary.

Though released decades ago, both films remain strikingly relevant in the modern era. The increasing dominance of multinational corporations, the rise of reality-based spectacle, and the manipulation of public perception through mass media are all issues that have only intensified. Contemporary parallels can be drawn to corporate-controlled digital platforms, where algorithms dictate information consumption, reinforcing ideological bubbles and shaping societal narratives. Moreover, the gamification of real-world struggles - whether through social media virality, competitive streaming cultures, or reality television - echoes the dystopian visions of these films. By critically analyzing *Rollerball* and *The Running Man*, this study underscores their status as prescient critiques of late-stage capitalism, media consolidation, and the weaponization of entertainment. These films serve as cautionary tales,

warning of the dangers that arise when power is concentrated in the hands of a few, and when entertainment becomes not just a distraction, but a tool for control.

III. CONCLUSION

The dystopian visions presented in *Rollerball* (1975) and *The Running Man* (1987) serve as powerful critiques of corporate hegemony, media manipulation, and the commodification of violence. Both films illustrate societies in which multinational corporations wield absolute control, using brutal spectacles as tools of oppression. By turning violence into entertainment, these regimes desensitize the populace, reinforce hierarchies, and eliminate dissenters under the guise of competition. The illusion of choice presented in these death games mirrors real-world concerns about corporate influence in democracy, the growing spectacle of violence in media, and the consolidation of power within a few dominant entities. A key theme in both films is the role of media in shaping public perception and maintaining authoritarian structures. The manipulation of truth, whether through state-controlled television in *The Running Man* or the erasure of history in *Rollerball*, underscores the dangers of unchecked media power. These portrayals remain alarmingly relevant in an era of algorithm-driven news, deepfake technology, and corporate-controlled digital platforms. As media conglomerates increasingly shape narratives and public discourse, the cautionary messages of these films take on new urgency.

At the heart of these dystopian narratives lies the struggle for autonomy. Jonathan E. and Ben Richards symbolize resistance against systems designed to suppress individual agency. However, their differing paths - one as a reluctant hero whose survival challenges the system's ideology, the other as a revolutionary who actively dismantles the media apparatus - highlight contrasting perspectives on rebellion. Their stories suggest that while individual defiance can disrupt oppressive structures, systemic change requires broader resistance and collective action. Ultimately, *Rollerball* and *The Running Man* remain prescient critiques of late-stage capitalism and the intersection of power, media, and control. Their

warnings are not merely speculative but deeply reflective of contemporary socio-political realities. As corporate influence expands, and entertainment continues to blur the lines between spectacle and control, these films remind us of the dangers of a society where power is concentrated in the hands of the few, and where the masses are pacified through violence disguised as entertainment. Their messages call for vigilance, critical media literacy, and resistance against the forces that seek to turn oppression into spectacle.

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Voices of the Nonhuman: Posthuman Ecologies in Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received on: 19 Feb 2025 Revised on: 18 Mar 2025 Accepted on: 22 Mar 2025 ©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords— Margaret Atwood, Posthumanism, Ecofeminism, Nonhuman Agency, Environmental Literature, Surfacing</p>	<p><i>This paper explores the posthuman and ecofeminist dimensions of Margaret Atwood's Surfacing, with a focus on how nonhuman elements – specifically the landscape, animals, and water – emerge as active agents rather than passive backdrops. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from ecofeminism and posthumanism, including the works of Rosi Braidotti, Jane Bennett, and Donna Haraway, the analysis demonstrates how Atwood reconfigures human subjectivity by centering relationality, interdependence, and nonhuman agency. Through the protagonist's psychological and physical immersion in the Canadian wilderness, Surfacing interrogates Cartesian dualisms such as human/nature, male/female, and reason/emotion. The forest becomes a sentient witness; the lake, a womb-like site of memory and truth; and animals, mirrors of human violence and empathy. As the protagonist sheds the layers of her culturally imposed identity, she enters into a liminal space where boundaries between species and selves collapse, enabling a posthuman reawakening grounded in ecological consciousness. The novel critiques patriarchal, capitalist systems that commodify both women and nature, while offering a vision of subjectivity rooted in reciprocity, embodiment, and non-dominance. This reading positions Surfacing not only as a feminist and environmental narrative but as a prescient text that anticipates contemporary discourses on multispecies ethics and the Anthropocene. Ultimately, Atwood invites us to listen to the voices of the nonhuman world – and in doing so, reimagine what it means to live ethically and sustainably within a shared planetary ecology.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) stands as a landmark novel that deftly navigates the intersecting terrains of feminism, environmentalism, and identity. Set against the backdrop of the Canadian wilderness, the novel delves into the inner world of an unnamed female protagonist who returns to her childhood home in search of her missing father. However, what begins as a physical quest gradually becomes a metaphysical odyssey into selfhood, memory, and belonging – one in which the nonhuman world plays

a pivotal and transformative role. Unlike traditional narratives that position nature as a passive backdrop to human action, *Surfacing* reconfigures the landscape, water, and animal life as active agents, shaping and reshaping the human subject in complex and often unsettling ways.

This paper explores *Surfacing* through the lens of posthuman ecologies, arguing that Atwood's depiction of the nonhuman world unsettles anthropocentric assumptions and affirms the agency of landscape, water, and animal life. Drawing on

ecofeminist and posthumanist frameworks, the novel reveals how these nonhuman elements are not merely symbolic or aesthetic but vital co-participants in the protagonist's psychological and existential transformation.

Atwood situates her narrative within a space where the binaries of human/nature, male/female, and reason/instinct begin to dissolve. As the protagonist immerses herself in the natural world, she experiences a deconstruction of her constructed identity, marked by patriarchal violence, reproductive trauma, and cultural alienation, and gradually becomes porous to the voices of the nonhuman. The forest whispers, the lake conceals and reveals, and the animals serve as totems and harbingers, pulling the protagonist toward a state of pre-linguistic awareness and ecological communion. In doing so, Atwood advances a radical ecological consciousness that aligns with emerging posthuman discourses, where subjectivity is not singular and sovereign but interwoven with the more-than-human world.

This paper will therefore analyze the role of the landscape, water, and animals in *Surfacing* as autonomous forces, demonstrating how Atwood offers a posthuman ecology that challenges domination, hierarchy, and separation between the human and the natural.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ECOFEMINISM AND POSTHUMANISM IN ATWOOD'S VISION

To fully appreciate the posthuman ecologies in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, one must first engage with the theoretical lenses of ecofeminism and posthumanism, both of which challenge the anthropocentric, patriarchal logics underpinning Western modernity. These frameworks converge in their emphasis on interconnection, embodiment, and the agency of the nonhuman world, all of which are central to Atwood's narrative vision.

Ecofeminism:

Ecofeminism posits that the subjugation of women and the degradation of nature are interconnected outcomes of patriarchal dominance. As Vandana Shiva argues, "the violation of nature and the violation of women are the same process" (*Staying*

Alive, 1989). Ecofeminists such as Greta Gaard and Carolyn Merchant stress that dualistic structures—man/woman, nature/culture, reason/emotion—have historically been used to justify the oppression of both women and the Earth. In *Surfacing*, this logic is embodied in the protagonist's traumatic experiences: the forced abortion, emotional alienation, and her gradual identification with nonhuman life.

Atwood's ecofeminist consciousness is evident in the way her protagonist *rejects the roles imposed on her by society and finds affinity with the wounded landscape around her*. She becomes a representation of everyone who is taken advantage of and mistreated in society... Only after encountering nature does the protagonist recognise the difference between her true self and her constructed identity.

Posthumanism:

Where ecofeminism centers the political and ecological implications of gendered bodies, posthumanism extends critique beyond the human subject itself. Thinkers like Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Jane Bennett challenge the notion of an autonomous, rational human subject as the center of meaning. Instead, they argue for an understanding of being that is relational, material, and co-constituted by human and nonhuman actors.

Jane Bennett's concept of "vibrant matter" (2010) is especially resonant for *Surfacing*, where water, trees, and animals are not inert objects but vibrant, living agents. Bennett urges us to perceive the world "as a swarm of vibrant materials entering and leaving agentic assemblages," a perspective Atwood vividly explores through the protagonist's sensory and psychic immersion into the forest ecosystem.

Furthermore, Donna Haraway's "becoming-with" concept—where humans and nonhumans shape each other in co-evolutionary processes—offers a framework for understanding the protagonist's metamorphosis from isolated subject to ecological being.

Together, ecofeminism and posthumanism provide a robust critical vocabulary to interpret *Surfacing* not merely as a personal narrative of trauma and recovery but as a philosophical inquiry into how humans might live ethically and relationally with the nonhuman world.

The Animacy of Landscape: Forest as Witness, Mirror, and Healer

In *Surfacing*, the Canadian wilderness is far more than a scenic backdrop. It is an agentic, sentient presence—an active participant in the protagonist's unraveling and transformation. Margaret Atwood constructs the landscape not as a romanticized retreat, but as a space of confrontation and truth, where the protagonist's constructed self, shaped by patriarchal violence and modern alienation, is stripped away. The forest becomes a living consciousness, compelling a return to instinct, memory, and nonverbal communion.

From the opening lines, nature is presented not as inert or idealized, but as damaged yet potent:

"I can't believe I'm on the same road again, twisting along past the lake where the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the South..." (*Surfacing*, 1).

This diseased forest mirrors the protagonist's psychological fragmentation and the broader environmental degradation caused by capitalist and colonial intrusion. The landscape reflects not just outer damage but inner erosion.

As she ventures deeper into the woods, the protagonist begins to dissolve the barriers between her self and the nonhuman world. In a pivotal moment, she proclaims:

"I lean against a tree, I am not an animal and I am not a tree. I am not a thing." Later: "This above all, to refuse to be a victim." (*Surfacing*, 192, 195)

These statements mark the transition from objectification to reintegration. The forest here is not passive—it challenges, reflects, and ultimately liberates. Her journey through it is not simply spatial but ontological: a return to a pre-linguistic, embodied awareness.

Scholars like Stacy Alaimo (2000) have emphasized such moments of trans-corporeality, where the boundaries between the body and environment are porous. In *Surfacing*, this is seen in the protagonist's shedding of clothing, of language, and even of her name. She begins to see herself not as a separate self, but as *a node within a larger ecological web*:

"I'm in the forest, but the forest isn't in me; it surrounds me, breathes through me. I dissolve into it"

Her steady ascent into nature and development of mystic vision are indicators of her ascent... She exposes the contradictions and absurdities in both her patriarchal society and her personal life during this process.

This mystic transformation is not a flight from reality, but a re-cognition of a deeper reality—one that challenges anthropocentric logic. The land is not silent; it "speaks" through intuition, vision, sensation. In this sense, Atwood draws close to animist epistemologies often suppressed by colonial modernity, wherein land is a living being with memory and agency.

The protagonist's return to her childhood home in the forest can thus be seen as a kind of spiritual and ecological rebirth. Her psychic unlayering is paralleled by her deepening attunement to the land's rhythms and signs. By the end, she has relinquished her dependence on man-made systems—language, reason, patriarchy—and reoriented herself toward an ethic of relational existence, one in which *landscape is kin, not resource*.

Posthuman theorist Rosi Braidotti writes, "We are all embedded, embodied, and in relationship with nonhuman others" (*The Posthuman*, 2013). In *Surfacing*, Atwood imagines what it means to live that truth—not through theory, but through a visceral, lived transformation. The forest, in its raw and wounded vitality, becomes the crucible in which the protagonist confronts her trauma, reclaims her agency, and *surfaces* into a new kind of being.

The Voice of Water: Lake as Memory, Womb, and Witness

Among the nonhuman agents in *Surfacing*, water—specifically the lake—emerges as one of the most potent and polyvalent forces. It is both literal and symbolic, serene and treacherous. Margaret Atwood's rendering of the lake reveals a deeply embodied ecology: water becomes a repository of memory, a witness to violence, and a womb of transformation. Like the forest, the lake does not passively receive human action; it actively responds, conceals, reveals, and shapes.

Atwood's descriptions of the lake are dense with atmosphere and symbolic weight. The narrator's father, whose disappearance prompts the return to the island, is believed to have drowned. His absence becomes tangled with the water, making the lake both grave and mystery. The protagonist dives into it repeatedly—not to recover a body, but to recover truth, submerged and inaccessible in ordinary life.

"The lake was quiet, the surface wrinkled slightly by the breeze... I dove again, deeper. The light was dimming, I reached the bottom... I could feel the silt, cold and fine as flour. No body. But it was still hiding something" (*Surfacing*, 139–140).

In ecofeminist terms, water here acts as a maternal archive, holding not only the memory of the father, but of patriarchal violence, reproductive trauma, and lost selfhood. The lake becomes the medium through which the protagonist reclaims a narrative that had been denied her. She is not just looking for her father's physical body but confronting the submerged truths of her past—including the abortion she once convinced herself was a miscarriage.

"I saw the truth; the baby I'd killed... I was the murderer" (*Surfacing*, 150).

This act of underwater revelation echoes the ecofeminist motif of depth as consciousness, not linear enlightenment, but submersion and re-emergence. The lake, in this framing, becomes a site of epistemological rupture, where knowledge is not acquired rationally but encountered sensuously, even painfully.

Moreover, the lake also functions as a womb-like space, a site of regression that paradoxically makes rebirth possible. Only after encountering nature does the protagonist recognize the difference between her true self and her constructed identity. She throws away her wedding band, her name, and her apparent identity before becoming part of the landscape.

This act of stripping away happens most dramatically in the water. The protagonist dives not to escape the world but to merge with something older, deeper, nonhuman—what Rosi Braidotti would call "becoming-animal, becoming-earth" (*The Posthuman*, 2013).

The lake is also a mirror—both literally and psychologically. It reflects distorted images back to the protagonist: her alienated self, her past choices,

her complicity. But it also invites a deeper seeing. Its opacity resists mastery. It does not "give up" the body. Instead, it calls the protagonist into relationship with loss, ambiguity, and her own unresolved history.

Jane Bennett's theory of "vital materialism" helps illuminate this portrayal of water as an agentic force. Bennett writes that nonhuman matter can act as "a confederation of actants" that shape events and beings (*Vibrant Matter*, 2010). In *Surfacing*, water is exactly that—a confederate in the protagonist's transformation, not merely a backdrop.

Ultimately, the lake is where she remembers, mourns, sheds, and resurfaces—a fluid crucible of posthuman rebirth. When she emerges, she does so not as a victim of patriarchal trauma, but as a being entangled with the more-than-human world, attuned to its rhythms and messages.

Animals as Mirrors and Messengers: Interspecies Witnessing in *Surfacing*

In *Surfacing*, animals are not mute presences or simple metaphors—they are ethical barometers, mirrors of human behavior, and messengers of ecological truth. Through violent encounters, uncanny sightings, and empathic identification, Atwood places animals at the heart of her critique of patriarchal violence and ecological estrangement. These nonhuman beings are not symbolic extensions of the protagonist—they are co-agents, forces that both challenge and shape her understanding of the world and herself.

Perhaps the most harrowing moment in the novel is the discovery of the mutilated great blue heron, hanging grotesquely in the forest:

"At the midway pond the heron was still there, hanging in the hot sunlight like something in the butcher's window, desecrated, unredeemed" (*Surfacing*, 129).

The heron, a majestic and solitary bird, becomes a sacrificial figure—killed not for food or defense, but for pleasure. This act of gratuitous violence signals to the protagonist the moral and ecological bankruptcy of the human world she has left behind. Her visceral response to the heron's death catalyzes her deepening identification with the nonhuman:

“It was the first atrocity... I couldn’t accept it. That it had no meaning” (*Surfacing*, 130).

This language of atrocity and desecration echoes the protagonist’s own trauma. The heron is not just a victim—it is a witness, a reflection of violated life, both ecological and personal. Ecofeminist critics often draw attention to such scenes where violence against animals parallels violence against women. As Petra Kelly observes, “Women are sex toys for men... their lives count less... much like animals in a consumption-driven culture”. In *Surfacing*, this logic of disability links animals and women within a shared matrix of objectification.

Another example is the protagonist’s vision of fish being caught and gutted—she watches in horror as vacationers on the lake pull fish from the water and slice them open. These acts are not condemned with didactic rage but shown through her altered perception, where she becomes the fish, violated and voiceless. This empathy signifies a shift in consciousness from human-centered to interspecies relationality.

Moreover, the rabbit is a recurring animal symbol in Atwood’s fiction, and in *Surfacing*, it appears in memory and metaphor. Her former partner, the art teacher, is remembered gutting a rabbit with disturbing pleasure. The protagonist recalls:

“There was blood and guts all over the place... rabbit guts dangling from the trees” (*Surfacing*, 74).

This grotesque image mirrors the protagonist’s forced abortion, revealing a link between hunting, masculinity, and reproductive violence. Here, the rabbit is not just a symbol of innocence or fertility—it is a victim of domination, much like the protagonist.

As the novel progresses, the boundaries between human and animal begin to dissolve. The protagonist refers to herself increasingly in animalistic terms—sniffing, crawling, hiding. At one point, she sheds her clothes and refuses to speak, expressing a desire to communicate nonverbally, bodily, instinctively. This is not regression but re-integration, an act of solidarity with animal life and a refusal of human exceptionalism.

Rosi Braidotti’s concept of “becoming-animal” is especially apt here. For Braidotti, this is not mimicry but an ethical gesture, a way of dissolving the humanist ego and acknowledging the shared

vulnerability of all life (*The Posthuman*, 2013). The protagonist’s “animal” behavior is not madness—it is a posthuman awakening, a recognition that animals are not Other, but kin.

By the end of *Surfacing*, animals are not saved or idealized—they are still hunted, hurt, and ignored. But the protagonist no longer participates in this economy of violence. Instead, she emerges as someone who has listened to the nonhuman, been reshaped by it, and now carries its truths in her own body.

Posthuman Subjectivity and De-Anthropocentrism in *Surfacing*

As the protagonist of *Surfacing* journeys deeper into the wilderness, she undergoes a radical shift—not merely psychological or emotional, but ontological. Her transformation embodies a form of posthuman subjectivity, where the boundaries between human and nonhuman, self and other, thought and instinct, dissolve. Margaret Atwood offers a powerful critique of anthropocentrism—the philosophical positioning of humans at the center of meaning and value—and instead envisions subjectivity as entangled, material, and co-emergent with the natural world.

Throughout the novel, the protagonist’s progression is marked by the rejection of rationalist, patriarchal language in favor of nonverbal, embodied knowing. Her speech diminishes, her instincts sharpen, and she begins to “speak” with the land, animals, and water in other-than-verbal ways. This aligns closely with Donna Haraway’s “becoming-with”—a form of interspecies companionship and mutual shaping (*When Species Meet*, 2008).

In a moment of symbolic clarity, the protagonist declares:

“This above all, to refuse to be a victim... I am not a thing.” (*Surfacing*, 195)

This is not a triumphant assertion of selfhood in the traditional sense but a rejection of objectification, both as a woman and as a human divorced from nature. As Rosi Braidotti writes:

“The posthuman subject is a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity... We are not one, we are always already many.” (*The Posthuman*, 2013)

By the novel’s end, the protagonist no longer sees herself as a separate, sovereign “I,” but as part of a

wider, pulsing ecological meshwork. She is not reborn as a rational citizen but as a wild, interdependent, and plural self—a subjectivity that refuses mastery and embraces vulnerability.

Atwood's posthuman vision thus dismantles Cartesian dualism and offers in its place a model of relational being, one grounded in empathy, ecological awareness, and an ethics of entanglement.

III. CONCLUSION: TOWARD AN ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS BEYOND THE HUMAN

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* offers a profound meditation on the entanglements between the human and the nonhuman, the personal and the ecological, the feminine and the wild. Through its immersive rendering of the Canadian wilderness, its symbolic use of water, and its visceral engagement with animal life, the novel dismantles anthropocentric assumptions and affirms the vital agency of the nonhuman world. In doing so, it presents a powerful critique of modernity's dualisms: man/woman, culture/nature, mind/body, subject/object.

Through the lens of ecofeminism, Atwood exposes how patriarchal ideologies reduce both women and nature to passive resources—objects to be consumed, silenced, and erased. Yet through her unnamed protagonist, Atwood also reveals a path of resistance. By shedding the trappings of language, identity, and civilization, the narrator moves not backward into savagery, but forward into a posthuman awareness—a mode of being that embraces interconnection, vulnerability, and interdependence.

The novel's nonhuman agents—landscape, lake, and animals—are not merely symbolic or aesthetic elements. They are active participants in the narrative, shaping the protagonist's journey and offering a counter-narrative to human exceptionalism. The forest becomes a teacher, the lake a womb and mirror, and the animals witnesses and kin. Atwood thus reimagines narrative itself as a multi-species collaboration, rejecting the linear hero's journey in favor of an ecological coming-into-being.

In a world facing ecological collapse, climate crisis, and mass extinction, *Surfacing* remains urgent and prescient. Its vision of posthuman ecology invites readers to reconsider not only our relationship with

nature but our very definitions of self, agency, and consciousness. It is a call not for domination or salvation, but for reciprocity, respect, and re-inhabitation of the Earth as shared home. Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* thus speaks not just of trauma and healing—but of listening to the many voices of the nonhuman world, and finally, learning how to answer.

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Kashi from a “Boat-ride Along Ganga”

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received on: 17 Mar 2025 Revised on: 12 Apr 2025 Accepted on: 20 Apr 2025</p> <p>©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords – Kashi, Daruwalla, Intentionality, Phenomenology.</p>	<p><i>The Paper launches a phenomenological inquiry into Banaras's cultural and spiritual representation by the poet Keki N Daruwalla in his poem “Boat-ride Along Ganga”. It studies the phenomenological intentionality of the poet in relation to its cultural and spiritual representation of the city. The Paper parallelly argues about the state of the objects of the city portrayed by Keki N Daruwalla. The objectives of the paper are to study the representation of the cosmos of the Kashi in the poem and compare it with the current state of the city. The poem serves as a means of understanding the essence of a city, focusing on how urban space is experienced, imagined, and lived through poetic language. The paper also seeks to uncover how the poem mediates the reader's experience of the city, from its physical architecture and rhythms to its symbolic and cultural resonances. Daruwalla's poem is utilized as a unique order of presenting reality (Hayden White) in studying cultural representation.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

The paper tries to discover the representation of Banaras in poetry. The oldest living city with age-old traditions, Kashi has been the cultural and spiritual center of India, and it is a home to different religious sects. The panorama of ghats possesses an image of Kashi and represents its ways of life in the intertwining lanes. Keki N Daruwalla in his poetry Collection dedicates several poems to Kashi, but the first poem, i.e., Boat Ride Along Ganga, poses a beautiful critical picture of Banaras, which does not singularly inform of the Sublimity of Banaras but also offers a realistic picture. Observing the object with realism is a subject of another study but understanding the intentionality of the conscience of the observer or the poet will give us a unique understanding of the cultural aspects of the city. The poet indulges in dissecting the happenings around him when he is riding a boat. The poem also becomes a tool for understanding the difference between the mythical Kashi of the Puranas and the

real Kashi of the modern-day world. The poem was a part of a poetic collection from 1976, but the imagery created by Daruwalla transcends time, and the representation offers a harrowing narrative of the unique city of Banaras. Although the poems of Keki N Daruwalla do not focus on Kashi as a subject (except for a few poems), his deep interest in Indian culture and mythological themes becomes an object of interest. The poem deals with the descriptive imagery of Banaras and also reflects upon the philosophy of life and death. In fact, philosophy assumes a central position in the poem, and the critical undertones remain on the outskirts. The poet's view of Kashi also becomes an object of analysis as it represents the daily lives of the people of Kashi. The peculiarity of the city also takes part in the discussion, and the contrasting themes of life and death hook the poet's imagination.

The objective of this paper is to understand the aspects of Banaras through the poem of Daruwalla and also conduct a phenomenological analysis of the

text. The Phenomenological analysis of the text will help in understanding the essence of Kashi, focusing on how a dynamic urban space is experienced, imagined, and lived through poetic language. The objectives also include exploring the role of the poem in capturing the sensory, emotional, and existential dimensions of city life.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The existing research on the poem Boat-ride along the River Ganga takes its stance from the perspective of deep ecology, landscape, nature, and passion in poetry. There have also been studies to understand the postmodern trends in the poetry of Keki N Daruwalla.

The presence of ecological aspects in the poem is highlighted frequently as Daruwalla appears to question the hygiene of the Ganga. The critique reflects the concern posited for the river. Victor observes in the poem that a sense of Shame is brought out in these lines.

“Hygiene is a part of my conscience, and I curse it
And curse my upbringing, which makes me queasy
here.”

Victor observes that the poet feels uncomfortable about the lack of hygiene, and when the poet crosses the pyres and fires, he is met with a horrible feeling. He is discomfited by the fact that people are bowing their heads to the “finality of fate” (Daruwalla).

He deduces that the poet feels the vibration of death in the river, and the pollution around the river is rampant. He also marks the ending lines of Daruwala as how other philosophers, scholars, or poets would be uncomfortable and confused by this vision of two fires

Rahaman talks about the unfurling of hypocrisy infused in the blind beliefs of Hindu rituals and customs. He looks upon this piece as a postmodern art. He discusses that Daruwalla objectively looks at the Ganga and becomes dumbfounded because he beholds both banks of the river, he understands and notices the peculiar coexistence of the performing of sacred rituals and the ugly sights of the river. At a loss, the poet is, and therefore Rahaman quotes Daruwalla

“Dante would have been confused here

Where would he place this city

In Paradise or Purgatory or lower down”

Rahaman establishes Daruwalla’s realism and points out the contrasting images discovered in the poetry of Daruwalla. He calls Daruwalla a “Hard-Core Realist” for depicting true pictures of the river where the poet can only find death, disease, deformity, and staleness. The poet expresses his awkwardness.

Rahaman comments that the poet is at a loss to view the juxtaposition of corpse fires and cooking fires and concludes that Daruwalla singularly aims to unfold the bitter truth. He discusses the amazement of the poet as he forwards to witnesses the cooking fires and the corpse fires burning side by side. He seems to express his disappointment with the treatment of the river and the unavailability of conscience in the people to revive, restore or conserve the holy Ganga. He argues that the holiest river has turned into an unholy place and Varanasi has become a picture of the filth and poverty of post-independent India. He singularly affirms the critical nature of Daruwalla. He also discusses Daruwalla as a poet of Landscape and applauds him for the scenic representation of Ganga. The central theme of the book is Ganga (Vrinda Nabar), and He argues that the poem Boat-Ride Along the Ganga in Crossing of Rivers alters the perspectives in a way that here the land is seen from the river and not the other way round. He concludes that, based on this poem, it would not be an exaggeration if it is said that Daruwalla is a poet of Nature and Landscape. He goes on to observe the presence of objective correlative in Daruwallas's poem. In this chapter, it is observed that in the poet's death is no lament. He argues that the poem Boat Ride Along Ganga is about Death and the river, and Varanasi serves as a context to be viewed concerning death.

Maharana argues that Daruwalla has created a sense of God's presence through the portrayal of surrounding landscapes in a certain manner. The treatment of landscape is an integral part of Daruwalla’s poetry. He observes that in the selected poem, the landscape imagery brings in the beautiful

image of death as such. He terms the images being transcended and validates the synecdochic function.

Alam discusses the problems of modern sophisticated man affirming traditional beliefs, and the tone that is set in motion continues to be satirical

Alam states a remark of Prasanjit Mukherjee as the poem marks a break from the urban middle-class syndrome and reaches towards a different plane of experience, elemental, bordering very near myth itself.

Alam compares with Boat-ride Along Ganga, Daruwalla's other poem, The Parijat Tree, he remarks that Daruwalla used highly eloquent suggestions and picturesque expressions in the poem Boat-ride along the Ganga. ALAM remarks on a kind of poem replete with images of death, disease, and distress. He also argues that the poem becomes ironic at several stages when Daruwalla exposes age-old superstitions that have created utter confusion in the city of Varanasi.

Jha observes Boat-ride along Ganga as a poem where the poet is engaged in sustained dialogue with the myth and reality of the holy river Ganga.

III. METHODOLOGY

The research employs Phenomenology to interpret and understand the essence of consciousness. The reading of the poem will be done in a way that would encompass hermeneutic phenomenology, imaginative variation, essence seeking, and intentionality. The eidetic reduction will also come into play while analyzing Keki N Daruwalla's poem Boat-ride along Ganga.

The purpose of employing this methodology is because the objects of phenomenology are absolute data grasped in pure immanent intuition. The traditional phenomenology of Husserl, along with the later theories of the phenomenology of Heidegger, will also be considered in the analysis.

The phenomenological reduction would include the reduction of the experience of the poet to its essential elements by analysis of the layers of consciousness. Whereas hermeneutic phenomenology would be employed to inquire into the meaning-making as it happens while reading. These methods explore the language, metaphors,

and symbolism, creating layers of meaning over time, shaped by both the text and the researchers' response. Imaginative variations seek to understand the experience of readers with different cultural and social backgrounds. Essence seeking and Intentionality are the basic traditional methods of employing a phenomenological approach in which the study would seek out the central themes or feelings that define the experience of the poem, and in the later analysis, about what- it is always directed towards objects or phenomena. The city, which will be considered as an object, would amount to the definition of noema (the objective entities that correspond).

IV. FINDINGS

Kashi which serves as noema or the objective entity that corresponds to the essential structure of the acts also known as noesis. The noesis is several kinds of awareness the poet possesses to interpret the imagery in front of him. The literature serves as a history of Banaras and depicts the cultural understanding of the poet. The phenomenon of observing the imagery of the river and broadly of Kashi results in Daruwalla's poem Kashi from Boat-ride along the Ganga

V. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The hermeneutic phenomenology encompasses the analysis of language, metaphors, and symbolism, and researchers had already paid heed to these elements, but to inquire about these elements and understand them in terms of the object here, which is Kashi, there is a need to revisit. The poet describes the dusk at the beginning of the poem and the boats scattered around, comparing ghats with nocturnal flowers. It appears that the river, which becomes the carrier of this imagery, facilitates the poet to move forward, and the dusk acts as a contrast to those gloomy flowers that the poet calls dusk. The panoramic view of the ghats provides a panoramic view of Kashi, where many things are set in motion in a single moment. The myths also become visible, which lurk around every stair descending towards the ghats and the panda offering his legendary talk. The sewers, which act as the basis of ecological criticism, are a struggle to

trust the eternity and coexistence of Kashi, which in this case has been badly damaged. The merits and punyas that the poet accrued, though, appear to be a satire, but it gives the reader a peek into the world of spirituality and attainment. The dismissal of these ideas comes under the trial of phenomenology. The passing of the poet's boat around Manikarnika changes the tone and understanding of the poem. The satire and the realism take the backseat, and the reader tries to experience the warmth of eternal fire. The life scattered around the ghats gives us an understanding of the city's dynamic nature and its peculiar ways of working. The philosophy of life is reflected, and it leads us toward an understanding of Kashi.

If we apply Imaginative Variation in understanding the poem and try to understand our object, that is Kashi, keeping in mind the ethnography. We would achieve varied results. Earlier research would find a position alongside the phenomenological understanding of the poem. The object here in this phenomenological study is viewed and associated via the lenses of the poet, but if the researcher assumes the observer position, he would be able to realize that the Banaras, which appear to have such lofty philosophical ideologies, function in the basal understanding of those ideas. Banaras to Banarasi is very ordinary and simple, but it is *alaukik* (outworldly), not in terms of its complexities but in terms of simplicity. The simultaneous burning of fires is in contrast to a poet who observes the object from the outside, but to the researcher and the natives, it's the truth and a simple way of life.

If we assume the "I" of the poet and seek the conscious central theme, it would be very similar to the analysis of the earlier researcher, but the take and understanding according to phenomenology would make a slight shift. The object here becomes very important as it gives the dichotomy that the Poet is seeking of the two fires burning together. The working and visualisation of life and death on similar grounds and the assimilation of the one truth of life appear to be a common occurrence in the city of Banaras.

The intentionality could be studied in the manner of several kinds of awareness that the poet experiences, and then only would be able to deduce the

intentionality of the poet. The poet possesses a certain kind of temporal awareness, and it is within his stream of consciousness that keeps on developing and disrupting due to changing scenery and experiences as the boat rows. The phantom that is experienced by the poet is the grandeur and chaos appearing around the bank due to ferrying boats. The spatial awareness, which is perceived by the poet adds to the understanding of his experience. This awareness defines the object clearly as the sand, the stairs, the ghats, and the water that all exist and communicate. The poet who moves with the water understands the importance of connecting lives. The spatial awareness is also questioned as the poet exclaims that he is experiencing reality on other planes. The feeling of surrealism surpasses the poet and draws us to a picture of life in front of the ghats. The poet also depicts the awareness of his own experience as he cannot forget the sight of the sewer mouth amid all the legends and grandeur of Kashi. This awareness shapes the perception of poet in the later part of the poem and also shapes his experience on the later part of the journey. The fire he compares it with is the fire of purgatory, and even projects the object below purgatory. The self of the poet in the act of thinking paints the picture of his intentionality and the feeling he associates with the images placed in front of him.

VI. CONCLUSION

The phenomenological analysis throws light upon the experience of the poet and develops a perception of Kashi. The imaginative variation offers the justification of perception of the poet as well as the reader. The intentionality confirms the experience of the poet through temporal and spatial awareness, which yields a cultural picture of Kashi.

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