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Book review: The Legal Image of China in the Chinese Legal Tradition

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 03 June 2026; Received in revised form: 30 June 2026; Accepted: 05 July 2026; Available online: 12 July 2026 Keywords – <i>The Legal Image of China, Translation, Chinese Legal Tradition</i> ©2026 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/).	<i>The book, The Legal Image of China in the Chinese Legal Tradition, authored by Chinese scholar Xiaobo Dong and Yiran Luo, provides an elaborate exploration of the legal image of China in Chinese legal tradition, encompassing process of image construction, modern significance and guidance for self-construction. Adopting a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach covering fields like communication study, translation study, imagology and so on.</i>

I. INTRODUCTION

The Legal Image of China in the Chinese Legal Tradition offers a thorough examination of China's legal image construction in domestic research and western academia, discussing not only the various types of China's legal image construction in the past time, but also the path of the self-shaping China's legal image in modern times. With numerous cases drawn from historical sources, this book presents a systematic analysis of the image construction from multiple perspectives, hence this book is rigorous in structure and authoritative in content. With the aim to offer a feasible path for constructing China's legal image in the New Era, this book delves into Chinese legal philosophy and practice, exploring the legal wisdom of ancient China. While this book introduces Chinese legal tradition including legal classics and legal thoughts, it also investigates the historical, cultural and political contexts surrounding the dissemination and the reception by western audience (Dong & Luo, 2025). Grounded on the analysis of historical material

and former research, this book points out that the historical change of western attitude towards legal image of China shifts from positive stance to negative one owing to the ideological needs of the west world. In this case, corresponding strategies are recommended to construct the self-shaping legal image.

The book is structured into eleven chapters, each chapter with one specific topic. It is well-organized in an order from general introduction to detailed descriptions, from analysis of the past to instructions for the future. The majority of the chapters begin with an introductory section to brief readers about every topic of the corresponding chapter and ends with a summary as a review for readers. The chapters are complementary to each other, together presenting a portrait of China's legal image through detailed analysis of Chinese legal tradition from different perspectives.

II. REVIEW OF THE CONTENT

Chapter 1 probes Chinese legal tradition in terms of its richness in content and its significance to the world, with focus on the formation and the guiding ideology of Chinese legal system, as well as the spreading of Chinese legal tradition in the world. Known as one of the five legal family in world legal system, Chinese legal system has a profound impact on East Asian nations, featuring a long history of 2000 years. The formation of Chinese legal system contributes to three main external factors including the similarity between the East Asian countries and political vassalage, together with diplomatic and educational activities among nations. In terms of the guiding ideology, there are five principles derived from Chinese Confucianism, which are the philosophy of “unity of heaven and man”, humanistic ethics, the quest for a harmonious concept of “non-litigation”, a blend of statutory law and case law in legislation, together with the legal oversight, regarded as the core of the guiding ideology of Chinese legal system and the inner motivation to shape the Chinese legal system. The spreading of legal classics can be elucidated in three key phases, encompassing the phase of understanding for missionary and commercial purposes, that of incomplete translations by sinologists and that of spreading of full translations and research dissertations. The contemporary value of the Chinese legal tradition is highlighted after an historical overview of its spreading. This chapter concludes not only historical overview of Chinese legal tradition including the philosophical origin and its spreading in past time, but also the contemporary value of Chinese legal tradition.

Chapter 2 extends the discussion to the construction of China’s legal image after conducting a general historical review of Chinese legal tradition. The disparity existing in different legal system and their pursuit of interests contributes to the very need for foreigners to understand Chinese legal culture. In addition, as part of global legal culture, the Chinese legal system differs from others and encapsulates the essence of Chinese people’s wisdom. Wang (2019) holds the idea that translation conveys the information about characteristics of the society, culture, literature, language of another nation, which shape the image of Other, therefore the image of

other is the core research topic of the translation study from the perspective of imagology. The influence of Chinese legal culture on western culture is further discussed in this chapter: China’s legal image is viewed as the Other through translation and dissemination, which means that the western world judges China’s legal image by Western standards, with western world dominating the discourse. It is suggested that the legal image of China pivots from “Utopia” to “backwardness, barbarism and cruelty”, in that the image construction cater to the needs of westerners in different specific period. Undeniably, “Utopia” comes from their admiration for a strong country, while “backwardness, barbarism and cruelty” reveals their superiority for rapid development and wild ambition of external expansion. Some Chinese scholars consider it necessary that Chinese laws and regulations should be translated and engage in the international exchange, contributing Chinese experience and wisdom of rule of law, constructing China’s legal image (Dong & Hu, 2020). This implies that, as China’s national strength continues to grow, it is essential for China to engage in global legal discourse to reconstruct legal image, a process associated with the selection of texts, translators and translation strategies.

Chapter 3 turns to a discussion of current domestic research on the dissemination of Chinese legal classics, using visual measure tool to examines research hotspots and explicate research tendencies. According to the definition of Chinese legal classics, the study sets search conditions to explore research samples in CNKI (the abbreviation of China National Knowledge Infrastructure). Through analysis of these samples, research on Chinese legal classic translation is presented in four aspects encompassing annual publication volume analysis, prolific authors analysis, publication institutions examination, and highly cited literature statistics. The annual publication volume of legal classic translation witnesses three phases, from few articles related to some specific historical events, to a surge in numbers and a shift in research focus on representative legal classics, finally to fluctuating growth in number contributing to the policies. With respect to the authors of these studies, they form two main research rings with different research perspectives. Moreover,

the study indicates that researchers are expected to equip themselves with interdisciplinary knowledge and the spirit of teamwork. In terms of the publication institutions, they share the similarity of their location being in the language departments of universities or colleges specialized in political science or law. As for highly cited literature, they have different research focus. Furthermore, this study also presents a panoramic overview of research hotspots through an analysis of the keyword features including keyword co-occurrence, keyword clustering and emerging words. Moreover, Chapter 3 elucidates that there are still research limitations including the lack of research samples, few collaborations between scholars with different academic backgrounds, few in-depth and comprehensive studies and few empirical research. Additionally, Chapter 3 delineates the research outlook on different research topic respectively to improve the foresight, depth, breadth, theoretical understanding, practical relevance and continuity.

From the perspective of the discourse of legal orientalism, Chapter 4 details the construction of China's legal image in western world and the ways of image extraterritorial spreading, delves into the reason why westerners shift their attitudes towards China's legal image. It is argued that the 19th century becomes the overt turning point of extraterritorial spreading of China's legal image. According to the historical records, China was regarded as a civilized country with advanced legal system for a long time by westerners in the early stage. However, the late 18th century and the early 19th century saw the reversal of China's image in western world. Through the dominance in discourse, westerners overstated the cruelty of Chinese law in comparison with the superiority of civilized western law. The stereotypes on Chinese law were formed and reinforced through spreading of the half-truth. By genre, the information can be categorized into codex translation, newspaper reviews, memories and experiences, copperplate etchings, academic research and the perfect imagination of westerners. Collectively, these constituted a series of discursive offensives, having an adverse effect on shaping China's legal image. After the presentation of this phenomenon, this chapter proceeds to deconstruct the Other-shaping of China's legal image. It is stated that China's legal

image in west indirectly projects the self of western culture. By shaping China's legal image of "backwardness", the west aimed to achieve their purposes of safeguarding commercial interest through seeking extraterritoriality and maintaining the hegemony by adopting western law as a measuring standard.

Chapter 5 to 8 examine the image construction from different perspective. Chapter 5 delves into details about the image construction in ancient Chinese code. The exploration of relationship between the image construction and the Chinese code is led by the analysis of a representative example, Ta Tsing Leu Lee, the first complete Chinese code available by westerners. Chapter 5 begins with a nuanced review of Ta Tsing Leu Lee covering the historical significance, content, textual features, providing necessary information for readers. It is worth noting that Ta Tsing Leu Lee is viewed as the bridge for the west to understand the ancient Chinese law. Because of its global influence, the legal idea of westerners undergoes two changes— —their focus pivoting from criminal provisions to civil provisions, and a shift in their attitude toward the code. Furthermore, it is emphasized that an overt phenomenon of "misreading" exists in the process of translators' comprehending the code, whether unintentional or intentional. This chapter specifies two levels of misreading: one is the avoidance and simplification in translation and transmission of some Chinese cultural information, while the other is complete interpretation and replacement with western legal terms. In the discussion on the reasons of misreading, the unintentional one is irrelevant to westerners' ideology, whereas the intentional misreading under the disguise of the cultural exchanges reveals the ideology and value judgement of the translators who manipulate the translation to exaggerate the cultural superiority of the west.

After the meticulous case study of Chinese code in Chapter 5 are the textual analysis of paratext of Chinese legal classics in Chapter 6 and that of Chinese legal words and terms in Chapter 7. From the paratextual perspective, Chapter 6 offers commentary on the paratext of translated Chinese legal classics, aiming to facilitate the comprehension of the role played and work done by the translators. The analysis on paratext of the translated legal

classics respectively followed by the basic introduction of four translations of Chinese legal classics among which are Ta Tsing Leu Lee, The Great Qing Code, The T'ang Code, The Great Ming code. The narrative of George Thomas Staunton on preface presents the characteristics of multivocality and the invisibility of "I" to disguise the subjectivity in expression, with the purpose of integrating his personal opinion into other's perception. Working on the same source text, William C. Jones adopts the method of blending narrative with evaluation and accentuating the mutual enhancement of research and translation. In terms of the paratext commentary on The T'ang Code, the translation of Wallace Johnson is based on his understanding about Chinese philosophical idea of "unity of heaven and man", with the translation strategy of annotation, representing a meticulous and practical piece of work. With regard to the paratext commentary on The Great Ming Code, Jiang Yonglin not only inherits the translation styles from the predecessors but also brings about some transformations such as transliteration and the use of parentheses and square brackets in annotation strategy, with an emphasis of Chinese cultural nuances. Consistent with translators' purpose, these paratext serves as a bridge for cross-cultural dialogue on legal culture.

Similarly, Chapter 7 presents an analysis of image construction from the perspective of ancient Chinese legal words and terms in A Dictionary of the Chinese Language compiled by Robert Morrison, along with an exploration of performance and reasons of rewriting legal words and terms. The legal words and terms discussed are classified into three branches of law, namely criminal law, civil law, procedural law. In addition, the examples of the legal words and terms are paired or grouped for comparative analysis, such as "笞"[to beat with the small bamboo] and "杖"[to beat with the great bamboo], "徒"[to transport to another district, and subject to hard labor for a term of years] and "流"[to banish perpetually to the confine of the empire] in criminal law. Although the differences between words are accentuated in translation to minimize the unclarity, some of terms are mistranslated due to the limited proficiency in Chinese. The phenomenon of rewriting legal words and terms is undeniable, involving overinterpretation, subjective commentary and

replacing Chinese legal concepts with western legal terms. The condemnation and criticism of some aspects of Chinese system from translators account for the overinterpretation and subjective commentary and the latter one is attributed to the western thought pattern.

The examination on image construction pivots from the textual level to the cultural level in Chapter 8. From the viewpoint of Morison who compiled A Dictionary of the Chinese Language, it is emphasized that Morison capsulizes and introduces Chinese culture through three Confucian concepts involving "仁" [Benevolence], integration of rituals and music, the aim of "educating people". Furthermore, Chapter 8 also traces the Morison's translation activity following the temporal and spatial clue. When Morrison arrived in China on his missionary task, he was faced with the challenge that "the unity of heaven and humanity" in Confucianism prevailing in China contradicted "dichotomy between human and the world" in Christianity from western world. Through his acquisition of both Chinese and western languages and cultures, Morrison seeks for similarities between Confucianism and Christianity, that is the common pursuit of love, creating a harmonious space for the communication of languages, thoughts and civilizations between the east and the west. During Morrison's staying in China, he upheld the idea that the learning of a foreign language was a process of equal communication and that China was not linguistically inferior to the west. Furthermore, he criticized Eurocentrism, advocating cultural diversity and equality, which explains his success of promoting communication and mutual learning between the two civilizations.

Chapter 9 explores the source of Chinese legalism from the perspective of the representative Chinese legalist, Guan Zhong and its extraterritorial spreading. In this chapter, an historical review of development of the Chinese legalism is expounded from its advent in Xia and Shang Dynasties, its application in pre-Qin period, finally to its maturity in Han Dynasty. As a key scholar in Spring and Autumn period, Guan Zhong in pre-Qin period served Duke Huan of Qi whose national strength significantly increased with the assistance of strategies. The book Guanzi was a compilation of

various school of thoughts in the name of Guan Zhong, covering fields such as politics, economics, law. The idea of Guanzi in governance can be unfolded in three principles embodying a people-oriented principle, the rule of the golden mean, and the governance of rule-by-law, which are the source of Chinese legalism, transcending time and space and influencing the contemporary society. The cultural impact of Guanzi was global. A great many of its copies exported to Japan due to the expansion of Japanese cultural class in Edo period. Although Guanzi was given a cold reception by Korean society at early stage, it is now regarded as an essential material to understand China. In addition, in the middle of twentieth century, the translation of Guanzi enjoyed popularity and was later under systematic study in western world.

After the meticulous examination of the previous situation of legal image construction and spreading, Chapter 10 delineates the possible path of legal image self-shaping through traditional term translation, providing suggestions on addressing present translation-related difficulties in extraterritorial spreading of China's legal image. This chapter discusses the traditional term translation by categories—ancient legal terms and classic terms. The ancient legal terms are characterized by inheritance, creativity and plurality, in that the ancient legal terms witness the changes of the whole Chinese legal system. Significantly, the untranslatability of ancient legal terms is an obstacle in legal classic translation, originating from the uniqueness of the Chinese legal system, the differences in ways of thinking and the historicity of ancient legal terms. As expounded in Chapter 10, the compensation strategy should be adopted to fill in the linguistic or cultural vacancies in translation under the guidance of six compensation principles of demand, relevance, focus, proximity, equivalence and consistency. It is stressed that the compensation strategies can be summarized to be equivalent literal translation and descriptive interpretation. Particularly, the standardization of the ancient legal term translation is necessarily promoted by establishing ancient legal terms translation table and strengthening the comparative and critical study of terminology translation. Similarly, the standardization of terms can also facilitate the classic

term translation. In terms of the characteristics of the classics term, the classic terms can be described as the containers of a specific history, the embodiment of the deepest pursuits of the Chinese people and they vary in meaning with the context. After the features of the classic term are elaborated on, the inherent requirements of classic term translation are proposed accordingly, together with the notable issues of conceptual prominence, symbolic normativity and the level of communicative choice.

Building upon the comprehensive analysis of legal image construction and spreading, the last Chapter indicates the strategic planning on content and framework for dissemination of Chinese legal classics. This chapter underscores the current situation and existing problems in three aspects: "Learning purpose of proselytizing and profit", which deviates the translation purpose in contemporary China; "Incomplete translation by sinologists", which results from the purpose of cultural assimilation and the complexity and length of Chinese legal classics; and "spreading of complete translations and research papers", whose existing problems lie in the scarcity of types, paucity of numbers, concentration of applicable regions, insufficient attention in academic research. It is worth mentioning that the "Going Global" for Chinese classics is feasible and necessary. The feasibility is grounded on the homology of legal culture with some countries along the "Belt and Road" and the influence on western countries. What necessitates the "Going Global" for Chinese legal classics is the task of advancing the rule of law in all-round way, reshaping the international image of traditional legal culture and strengthening national cultural confidence. A strategic planning is elaborated on content and framework for "Going Global" of Chinese legal classics. The strategic planning consists of the planning in status, ontology, education and spreading. Status planning stresses a systematic study on Chinese history and culture under the guidance of President Xi in a congratulatory letter on the establishment of the Chinese Academy of History, requiring greater attention and political support for legal classics; ontology planning entails understanding the essence of legal classics, thus making an internal system planning and fostering a distinctive and compatible

legal disciplinary discourse system; education planning indicates the significance of an ample reserve of talents with interdisciplinary knowledge; spreading planning highlights the complementary role between translation and spreading and the importance of the relation between translation and various factors involved in spreading. A strategic planning exists at four levels: government level, industry level, academia level and media level, upholding the principles of scientificity, systematicity, pertinence and openness. Following the principle of scientificity, the translation of legal classics should ensure the completeness, sufficiency and truthfulness of the information, investigating the needs of readers. It is emphasized in the principle of systematicity that strategic planning requires consideration from a holistic perspective to tackle with the problems like disconnection between discourse translation and discourse spreading. Pertinence planning suggests that the strategic planning will avoid blindness and generality, adjusting measures to local conditions. It is pointed out in principle of openness the formation of policies or planning will feature in a certain degree of openness, dynamism, flexibility and interactivity to adjust with the time.

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, The Legal Image of China in the Chinese Legal Tradition is comprehensive study based on Chinese legal tradition to probe the image construction and the possible path of reconstructing the legal image of China. It presents a detailed exploration on China's legal image from the interdisciplinary perspective, offering new theoretical insights to future image construction. In addition, the mixed quantitative and qualitative methods are employed to examine the translated Chinese classics in this book. The domestic studies are visualized through the quantitative method, offering a panoramic display of the research development. As a consequence of adopting a qualitative method, nuanced textual analysis is conducted on representative cases and shed light on the generality of phenomena. Additionally, this book establishes a systematic study on Chinese legal image, and further research can be conducted in light of the research outlook mentioned in this book. Apart

from these theoretical contributions, there are also practical contributions for cultivating talents and providing insights on legal image reconstruction in multicultural legal landscape. The targeted readers of this book can be both the laymen and the professionals in China due to the in-depth study with simple wording. This book not only offers readers with a scientific understanding of the Chinese legal image built on Chinese legal tradition, but also facilitates mutual learning of civilizations between China and west. Furthermore, this book offers valuable insights for retranslating the Chinese classics. From Chinese traditional code to Chinese modern law, the development in law studies is based on the legal translation and legal transplantation (Zhao & Long, 2023). This book stresses that this era calls for a new path to reconstruct China's legal image. The translation for external communication in new era is aimed to establish cultural identity, construct national image and increase international significance (Wu, 2022). The translators are expected to "tell a Chinese story well" in legal domain under the guidance in this book, by integrating the ancient wisdom into modern perspective, achieving China's having a greater say on rule of law in the world.

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Concealment and Declaration in Selected Kangra and Haryanvi Folk Songs

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 08 June 2026; Received in revised form: 05 July 2026; Accepted: 12 July 2026; Available online: 18 July 2026 Keywords— cultural studies, Haryanvi folklore, Kangra folksong, women's oral tradition, new historicism, gender and lamentation. ©2026 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/).	Women's folk songs in northern India have long carried experiences, desire, grief, and dissent that the dominant literary and religious discourse excludes, transmitted orally rather than written down. This paper compares two such songs: a Kangra Pahari song of concealed desire from Himachal Pradesh, and a Haryanvi alaahna, or lamentation, of grief. While scholars have studied North Indian women's folksong extensively, few have compared Himalayan and Haryanvi traditions directly, and Haryanvi folksong in particular remains under-studied. This paper addresses that gap through a Cultural Studies reading grounded in New Historicism, Raymond Williams's Cultural Materialism, and Stuart Hall's theory of encoding and representation. Using close textual and comparative analysis, it argues that the Kangra song manages desire through metaphor and double encoding, while the Haryanvi lamentation licenses grief through direct address sanctioned by ritual mourning. The comparison shows that folk song is not a single, uniform tradition but a range of regionally distinct strategies through which women's suppressed emotional lives survive within patriarchal culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

Oral tradition has never been simply a repository of inherited stories; it is, as Richard Bauman insists, a form of situated communicative practice in which meaning is produced anew in each performance, an emergent quality of performance itself rather than a fixed textual residue (Bauman 44). This distinction matters for any reading of women's folk song in northern India, where the song is inseparable from the occasion, the grinding stone, the wedding chamber, the deathbed vigil, that calls it into being. Jan Vansina's foundational work on oral tradition as historical testimony similarly insists that orally

transmitted material is not a degraded version of a written original but a distinct mode of preserving social knowledge across generations, one whose reliability and meaning must be assessed on its own terms (Vansina 27-29). What both scholars share is a refusal to treat orality as literature's poor relation; the folk song is instead a technology of memory, sustained by repetition, performance, and the intimate transmission of women teaching other women what may otherwise not be said aloud.

The stakes of this transmission become sharper when the content being carried is itself socially proscribed. A.K. Ramanujan, surveying the vast and

heterogeneous field of Indian oral literature, observed that India possesses not one folklore but a proliferating multiplicity of counter-systems, genres that exist in critical relation to the sanctioned literary and religious canon, often carrying precisely the material, female desire, female anger, female grief – that classical and devotional literature suppresses or idealizes (Ramanujan, “Toward a Counter-System” 33–35). Women’s folk song, in this account, is less a naive expressive outlet than a deliberate cultural counter-archive: a space in which experience unauthorised by dominant discourse nonetheless finds durable form. This is also, crucially, a question of cultural memory in Jan Assmann’s sense, the process by which a group stabilises and transmits self-images and formative experiences across generations through symbolically condensed forms (Assmann 126–128). The peacock that cries on a distant Himalayan hillside and the widow’s unanswered plea to God on the Haryanvi plains are both, in this light, mnemonic devices: compressed vehicles carrying forward an emotional history that written and institutional archives were never built to hold.

To situate the folk song within Cultural Studies discourse, rather than to define folklore in the abstract, is to ask what ideological work a given song performs within a specific field of social relations. Raymond Williams’s insistence that culture must be understood as a whole way of life rather than a set of isolated aesthetic artefacts reframes the folk song as social practice: it is produced by, and reproduces, particular relations of gender, labour, and kinship (Williams, *Long Revolution* 57). Stuart Hall extends this by arguing that meaning is never transparently given but is actively constructed through codes of representation that are themselves sites of struggle. Meaning, Hall writes, does not inhere in things; it is constructed through the systems of representation available to a culture at a given historical moment (Hall, *Representation* 5). Read together, Williams and Hall license a mode of reading in which the folk song’s formal choices, its metaphors, its silences, and its permitted directness are treated not as decorative inheritance but as ideological labour, performed under specific and traceable historical constraints.

Regional identity compounds this picture. The Kangra hill tradition of Himachal Pradesh and the Haryanvi plains tradition of Haryana are not interchangeable

instances of a generic “North Indian” women’s folk culture; each is shaped by distinct histories of settlement, agrarian economy, caste structure, and, crucially for this essay, distinct conventions governing which emotions women are permitted to express, in which genres, and before which audiences. Benedict Anderson’s account of regional and national belonging as a form of imagined community, sustained by shared symbolic and linguistic practice rather than by direct acquaintance among all members, offers a useful, if originally nation-focused, vocabulary for understanding how a dialect-bound song tradition like Kangra’s or Haryana’s comes to function as a marker of communal identity distinct from the political and literary mainstream of Hindi (Anderson 6–7). Kirin Narayan’s ethnographic work on Kangra confirms this regional specificity in granular detail, documenting how the local dialect, kangri bol, mixes with Punjabi, Hindi, and Urdu in ways that encode the district’s layered colonial and post-colonial history even as its women’s songs carry an intensely private emotional cargo (Narayan, “Singing from Separation” 26–28).

This essay places one Kangra Pahari song and one Haryanvi lamentation song into sustained comparative conversation, reading both through a Cultural Studies framework that combines Williams’s cultural materialism, Hall’s theory of encoding and representation, and the New Historicist premise, associated above all with Stephen Greenblatt, that no text stands outside the historical field of power that produces its very possibility of utterance. The argument that follows is not that these songs merely reflect patriarchal conditions, but that they actively negotiate those conditions, circulating, in Greenblatt’s terms, as part of a broader traffic in social energy between artistic form and the constraints of the social world that produces it (Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* 1–6). What distinguishes the two songs is not the presence or absence of ideological constraint; both operate under patriarchal regimes of permitted speech, but the specific strategy each regional tradition has developed for managing that constraint: concealment in one case, ritually sanctioned declaration in the other.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on North Indian women's folk song has developed substantially since the 1980s, though unevenly across regions. Kirin Narayan's body of work on Kangra remains the most sustained regional study relevant to this essay. In "Birds on a Branch: Girlfriends and Wedding Songs in Kangra," Narayan demonstrates that Kangra wedding songs encode female bonding and ambivalence about marital transition through genres that are performed collectively among women and rarely heard by men (Narayan, "Birds on a Branch" 49-52). Her later essay "Singing from Separation: Women's Voices in and about Kangra Folksongs" extends this analysis to songs of longing and separation, arguing that Kangra women's songs constitute a form of oral literary criticism through which singers comment reflexively on the emotional conditions of their own lives (Narayan, "Singing from Separation" 24-31). Narayan's full-length study *Everyday Creativity: Singing Goddesses in the Himalayan Foothills* extends this ethnography further, arguing that Kangra women experience song-making itself as a source of accomplishment and well-being even when the content sung concerns hardship, longing, or loss, a finding that supports this essay's reading of the peacock song as an act of managed rather than merely suppressed expression (Narayan, *Everyday Creativity* 12-18). This scholarship establishes, with ethnographic specificity, that Kangra song culture operates through indirection, genre convention, and collective female authorship, precisely the qualities this essay identifies in its Kangra Pahari text.

For the broader North Indian plains, Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold's *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* remains a foundational text. Raheja and Gold argue that women's songs performed at weddings, in agricultural labour, and during ritual mourning frequently articulate a critical perspective on patrilocal marriage and kinship obligation that is unavailable to women in ordinary discursive speech, such that song becomes a discourse of its own running counter to officially sanctioned kinship ideology (Raheja and Gold 20-24). Smita Tewari Jassal's *Unearthing Gender: Folksongs of North India* builds on this tradition, reading Bhojpuri-region women's songs as sites where labour, desire, and dissent are

encoded through agricultural and domestic imagery, and arguing that folk song functions as women's primary vehicle for social commentary precisely because its ritual and generic framing renders that commentary permissible (Jassal 6-12). Earlier comparative work by I. Srivastava on the portrayal of women in North Indian folk song similarly catalogues recurring images of suffering, endurance, and thwarted desire across regional song traditions, providing a broader typological context for the two songs examined here (Srivastava).

Beyond region-specific ethnography, the theoretical study of Indian folklore as a field of cultural contestation owes much to A.K. Ramanujan and to the collection *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India*, co-edited by Stuart Blackburn and Ramanujan, which argues collectively that Indian folk genres cannot be read as a unified national tradition but must be understood as a plurality of regionally and socially specific systems in dialogue and tension with dominant Sanskritic and literary culture (Blackburn and Ramanujan 1-5). Ramanujan's essay "Toward a Counter-System: Women's Tales," published in *Gender, Genre, and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions*, makes the gendered dimension of this contestation explicit, arguing that women's oral genres across South Asia routinely function as counter-discourses to patriarchal and Brahminical norms embedded in classical literature (Ramanujan, "Toward a Counter-System" 33-37). This body of scholarship collectively establishes the theoretical premise on which the present essay builds: that folk song is ideologically active, regionally differentiated, and gendered in its very mode of transmission.

III. RESEARCH GAP

What this scholarship has not yet undertaken is a sustained comparative reading of Himalayan hill song and Haryanvi plains song as two distinct strategic responses to a shared condition of patriarchal constraint. Existing studies are overwhelmingly regionally bounded: Narayan's work remains focused on Kangra, Raheja and Gold on Rajasthan and the central plains, Jassal on the Bhojpuri-speaking east. Haryana itself remains comparatively under-studied within this literature, where it appears it is typically

folded into generalised accounts of “North Indian” women’s song rather than treated as a tradition with its own genre conventions, dialect, and history of ritual practice. This absence is analytically significant, since Haryana’s well-documented history of severe patriarchal regulation, including stringent codes of female seclusion and mobility, makes its women’s expressive genres, and in particular the *alaahna* or lamentation song, a critical test case for understanding how ritual licence operates as a distinct alternative to metaphoric concealment. No existing study places a Kangra song and a Haryanvi lamentation in direct comparative reading using a shared Cultural Studies apparatus. This essay contributes precisely that comparison, and in doing so proposes concealment and declaration as two poles of a broader typology of strategies by which regional oral traditions manage women’s emotional expression under patriarchy.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study is organised around three questions. First, how does each song encode content, female desire in the Kangra case, female grief in the Haryanvi case, that dominant social norms render difficult to express directly? Second, what specific historical and material conditions of production, transmission, and performance make each song’s formal strategy possible and necessary? Third, what does a comparative reading of these two strategies reveal about the range of ideological work that regional folk song performs across northern India, and about the limits of treating “women’s folk song” as a single undifferentiated category?

V. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To provide a theoretically grounded close reading of both songs using Williams’s cultural materialism, Hall’s theory of representation, and New Historicist method.
- To situate each song within its regional historical and ritual context.
- To develop a comparative argument establishing concealment and ritually sanctioned declaration as two distinct, historically produced strategies of female expressive survival within patriarchal oral culture.

VI. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study contributes to Cultural Studies and Folklore Studies by extending the comparative method to an under-examined regional pairing, and by demonstrating that theoretical frameworks developed within British and American Cultural Studies, Williams’s residual culture, Hall’s encoding/decoding, can be productively adapted to South Asian oral material without flattening its regional specificity. For Comparative Literature, the essay models a method for reading oral, non-canonical texts alongside one another with the same interpretive rigour typically reserved for written literary texts. For Haryanvi cultural scholarship specifically, the essay begins to address a documented scarcity of sustained literary-critical attention to the region’s women’s oral genres.

VII. METHODOLOGY

7.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive Cultural Studies methodology combining close textual analysis with a comparative literary method. Rather than pursuing quantitative or corpus-linguistic analysis, the essay treats each song as a densely coded cultural text whose full significance emerges only through sustained interpretive reading informed by historical and performance context, in keeping with Cultural Studies’ foundational refusal to treat meaning as self-evident on a text’s surface (Hall, Representation 5). Close reading, rather than aggregation across a large corpus, is appropriate to material whose significance is carried by dense, historically specific imagery, the peacock, the cage, the moon, the unanswered prayer, each of which requires the kind of sustained, single-text attention that Williams’s materialist method and Hall’s model of encoding and decoding both presuppose. Comparative literary analysis is used to place the two songs in dialogue without collapsing their regional and generic differences, following the precedent set by comparative folklore scholarship such as Blackburn and Ramanujan’s *Another Harmony*, which reads Indian oral genres relationally rather than in isolation.

VIII. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This essay is conducted within Cultural Studies as its overarching framework: the premise, running through the discipline since its founding at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, that no cultural artefact, however humble, oral, or regionally confined, can be read in isolation from the relations of power that produce and circulate it. Within that broad commitment, the reading developed here rests on a single foundational premise supplied by New Historicism, from which two complementary analytical methods, Raymond Williams's Cultural Materialism and Stuart Hall's theory of encoding, decoding, and representation, are then derived and applied directly to the two songs.

New Historicism, most influentially articulated by Stephen Greenblatt, supplies this foundation. Greenblatt's claim that literary texts are inseparable from the circulation of social energy that produces and is produced by them insists that a text's form cannot be read as an aesthetically autonomous choice but must be understood as an outcome of the historically specific power relations within which it was composed and performed (Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* 1–6). Applied to folk song rather than to Renaissance drama, this premise directs the entire analysis that follows toward a single governing question: what historical conditions of gender regulation, caste structure, and ritual convention make a given song's formal strategy, metaphoric concealment in the Kangra case, licensed lamentation in the Haryanvi case, not simply possible but necessary. It is this New Historicist premise, rather than any additional theorist, that authorises and organises the two analytical methods below.

The first method is Williams's Cultural Materialism, developed most fully in *Marxism and Literature*. Williams's distinction between dominant, residual, and emergent cultural forms allows this essay to identify both songs as residual: cultural practices formed in an earlier social order that nonetheless remain active elements of present consciousness and practice rather than merely surviving as historical relics (Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 122). Williams is useful here precisely because he refuses to treat popular or oral forms as aesthetically inferior to institutionally sanctioned literature; his framework insists that meaning is produced through material

practice— who sings, where, and for whom, making the performance context of each song analytically indispensable rather than incidental.

The second method is Stuart Hall's theory of encoding and decoding, first developed in "Encoding/Decoding" and elaborated in the edited volume *Representation*. Hall argues that a cultural message is encoded by its producers according to available codes and then decoded by its audience, with the encoding and decoding positions not necessarily symmetrical. Audiences outside the code's originating context may read only a message's literal surface while its connotative depth remains legible only to insiders (Hall, "Encoding/Decoding" 131–133). This model is indispensable for the Kangra song, whose entire strategy depends on a surface meaning available to any listener and a deeper meaning legible only to women who share the song's social conditions of production. Hall's account of representation as a site of ideological struggle further clarifies how the specific images each song deploys, the peacock, the cage, the moon, the face, the back, the unanswered prayer, are not neutral illustrations but contested sites where meaning about gender and power is actively produced. Read together and historicized throughout by the New Historicist premise above, Williams and Hall supply the two lenses through which the close analysis of both songs is conducted in the section that follows.

IX. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

9.1. The Kangra Pahari Song: Metaphor as Ideological Containment

The song is reproduced here in its full working translation, prepared for this study, to ground the reading that follows in the text's own sequence of images and exchanges:

"Mother asks her daughter, 'Tell me, my child, why have you become so thin and weak?' The peacock calling from the distant hill, O mother, has taken away my sleep. Call the hunter, call the marksman — let this peacock be killed. No, mother, do not kill it; keep it in a cage instead. Where do the moon and stars disappear, O mother? Where do the supports of the heart go? The moon and stars do not truly disappear, my daughter; they only hide, just as the heart's beloved remains hidden within."

The Kangra song stages a dialogue between mother and daughter in which the daughter's wasting body, she has grown thin and weak, becomes legible only through the mediating figure of a peacock whose distant cry has stolen her sleep. Read through Hall's model, the song operates on two simultaneous levels of code: a denotative surface (a girl cannot sleep because of birdsong) and a connotative depth (a woman is consumed by desire for an unnamed man) that becomes available only to listeners who share the song's social world (Hall, "Encoding/Decoding" 132). The peacock is not an arbitrary image. As Narayan's ethnographic work on Kangra confirms, the region's women's songs draw on a shared, densely conventionalised repertoire of natural imagery, birds, seasons, and rivers, through which emotional states considered too dangerous to name directly are nonetheless communicated within a community of female listeners fluent in the code (Narayan, "Singing from Separation" 30–33). The bird's association with the monsoon and with erotic longing throughout North Indian literary and folk convention means that its deployment here is best understood not as poetic ornament but, in Williams's terms, as a residual cultural form doing precisely the ideological work that direct speech could not: it allows desire to circulate under the cover of pastoral innocence.

The mother's offer to have the peacock killed, followed by the daughter's insistence that it be caged rather than destroyed, dramatises a negotiation over the containment rather than the elimination of desire. This negotiated outcome is significant precisely because it refuses both possibilities the dominant order would prefer, neither full suppression (the peacock killed) nor open acknowledgement (the peacock, and the beloved it stands for, freely embraced). The cage is a third position: desire preserved but disciplined. Read through Williams's account of residual culture, this negotiated outcome is not a compromise between an autonomous desiring subject and an external authority but the specific, historically produced shape that desire is permitted to take within Kangra's structure of household authority and ritual performance, a residual practice that carries an older affective life forward under the material and social terms the present order allows (Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 122). New Historicism's premise that textual form is inseparable from the

power relations of its historical moment (Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* 1–6) clarifies why the cage, rather than any other resolution, is the form the song arrives at: it is neither silence nor confession but the negotiated middle term that Kangra's specific historical conditions of female seclusion and household authority render available. The song's closing exchange, in which the mother explains that the moon and stars do not vanish but only hide, generalises this logic into a theory of survival: what social order renders invisible persists nonetheless, concealed rather than destroyed. This is, in Williams's vocabulary, a strikingly self-aware statement of what residual culture accomplishes; the song describes its own condition of transmission, hidden from dominant institutional notice yet alive in the intimate, matrilineal space of oral performance.

9.2. The Haryanvi Lamentation: Ritual as Licensed Directness

The Haryanvi alaaahna, likewise reproduced here in its full working translation, moves through a markedly different emotional register:

"I saw your face when you came, but when you left, all I saw was your back. Do not turn away from me – my cries are heavy without you. You did not hear my call; the Divine suddenly took you away. I pleaded with God to grant me more days. The days I asked for were not given – instead, death was granted."

The Haryanvi alaaahna operates by an almost opposite formal logic. Where the Kangra song encodes, the lamentation declares: the speaker names her loss without intermediary image, addresses the departed directly in the second person, and confronts the divine order without euphemism. A New Historicist reading, however, resists treating this directness as evidence of an absence of ideological constraint. Following Greenblatt's premise that textual form is never free of the power relations that produce it, the song's bluntness must instead be read as the product of a different, equally specific historical condition: the alaaahna is a ritually sanctioned genre, and death is one of the few social occasions on which North Indian women have historically been permitted, even required, to grieve publicly, loudly, and in the first person (Raheja and Gold 22–24). Directness here is not the absence of a code but the presence of a different code: in Hall's terms, the genre of lamentation is itself the encoding, a recognizable frame that licenses the

audience to decode direct, unmediated speech as legitimate grief rather than as transgression (Hall, "Encoding/Decoding" 132-133), and this frame is available to the singer only because Haryana's historically specific regulation of female speech has, as New Historicism would predict, carved out mourning as one of its few sanctioned openings.

The song's central image, seeing the beloved's face on arrival and only his back on departure, condenses, in Hall's sense of representation as ideological staging, an entire structure of denial into a single visual reversal. Face signifies presence, recognition, and relational obligation; back signifies rupture and the withdrawal of relation. The song's final movement, in which the speaker's plea to God for more days is answered instead with death, repeats this structure of the unanswered appeal at a cosmic register, extending the pattern of denial from the domestic to the divine. Jassal's reading of Bhojpuri-region women's songs identifies a comparable pattern in which ritual genres become vehicles for articulating grievances, against husbands, in-laws, fate, and God, that would be impermissible outside the sanctioned frame (Jassal 8-10), and the Haryanvi lamentation examined here participates in precisely this broader North Indian pattern while inflecting it through the region's own history of severe restriction on women's public speech. The *alaahna*'s material context, communal performance by women gathered at a deathbed, often in call-and-response, further confirms, in Williams's materialist terms, that its ideological work is inseparable from its performance conditions: it is precisely because grief is processed collectively and ritually that its expression can be so unguarded.

9.3. Comparative Discussion

Placed side by side, the two songs reveal that women's folk songs in northern India are not a single expressive mode but a differentiated field of strategies, each calibrated to a specific regional configuration of genre, ritual licence, and prohibition. The Kangra song negotiates patriarchal constraint through what might be called a politics of concealment: desire survives by never fully surfacing, protected by a double code that is legible only within a female interpretive community. The Haryanvi lamentation negotiates the same underlying condition, the structural denial of authority to women's emotional speech, through a politics of ritual licence: grief survives by being fully

and publicly declared, but only within the narrow temporal and ceremonial window that mourning provides. Neither strategy should be read as freer than the other; both are, in Greenblatt's sense, historically produced negotiations rather than expressions of an underlying natural female voice waiting to be liberated (Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* 3-5).

Regional history helps explain why these particular strategies, rather than others, developed in each location. Kangra's hill topography and its position within a shifting administrative boundary between Punjab and Himachal Pradesh produced a song culture saturated with linguistic layering and pastoral imagery drawn from an agrarian hill environment (Narayan, "Singing from Separation" 26-28), conditions well suited to a metaphoric strategy grounded in the natural world. Haryana's plains agrarian economy and its well-documented history of exceptionally stringent codes of female seclusion and mobility restriction, by contrast, appear to have concentrated permissible female emotional expression into a small number of ritually bounded genres, lamentation prominent among them, in which directness could be tolerated precisely because it was hedged by ceremonial containment. This divergence supports Williams's broader argument that residual cultural forms are not uniform survivals of an undifferentiated past but are actively reshaped by the specific material and social conditions of the regions that sustain them (Williams, *Marxism and Literature* 122).

The theoretical implication is that Hall's model of encoding and decoding must itself be regionally calibrated: the Kangra song requires an audience fluent in a shared metaphoric code to access its full meaning, while the Haryanvi lamentation requires an audience that recognises the ritual frame of mourning as the code authorising its directness. In both cases, meaning is not self-evident on the textual surface but is produced through the listener's positioned knowledge of genre and context, confirming Hall's insistence that representation is always a relational, code-dependent process rather than a transparent reflection of experience (Hall, *Representation* 5-8). Read comparatively, the two songs thus expand the available typology of women's expressive strategy within South Asian oral tradition beyond the binary

of silence versus speech, revealing instead a spectrum of negotiated positions, caging rather than killing the peacock, declaring grief only within the sanctioned time of mourning, in which women's interior lives persist by finding, in each regional context, the specific cultural form that constraint will allow.

X. CONCLUSION

This comparative reading suggests several implications beyond the two songs themselves. For Cultural Studies, the analysis demonstrates that Williams's and Hall's frameworks, developed within a British context of mass and popular culture, translate productively to oral, regional, non-print traditions, provided their application remains attentive to the specific material and ritual conditions of the culture under study rather than imported as a universal grid. For Folklore Studies, the essay reinforces an argument central to Ramanujan's and Blackburn's scholarship: that Indian folk tradition is best understood not as a single national inheritance but as a plurality of regionally specific counter-systems, each requiring its own historicized reading rather than assimilation into a generalised category of "Indian women's folk song." For Comparative Literature, the essay models the possibility of reading oral texts against one another with the same theoretical seriousness typically reserved for canonical written works, without erasing the performative and communal conditions that distinguish song from text.

Future research might extend this comparative method to other regional pairings within North India, Bhojpuri, Rajasthani, Bundeli, to test whether the concealment and declaration typology proposed here holds more broadly or requires further differentiation, and might supplement textual analysis with fresh ethnographic fieldwork on Haryanvi lamentation performance, an area where documentation remains sparse relative to Kangra and Rajasthan. What this reading has sought to establish, in the meantime, is that the peacock caged rather than killed and the plea answered with death rather than more days are not simply pathetic details of two isolated songs, but evidence of two sophisticated, historically produced technologies through which women's suppressed emotional knowledge has been carried, generation

after generation, by voices that the official archive never thought to record.

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Comic Realism: The Humour of Everyday Indian Life in *Learn from the Almond Leaf* by Eunice de Souza

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 12 June 2026; Received in revised form: 09 July 2026; Accepted: 14 July 2026; Available online: 19 July 2026 Keywords— Eunice De Souza, <i>Learn from the Almond Leaf</i>, Humour, Comic realism, Satire, Poetry. ©2026 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/).	This paper examines <i>Learn from the Almond Leaf</i> by Eunice de Souza through the critical lens of comic realism, focusing on how humour becomes a tool to represent the textures of everyday Indian life. De Souza's comic realism emerges from her sharp observation of ordinary experiences—family relations, religious practices, gender norms, and middle-class anxieties—rendered with irony, wit, and understated satire. Rather than offering escapist humour, her poems expose social hypocrisies and emotional contradictions embedded in quotidian life. Drawing on theories of comic realism and satire, the study argues that de Souza employs humour to negotiate serious concerns such as patriarchy, urban alienation, and cultural conformity. The laughter generated by her poetry is thus ambivalent, functioning both as critique and resistance. By blending realism with comedy, <i>Learn from the Almond Leaf</i> situates personal experience within broader social realities, affirming humour as a powerful mode of socio-cultural commentary in contemporary Indian English poetry.

Comic realism is different from comic books, which present art and literature at one glance. Comic realism in poetry is the combining of comedy elements in the creation of poems on topics that are grounded in reality. Eunice De Souza has mastered the art of comic realism in her later poetry collections, such as *Learn from the Almond Leaf* (2016). In this short poetry collection, she has mocked or made fun of incidents taken from ordinary life in India. Be it on the rising global warming and pollution due to Indian people's activities, or the misfits of the cultural Indian society, such as dogs and crows, or making fun of her single Indian woman status. She uses wit, satire, humour, and irony as forms of comedy in her poems. Her poetry uses sharp wit, irony, and mundane detail to expose the contradictions of urban Indian middle-class life, gender expectations, and institutional religion—making humour a vehicle for social and ethical critique rather than mere amusement.

In "*Learn from the Almond Leaf*," Eunice de Souza employs comic realism as a mode that fuses everyday realism with irony and understated humour to critique the social structures governing middle-class Indian life. Rather than relying on exaggeration or farce, De Souza grounds her poetry in familiar domestic, religious, and social routines, allowing humour to emerge from the recognition of normalized absurdities within lived reality.

Satire is a form of comedy that is used to ridicule or express the shortcomings of society. In ancient Indian literature, satire is considered an important element or "rasa". Even in Dalit literature, satire was useful in expressing their discontent with the Indian caste system and the "untouchable rule". In the Indian context, it has functioned not merely as a literary device but also as a powerful medium through which ordinary people articulate dissent and channel

collective anger against oppressive structures of power (Wikipedia contributors).

Eunice de Souza's poetry often satires the shortcomings of Indian society through poetry and fiction. Particularly in *Learn from the Almond Leaves* she presents the raw image of an Indian city called Mumbai. The Mithi River that runs through Mumbai is full of garbage littered by the urban population. In the religious festival of Hindus, kite flying often harms the bird life in the city. Mumbai is one of the few Indian cities where it's hot throughout the year, the reason being global warming through overpopulation, and too many concrete spaces. In the book, she also explains how rats are worshipped in temples, yet nobody worships crows as the cleaners of the city, as they eat roadkill, which actually keeps the urban streets clean. At last, she jokes about death and her spinsterhood status in life, something which is unacceptable in Indian patriarchal society. It is clearly stated in the article "*Eunice de Souza: A Critical Biography*" by Saradindu Bhattacharya:

"De Souza's mode of representing the world around her is consistently satirical, demonstrating an unsparing criticism of normalized forms of oppression in society that the reader is called upon to confront, not through overt moral cues offered by the poet (she does not offer any) but by means of sharing with her a common knowledge of *how* that world functions." (Indian Writing in English - an Institution of Eminence Project).

In the third poem of the book *Learn from the Almond Leaf*, titled "Kite Season," de Souza talks about how the ritual of the kite flying festival in January, known as Makar Sankranti by Hindus, actually harms the ecosystem. The glass power used in the strings of the kite may injure birds who get tangled in the kite strings. Glass power is a common method used by kite flyers to cut the strings of other kites and win the match of flying kites. She presents a common sight imagery writing,

"...the trees are festooned with birds/
hanging by a wing/ an entangled leg/ glass-
coated string." (*Learn from the Almond Leaf*, pg 3)

In the poem "Close on the Heels," she jokes about God not having mercy on Mumbai citizens and that it's humid all seasons round, even in October,

November, and December. She might indicate the presence of global warming in one of the crowded cities of India. (*Learn from the Almond Leaf*, pg. 5).

De Souza's wit is rarely playful; instead, it is dry, restrained, and often unsettling, compelling readers to confront uncomfortable social truths beneath the surface of the ordinary. A defining feature of de Souza's humour is her use of understatement. She frequently presents emotionally charged or oppressive situations in a flat, conversational tone, allowing irony to emerge implicitly. This stylistic choice mirrors the silencing and normalization of patriarchal authority in domestic spaces. The humour arises from the disjunction between what is said and what is experienced, creating a quiet but powerful critique of social expectations imposed on women. In the poem "Tell Me," She writes:

"Tell me, Mr. Death/ Date. Time.
Place. /I have to look for my life of sin panties,
/ Make an appointment/ For a pedicure."
(*Learn from the Almond Leaf*, pg- 23)

Another example of her dry humour is when she does not spare her dog, and her neighbours' dislike of keeping pets in her apartment block. The article "Eunice De Souza, the Cult Guru Who Rocked" Susan Abraham writes, "Her love for the animals around her was legendary. The two dogs who strayed into her house and stayed there, and her parrot, Mr De Souza, will be bereft without her. She had stopped travelling outside the city because they would not be able to take it. She found absolute unconditional love in all the street dogs around her, and so she would feed them and nurse them during their injuries and illnesses, much to the chagrin of the members of her middle-class housing society. It is those who lived in the slums around her colony who understood her the most, she would say." (Abraham). Eunice de Souza writes in the poem "For the Love of Lout, my Dog":

"...A sniffer of crotches. / The good
ladies of the neighbourhood/ Avoid him. So
do the men. / He knows too many secrets."
(*Learn from the Almond Leaves*, pg 10)

Religious orthodoxy, particularly Catholic moral discipline, is another recurrent target of de Souza's humour. Rather than attacking faith directly, she satirizes the hypocrisy and repression embedded in institutionalized religion. Through ironic references

to confession, sin, guilt, and surveillance of female sexuality, her poetry exposes how religious doctrine often reinforces fear and control rather than compassion. This aligns with the Indian tradition of *vyaṅgya*, where suggestion and implication carry sharper critical force than explicit condemnation. In a poem like “Rats,” she says that rats and snakes are worshipped in temples by Hindus, but crows, even being a holy symbol, are not worshipped. They clean the cities by eating the roadkill, yet they are not worshipped as rats and snakes are. She showcases Hindu hypocrisy in the name of religion. (*Learn from the Almond Leaf*, pg 18)

She satires the Indian society of Mumbai for lacking civic sense. The Mithi River, which runs through the city, is full of sewage and waste from households and industries. So much so that one cannot swim in it, or the garbage will sweep through away. She writes:

“...The Mithi River won't let you/
Sink or swim. / It will carry you/ On a raft of
garbage/ to a dying sea...” (*Learn from the Almond Leaf*, pg 13)

De Souza's humour is also deeply feminist in orientation. Poems dealing with marriage, desire, spinsterhood, and female respectability dismantle romantic ideals through sardonic observation. By mocking conventional notions of femininity and domestic virtue, she reveals how women are trained to internalize shame and compliance. Laughter in her poetry thus becomes a form of resistance—a means of reclaiming agency within restrictive social frameworks. In the poem “Moon and Star” and “The Moon is Feeling Her Age”, the poet says that even the Earth's natural satellite is anticipating her glowing age and that she is getting older. In India, getting older means a woman is out of the marriageable market. Eunice de Souza was unmarried in her lifetime. (*Learn from the Almond Leaf*, pg- 32-34). In the web article titled, “Eunice De Souza: The Woman Who Dominated The Poetry Skyline” it is written:

“De Souza, throughout her writings, shows concern for the plight of numerous Indian women across different social contexts: a maid, a daily wage worker or an isolated ‘housewife’. Her poems commonly explore the loss, alienation and isolation that accompanies womanhood.” (Agarwal)

Importantly, de Souza's humour contributes to a form of comic realism. Her poems are grounded in everyday settings—homes, churches, classrooms, relationships—yet these familiar spaces become sites of quiet violence and emotional constraint. The humour does not soften reality; instead, it sharpens it. Readers are led to laugh briefly, only to recognize the seriousness of the conditions being exposed. This uneasy laughter underscores the ethical urgency of her work.

In the context of postcolonial Indian English poetry, de Souza's humour stands apart for its refusal of grand gestures or nationalist rhetoric. Her satire operates at the level of the intimate and personal, revealing how power functions through routine, language, and habit. By transforming mundane experiences into moments of ironic revelation, Eunice de Souza demonstrates how humour can serve as a potent literary strategy for social awareness and critique.

CONCLUSION

This research paper has sought to demonstrate that *Comic Realism: The Humour of Everyday Indian Life* in *Learn from the Almond Leaf* is not merely a stylistic descriptor but a defining aesthetic strategy through which Eunice de Souza interrogates the textures of postcolonial Indian existence. By blending humour with an unflinching realist gaze, de Souza transforms the mundane—family rituals, religious instruction, gendered expectations, and social hypocrisy—into sites of critical reflection. Her comic realism operates not as escapist laughter but as an ethical and cultural mode that exposes contradictions embedded in everyday Indian life.

The study establishes that humour in *Learn from the Almond Leaf* functions as a subversive tool rather than a decorative literary device. De Souza's wit is marked by irony, understatement, and tonal restraint, allowing her poems to critique social institutions without overt polemic. The humour often emerges from incongruity: between professed moral values and lived behaviour, between inherited traditions and individual desires, and between public respectability and private disillusionment. This incongruity generates laughter that is uneasy and reflective, compelling readers to recognize the

absurdities normalized within domestic and social spaces. In this sense, comic realism becomes a means of cultural demystification.

A key finding of this research is that de Souza's comic realism is deeply rooted in the everyday experiences of Indian women. Her poems foreground domestic spaces, familial relationships, and religious conditioning, revealing how humour becomes a strategy of survival within restrictive social frameworks. Rather than romanticizing suffering or dramatizing rebellion, de Souza employs a dry, almost casual humour that mirrors the ordinariness of oppression itself. This approach underscores the insidious nature of patriarchy, showing how it operates through routine gestures, language, and expectations. The laughter elicited by these poems thus carries a feminist charge, exposing power structures while resisting sentimentality.

The paper also highlights the postcolonial dimensions of de Souza's humour. Her comic realism reflects the complexities of Indian identity shaped by colonial legacies, Catholic upbringing, and Western literary influences. Yet, de Souza does not replicate Western models of satire uncritically. Instead, she adapts them to an Indian context, infusing her poetry with local idioms, cultural references, and social realities. Her humour captures the tensions between tradition and modernity, faith and skepticism, obedience and autonomy—tensions that define postcolonial Indian life. Comic realism, in this sense, becomes a distinctly Indian literary mode, grounded in lived experience rather than abstract theory.

Furthermore, this study reveals that de Souza's realist humour aligns with broader debates on realism in postcolonial literature. Unlike classical realism that seeks objective representation, her comic realism acknowledges fragmentation, irony, and subjectivity. By focusing on the "small" moments of everyday life, de Souza challenges grand narratives of nationhood, progress, and cultural unity. Her poems suggest that truth often resides in the overlooked, the trivial, and the uncomfortable. Humour, therefore, becomes a way of telling truths that might otherwise remain suppressed or ignored.

In reassessing *Learn from the Almond Leaf* through the lens of comic realism, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of Eunice de

Souza's poetic significance within Indian English literature. It positions her as a poet who redefines humour as a serious literary and political instrument—one that negotiates identity, critiques social norms, and resists ideological rigidity. Her work demonstrates that laughter, when rooted in realism, can be a powerful form of cultural critique.

In conclusion, Eunice de Souza's comic realism offers a nuanced and compelling vision of everyday Indian life—one that refuses both romantic idealization and overt cynicism. Through humour that is sharp yet controlled, intimate yet socially resonant, *Learn from the Almond Leaf* reveals the quiet absurdities and persistent injustices that shape ordinary existence. This study affirms that de Souza's humour is ultimately an act of literary courage: a refusal to remain silent in the face of hypocrisy, and a reminder that the comic can be as revelatory and transformative as the tragic in articulating human experience.

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Status and Trends of Research on China's Machine Translation— CiteSpace-Based Visual Bibliometric Analysis (2020–2025)

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 19 June 2026; Received in revised form: 21 July 2026; Accepted: 25 July 2026; Available online: 29 July 2026 Keywords— CiteSpace, Machine Translation, Knowledge Mapping ©2026 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/).	Machine translation is a language processing technology and cross-lingual intelligent task, which adopts computer algorithms and artificial intelligence to automatically transform text between different natural languages without manual sentence-by-sentence participation. In recent years, machine translation has been increasingly widely applied in translation practice, and relevant research has gradually become a popular academic hotspot. As a typical representative intelligent technological application in the fields of artificial intelligence and language services in China, machine translation is of vital importance to grasping the developmental context and evolutionary pattern of China's artificial intelligence industry and language service sector. From the perspective of development trends, machine translation research is expected to remain a cutting-edge topic in translation studies. Based on 497 research papers published in CNKI during the research period, this paper adopts the CiteSpace information visualization software. From five dimensions including authors, research institutions, burst keywords, keyword relevance and timeline, it focuses on research hotspots and development trends, conducts a systematic analysis of domestic literature in the field of machine translation in China, and summarizes the research focuses and frontier trends in this domain. Using CiteSpace as the visualization analysis tool, this study finds that domestic machine translation research from 2020 to 2025 presents the following characteristics: it is led by core authors yet lacks adequate team collaboration; foreign language universities and top research institutions occupy a dominant position, and regional features have formed distinctive research clusters. The main research line remains stable, the research on human-machine relationship keeps advancing, and interdisciplinary features are becoming increasingly

prominent. Research hotspots have been upgraded in technology, application scenarios and translation quality, forming a research pattern featuring the linkage of technology, process and data as well as the in-depth integration of industry, academia and research. Meanwhile, this study also predicts the potential development trends of machine translation in such directions as intelligent human-machine collaborative translation, multimodal translation, and the application of large language model-based translation.

I. INTRODUCTION

With the deepening of global exchanges and the explosive growth of cross-lingual information, traditional human translation is constrained by low efficiency and high cost, making it difficult to meet the demand for large-scale data processing. Meanwhile, the rapid advancement of computer technology, artificial intelligence and deep learning, together with the continuous accumulation of big data corpus resources, has provided solid technical support and data foundation for machine translation (Xiao, 2018). Against this backdrop, machine translation has emerged and maintained rapid development. Machine translation is an important product of the integration of artificial intelligence and language services. It can break down language barriers and facilitate international exchanges and cross-cultural communication, while greatly improving translation efficiency, reducing costs, and meeting the demand for real-time processing of massive texts (Wang, Chen, 2021). Furthermore, it promotes the interdisciplinary development of linguistics and computer science. Widely applied in foreign trade, cultural tourism, education and scientific research, government affairs and foreign affairs, it plays a vital supporting role in the digitalization and intelligent development of language services (Cui, 2021). However, there is still a lack of systematic and comprehensive bibliometric analysis on the academic literature of machine translation in current academic circles.

This paper aims to address two research questions: (1) What is the research status of machine translation in CNKI literature? (2) What are the emerging trends and potential future research

directions of machine translation research in China? Adopting bibliometric methods such as high-frequency authors, high-frequency institutions and burst keywords, this study explores research hotspots and development trends, and systematically presents the knowledge mapping of machine translation research from 2020 to 2025, hoping to provide valuable references for domestic research on machine translation.

II. DATA SOURCES AND ANALYTICAL TOOLS

Data Sources

Since this study aims to examine the recent status of domestic machine translation research, the time frame is set from January 1, 2020, to October 12, 2025, and the data retrieval was conducted on October 12, 2025. Papers with co-occurring keywords of "machine translation" were retrieved from the SSCI and CSSCI databases. The rationale for selecting "machine translation" as the search keyword is that it is a standard and universally accepted term in this field. It fully covers the research scope of this paper, including professional text translation, cognitive translation mechanisms and translation error analysis, and accurately matches relevant research findings. Meanwhile, it facilitates subsequent bibliometric analyses such as author collaboration and research trends, ensuring complete search samples and valid analytical results. Taking machine translation as the search word, this paper conducts an advanced search on CNKI, with the literature type limited to journal papers and the time span ranging from 2020 to October 12, 2025. After literature export, low-relevance papers such as conference articles

were eliminated, and only highly relevant literature was retained. Finally, a total of 497 valid papers were screened out for analysis. Founded in June 1999 and initiated by Tsinghua University and Tsinghua Tongfang, CNKI is a national knowledge information infrastructure. As China's largest integrated academic literature database platform with the most complete resource types, it serves as a comprehensive knowledge service system covering the whole life cycle of academic research. It contains more than 90% of domestic knowledge and information resources and has formed a massive literature resource pool of over 100 million articles.

Analytical Tools

The main statistical and analytical tool adopted in this study is CiteSpace 6.3.1. Developed by the research team led by Professor Chaomei Chen at Drexel University in the United States, CiteSpace 6.3.1 is a Java-based software for bibliometric analysis and literature visualization. It helps identify research hotspots and academic frontiers in a given discipline by analyzing high-frequency keywords and burst terms. As a core tool in the field of scientific knowledge mapping, it enables in-depth

mining and visual presentation of massive academic literature.

Knowledge Mapping Analysis of Machine Translation Based on CiteSpace High-Influence Authors

Authors with certain academic influence epitomize the scientific research activities in a specific disciplinary field (Li, 2014). Analyzing high-influence authors can not only accurately identify the core research forces and talent echelons within the field, but also explore the current status and existing deficiencies of cross-team and cross-institutional academic collaboration by examining the collaboration network of influential scholars. It provides a reliable reference for disciplinary development and resource allocation (Lu, Li, Zhou, 2025) . Meanwhile, it complements other analytical dimensions, enabling a more systematic interpretation and more objective conclusions regarding the research status of the field.

Figure 1 presents the collaborative network of active authors who published journal articles on machine translation from 2020 to October 12, 2025, comprising 157 author nodes and 30 collaborative links.

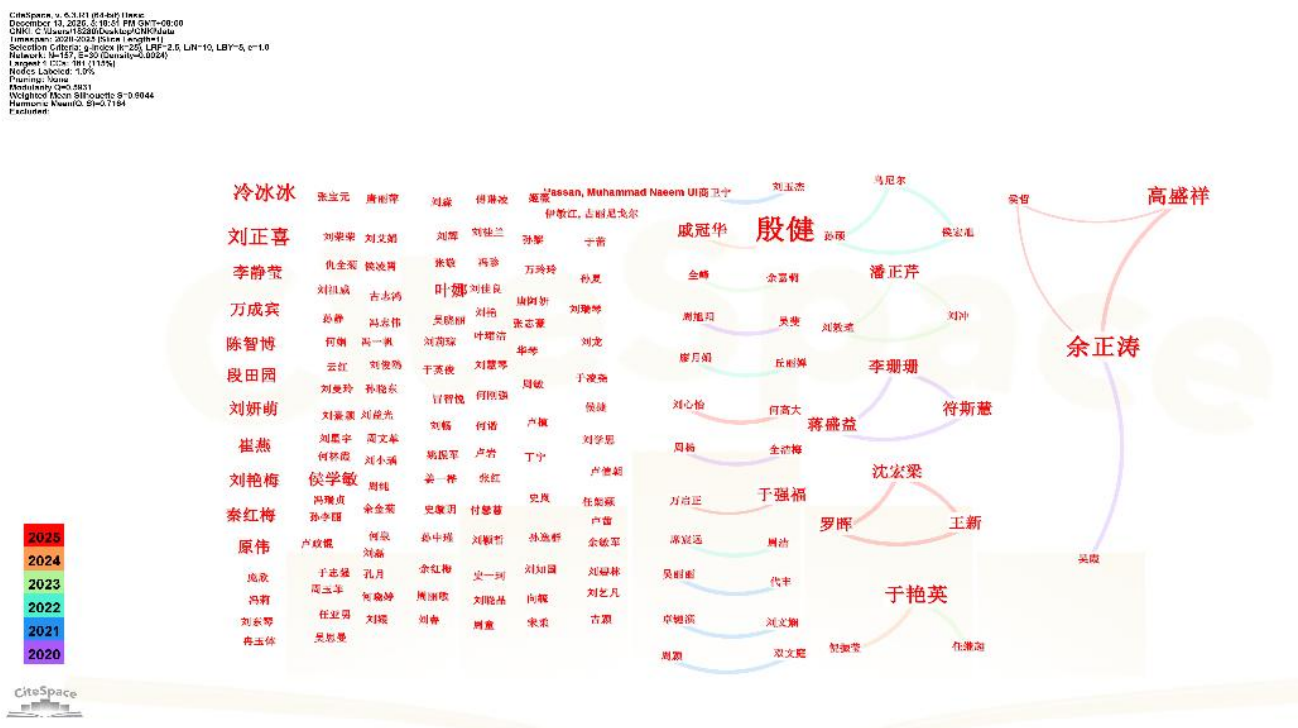


Fig.1. High-influence Author

Highly influential literature on domestic machine translation research is concentrated in 2025. In terms of network structure, several stable collaborative subgroups centered on scholars such as Yin Jian, Yu Zhengtao, Yu Yanying, and Ye Na have been formed, who constitute the core academic force driving the development of machine translation research. Nevertheless, cross-team and cross-institutional cooperation among these subgroups remains sparse. The research community is still dominated by small-scale independent research groups, with evident deficiencies in the depth and breadth of inter-institutional collaboration, indicating persistent barriers to academic cooperation. As Li and Chen (2017) pointed out in *CiteSpace: Text Mining and Visualization in Scientific Research*, small-group clustering is a common feature of academic collaborative networks, especially prevalent in technology-oriented disciplines, which is highly consistent with the emerging technical attributes of machine translation research.

From the perspective of temporal evolution, early core scholars, such as Leng Bingbing and Liu Zhengxi, laid a solid foundation for research in this field. They took the lead in introducing machine translation into college translation teaching scenarios and established a basic research framework for the integration of machine translation and translation education, providing theoretical support for the subsequent reform of translation technology teaching. Meanwhile, they pioneered the adoption of corpus-based and empirical textual research methods to explore machine translation quality assessment and practical applications, thereby establishing the mainstream research ideas and analytical paradigms in this field. Furthermore, their studies have refined core research topics including translation teaching, corpus application, and translation quality evaluation, improved the academic discourse system of domestic machine translation research, and laid a solid academic foundation for subsequent scholars to conduct in-depth and expanded research. However, obvious limitations remain: research perspectives tend to focus on macroscopic description, the

theoretical framework lacks localization adaptation, empirical methods are simplistic with small sample sizes, cross-institutional and cross-team collaboration is inadequate, research outcomes are poorly integrated with practical application, and forward-looking exploration into interdisciplinary integration and new technologies is insufficient. These issues undermine the reproducibility and universality of research findings, making it hard to fully address practical demands in complex scenarios (Jiang, 2022). In the middle research stage, the emergence of emerging scholars represented by Yu Yanying and Shen Hongliang has further diversified the research directions of machine translation. Yu Yanying has focused on machine translation research on specialized texts such as petrochemical and scientific English, systematically analyzing error types and redundancy problems in the translation of professional texts, and promoting the in-depth development of machine translation from general scenarios to vertical industries including energy and science and technology (Yu & Tong, 2021). Nevertheless, its research still has notable shortcomings. It mostly conducts case analysis relying on conventional translation software such as Youdao and Google, with limited research samples and simplistic comparison dimensions. Few studies incorporate cutting-edge large language model translation technologies like GPT, and no practical improvement strategies for translation optimization have been formulated. Accordingly, the research lacks practical application value and popularization potential (Deng & Zhang, 2026). From philosophical and cognitive perspectives, Shen Hongliang explored the essence of “comprehension” in machine translation and proposed that machines possess a unique language comprehension mechanism independent of human beings, which provides novel theoretical deliberations and cognitive perspectives for technological development (Shen, Wang, Luo, 2025). But Shen Hongliang's research lays excessive emphasis on philosophical speculation and conceptual deduction, lacking experimental verification based on large-scale empirical corpora

and mainstream translation models. The definition of "independent machine comprehension" remains overly macroscopic and abstract. It fails to conduct detailed analysis combining the actual operational mechanisms and limitations of large language models, nor establish a verifiable analytical framework for differences between human and machine comprehension. The theoretical construction is poorly connected with engineering practice and empirical data, offering limited guiding value for practical technological implementation (Dai & Huang, 2025). In recent years, core research teams led by Yin Jian and Yu Zhengtao have remained continuously active, demonstrating the strong sustainability and vigorous development momentum of machine translation research in China. Nevertheless, such sustainability is mainly reflected in in-depth explorations within individual core teams, while

collaborative innovation across different teams still has considerable room for improvement. This phenomenon is consistent with the general characteristic of domestic academic collaboration networks, where research cooperation is largely confined to fixed research groups (Guo, Li, Liu, 2025).

Publishing Institutions

The analysis of publishing institutions takes academic literature-producing institutions as the research object. Through quantitative and visual analysis from the dimensions of institutional cooperation network, geographical distribution and temporal evolution, it aims to reveal the pattern of research forces, cooperation modes and development context in a certain field. Figure 2 shows the knowledge mapping analysis of publishing institutions within the time span of this study.

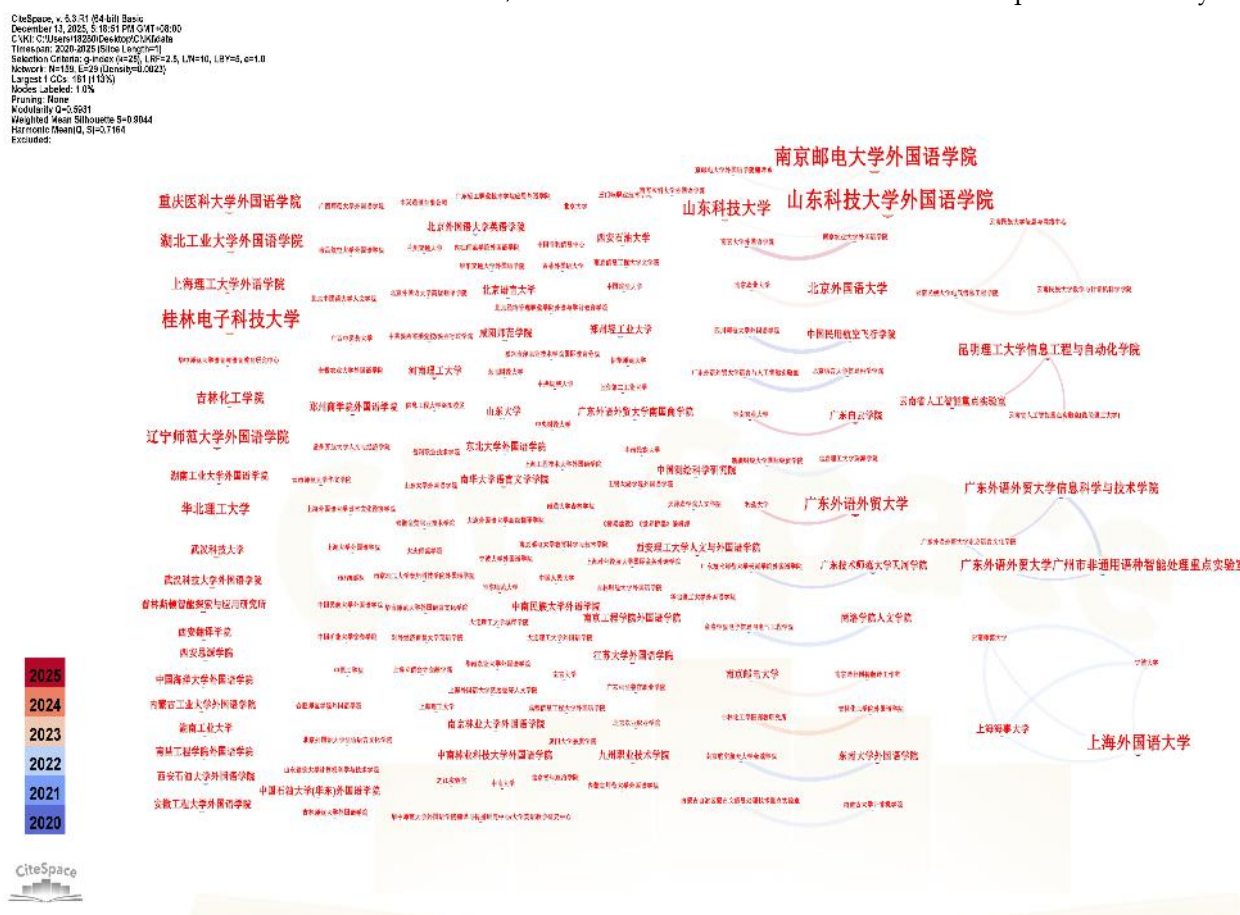


Fig.2. Publishing Institutions

Based on the visual analysis of the institutional cooperation network in the field of domestic machine

translation from 2020 to 2025 using CiteSpace, the network consists of 159 institutional nodes and 29

cooperation links. In terms of the spatial distribution of publishing institutions, research forces are mainly concentrated in foreign language universities, foreign language schools of comprehensive universities, and some science and engineering universities with technological advantages. Several cooperative subgroups have formed with the School of Foreign Languages of Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications, the School of Foreign Languages of Shandong University of Science and Technology, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, and other institutions as the core. Among them, institutions such as the School of Foreign Languages of Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications and the School of Foreign Languages of Shandong University of Science and Technology occupy pivotal positions and serve as the core forces advancing research in this field. Renowned foreign language universities including Guangdong University of Foreign Studies and Shanghai International Studies University lead the theoretical and applied research directions by virtue of their profound disciplinary accumulation. In addition, technology-oriented institutions represented by the Faculty of Information Engineering and Automation of Kunming University of Science and Technology and the Yunnan Key Laboratory of Artificial Intelligence play a vital role in the technological research, development and industrial application of machine translation. The cooperation between prestigious foreign language universities, high-level science and engineering institutions, and key laboratories has further promoted the integrated development of linguistics and intelligent technology.

Although translation technology research has become a vital interdisciplinary domain integrating translation studies and artificial intelligence, prominent disciplinary barriers still exist in domestic relevant research (Wang & Liu, 2022). Despite certain inter-institutional cooperation and relatively close collaboration within individual institutional subgroups, cross-institutional and cross-regional partnerships remain insufficient. Accordingly, the

overall research layout presents characteristics of local agglomeration and scattered distribution nationwide. This phenomenon reflects that disciplinary and geographical barriers still prevail in domestic machine translation research. Academic cooperation is largely confined to institutions within the same university or adjacent regions, leaving considerable room for improvement in interdisciplinary and cross-regional collaborative research (Diao, 2017).

The number of enterprises mainly engaged in machine translation and artificial intelligence translation has risen to 1,545. With translation technology deeply intertwined with industrial demands, the industry is evolving into a collaborative ecosystem integrating language, technology and industry (Translators Association of China, 2025). As can be seen from Table 2, research clusters have gradually taken shape in regions such as Yunnan and Guangdong. A growing number of science and engineering universities, research laboratories and even translation enterprises have joined relevant research undertakings. It is indicated that domestic machine translation research is shifting from a single linguistic perspective toward the diversified integration of technology and industry. However, cross-institutional and cross-regional cooperation remains insufficient and requires further enhancement, so as to boost the overall development of research in this field

Keywords

Word frequency analysis is a classic bibliometric approach that identifies research hotspots and frontier trends in a specific discipline by counting the occurrence frequency of keywords in academic literature (Li, 2014). As highly condensed representations of the core content of academic papers, keywords can be analyzed to effectively capture the mainstream research themes and hot topics in a given research field. CiteSpace can automatically extract keyword fields from literature data, unify synonymous terms and filter stop words. On this basis, the software conducts frequency statistics on standardized keywords to screen out

high-frequency terms. Taking high-frequency keywords as network nodes and the co-occurrence of keywords in the same literature as connecting edges, it constructs a keyword co-occurrence network and intuitively visualizes the distribution and internal correlation of core research keywords through scientific mapping. Meanwhile, the embedded clustering algorithm classifies closely associated keywords into distinct thematic clusters and presents the evolutionary trajectories of research topics via

timeline visualization. In addition, CiteSpace is capable of detecting burst keywords with a sharp surge in occurrence frequency within a specific time period, which generally indicate emerging research frontiers and developmental trends in the disciplinary domain (Li & Chen, 2017).

Figure 3 illustrates the high-frequency keyword co-occurrence network of machine translation research within the research period, generated via CiteSpace.

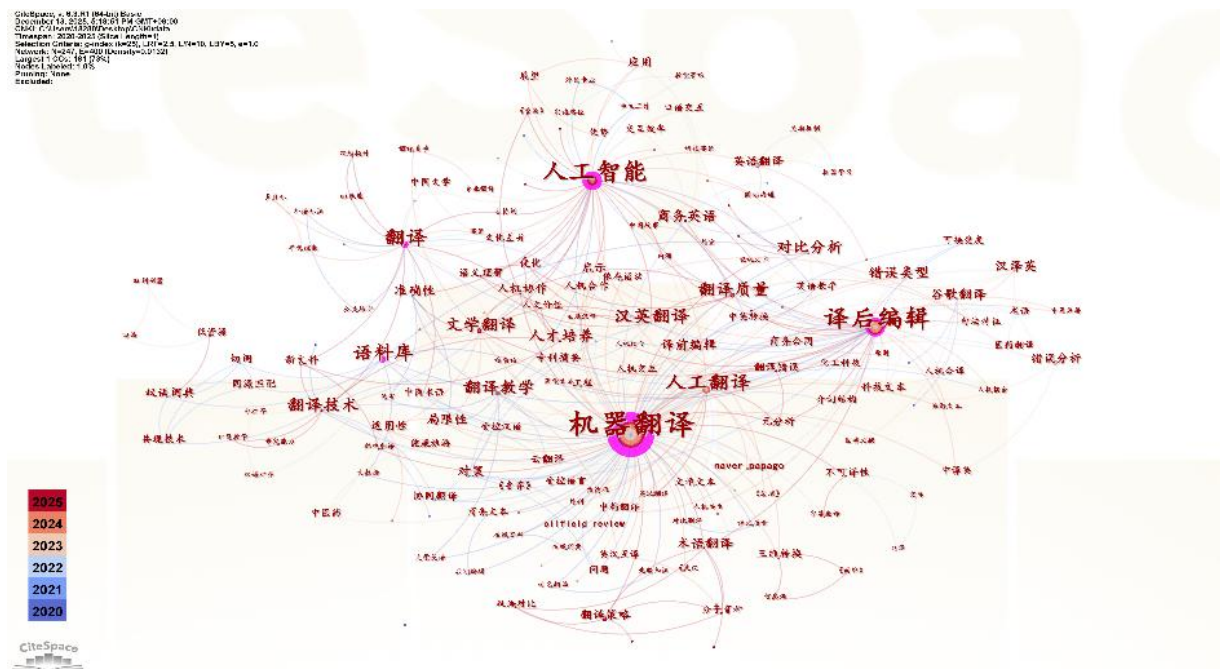


Fig.3. Keyword Co-occurrence Network

The network comprises 247 nodes and 400 co-occurrence links. In terms of core nodal distribution, keywords including machine translation, artificial intelligence, post-editing, Chinese-English translation, and translation technology occupy the dominant positions in the mapping with the largest node sizes, representing the predominant research hotspots in this field (Hu & Wang, 2024). Among these terms, machine translation constitutes the largest node and serves as the central hub of the entire network, maintaining close co-occurrence associations with artificial intelligence, translation technology, post-editing and other core keywords.

This demonstrates that contemporary domestic machine translation research is deeply integrated with artificial intelligence technologies, focuses on the translation practice of the core Chinese-English language pair, and attaches great importance to the essential role of post-editing in optimizing translation quality (Wang, 2022).

Based on the keyword clustering map of machine translation research generated by CiteSpace, this study compiles Table 1 to systematically sort out the research hotspots and thematic focuses within each cluster.

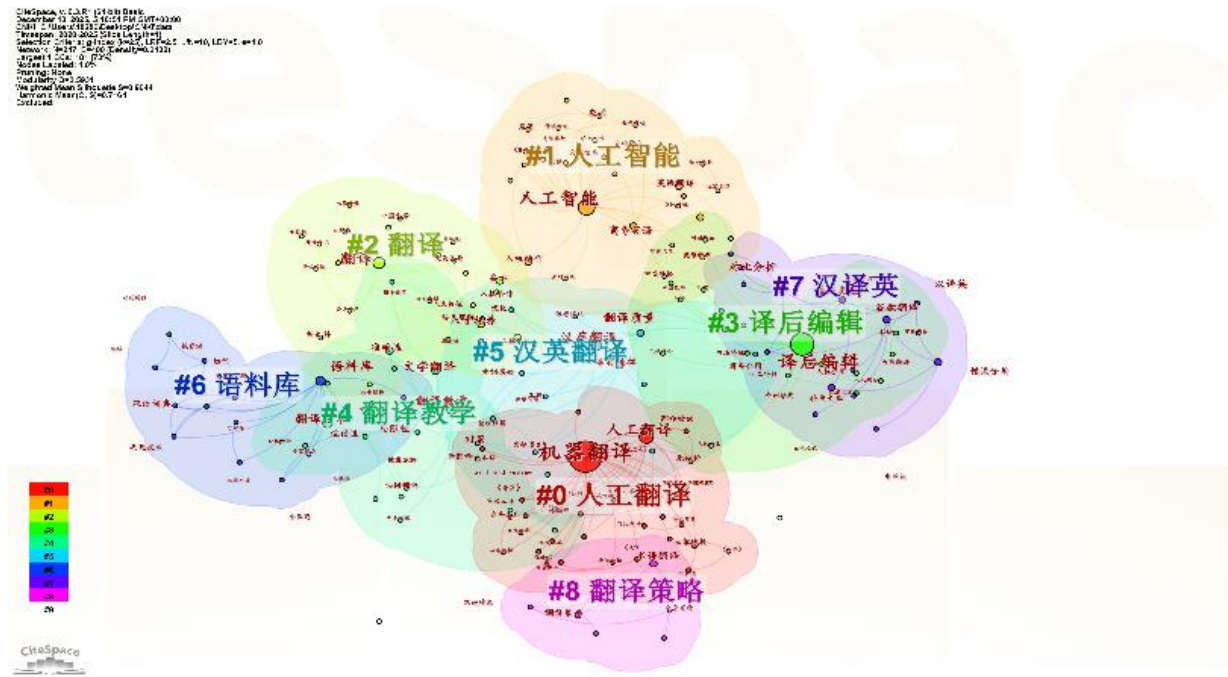


Fig.4. Keyword Cluster

Table 1. Keywords cluster

序号	Cluster Term	Related Cluster Term
# 0	Human Translation	Machine Translation, Human Translation, Medical Literature, Terminology Translation
# 1	Artificial Intelligence	Artificial Intelligence, Business English, English Translation, Machine Learning, Interaction Efficiency
# 2	Translation	Translation, Literary Translation, Semantic Comprehension, Talent Cultivation, Accuracy
# 3	Post-editing	Post-editing, Error Type, Comparative Analysis, Medical Translation, Scientific and Technical Texts
# 4	Translation Teaching	Translation Teaching, Limitations, Applicability, College English, Online Dictionaries
# 5	Chinese-English Translation	Chinese-English Translation, Translation Quality, Human-Machine Collaboration, Pre-editing, Chinese-English Conversion
# 6	Corpus	Corpus, Low-resource, Bilingual Dictionary, Homology Matching
# 7	Chinese-Engilish Translation	Chinese-English Translation, Error Analysis, Traditional Chinese Medical Classics, Terminology, Syntactic Features
# 8	Translation Strategy	Translation Strategy, Bilingual Contrast, Molecular Breeding, Place Name Translation

As shown in Table 1, machine translation research generates eight distinct clusters with different thematic terms, which can be broadly categorized into three types: technology-driven research, applied practice research, and educational

integration research. The technology-driven category centers on artificial intelligence, machine translation, and machine learning, focusing on the integration of translation research and intelligent technologies. The applied practice category takes Chinese-English

translation, post-editing, and translation quality as core themes and explores the extension of theoretical findings to practical application scenarios. The educational integration category revolves around college English, translation teaching, and talent cultivation, concentrating on the in-depth integration of machine translation technology and foreign language education.

Burst keywords refer to terms whose usage frequency suddenly increases or newly emerges within a short period (Li, 2014). They serve as a powerful tool for analyzing cutting-edge areas and

developmental trends in a given discipline. Unlike conventional high-frequency keywords, burst keywords, by virtue of their dynamic characteristics, can more accurately reflect the research frontiers of a field. Based on the 497 valid articles selected for this study, keyword burst detection was conducted using CiteSpace.

As shown in Figure 5, there are 14 burst keywords in machine translation research, which allow us to clearly trace the research frontiers and development trajectory of the field during this period.

Top 14 Keywords with the Strongest Citation Bursts

Keywords	Year	Strength	Begin	End	2020 - 2025
翻译教学	2020	2.01	2020	2021	
翻译技术	2020	2.01	2020	2021	
语料库	2020	1.35	2020	2021	
准确性	2020	1.21	2020	2021	
局限性	2020	0.73	2020	2021	
人机交互	2020	0.52	2020	2021	
人机翻译	2021	1.16	2021	2022	
专利摘要	2021	0.92	2021	2022	
启示	2021	0.22	2021	2022	
译前编辑	2023	1.24	2023	2025	
科技文本	2023	1.24	2023	2025	
错误类型	2023	1.24	2023	2025	
专业翻译	2023	0.49	2023	2025	
中译英	2023	0.49	2023	2025	

Fig.5. Burst Keywords

According to the burst keyword mapping generated by CiteSpace, *translation teaching* and *translation technology* show the highest burst strength of 2.01, starting as early as 2020. This phenomenon may result from the combined effects of the field's development stage, disciplinary transformation, and social demands. At that time, machine translation technology entered a period of widespread application with significantly reduced technical barriers. Coupled with the large-scale promotion of online teaching amid the COVID-19 pandemic, both *translation technology* and *translation teaching* quickly became focal points in academic circles (Xun, Xiang,

2020). Meanwhile, translation studies was accelerating its paradigm shift from traditional linguistic research to an interdisciplinary model of "language + technology". The education sector had an urgent demand for technology-enabled talent cultivation, creating a high degree of resonance between supply and demand for these two themes. This phased transformation and pressing social demand directly triggered an outburst of relevant research, leading to broad academic consensus and high research engagement. As a result, these themes emerged as the most strongly detected research frontiers in the burst analysis, marking the

official entry of domestic machine translation research into the stage of exploring technology-enabled teaching applications (Wang, 2022).

In addition, other keywords with strong burst strength include corpus, accuracy, pre-editing, scientific and technical texts, error types, and human-machine translation. Both *corpus* and *accuracy* showed research burst starting in 2020 at the initial development stage of the field. Machine translation evolved from a laboratory concept into a practical digital tool widely applied in translation education, establishing a fundamental research framework grounded in corpus resources and centered on translation accuracy (Li, Peng, Jin, 2024). In 2021, *human-machine translation* became the core burst keyword. Research broke away from the conventional perception of opposition between human and machine translation and shifted toward the practical paradigm of human-machine

collaboration (Zhang, 2021). Keywords such as *pre-editing*, *scientific and technical texts*, and *error types* registered strong bursts in 2023. The research focus gradually shifted from the feasibility of machine translation to the pursuit of accurate and high-quality translation. Research scope expanded beyond general language texts to specialized domains such as science, technology and medicine (Ana Muñoz-Miquel, 2025). By adopting pre-editing and post-editing strategies to systematically address various error types, machine translation research achieved a qualitative leap toward refinement, specialization and scenario-based application(Wang, 2022).

Timeline

From Figure 6, the keyword time-zone map generated by CiteSpace 6.3.1, the complete research context and evolutionary logic of machine translation research over the past five years can be systematically identified.

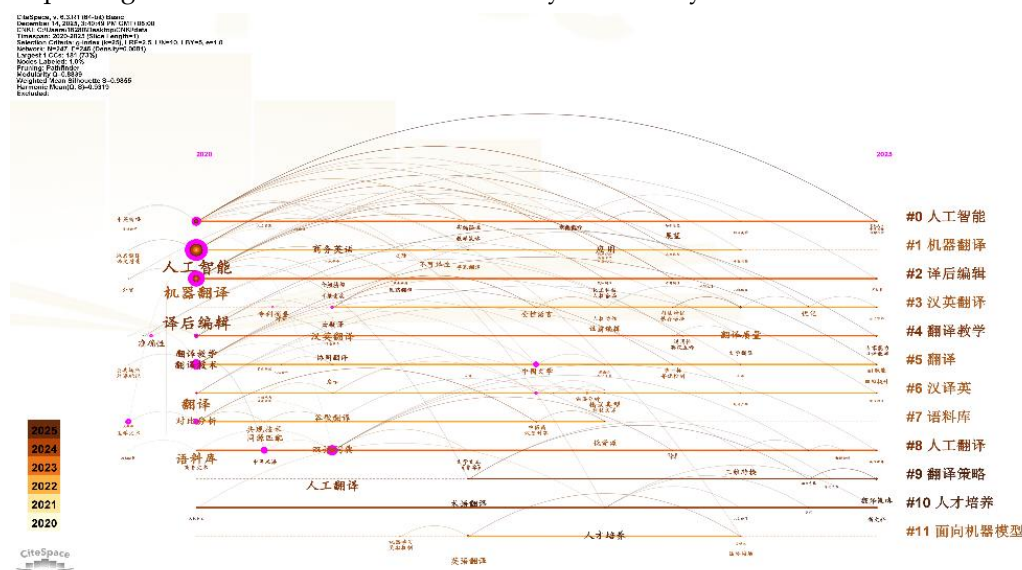


Fig.6. Keyword Timeline

Taking time as the evolutionary axis, the map intuitively reveals the research hotspots, thematic shifts and trend changes in different research stages:

Around 2020, the research focus of machine translation centered on artificial intelligence, machine translation per se, as well as fundamental application directions including post-editing, translation teaching, corpus linguistics, and Chinese-English

translation. Serving as the starting point of research at that stage, these themes mostly revolved around the basic application scenarios of machine translation and the integration of traditional translation studies with emerging technologies, reflecting the characteristics of early-stage research oriented toward technology introduction and scenario adaptation (Feng & Shao,2020). Over time, research

themes have shown an obvious trend of differentiation and in-depth development. On the one hand, at the general technical level, research has extended to such topics as translation quality optimization, human-machine collaboration, pre-editing, low-resource translation, and controlled language, focusing on improving the performance of machine translation and expanding its application boundaries (Wang H F, Wu H, He Z J, et al, 2021). On the other hand, application scenarios have continuously penetrated into vertical fields, with emerging segmented research directions including business English, medical translation, subtitle translation, the external communication of Chinese literature, and bilingual alignment of traditional Chinese medicine, reflecting the in-depth integration of technology and industrial demands (Lv, Li, Tao, et al, 2025). In the later stage shown in the map, the systematicness and forward-looking nature of relevant research have become more prominent. Research topics such as translation strategies for machine models, talent training, translation development against the background of the New Liberal Arts, and cross-cultural communication have become new research priorities. This indicates that research has shifted from simple technical application to holistic reflections on the industrial ecosystem, talent training system and future development of the discipline (Lyu C, et al, 2024). Meanwhile, the linkage distribution of keywords in the time-zone map also reveals the inherent inheritance among research themes. The fundamental research in the early stage has laid a solid foundation for subsequent exploration in specialized fields and academic frontiers. As the core driving force throughout the whole period, artificial intelligence has continuously advanced the evolutionary process of machine translation research: from basic adaptive application to in-depth performance optimization, from single technology application to cross-disciplinary integration, and from practical application to systematic disciplinary development. It also reflects the transformation trajectory and the shift of academic hotspots in

domestic translation research amid the technological wave (Wang & Liu, 2022).

III. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Distribution of Publications by Publication Year

From 2020 to 2021, research in the field of machine translation still focused on the integration of basic technological applications and traditional translation scenarios. Artificial intelligence and machine translation served as the core themes throughout this period. Keywords such as post-editing, translation teaching, corpus construction, and Chinese-English translation emerged intensively, indicating that scholarly attention at that time was largely directed toward the basic adaptability of machine translation. Researchers mainly explored how relevant technologies could be implemented in traditional areas such as translation teaching and corpus support. Meanwhile, discussions on early commercial translation tools including cloud translation and Google Translation gradually emerged. On the whole, research remained at the stage of technology introduction and preliminary application (Tao, 2023).

During 2022–2023, the research focus gradually shifted toward scenario-specific applications and technical optimization, with a substantial increase in explorations of machine translation in vertical domains. Research hotspots successively emerged in multiple segmented directions, including business English translation, medical translation, subtitle translation, the overseas translation of Chinese literary works, and bilingual alignment of traditional Chinese medicine. Meanwhile, emerging research topics such as human-machine collaboration, pre-editing, low-resource translation, and controlled language came into academic sight. This shift indicates that research in this phase broke through the limitations of basic application practices. Instead, it focused on the adaptive optimization of machine translation for diverse industrial scenarios and addressed practical translation challenges such as untranslatability and insufficient corpus resources,

demonstrating a refined and scenario-oriented trend of technological application (Wang & Liu, 2022).

From 2024 to 2025, relevant research further developed toward systematization and forward-looking exploration. Emerging research priorities included translation quality optimization, machine model-oriented translation strategies, talent cultivation, and translation development under the background of the New Liberal Arts. This transformation is primarily driven by the rapid iteration of artificial intelligence technologies, which has substantially advanced the capability of machine translation and prompted academic attention to the industrial ecological changes brought about by technological progress. Scholars have not only conducted in-depth investigations into model adaptation strategies and translation quality evaluation systems but also reconsidered talent training modes and cross-cultural communication demands in the translation field. This research shift indicates that academic focus has evolved from isolated technological applications toward systematic exploration of the coordinated development of technology, industry and professional talents (Ataman D, 2024).

Influence of Core Authors

In the field of machine translation research, multiple collaborative sub-networks centered on core scholars have taken shape. Some teams maintain close internal connections and stable collaboration, yet a large-scale cross-team collaborative network has not been fully established overall, presenting a pattern of local concentration and overall dispersion. Scholars represented by Yin Jian, Yu Zhengtao and Pan Zhengqin occupy pivotal nodes in the network with dense collaborative ties, ranking as the most influential core authors in this field. In addition, scholars including Jiang Shengyi, Shen Hongliang and Yu Yanying have each formed stable research groups, playing a vital bridging role within their respective sub-networks.

The research conducted by these core author teams primarily focuses on the practical application of machine translation, translation teaching

optimization, post-editing, and the adaptation of language processing technologies. Through long-term and continuous collaborative outputs, these efforts have advanced domestic machine translation research from pure technical application toward scenario-oriented, teaching-oriented, and systematic development, thereby laying a solid academic foundation for the progress of this research field. In contrast, most other research groups in this domain predominantly adopt independent research modes or small-scale collaboration. A widespread cross-institutional collaborative network has not yet been established, resulting in relatively fragmented research forces and a lack of integrated academic synergy across different teams.

Overall, the current collaboration pattern in machine translation research is characterized by domination by core teams and supplementation by scattered independent studies. Core authors including Yin Jian, Yu Zhengtao, and Pan Zhengqin, along with their research teams, serve as the backbone of advancing domestic machine translation research. Their studies not only focus on technical applications but also extend to multiple dimensions such as teaching practice and translation quality improvement, providing crucial support for the sustainable development of this research field.

Institutional Publication Influence

Research institutions in the field of machine translation are widely distributed, forming a pattern dominated by foreign language schools with the collaborative participation of multidisciplinary universities. Among them, institutions with large-scale network nodes, including the School of Foreign Languages of Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications, the School of Foreign Languages of Shandong University of Science and Technology, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, and Shanghai International Studies University, stand out as core institutions with prominent publication output and academic influence, representing the major research forces in this domain.

In terms of collaborative relationships, several

small-scale research clusters have emerged in machine translation research. Typical examples include the local collaborative networks centered on the School of Foreign Languages of Shandong University of Science and Technology and the School of Foreign Languages of Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications, as well as the cross-departmental collaborations of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies with its School of Information Science and Technology and the Guangzhou Key Laboratory of Intelligent Processing for Non-Universal Languages. This indicates that certain institutions have established stable internal or inter-university cooperation. Nevertheless, cross-regional and inter-institutional collaboration remains loose at the overall level. Most institutional nodes prioritize independent research, and no large-scale nationwide collaborative network has been formed, resulting in an overall low collaboration density in this field.

Such distribution and collaborative characteristics reflect that domestic machine translation research is currently mainly undertaken by foreign language schools in universities. Although research forces are widely dispersed, cross-institutional academic collaboration remains to be strengthened. Core institutions exert a prominent leading role in this field, while most local universities mostly conduct independent explorations and fail to form extensive academic synergy.

Research Hotspots

Burst terms during 2020–2021, such as “translation teaching”, “corpus”, and “accuracy”, indicate that early-stage research primarily focused on the basic application, teaching practice, and corpus support of machine translation, representing an exploratory phase for technological implementation. Keywords emerging from 2021 to 2022, including “human-machine translation” and “patent abstract”, reflect that research began to concentrate on the application of machine translation in specific text types and human-machine collaborative modes. From 2023 to the present, the continuous surge of burst terms such as

“pre-editing”, “scientific and technological texts”, “error types”, and “professional translation” demonstrates that the research focus has shifted toward refined technological optimization and vertical scenario adaptation. Current studies mainly explore approaches to improving translation quality through pre-editing, optimizing models by analyzing error patterns, and expanding the application of machine translation to scientific, technological and professional domains. These findings are highly consistent with the core clusters in the clustering map, including “post-editing”, “Chinese-English translation”, and “translation teaching”. Overall, three pillar directions have been formed in current machine translation research: technical quality optimization, teaching application, and scenario-specific translation (Wang & Liu, 2022).

“Machine translation” and “artificial intelligence” serve as the core nodes running through the research field, radiating high-frequency related topics such as “post-editing”, “translation quality”, “human-machine collaboration”, and “low-resource languages”. These elements clearly outline the current landscape of research hotspots in this domain. On the one hand, “human-machine collaboration” and “pre-editing/post-editing” constitute the core of technical optimization, with academic research predominantly focusing on improving translation efficiency and quality through human-machine synergy. On the other hand, the high-frequency occurrence of vertical research fields including “scientific and technological texts”, “medical translation”, and “Chinese literature translation” reflects the in-depth expansion of application scenarios. Relevant research is no longer limited to general texts but extends to professional domains and cultural outbound translation. Meanwhile, the emerging relevance of themes such as “translation teaching”, “talent cultivation”, and “new liberal arts” indicates that research perspectives have shifted from pure technical exploration to a comprehensive dimension integrating education and talent training.

Current machine translation research is evolving along three distinct directions. First, at the technical

level, research has shifted from basic technical application to refined optimization involving human-machine collaboration, pre-editing and post-editing, and error analysis, with a core focus on improving translation quality and scenario adaptability. Second, at the application level, research scope has expanded from general texts to vertical domains such as science and technology, medicine, and literature, with particular attention to the practical demands of professional translation and the external dissemination of Chinese culture. Third, at the educational and talent training level, the integration of machine translation and translation teaching has been continuously deepened. Scholars have begun to explore innovative training modes for translation talents under the framework of the new liberal arts to adapt to the industrial transformation driven by technological changes. Overall, machine translation research has departed from the early stage of technological introduction and entered a diversified development phase featuring technical optimization, in-depth scenario exploration, and ecological reconstruction. The continuous iteration of artificial intelligence technology will further promote the development of machine translation research toward greater intelligence, accuracy, and industrial practicality.

IV. DISCUSSION

Causes of Literature Distribution

Around 2020, relevant research was still in the early exploratory stage with limited publication output. Research themes were mainly confined to fundamental concepts such as “machine translation”, “artificial intelligence”, and “corpus”. This phenomenon is primarily attributed to the immaturity of artificial intelligence and machine translation technologies at that time. Academic research mainly focused on the discussion of basic theories and technical adaptability, and a large-scale research upsurge had not yet emerged in this field.

After 2012, especially during 2020–2022, the number of published papers increased significantly, and research themes expanded from singular

fundamental concepts to diverse application scenarios, including “translation teaching”, “post-editing”, and “Chinese-English translation”. Such changes can be attributed to the breakthroughs in deep learning technologies, which have substantially improved the performance of machine translation systems. The widespread adoption of commercial translation tools has also prompted academic attention to the practical value of machine translation technologies in teaching, text processing, and other fields. Meanwhile, the increasing acceptance of emerging technologies within domestic translation disciplines has further contributed to the growing number of relevant research outcomes (TAC, 2023).

From 2023 to the present, the volume of publications has remained at a consistently high level, and research topics have further developed toward refined research directions, including “pre-editing”, “scientific and technological texts”, “professional translation”, and “talent cultivation”. This shift is primarily driven by the rapid iteration of large language models and generative artificial intelligence, which has continuously expanded the functional boundaries of machine translation. Academic research is no longer limited to general text translation but has turned to the adaptive optimization of machine translation for specialized fields such as science, technology, and medicine. Additionally, increasing attention has been paid to the impacts of technological transformation on the translation industry and talent training paradigms. Furthermore, the disciplinary transformation of translation studies under the framework of the new liberal arts has facilitated the rise of research on “talent cultivation” and “translation strategies”, ultimately forming the current literature distribution pattern characterized by stable publication output and diversified research themes (TAC, 2025).

Overall, the temporal distribution of publications in machine translation research is jointly driven by technological iteration, policy guidance, and practical application demands.

Influence of Core Authors

Multiple research clusters centered on prominent scholars have been formed in the field of machine translation research. With stable publication output, high collaboration intensity, and sustained research achievements, these core authors have exerted a significant influence on the development of this research domain. Scholars including Yin Jian, Yu Zhengtao, and Pan Zhengqin occupy pivotal positions in the collaborative network and represent the most influential core authors in the field. The research team led by Yin Jian features close internal cooperation and forms a stable research cluster centered on the scholar. Its research outcomes demonstrate obvious continuity in the knowledge mapping. Focusing on the optimization paths of machine translation in teaching and practical application over a long period, the team has advanced the integrated development of machine translation and translation teaching in China. The team led by Yu Zhengtao and Gao Shengxiang constitutes another crucial independent research branch with a well-structured collaborative network. Its research primarily focuses on technical explorations such as machine model-oriented translation strategies and cross-lingual processing, providing substantial support for the technical adaptation and optimization of machine translation systems. Pan Zhengqin and her team have conducted in-depth and continuous research on post-editing and translation quality assessment, forming distinctive research characteristics. Their findings offer valuable references for the refined development of practical machine translation application scenarios.

In addition, scholars including Jiang Shengyi, Shen Hongliang, and Yu Yanying have each established stable research groups, playing a vital bridging role within their respective sub-networks and promoting the development of machine translation in niche directions such as specific text types and teaching scenarios. In contrast, a large number of scholars still prioritize independent research or small-scale collaborative projects. A widespread cross-institutional collaboration network

has yet to be established, resulting in relatively fragmented research forces in this field.

Overall, these core authors and their research teams serve as the backbone of the development of domestic machine translation research. Their studies cover multiple crucial dimensions, including technical optimization, scenario-based application, and educational integration. Through sustained collaboration and academic output, they have constructed a key academic context for this field and provided solid support for the refined and systematic development of machine translation research from preliminary basic applications to advanced and well-established practices.

Regional Development of Institutions and Its Impacts on Machine Translation

The core publishing institutions engaged in machine translation research are mainly foreign language schools of domestic universities and several science and engineering colleges. Their distribution is closely associated with the characteristics of local disciplinary development and the allocation of scientific research resources, which profoundly shapes the overall development trend of machine translation research.

Foreign language universities represented by Guangdong University of Foreign Studies leverage their traditional strengths in foreign language education and translation research to conduct in-depth long-term studies on the practical application of machine translation, the optimization of translation teaching, and language service technologies. Relying on research platforms such as the Guangzhou Key Laboratory of Intelligent Processing for Non-Universal Languages, these institutions have advanced research on the adaptation of machine translation to multilingual and professional scenarios, serving as a vital base for exploring practical application scenarios of machine translation in China. Established foreign language institutions including Shanghai International Studies University and Beijing Foreign Studies University boast solid linguistic disciplinary foundations and have sustained productive research in translation

quality assessment, corpus construction, and Chinese-foreign translation comparison. Their continuous academic output provides robust theoretical support for the linguistic adaptation and optimization of machine translation systems.

The foreign language schools of science and engineering universities, including Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications, Shandong University of Science and Technology, and Kunming University of Science and Technology, have formed distinctive interdisciplinary research features by drawing on their institutions' interdisciplinary resources in information technology and artificial intelligence. For instance, the School of Foreign Languages of Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications focuses on interdisciplinary research integrating machine translation and natural language processing, while the Faculty of Information Engineering and Automation of Kunming University of Science and Technology explores machine translation model optimization. Such research efforts have driven the transformation of machine translation research from pure linguistic-oriented studies to technology-enabled innovation and model optimization, and set a valuable benchmark for interdisciplinary translation research conducted by local universities.

Overall, the distribution and development of these core institutions reflect a research pattern dominated by foreign language universities and empowered by science and engineering universities, which further promotes the diversification of machine translation research. Foreign language universities prioritize practical application scenarios and teaching practice, while science and engineering universities focus on technical optimization and model adaptation. The collaborative complementarity between the two types of institutions jointly facilitates the evolution of domestic machine translation research from basic application to refined, interdisciplinary and scenario-oriented development, and provides solid support for the disciplinary transformation and talent cultivation of translation studies in various

regions.

V. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

From a technical perspective, future research will further advance toward human-machine collaboration and refined optimization. Burst keywords in the knowledge mapping, such as "pre-editing", "error types", and "translation quality", have maintained a sustained surge since 2023. Combined with high-frequency associated themes in the co-occurrence network, including "human-machine collaboration", "post-editing", and "optimization", it is evident that academic research is no longer confined to the basic application of machine translation. Instead, scholars have shifted focus to constructing a more sophisticated human-machine collaborative workflow. Through pre-translation text processing, post-translation quality evaluation and error correction, a closed-loop optimization system can be established to address the issues of accuracy and acceptability of machine translation outputs in complex contexts and low-resource languages. This represents a core approach to enhancing the practicality and adaptability of translation models amid the continuous iteration of artificial intelligence technologies.

In terms of application scenarios, machine translation will continue to expand toward vertical professional fields and cultural outbound translation scenarios. The concentrated emergence of research themes such as "scientific and technological texts", "professional translation", "medical translation", and "Chinese literature" in the clustering mapping, as well as the evolutionary trends of nodes related to "Chinese-English translation" and "cultural outbound translation" in the time-zone mapping, indicate that future research will pay greater attention to the adaptation of machine translation in professional domains. This includes terminology alignment and syntactic optimization for specialized texts in science and technology, business, medicine, and other industries. Meanwhile, increasing focus will be placed on the application of machine

translation in the external dissemination of Chinese culture. Scholars will explore how emerging technologies can facilitate the international communication of cultural content such as Chinese literature and traditional Chinese medicine, and address translation challenges posed by culture-loaded words and literary expressions. Overall, machine translation research will continue to shift from general scenarios toward industrialized, professional, and culture-oriented applications (Wang & Liu, 2025; Hu, 2025).

Furthermore, with the advancement of new liberal arts construction and the transformation of the translation industry, machine translation research will achieve in-depth integration with talent cultivation and industrial ecology. The emergence of thematic nodes including “talent cultivation”, “new liberal arts”, and “machine model orientation” in the time-zone mapping demonstrates that future research will no longer be limited to a pure technical perspective. Instead, it will integrate the development of machine translation with translation education and industrial demands, exploring innovative training modes for translation professionals under the background of new liberal arts to cultivate interdisciplinary talents equipped with both solid linguistic competence and proficient technical literacy. In addition, greater attention will be paid to the impacts of machine translation on the ecological transformation of the translation industry, including the reconstruction of translation workflows, the formulation of industrial standards, and the establishment of human-machine collaborative working modes. Such research will promote the transformation of machine translation from a technical tool to fundamental infrastructure for the translation industry, thereby realizing the coordinated development of technology, education and the translation industry (Mu, 2024; Wang et al., 2025).

Overall, the future development of machine translation will be fundamentally driven by artificial intelligence technology, take human-machine collaborative optimization as the main technical

thread, prioritize vertical domain applications and cultural outbound translation as key application focuses, and rely on talent cultivation and industrial ecological restructuring as critical support. This trend will foster a new development pattern featuring the coordinated evolution of technology, application, education, and industry, and continuously advance machine translation research toward greater intelligence, higher accuracy, and better adaptation to practical demands (Wang & Liu, 2025; Hu, 2025).

VI. MAJOR FINDINGS

Overall, domestic machine translation research has undergone a complete evolutionary process from basic application to in-depth diversified exploration over the past five years, presenting distinct phased characteristics and predictable future trends. Early research primarily focused on the technological introduction and teaching adaptation of machine translation. The keyword burst mapping indicates that the burst terms from 2020 to 2021 were concentrated on “translation teaching”, “corpus”, and “accuracy”, demonstrating that academic attention at that time was largely placed on the practical implementation of emerging technologies in traditional translation scenarios. With the continuous iteration of artificial intelligence technologies, the research focus has gradually shifted to technical optimization, giving rise to emerging themes such as “human-machine translation” and “pre-editing”. This shift reflects the academic community’s sustained exploration of improving machine translation quality and expanding its application boundaries.

In terms of current research hotspots, machine translation is evolving toward scenario-based, refined, and interdisciplinary development. The keyword co-occurrence network and clustering mapping demonstrate that core research hotspots have centered on “post-editing”, “scientific and technological texts”, and “professional translation”. This indicates that academic research is no longer limited to general text translation but has extended to vertical fields such as science and technology,

medicine, and cultural outbound translation, focusing on practical issues including professional terminology alignment and complex context adaptation. Meanwhile, the prevalence of highly correlated themes such as “translation quality”, “error types”, and “optimization” reveals that research priorities are shifting from simple technical application to the construction of closed-loop optimization systems, promoting the development of machine translation from functional availability to practical usability.

Looking ahead, machine translation research will continue to deepen across three dimensions: technology, application, and research ecology. In terms of technology, research priorities will focus on human-machine collaboration, pre-editing and post-editing, and low-resource translation. Scholars will further explore the in-depth integration of artificial intelligence technologies and diverse translation scenarios to improve the adaptability and accuracy of translation models. In terms of application, translation demands in professional fields such as science and technology, culture, and medicine will drive the industrialization of relevant research, facilitating the external dissemination of Chinese culture and international academic and industrial exchanges in specialized disciplines. In terms of education and industrial development, the integration of machine translation and translation teaching, as well as the exploration of interdisciplinary talent training models, will emerge as a vital research direction. Such progress will promote the restructuring of the translation industry ecosystem and advance the disciplinary transformation of translation studies under the framework of the new liberal arts initiative.

VII. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS

This study conducts a bibliometric analysis of domestic research on machine translation based on literature retrieved from the CNKI database, and there are still certain limitations. First, the data source is limited solely to the CNKI database,

excluding relevant publications from foreign databases such as WOS and Scopus, which fails to fully cover the research progress of the international academic community. Second, the analysis mainly focuses on domestic literature published from 2020 to 2025, with an insufficient review of the research context in earlier stages, making it difficult to fully present the long-term evolutionary trajectory of machine translation research. Furthermore, this study only carries out a macroscopic analysis based on bibliometric mapping, without an in-depth content analysis of the core viewpoints and theoretical frameworks of highly cited literature, which limits the interpretation of specific research findings.

In view of the deficiencies of the current study and the development trends of this field, future research can be further expanded from three aspects. First, in terms of data dimension, the scope of databases should be extended to integrate multilingual literature at home and abroad, so as to construct a more comprehensive literature repository for machine translation research. Meanwhile, incorporating literature with a longer time span can help systematically sort out the historical development context of the field. Second, in terms of research methods, on the basis of bibliometric analysis, qualitative methods such as content analysis and case studies can be adopted to deeply interpret the theoretical contributions and practical value of core literature, thereby compensating for the deficiencies of purely quantitative analysis. Third, in terms of research directions, greater emphasis should be placed on emerging application scenarios of machine translation driven by generative AI and large language models, especially the adaptive research for vertical fields such as scientific and technological texts and cultural external translation. In addition, cross-institutional and interdisciplinary cooperation should be strengthened to promote the in-depth integration of machine translation technology with linguistics, computer science, and translation teaching, and facilitate the coordinated development of the industrial ecology and

disciplinary system of translation studies.

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Paradox and Irony in Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 04 July 2026; Received in revised form: 29 July 2026; Accepted: 03 Aug 2026; Available online: 08 Aug 2026 Keywords— Paradox, Irony, Grace, Sin, Christian Realism. ©2026 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/).	Graham Greene's <i>The Power and the glory</i>, arguably his boldest and most penetrating exploration of faith, stands as a masterwork of paradox and irony. Through the deeply flawed figures of the whisky priest and Marxist Lieutenant, Greene dismantles the traditional Judeo-Christian assumption that redemption is attainable only through a state of grace. Instead, he proposed a radical inversion: spiritual clarity and salvation emerge through human weakness, bodily desire, and moral failure. This paper examines how Greene's ironic vision transforms sin into the ground of grace, revealing a theology in which spiritual sanity arises not from purity, but from the struggle with imperfection. By tracing the priest's evolution from prideful cleric to "glorified sinner," and the Lieutenant's journey from ideological certainty to existential disillusionment, this study argues that Greene positions sin as the crucible of spiritual awakening. Situating the novel within Greene's historical, cultural, and religious contexts, this paper contends that Greene is one of the twentieth century's most incisive Christian realists, misunderstood precisely because of his sophisticated use of paradox and irony as tools for realism and spiritual inquiry.

I. INTRODUCTION

Graham Greene's *The Power and the glory* (1940), henceforth (TPG), stands as one of his most daring and theologically provocative explorations of faith, sin, and spiritual glory. Set in the small Mexican state of Tabasco during the Cristero War (1926–1929), the novel dramatizes the violent conflict between the Church and State after the Mexican government outlawed Catholicism. At its center is an unnamed Catholic priest, known only as the whisky priest, who becomes a fugitive, caught between the instinct for self-preservation and the demands of his vocation. As he navigates the treacherous landscape at the heart of the rainy season, he confronts his own failures, desires, and moral contradictions. Along the way, he encounters characters such as Coral Fellows, Mr. Tench, the Half-Caste, and the Lieutenant whose

ideological zeal drives him to "make a massacre for their sakes - first the Church and then the foreigner and the politician" (Greene p. 54). The novel closes with the Priest's execution, yet the Lieutenant's victory is hollow. The fervour that once animated his mission dissipates, leaving him spiritually diminished.

Understanding the issues raised in this paper requires situating the novel within its historical and artistic context. Greene's reputation as either a "Catholic writer" or "a writer who happens to be Catholic" has long shaped the reception of his work. As Valverde and Bosco (2019) observed, Greene's novels are frequently interpreted through the lens of his religious preoccupations, with critics attempting to categorize his theological affiliations and moral concerns. Whether in *Brighton rock*, *The End of the affair*,

The Heart of the matter, or *TPG*, Greene persistently interrogates the role of the Church, the nature of belief, and the paradoxes of humans striving toward God. Like Pinkie, Sarah, and Scobie, the whisky priest embodies Greene's fascination with the tensions between sin and sanctity, faith and despair, human frailty, and divine mercy.

The controversial yet realistic themes in *TPG* reflect Greene's conviction that "God can re-cycle sin in a mysterious way to make it work for good," a view Barbara wall identifies as central to the novel (Sherry, 1989, p. 34). Mark Bosco similarly notes that Greene's "Catholic consciousness" is a recurrent thematic concern, especially in *TPG*, where the Priest wrestles with despair, guilt, and the desire for meaning (2004, p. 51). Unsurprisingly, Greene's portrayal of the Judeo-Christian tradition has provoked both admiration and condemnation. In 1939, two Catholic bishops in France denounced the novel: in 1953, Cardinal Giuseppe Pizzardo condemned it as "paradoxical" and morally dangerous, while Cardinal Griffin¹ criticized its "erotic passages" as harmful to the young (Sherry, 1974, p. 42). Early critics often read Greene's work through the lens of Catholic dogma, attributing his moral concerns to his conversion, his marriage to the devout Vivien Dayrell-Browning, and his spiritual conflicts. Cedric Watts observes that Greene's imagination became "preoccupied with the debate between Catholicism, skepticism, and communism" (Watts, p.87). Bosco adds that religious critics struggled to accept Greene's paradoxical inversion of Catholic doctrine (2004, p. 52). Greene himself rejected such labels; as Maria Couto records, he insisted, "Those who say I am a Jansenist have not read theology... I don't believe in such a thing as hell" (1988)².

Later criticism of the 1990s cast Greene as agnostic, Jansenist, or even anti-Semitic, pointing to his creation of "perverse saintly heroes" like the whiskey priest. However, these critiques overlook Greene's artistic intention to take his protagonists

through unorthodox, confrontational journeys toward assumed sainthood. Whether Greene's Catholicism is unorthodox or misunderstood, his contribution to debates on the Church's role in human spiritual and psychological growth remains profound. As Pope Paul VI remarked, parts of Greene's work "are certain to offend some Catholics," yet they illuminate the paradox of humanity's quest for salvation amid natural desire (Sherry, 1989, p. 43). This paper argues that Greene's sustained "argument for the virtue of disloyalty" (Valverde & Bosco, 2019) is central to his use of paradox as both a narrative strategy and thematic core.

Paradox in Greene's Catholic novels is not merely stylistic; it is prophetic. In an era marked by debates over sexuality, identity, and ecclesial authority, Greene's exploration of moral ambiguity and divine mercy is strikingly contemporary. His depiction of "the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God" (De Vitis, 1986, p. 66) resonates with modern readers navigating the tensions between doctrine and lived experience.

The Power and the glory present a paradoxical and ironic exploration of faith, sin, and redemption. Greene challenges the Judeo-Christian belief that redemption requires a state of grace; instead, he suggests that spiritual awakening emerges through the pursuit of natural instincts and confrontation with human frailty. In this sense, Greene aligns with postmodern notions of unstable truth and fractured identity. The whisky priest becomes a glorified sinner whose salvation is forged through weakness, while the Marxist Lieutenant inadvertently reveals the priest's destiny through cruelty. Spiritual sanity arises, therefore, not from purity but from the struggle with bodily desire. To Greene, *grace is in sin, or, differently, through sin you shall find grace*.

By situating the novel within Greene's historical context and contemporary moment, Greene stands as a towering literary futurist and one of the most incisive Christian realists of the twentieth

¹ For detailed accounts of Cardinal Giuseppe Pizzardo's 1953 condemnation of the novel as "paradoxical" and morally dangerous, and Cardinal Bernard Griffin's criticism of its "erotic passages", see Sherry, N. (1994). *The life of Graham Greene: Volume 2, 1939-1955*. Janathan Cape.

² Jansenism is a school of thought that believes in the existence of hell. Postulated from the preaching of the

English Flemish theologian and Bishop of Ypres, Cornelius Jasen, it argued in favour of absolute predestination, where humans are conceived as incapable of doing good without God's unsolicited grace and only a few are believed to receive salvation. This notion is one of the controversies about Greene's Catholicism. See Maria couto's *The Solitude of a writer* (p. 420-22).

century. As François Mauriac observed, Greene's fiction enables readers "to rediscover Christian faith," offering solutions to the problems of grace and salvation that transcend "the rigid categories of theologians and casuists" (Maria Couto, 1988, p.65). Ultimately, Greene's paradoxical imagination, his use of irony as both realism and enchanted grove, reveals a God whose love operates not through perfection but through a broken, restless human heart.

II. GREENE'S RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION: CONTEXT, CONTROVERSY, AND CATHOLIC NONCONSCIOUSNESS

As discussed in the Introduction, Greene's Catholic imagination is neither doctrinal nor devotional. It is paradoxical, subversive, and deeply realistic. Across works such as *Brighton rock*, *The End of the affair*, *The Heart of the matter*, and TPG, Greene interrogates the limits of institutional religion and the complexities of a person's relationship with God. His protagonists, Pinkie, Sarah, Scobie, and the whiskey priest, are not paragons of virtue, but deeply flawed individuals whose spiritual journeys unfold through sin, desire, and moral failure. As Bosco (2004) notes, Greene's "Catholic consciousness" is not a celebration of orthodoxy but an exploration of the tension between divine mercy and human frailty.

This paradoxical theology, which A. A. De Vitis (1986 p. 66) calls "the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God", is central to Greene's narrative method. His fiction challenges the assumption that spiritual truth is found with purity or doctrinal certainty. Instead, Greene suggests that grace emerges through cracks in human weakness and that spiritual authenticity is forged in the struggle with desire, guilt, and failure. In this sense, Greene's Catholic imagination is profoundly modern, anticipating contemporary debates on sexuality, identity, and ecclesial authority. His exploration of moral ambiguity and divine mercy resonates with twenty-first-century readers navigating tensions between doctrine and lived experience.

Understanding *The Power and the glory* requires situating the novel within the turbulent historical and cultural landscape of early twentieth-century Mexico. Greene's 1938 journey through the country, commissioned by *The London times* to report on religious persecution, exposed him to the aftermath of the Cristero War (1926–1929), a violent conflict between the Mexican government and Catholic insurgents who resisted anti-clerical legislation. The state of Tabasco, where Greene sets the novel, is among the most aggressive anti-religious regions.³ The conversation between the dentist and "the stranger" at the port reveals the nature of the ongoing violence against the Church: the Priest is in disguise, hoping to escape with the Obregon to Vera Cruz, Lopez is shot to help people out, and the Church has been transformed into a treasury. (Greene, 2019). Under the governorship of Tomás Garrido Canabal, churches were burned or converted into government buildings, priests were hunted, and public worship outlawed. Greene later described the region as the fiercest persecution of religion since the reign of Elizabeth (Sherry, 1989)

This historical background shapes the novel's atmosphere of fear, suspicion, and spiritual desolation. The opening scene, Mr. Tench walking past the old church and now converted into a treasury, symbolizes the collapse of institutional religion and the displacement of spiritual authority by political power. The government's ban on sacraments and consequences portrayed through the pious woman in the prison cell, its forced marriages of priests like Jose, and its execution of clergy reflect the real policies of the Mexican state during the 1920s and the 1930s (Greene, 2019). Greene's depiction of the Lieutenant's ideological zeal echoes the rhetoric of revolutionary leaders, who viewed the Church as an obstacle to social progress, associating Catholicism with superstition, poverty, and colonial oppression. He thinks that 'The gringo' is less dangerous than the Priest. 'A man like that, . . . does no real harm. A few men dead. We shall all have to die. We do better when we catch one of these [the Priest]. Greene observes:

³ Under Governor Tomas Garrido Canabal, Tabasco became the epicenter of Mexico's most militant anti-religious campaign: churches were burned or converted into state buildings, priests were hunted, and public worship was outlawed. Greene later characterized the region's repression

as the fiercest persecution of religion since the reign of Elizabeth I, a judgment recorded by Sherry (1989) and consistent with the violence depicted in *The Power and the glory*.

"There was something disinterested in his ambition: a kind of virtue in his desire to catch the sleek-respected guest of the first communion party" (2019, p. 17). The above quotation creates the stage for the dramatic and verbal irony that occurs during the encounter between the state and the church in the last chapters of the novel, where the Lieutenant becomes the facilitator for the priest's journey to spiritual sanity and continuation of the glory.

However, Greene's Mexico is not merely a historical setting; it is also a moral and spiritual landscape. Oppressive heat, relentless rain, swamps and jungles, and dilapidated villages create a physical environment that mirrors the characters' internal struggles. In response to Coral's curiosity as to why he prefers rain, he says, 'Oh no, no. They mean another six months living like this' (2019, p.35). Geography becomes a metaphor for Priest's spiritual journey: muddy, treacherous, and marked by moments of unexpected grace. As critics have noted, Greene's Mexico is less a realistic portrait than a symbolic terrain, a "Greeneland" where moral ambiguity and spiritual longing coexist (De Vitis, 1986 p.66).

The Cristero War also provided an ideological framework for Lieutenant's character. His Marxist convictions, hatred of the Church, and belief in a future free from superstition reflect the revolutionary ethos of post-revolutionary Mexico⁴. His desire to "give the people the whole world" by eradicating religion echoes the utopian promises of socialist reformers. Stirred by Luis and his friends and his own childhood, the Lieutenant vows to "eliminate from their childhood everything which had made him miserable, [including] all that was poor, superstitious, and corrupt. They deserve nothing less than the truth. . ." (Greene, 2019 p. 54). However, Greene complicates this ideological certainty by revealing Lieutenant's moral contradictions: his compassion for children, his personal austerity, and his growing discomfort with the violence he commits by killing his own people.

The historical conflict between the Church and the State thus becomes a stage on which Greene explores the paradoxes of justice, authority, and moral responsibility.

Greene's portrayal of the whisky priest also draws from historical accounts of fugitive clergy, who continued to minister in secret despite the threat of execution. Priests often ministered clandestinely, traveling from village to village to baptize, hear confessions, and celebrate Mass, even at the risk of their lives⁵ (Pius XI, 1932/2012; Parsons, 1936). Greene's priest, however, is not a heroic martyr in the traditional sense; he is burdened by sin, fear, and self-loathing. By placing such a flawed figure within the historically authentic context of persecution, Greene challenges the narratives of martyrdom and sanctity. The story of Young Juan and his martyrdom sound unrealistic. Sent to report himself, Luis tells his father 'My mother told me to tell you that I told her that I did not believe that the book she was reading . . . ' His father's effort to paint a good picture of the past does not change his perception. 'But this Juan,' the boy said, 'He sounds silly' (Greene, 2019 p. 47).

The cultural context of rural Mexico enriches this novel's thematic complexity. The villagers' mix of superstition, fatalism, and devotion reflects the syncretic nature of Mexican Catholicism. Their longing for sacraments, even when administered by morally compromised priests like Padre Jose and the whisky priest, reveals the deep spiritual hunger that persists despite political repression. Greene's depiction of people's suffering, poverty, and resilience underscores the novel's central paradox that grace often emerges in the most desolate and unlikely places.

In *The Power and the glory*, the historical and cultural context is not merely a background, but an integral part of Greene's exploration of sin, grace, and redemption. The Cristero War creates external

⁴ The ideological roots of post, revolutionary anti, clericalism, including Marxist, influenced hostility toward the Church and the state's vision of a secular "modern" Mexico, are well documented in historical studies of the Cristero War. See Meyer, J. A. (1976). *The Cristero Rebellion: The Mexican people between Church and State, 1926-1929*. Cambridge University Press; and Butler, M. (2004). *The Cristero Rebellion: conflict, and the struggle for public life in Mexico*. Cambridge University Press.

⁵ As Pius XI (1932/2012) observed in *Accerba Animi*, priests who remained in hiding "succeeded in effectively encouraging the faithful, and in secretly administering the holy sacrament," a reality echoed by Parsons (1936), who described clergy traveling in disguise from village to village to baptize, hear confessions, and celebrate Mass at the risk of their lives.

conflict, but the novel's true drama unfolds in the interior struggles of its characters. Greene uses the historical persecution of the Church not to celebrate institutional religion but to reveal the fragility and persistence of faith in a world marked by violence, desire, and moral ambiguity. The result is a narrative that transcends its historical moment, offering timeless meditation on the human condition and the paradoxical nature of spiritual salvation.

III. CHRISTIAN REALISM

The Power and the glory is deeply rooted in the intellectual and theological traditions of Christian realism, a framework most closely associated with Reinhold Niebuhr⁶. Christian realism rejects idealized visions of human nature and emphasizes the inescapable tension between moral aspiration and human frailty. Greene's fiction embodies this worldview with a remarkable clarity. His characters are not moral exemplars but conflicted, wounded individuals whose spiritual journeys unfold through failure, desire, and contradiction. In *TPG*, Greene uses the whisky priest's moral collapse and reluctant perseverance to dramatize the paradox at the heart of Christian realism: that grace often emerges not despite human weakness, but through it.

In *The Power and the Glory*, Graham Greene employs Christian Realism to expose the paradox and irony of human weakness. The whisky priest, flawed, yet compassionate, demonstrates how failure can become a channel of grace. By contrast, Lieutenant's rigid pursuit of justice reveals how strength blinds itself to mercy. Their foils, figures who trivialize faith or cling to hollow virtue, intensify these tensions, underscoring Greene's central claim that divine power is most vividly revealed not in human perfection but in the fractured contradictions of human frailty.

Whisky priests are quintessential Christian realist protagonists. He is painfully and "desperately

inadequate," as Greene describes him (Greene, 2019, p. 79). His alcoholism, sexual transgression, cowardice, and pride put him far from the traditional image of a saint. However, Greene refuses to portray these flaws as disqualifying: Instead, it becomes the terrain on which the priest's spiritual awakening unfolds. Greene's portrayal of spiritual crisis is deeply rooted in a theological vision in which despair becomes the beginning of grace. As Karl (1972) notes, Greene believed that "when a man finally reaches the state of despair he decides to surrender to the will of God," a conviction that resonates strongly with Augustine's confession that the human heart remains restless until it rests in God⁷.

The paradoxical view that sin is a doorway to grace is central to Greene's theological imagination. The whisky priest's failures do not render him spiritually sterile; rather, they eliminate the illusions of self-sufficiency that often accompany religious authority. His pride, which he identifies as "the sin by which angels fell," becomes a flaw that forces him into self-examination (Greene, 2019, p. 92). His alcoholism, which humiliates him, also humanizes him, enabling him to understand the suffering of the poor. His sexual sin, embodied in his daughter Brigitta, becomes a source of tenderness and responsibility, rather than shame alone. "He went down on his knees and pulled her to him: 'I love you. I am your father and I love you. . . I would give my life, that's nothing, my soul . . . my dear, my dear, try to understand that you are – so important. In Greene's world, sin is neither romanticized nor dismissed as mere moral failure; it is woven into the fabric of spiritual growth. Instead of going north, to safety, he turns south to complete his journey to martyrdom (Greene 2019. P. 79).

Existential Christian Realism also shapes Greene's portrayal of the Lieutenant, who serves as the priest's ideological foil. Lieutenant's Marxist idealism—his belief that eradicating the Church will liberate people—reflects a secular version of moral absolutism. He is austere, disciplined, incorruptible, and utterly

⁶ For the theological foundations of Christian realism, particularly its emphasis on human fallibility, moral ambiguity, and the need for divine grace, see Niebuhr, R. (1941). *The nature and destiny of man: A Christian interpretation* (Vol. 1). Charles Scribner's Sons.

⁷ Greene's belief that despair becomes the point of surrender to God aligns with Augustine's teaching that the human

heart remains restless until it finds rest in God. This interpretation of Greene's Augustinian sensibility is supported by Karl, F. R. (1972). *A reader's guide to the contemporary English novel*. Noonday Press; and Allott, M. (1951). *Graham Greene: The novelist*. Longman, Green.

convinced of the righteousness of his cause. However, his pursuit of justice leads him to commit acts of profound injustice, including the execution of innocent hostages. Hunting down the Priest in his former parish, he declares, 'You heard what happened in Concepcion. I took a hostage there . . . and when I found that this priest had been in the neighborhood, I put the man against the nearest tree' (Greene, 2019, p.74). The Lieutenant's moral clarity about evil caused by the Church against his people becomes a form of blindness. Greene uses him to expose the dangers of ideological purity, suggesting that the refusal to acknowledge human weakness can lead to cruelty being disguised as virtue. As Ray (2005) notes, the Lieutenant becomes "all power and no glory," a man whose utopian vision collapses under the weight of its own contradictions. Greene's narrative reiterates the need for religious realism, which focuses on faith in concrete and flawed human contexts.

Thus, the whisky priest and the Lieutenant embody opposing yet intertwined forms of realism. The priest's journey reveals redemptive realism: he recognizes the limits of his own virtue and the complexity of human desire. Lieutenant's realism is political: he recognizes the material suffering of the people but fails to grasp the spiritual dimension of their lives. This brings relevance to Priest's questions: What if people want to suffer? Greene brings these two forms of realism into dialogue, revealing that neither form is sufficient on its own. The priest's sin does not negate his capacity for grace, as revealed by the Lieutenant during their conversation, and Lieutenant's virtue does not prevent him from committing evil. Their encounters expose the paradox that lies at the heart of Greene's vision: moral strength emerges not from purity but from honest confrontation with human limitations. His use of tragic realism captures a blend of moral failure, grace, and existential struggle.

As the earlier analysis suggests, Greene's Augustinian moral vision disrupts traditional narratives. The whisky priest is no orthodox martyr; he neither wills his death nor embodies the polished virtues typically associated with sanctity, yet it is precisely through this imperfection that the grace becomes legible. He is frightened, reluctant, and often self-absorbed. Yet, his final act, returning to hear the confession of a dying criminal despite knowing it is a

trap, reveals a deeper form of courage. It is not the courage of a triumphant saint like Young Juan, but the courage of a broken man who continues to serve despite his failures. This is the paradox of Greene's theology: holiness is not the absence of sin, but the persistence of love amidst it.

Greene's novel aligns with the broader modernist project of redefining heroism. As Lionel Trilling (1965) notes, modern literature replaces the traditional hero with the anti-hero, whose authority lies not in ethical nobility, but in the authenticity of his struggle. A whisky priest exemplifies this shift. His authority does not come from moral purity, but from his refusal to abandon his calling, even when he believes himself unworthy. His spiritual sanity emerges not from detachment from the body, but from wrestling with it. He is quick to check himself when he asks for brandy from Coral and insists that she must not steal despite his desperate need for the drink. His journey reveals that grace is not a reward for virtue, but a gift that breaks through human weakness.

Thus, Greene's Christian realism provides a conceptual foundation for the novel's exploration of paradox and irony. By portraying sin as the crucible of grace and weakness as a pathway to spiritual sanity, Greene challenges conventional theological assumptions and offers radical reimagining of redemption. In *TPG*, the human condition is not a barrier to divine mercy but a very medium.

Greene's characterization of the whisky priest, his flaws, contradictions, and paradoxical nature shapes the novel's sustained use of paradox and irony. The subplot of young Juan provides deliberate contrast. Juan's spiritual journey is unrealistically pure: from birth to his saint death, he embodies unwavering obedience, self-reflection, and spiritual confidence. Even young Luis grows weary of hearing his mother read Juan's story each evening. Juan's extraordinary courage and serene acceptance of martyrdom are captured in the line: "He was quite calm and happy and smiling at the Chief of Police, he asked if he had come to lead him to the banquet" (Greene, 2019, p. 216).

The whisky priest, in contrast, is a complex, multifaceted figure; his life is anything but a spiritual life - story. His flaws are numerous. The Lieutenant is

astonished to learn that the Priest has fathered a child, yet Greene uses this revelation to highlight the Priest's paradoxical humanity. He admits, "Pride was at work all the time. Not love of God" (Greene, 2019, p. 194). Unlike Juan, whose path to sainthood is marked by purity and unwavering devotion, the whisky priest journey is shaped by bodily desires and human frailty. Greene foregrounds these flaws—his alcoholism, wavering faith, cowardice, and emotional vulnerability—to emphasize Priest's realism as a modern hero. One who impacts a fellow man as he departs from Coral, she assures him, 'if they kill you I shan't forgive them – ever' (Greene, 2019, p.37).

The Priest's vocation itself was not born of a divine calling, but of fear and economic insecurity. Confronted with Brigitta, the living reminder of his mortal sin, he recalls his childhood: "It had been a happy childhood, except that he had been afraid of too many things and had hated poverty like a crime; he believed that when he was a priest, he would be rich and proud -that was called having a vocation" (Greene, 2019, p. 64). When the Lieutenant assumes priests are educated, the whisky priest corrects him: "I'm not that. My father was a storekeeper" (Greene, 2019, p. 196). His desire for survival, an essential aspect of modern human experience, shapes his path toward a unique and controversial form of heroism. Although priesthood is traditionally understood as a spiritual vocation, Greene deliberately subverts this expectation to reveal a more human, conflicted, and paradoxical figure.

Driven not by divine calling but by human weakness, specifically the fear of poverty and desire for material security, the whisky priest's lustful and proud nature leads him to grave mistakes and poor decisions. He remains in Tabasco, while other priests flee out of faith or love for God but, as he later admits to the Lieutenant, out of pride. Now a fugitive, Greene's protagonist succumbs to "despair, the unforgivable sin," and fathered a seven-year-old daughter, Brigitta (Greene, 2019, p. 57). Once accustomed to the privileges of priesthood, he is shocked when "Nobody came forward to kiss his hand and ask for blessings" upon his return, "it is as if he had descended by means of his sin into the human struggle to learn other things besides despair and love, that a man can be unwelcome even in his own home" (Greene, 2019, p. 59). He had loved "the

beauty of [God's] house, the warmth and comfort," yet understood nothing of "the reality of human experience and love" (p. 156).

Chased by the Red Shirts, the Priest seeks refuge with Padre José, who has capitulated on the governor's order that all priests marry. At the moment of humility, he confesses, "I was conceited, proud, and overbearing - a bad priest. I always knew in my heart that you were the better man" (Greene, 2019, p. 116). This pride kept him in Tabasco, while others escaped persecution. He relished being the only priest and being "liked" by Christians. He later admits, "It would have been much better if I had gone too. But I didn't out of pride. 'Not love of God'... Pride was what made the angels fall... I thought I was a fine fellow to have stayed when others had gone" (Greene, 2019, p. 194).

His belief that he is "so grand and could make his own rules" fuel not only his negligence of priestly duties but also his dependence on alcohol. The whisky priest is a habitual drinker who relies on whisky to cope with emotional and psychological strain. He risks carrying it in his attaché case even when alcohol is outlawed. He misses *General Obregón*, his chance to escape, because he cannot resist Mr. Tench's invitation to drink. He would rather go hungry than forgo "a little brandy" from Captain Fellows.

His conversation with young Coral exposes his cowardice. He flees danger, avoids confrontation, and recoils from the possibility of martyrdom. He lacks the courage to tell Coral that he was not a doctor. He lives as a fugitive, hiding in barns, begging for brandy, running through marshes, occasionally erupting in frustration: "Why don't they catch me? The fools. Why don't they catch me?" (Greene, 2019, p. 60). When Coral asks, "But can't you... just give yourself up?" he responds, "There's pain. To choose pain like that - it's impossible" (p. 35). One would expect God's servant to follow Christ's example, yet he hides, while innocent Christians are taken hostage and executed for refusing to betray him. His fear of pain and death reveals his lack of faith and humanity.

Despite being a priest, he struggles profoundly with beliefs. He questions God's existence and purpose whenever adversity strikes: In the opening chapter, "The Port," he denies his faith. When Mr. Tench hears him mutter "O God. Ora pro nobis" and asks if he is Catholic; the priest replies, "No, no.

Just an expression. I don't believe in anything like that" (Greene, 2019, p. 4). He lies about being a doctor, a lie that catches up with him when a child seeks medical help for a dying woman. He laments to Mr. Tench, "It always seems to happen. Like this... I shall miss it... I am meant to miss it" (p. 11). He eats the last cube of sugar meant for a dead child and rationalizes, "If God chose to give back life, couldn't He give food as well?" (p. 155).

The critique of the Priest as God's representative in Tabasco is unmistakable. Cates Baldridge captures this anti-heroic portrayal: "The protagonist's present tense existence is scandalous in a conventional sense in part because he lived continually in extremis..." (2000, p. 50). Greene weaves Priest's fate from his lack of faith. His physical and emotional desires overwhelm his spirituality, leading him to distort doctrine for self-preservation: "He thought: I have to get to shelter - a man's first duty is to himself - even the Church taught that, in a way" (Greene, 2019, p. 154). The Priest's journey mirrors the structure of the hagiography⁸ (Karl, 1972). In saint narratives, he is wholly unfit for martyrdom.

Furthermore, the whisky priest's flawed personality is sharpened by the ruthless idealism of Lieutenant. A police officer is a crucial figure whose ideological zeal shapes the priest's destiny. His conviction, ruthlessness, and revolutionary fervours reflect Mexico's broader political upheaval. Lieutenant believes that the destruction of the Catholic Church is essential to national progress. Greene writes, "He was quite prepared to make a massacre for their sakes, first the Church, and then the foreigners and then the politicians..." (Greene, 2019, p. 54). Outraged that a priest remains alive in Tabasco, he studies the priest's photograph with contempt.

'He looks like all the rest,' the Lieutenant said. It was obscure, but you read from the smudgy photograph a well-shaved, well-powdered jowl much too developed for his age. The good things of life have come to him too early - the respect of his contemporaries, a safe livelihood... the ready acceptance of other people's homage... a happy life. A natural

hatred as between a dog was stirred in the Lieutenant's bowels. "We've shot him half a dozen times," he said. (Greene, 2019, p. 16)

To the Lieutenant, the Priest symbolizes corruption, which keeps the masses poor. He cannot fathom why anyone would believe in "a loving and merciful God" when he sees only "a complete certainty in the existence of a dying, cooling world, of human beings" (Greene, 2019, p. 19). Convinced that the Church must be eradicated even at the cost of innocent lives, he declares, "Those men I shot. They were my own people" (p. 196). He takes hostages from each village, threatening execution if the priest is not reported: "A lot of them will die of course... Wouldn't it be worth it?... To be rid of those people forever" (p. 18).

Ironically, this relentless manhunt becomes the priest's path to spiritual transformation. During their journey back to Tabasco, Lieutenant explains why the Church must be destroyed: its doctrines of sacrifice, poverty, and eternal life deceive and exploit the poor. "You're a danger. That's why we kill you" (Greene, 2019, p. 191). Even after recognizing the Priest's goodness by declaring that he has nothing against him as a person, the Lieutenant still leads him to execution.

Lieutenant remains one of the most fascinating and complex figures in this novel. Although determined to capture the priest "to give his people the whole world" (Greene, 2019, p. 196) and build a better future by destroying the Catholic Church, he embodies Greene's paradox. His revolutionary zeal was tempered by moments of self-examination and doubt. Despite his eagerness to ensure that the Church "is not remembered," he is cautious: he asks for "orders" from the jefe, wants confirmation that the governor's instructions are in writing, and worries whether the governor will protect him if "They make a fuss in Mexico City" (Greene 2019, p. 53). His initial enthusiasm and willingness "to make a massacre for their sakes" wanes once he captures the priest and recognizes him as the same man to whom he once gave money in prison.

⁸ Greene deliberately contrasts the sanitized martyrdom of Young Juan with the morally compromised life of the whisky priest.

Greene thus portrays the Lieutenant as a man whose blind pursuit of the priest paradoxically shapes the hero's path to martyrdom. This antagonism highlights their opposing views. The Lieutenant envisions a world free of misery, corruption, poverty, or superstition. He dreams of a future in which the next generation has "the right to be happy and to choose." To achieve this, he believed that the Church, foreigners, and politicians must be eliminated. Like a Marxist revolutionary, he is willing to sacrifice the present generation for the imagined liberation of the next generation. Advocating for equality and a classless society, the Lieutenant hopes to "begin the world again with them, in a desert" (Greene, 2019, p. 54).

The brief but intense conversation between the Marxist Lieutenant and the cowardly Priest is laden with a paradox. Their exchange touches on the nature of God's love, human suffering, death, poverty, and the roles of the Church and State in shaping human experience. Each defends his worldview, and this contrast reveals the Priest's fate as a modern martyr and a symbol of faith. Both men acknowledge that each is inherently good in some sense. In explaining the complexity of divine mercy and justice, the priest absolves himself.

'I'm not as dishonest as you think I am. Why do you think I tell people out of the pulpit that they're in danger of damnation if death catches them unawares? I'm not telling them fairy stories I don't believe myself. I don't know a thing about the mercy of God: I don't know how awful the human heart looks to Him. But I do know this, that if there's ever been a single man in this state damned, then I'll be damned too... I just want justice, that's all. (Greene, 2019, p. 198)

The Lieutenant becomes a catalyst for Priest's self-realization and transformation. "You're a danger. That's why we kill you. I have nothing against you... as a man" (Greene, 2019, p. 191). The long pursuit through marshes and forests, witnessing the deaths of innocents, confronting the consequences of his mortal sin, and recognizing his responsibility as a father all

forced the priest to confront his fears, doubts, and faith.

The interaction between the protagonist and antagonist reveals Greene's mastery of irony, particularly in his portrayal of sin and redemption. As literary irony, the novel abounds in verbal, situational, and dramatic ironies. Greene's sophisticated use of paradox and his conception of irony as a tool of realism invites a reexamination of sin and spirituality in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As Cates argues, "surely the tragic spectacle of the twentieth century justified and perhaps demanded such a radical revaluation of values" (2000, p. 2). Greene's ability to thrive as "the century's most representative English novelist" stems from his skillful engagement with contradiction.

Should a priest known for drinking, lying, and adultery be redeemed by God? Greene frames this question through profound irony: spiritual sanity arises not from the pursuit of purity but from the embrace of human experience. Entrapped in Greeneland, caught between the Lieutenant's righteous zeal, the corruption that seeped through the Mexican Revolution⁹ (Knight A., 1986), and his own moral failures, the priest embodies what Margaret Drabble memorably calls "the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God" (1985, p. 415).

Despite his disreputable drinking, lies, and adultery, the priest becomes a symbol of salvation. Adounsiba (2017) deepens this reading by comparing his passion, death, and resurrection to those of Christ, suggesting that Greene deliberately casts him as a flawed yet redemptive figure. He is, in Greene's own words, the "damned man putting God into the mouths of men" (2019, p. 57), a paradox whose very brokenness becomes the conduit of grace. His odd servanthood transformed those encountered quietly. Coral, who earlier insists, "I don't believe in God... I lost my faith when I was ten," soon becomes fiercely protective of him and even vows revenge if he is killed (p. 37). Mrs. Fellows later observes the same unsettling influence when she remarks, "But the odd thing is - the way she went on afterwards - as if he had told her things" (p. 213). Through these encounters, Greene

⁹ For authoritative historical accounts of the corruption, factionalism and ideological distortions that emerged during and after the Mexican Revolution, see Knight, A.

(1986). *The Mexican Revolution* (Vols. 1- 2). Cambridge University Press.

reveals a priest whose holiness emerges not from moral purity but from the mysterious, disruptive power of grace working through human frailty.

The whisky priest refuses to drink a stolen brandy or encourages Coral to do so. While other Priests, including the bishop, have fled to safety, and Padre José has capitulated on the governor's order to marry, the whisky priest alone risks his life to "put God into the mouths of men" (Greene, 2019, p. 57). He baptizes children, hears confessions, and tends to be sick. In Carmen, the site of his mortal sin and Brigitta's home, he again risks capturing to perform his duties. His sermon marks a moment of epiphany and self-awareness. Ultimately, he abandons the possibility of escape and succumbs to mestizo's manipulation, choosing to hear the confession of a dying man out of pride and conscience. "Even a coward has a sense of duty," he tells the Lieutenant. Adounsiba (2017) aptly observes: "What is remarkable about Greene's depiction of the whisky priest is that he refuses to spare us the Priest's less than noble side, and yet also convincingly shows him overcoming his weakness and performing acts of great heroism" (p. 10). Greene achieves this through his powerful and sustained use of irony.

On the other hand, Greene portrays Lieutenant as an egregiously self-aggrandizing figure. He does not merely embody the "idea of absolute laic perfection without God" (Adounsiba, 2017, p. 7); he also sees himself as a righteous and just man, even though his intentions are driven by a desire for authority and control. Greene notes, "He was a mystic, too" (2019, p. 19), prepared to massacre priests, politicians, and foreigners to eradicate everything he associated with misery, poverty, superstition, and corruption (p. 54). After devising a calculated plan to capture the Priest by taking hostages from every village, supposedly so the people may have "the right to be happy in any way they chose," he later tells the Priest, "Those men I shot. They were my own. I wanted to give them the whole world" (p. 196). Yet, he kills or imprisons them for praying, promises to "see they don't suffer" (p. 192), and intends to teach them only the books he approves.

Greene's portrayal anticipates a postmodern dilemma: the collapse of absolute values and the impossibility of constructing a world free of suffering. Lieutenant's vision raises questions central to

Greene's realism: Can life be a void of human suffering? Can happiness be separated from poverty and wealth? What if people find happiness in prayer, confession, and devotion? Greene's modern heroism lies in the priest's recognition that "the world is unhappy whether you are rich or poor, unless you are a saint, and there aren't many of those." When the Lieutenant challenges him about fear of death, the priest replies, "But I'm not a saint... I'm not even a brave man" (p. 192). Their interaction becomes another of Greene's brilliant paradoxes: the Lieutenant is brought to "self-discovery" when "pride and joy left him" after the priest's execution (Adounsiba, 2017, p. 9).

Furthermore, Greene exposes how the corrupt nature of the Mexican Revolution shaped the priest's actions and destiny. The revolutionary forces, the governor, the Jefe, and the Lieutenant, claim to fight for justice and equality, yet they are corrupt and oppressive. Religious books and objects were outlawed, priests were forced to marry, public worship was banned, and violations resulted in imprisonment or fines. Prison cells were filthy and overcrowded. The governor's cousin profits from selling outlawed alcohol, and officials, including Jefe, drink freely in bars. This paradox leads the priest into the prison cell, where he encounters a pious woman and discovers "the beauty of love in the filth." When she recoils at the sexual scene before them, he tells her, "Don't." The priest urges the pious woman not to recoil from the filth of the prison cell: "Don't believe that it is dangerous. Because suddenly we discover that our sins have so much beauty" (Greene, 2019, p. 128), a realization shaped by his love for Brigitta.

In prison, the priest confronts his shortcomings. For years, he had abandoned his duties. Unable to escape Tabasco, he was forced to face his sinfulness and take responsibility. The past six years have been years of gradual spiritual surrender for the priest.

Feast days and fast days and days of abstinence had been the first to go, then he had ceased to trouble more than occasionally about his breviary, and finally he had left it behind altogether... Then the altar stone went - too dangerous to carry... The routine of his life like a dam was cracked... Five years

ago, he had given way to despair—the unforgivable sin.... (Greene, 2019, p. 57)

Ashamed, he avoided Concepción, his parish, for six years. Just as he surrendered religious objects to save himself, he abandoned his parishioners and child. His desire for brandy caused him to miss *Obregón*, to be spotted in Tabasco, and to be imprisoned for carrying outlawed liquor. These actions place him squarely in Lieutenant's sight. Unable to go west (where soldiers search for him) or east (blocked by Red Shirts), he is forced north to Carmen, "the very place where he most wanted to be... it was his duty to go there, it couldn't count as sin" (p. 57). He returned to tattered clothes as an ordinary man. His repeated attempts to escape to a peaceful life have failed (p. 61). His journey toward salvation has often been compared to the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ (Mathias et al., n.d., p. 3).

This new reality marks the final stage of his spiritual transformation: The sermon he delivers that morning, as the police approach, Concepción symbolizes his growth. His discourse on the paradox of pain and suffering reveals spiritual depth: "I tell you that pain is here: this is part of heaven just as pain is part of pleasure" (Greene, 2019, p. 66). He no longer fears his own damnation: "He felt humbled by the pain ordinary people felt voluntarily" (p. 67). His epiphany comes in the prayer, "Oh Lord, I have loved the beauty of your house...", a confession that he has loved the Church's comfort more than its people. For the first time, he feels "the shock of human love... an immense load of responsibility: it was indistinguishable from love" (p. 63). Looking at Brigitta, aware of her future without religious guidance, he pleads, "Oh God, give me any kind of death... only save this child." Greene's irony is poignant when the priest kneels by the trash heap, pulls his daughter close, and says, "I love you'. I am your father and I love you." Unlike politicians who care only for the state, "This child is more important than the whole continent" (p. 79).

The Priest's dynamic humanity, visible even as he awaits execution, reveals Greene's mastery of the paradox. In Greeneland, the boundaries between faith and sin, loyalty, and betrayal are perilous. Thus, the "communist atheist Lieutenant" attempts to suppress religion, while the "hapless priest," who

becomes a martyr almost by default, embodies Greene's artistry (Norman, 1989, p. 311).

Similarly, Greene explored priests' psychological turmoil. Contrary to Lieutenant, Mestizo, and Padre José, who see him as worthless, the reader perceives his inner conflict, sense of uselessness, and longing for salvation (Mathias et al., n.d., p. 2). He is constantly torn between saving himself and fulfilling spiritual duties. In the opening chapter, when a child seeks a doctor for his dying mother, Mr. Tench urges the priest to not go lest to miss the boat. Frustrated, the priest retorts, "You know nothing... That is what everyone says all the time - you do no good" (Greene, 2019, p. 11). His photograph on the prison wall gives a false impression of prosperity and respect. The Lieutenant sees him as "disinterested in his ambition: a kind of virtue in his desire to catch the sleek-respected guest of the first Communion party" (p. 17). When he finally captures him, he tries to understand, "Why you - of all people - should have stayed when others ran" (p. 193).

The Mestizo, a Judas figure, continually tempts and probes the priest's conscience, accusing him of neglecting his duties and lacking charity. Determined to earn his reward, he follows the priest to Las Casas "on an errand of mercy" to save the dying gringo while betraying the priest (p. 175). When the Priest confesses that pride trapped him in Tabasco, the Lieutenant replies, "Well, you're going to be a martyr - you've got that satisfaction" (p. 195). He sees the Priest, and the Church, as a threat: "You're a danger. That's why we kill you" (p. 191). Yet the reader sees a man in constant self-reproach: "Oh God, send them someone more worthwhile to suffer for" (Greene, 2019, p. 3).

Contrary to Lieutenant's and mestizo's distorted views of the hero's indifference and worthlessness, the reader witnesses a man in constant conflict with himself through prayer, confession, self-examination, and repentance. He repeatedly accuses himself of pride, "the sin by which angels fell" (Greene, 2019, p. 92). His attempts to escape were half-hearted because of this pride. When summoned by the boy to attend the "dying woman," he is torn between catching the *General Obregón*, his chance to escape persecution, and fulfilling his priestly duty. Like the king of a West African tribe, the slave of his people... the stranger got up as though unwillingly he had been

summoned to an occasion he could not pass by" (pp. 11-13). In a moment of dramatic irony, mestizo taunts him: "You think you're very fine... helping your enemies. That's Christian, isn't it?" (p. 96).

Despite the danger and his desire to flee, the priest's conscience compelled him to act. When Coral asks why he cannot simply surrender or renounce his faith, he replies, "There's the pain. To choose pain like that - it's impossible. And it's my duty not to be caught" (p. 35). His words echo D. H. Lawrence's assertion that modern characters cannot be reduced to "the old stable ego" (Kern, 2011, p. 30). Greene's Priest is far from being a virtue - centered life figure. He did not defend himself against the accusations. He tells the Lieutenant plainly, "I'm not a saint... Oh no. Martyrs are not like me" (p. 195). Yet, unlike the Mestizo, he insists, "I'm not as dishonest as you think I am" (p. 198). Greene suggests that spiritual growth requires self-absolution and honest self-examination. Throughout the novel, the priest emerges as a modern hero set against Young Juan, the mestizo, and the Lieutenant, whose flawed humanity becomes the ground for grace. Even the Marxist Lieutenant concedes, "You aren't a bad fellow. If there's anything I can do for you..." (p. 199).

The fragile humanity affirms that spiritual realism locates divine power within human frailty rather than perfection. As this paradox sharpens, the narrative turns into a deeper contest, whether faith and redemption reside in the authority of institutions or in the lived, uncertain grace of ordinary belief. From here on, Greene begins to contest traditional notions of faith and redemption, shifting the focus from doctrinal certainty to the complexities of lived experience.

IV. **CONTESTING TRADITIONAL NOTIONS OF FAITH AND REDEMPTION**

Graham Greene's *The Power and the glory* is a master class in reimagining traditional religious narratives. Instead of presenting a saintly, morally upright protagonist, Greene offers an anti-hero: a deeply flawed, alcoholic, lustful, and self-pitying fugitive who paradoxically becomes the novel's moral and spiritual center. His spiritual journey challenged the conventional ideas of holiness and redemption. This tension allows Greene to interrogate the meaning

of faith and salvation. As Drabble (1985) observes, Greene's work is marked by "moral dilemma... attempts to distinguish 'good or evil' from right or wrong," and a persistent focus on "seedy locations" that give his fiction its distinctive tone (p. 415).

Unlike traditional realist heroes, whose stature rests on moral character, Greene, writing as a modernist, creates a "new kind of hero," an anti-hero whose stature is defined by his "hard, true and enlightened existence" (Kern, 2011, p. 34). Although critics have compared the priest's journey with Christ's Passion, Death, and Resurrection, his character is nothing like Christ. He is unmistakably an anti-hero. Greene's portrayal is "less about moral character and more about creativity and fulfillment" (Kern, 2011, p. 34).

Consequently, the Priest's weaknesses are not obstacles to grace; they are grounds for salvation. Traditional saints are paragons of virtue; Greene's Priest is "neo-heroic" (Kern, 2011, p. 34). He is a drunkard who fathered a child with a parishioner. He refuses to surrender because he fears death: "I am frightened... There's the pain. To choose pain like that, it's impossible" (Greene, 2019, p. 35). He stays in Tabasco, not out of duty but pride. His attempts to flee were marked by feelings of unworthiness. To a realist critic, he lacks "ethical nobility" and resembles nothing like Young Juan (Kern, 2011, p. 34). However, Greene insists that grace operates precisely through a spiritual breakdown. The priest's awareness of his sin makes him more compassionate, human, and capable of understanding suffering. He becomes a saint not because he is pure but because he continues to choose service despite his impurity.

Greene rejects the triumphalist idealism of heroes modeled after Jesus. Priests' sense of failure becomes a measure of their spiritual authenticity. In the prison cell, he confesses to the pious woman that he is a bad priest: "The eight hard hopeless years seemed to him to be only a caricature of service: a few communions, a few confessions, and an endless bad example" (Greene, 2019, p. 207). He believed that his sacrament was contaminated by his moral and spiritual infidelities. Even at the moment of execution, he feels he has betrayed God and his people, praying that God send "someone more worthwhile to suffer for."

Paradoxically, Greene uses this self-loathing, “physically unattractive, sexually unconventional, impotent and cowardly neo-hero” to critique perfectionist versions of faith. The priest’s humility and his refusal to see himself as holy makes him spiritually credible. He embodies the idea that holiness is not self-confidence but self-emptying. In the traditional sense, his final act of sacrifice is not heroic. Christianity demands singularity of purpose, modeled after Christ, who is “the way.” However, the Priest’s life is marked by “discontinuity, wrong turns and dead ends” (Kern, 2011, p. 41). When he returns to hear the confession of a dying criminal, he knows that it is a trap. He goes anyway, not out of courage but out of duty and compassion. From his introduction at the harbor to his execution, he never becomes brave, never overcomes his flaws, and never transforms into an idealized martyr like Young Juan. Instead, he remains flawed yet chooses the good and possibly the human. Greene suggests that redemption lies in fidelity, rather than perfection.

The state’s persecution sanctifies him. “You’re a danger. That’s why we kill you. I have nothing against you... as a man,” the Lieutenant tells him (Greene, 2019, p. 191). The government seeks to eradicate the Church by eliminating priests, yet the whisky priest’s very existence—weak, lustful, drunken, wandering, hunted—reveals the absurdity of their fear. With the help of Lieutenant and Mestizo, he became a symbol of endurance. “I’d rather be caught,” he tells Coral (Greene, 2019 p. 35). His spiritual stubbornness appears in the services that he continues to offer at great personal risk. His sermon in Carmen marks the climax of his spiritual awakening: “It hadn’t after a while seemed to matter very much whether he was damned or not, so long as these others...” knew about God (p. 66). As the police approach, he declares, “Heaven is where there is no jefe, no unjust laws, no taxes, no soldiers and no hunger” (p. 67). His faith persists in unlikely vessels such as Coral Fellows, Mr. Tench, his parishioners, the American Yankee, and even the Lieutenant. His “sainthood” is almost accidental: he becomes holy because the world tries to crush him, not because he tries to be holy.

In *The Power and the glory*, Greene redefines spiritual biography as solidarity with human suffering rather than “a continuous organic unfolding in life” (Kern, 2011, p. 41). Unlike Lieutenant and Young Juan, Priest’s greatest strength is not virtue, but empathy. He understands poverty; he lived there before becoming a priest and for seven years as a fugitive. He knows shame, fathering a child, begging for brandy, is unable to comfort, and defend Brigitta when she is mocked by other children. He knows of hunger, fighting a dog for a bone at the Fellows’ abandoned house, taking the last cube of sugar from a dead child’s mouth to survive (Greene, 2019. p. 155). His flaws bring him closer to his people, because he shares their weaknesses. This is in stark contrast to sanctity narratives¹⁰, where saints are set apart from ordinary life. Greene’s message is bold, prophetic, and revolutionary: a saint is not someone above humanity but someone deeply human.

The execution of the whisky priest and the quiet arrival of another unnamed priest crystallize Greene’s theological claim that grace operates through imperfections. The newcomer’s simple declaration, “I am a priest” (p. 220), signals that the sacramental mission endures beyond the flawed man who carried it. For young Luis, this arrival confirms that the whisky priest’s compromised ministry still holds deep meaning for the community. The appearance of a new priest also intimates the glory denied to the whisky priest himself: although stripped of purity, honor, and triumph, his vocation proves continuous and mysteriously fruitful.

Despite his physical weakness, sexual lapses, and moral ambiguity, he remains more spiritually vital than the “silly” Young Juan because, for Greene, as for Lawrence and many modernists, God works through broken instruments, fractured minds, and wounded bodies. Thus, redemption emerges as communal inheritance rather than individual achievement. The whisky priest’s life ultimately testifies that faith persists not through perfect leaders but through persistent, imperfect ones, whose frailty becomes the medium of grace.

¹⁰ Classical sanctity narratives typically portray holiness as a linear ascent toward moral perfection, “a continuous organic folding in life” (Kern, 2011, p. 41). Greene deliberately overturns this model. As Sherry (1974)

observes, Greene’s saints are “not models of perfection but figures in whom grace works through failure (p. 112), Making the whisky priest’s flawed, suffering humanity not a deviation from sanctity but its very condition.

Greene uses the whisky priest to argue that holiness is compatible with weakness, redemption is possible even for the deeply flawed, faith is not about moral perfection but moral persistence, and grace works through human imperfection, not despite it. This is why the protagonist “becomes a saint almost by default,” not because he embodies traditional virtue, but because he embodies radical, reluctant, stumbling fidelity (Maher, 2015, p. 311). Like Conrad in *Lord Jim*, Greene “probes aesthetic and existential questions more than moral ones,” asking that one lives an authentic life rather than a conventional, courageous or moral one (Kern, 2011, p. 37).

The historical and physical settings of the novel explore how faith persists amid institutional collapse and personal failure. Parents yawn prayers to accompany their dead children. The treasury now stands where the Church once stood (Greene, 2019, p. 1), and Mr. Tench, though not a Christian himself recalls, “When they sacked the church, it didn’t feel right...” (p. 7). The whisky priest is not a model of virtue, yet it is precisely through his imperfections that Greene redefines grace.

Greene also critiques the religious biographical tradition using the subplot of Young Juan as a structural echo of virtue literature. In contrast, Priest’s death is quiet. Instead of executing him in the open cemetery, the jefe tells Mr. Tench, “It was better not to this time. There might have been a demonstration” (Greene, 2019, p. 215). The whisky priest is a good man, but because he is a priest, he must die. His death lacks the triumphant declarations of the traditional saints’ lives. However, his sacrifice, symbolized by the vulture circling overhead, suggests that sainthood lies not in perfection, but in the courage to continue when faith feels the most fragile. Greene weaves irony, biblical allusion, and narrative structure to challenge the religious biographical tradition of redemption and sanctity, portraying the “romantic model as romantic biology” and exposing the naïveté of idealized spiritual purpose (Kern, 2011, p. 41).

However, the author uses the whisky priest’s contradictory nature to illuminate the paradox of grace: redemption is not reserved only for the morally perfect but may emerge through flawed persistence and reluctant courage. On the day of his execution, the priest is gripped by fear, fear of pain, and fear of how

long it will last. He clutches an empty brandy flask, “trying to remember an Act of Contrition. ‘O God, I am sorry and beg pardon for all my sins...’” (Greene, 2019, p. 208). He feels remorse as failure. Young Juan, by contrast, prays “not for himself, but for his enemies...” (p. 217). The juxtaposition is deliberate; Greene dismantles the edifying narrative of martyrdom. The Priest’s sanctity is steeped in irony because he is betrayed by someone he once tried to help, and his death is quiet and uncelebrated, a stark contrast to the virtue – centered life in the children’s storybook that opens the novel. Greene subverts the heroic narrative by offering a portrait of grace that is gritty, reluctant, and deeply humane.

The novel’s opening chapter, “The Port,” establishes an ironic trajectory. The priest introduces himself as a “quack” doctor, a desperate disguise in a regime where priesthood is punishable by death. His deception was both necessary and tragic. His casual invocation, “O God. Ora pro nobis,” ironically set the stage for his spiritual journey. When Mr. Tench questions his faith, the Priest quickly replies, “No, no. Just an expression. I don’t believe in anything like that” (Greene, 2019, p. 4). Yet, this denial foreshadows a deeper entanglement: whether by fate or faith, he is drawn into a web of moral responsibility both as a doctor and as a priest.

The Priest’s first decisive moment of reluctant compassion occurs when he must choose between escape and service. Faced with a dying woman, he cannot turn away. Greene reveals not only his inadequacies, drunkenness, cowardice, and lust, but also his humanity. Drinking has become second nature. He risks death for a shot of brandy, endures prison for carrying outlawed liquor, and collects money from impoverished villagers for sacraments to spend only on alcohol. Through this deeply flawed figure, Greene crafts a theology of brokenness: grace seeps through cracks, and even the most compromised soul can become a vessel of redemption.

Biblical allusions have deepened this contradiction. The Priest’s journey echoes Christ-like imagery: he is “called back” three times, mirroring Peter’s three denials and Christ’s thrice-asked question, “Do you love me?” (*King James*. John 21: 15 - 25). Greene also plays with the hymn of praise, “the power and the glory,” to question whether

institutional religion embodies these ideals or whether they are found in quiet acts of compassion.

Thus, the Priest's repeated calling back does not merely delay his escape; it charts the reluctant rhythm of his path toward martyrdom, binding hesitation to destiny. His first calling occurs when he is summoned to the dying woman in "The Port," rising "as though unwillingly he had been summoned to an occasion he couldn't pass by" (Greene, 2019, p. 11). His second call occurs when he returns to baptize a child despite knowing the danger. As Drabble (1985) notes, "the appalling strangeness of the mercy of God" becomes central to Greene's fiction. His third calling, to hear the American gringo's confession, closes the door to his escape and leads directly to his execution. Mestizo, like Judas, who leads him to this, parallels Christ's betrayal. Like Christ, he walks into betrayal and death in the obedience of His Will.

Greene critiques institutional religion by showing that its absence exposes both its limitations and latent potential. Institutional religion is stripped of authority, yet grace persists through human vulnerability. As an institution, the Church is largely invisible or impotent. Luis' father tells him that they have been deserted. However, in this vacuum, grace emerges through flawed human action. Greene's theological vision is radical: glory is not found in triumph, but in surrender; grace is in sin. The priest's martyrdom is quiet, uncelebrated, and morally ambiguous.

The whisky priest dies not as a saint but as a sinner who refuses to abandon his flock, a modernist "neo-hero." This sharply contrasts with the sanitized martyrdoms in the children's storybook, where "a smile of complete adoration and happiness passed over Juan's face" (p. 117). Greene suggests that true spiritual power lies in broken persistence in the recognition of bodily desires, rather than institutional purity.

The novel's final irony emerges in the question of whether the whisky priest's life was a failure or hidden triumph. Young Luis, disappointed with Lieutenant, becomes the continuity of faith. In his dream, "the dead priest winked at him," and upon waking, "he knew that it was his duty." When the new priest arrives, "I am a priest", Luis opens the door eagerly and kisses his hand (p. 220). This quiet gesture

becomes a living doxology: "For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever." Greene echoes Nietzsche's concept of self-overcoming through the priest's endless "self-questioning and reconstruction," revealing the "instabilities" that characterize modernist protagonists (Kern, 2011, p. 30). Like the executed anti-hero, the new priest has no name, nationality, race, or family, and is another anonymous vessel of grace.

By invoking the Eulogy to God in the title and then dismantling its traditional associations, Greene invites readers to reconsider where holiness truly resides, not in cathedrals or creeds, but in the trembling hands of a man who chooses compassion over escape. Each missed opportunity strips away the priest's chance of safety and forces him deeper into spiritual service. "I shall miss it... I am meant to miss it" (Greene, p. 11). After the sermon in Concepción, he again narrowly escaped capture. "Why don't they catch me?" he cries. Greene uses Christ's passion to challenge traditional notions of sainthood.

Frederick R. Karl observes that "the humiliation of the whisky priest... transforms him" (1972, p. 958). The whisky priest becomes a vessel of grace, not through purity but through persistent sacrifice. The structure of the novel reinforces this subversion. It opens and closes Young Juan's hagiographical story. Greene juxtaposes this sanitized martyrdom with the morally ambiguous reality of the whisky priest's life and death. By ending with another priest arriving, Greene leaves readers questioning whether redemption is a singular event or an ongoing imperfect process.

V. CONCLUSION

Greene's *The Power and the Glory* endures because it refuses the consolations of certainty. Through the whisky priest, fearful, lustful, alcoholic, proud, and yet persistently faithful, Greene dismantles the romanticized ideals of sainthood and replaces them with a modernist vision of holiness grounded in human frailty. The novel's paradoxes, between purity and sin, courage and cowardice, institutional collapse, and sacramental endurance, reveal a theology in which grace emerges not despite imperfection but through it. The whisky priest's life demonstrates that spiritual authenticity is not measured by moral

consistency, but by the stubborn willingness to serve amid weakness.

Greene's narrative structure reinforces this vision. The juxtaposition of Young Juan's hagiographical perfection with the whisky priest's moral ambiguity exposes the inadequacy of idealized martyrdom. The Lieutenant's ideological certainty collapsed before the Priest's reluctant compassion. Mestizo's betrayal becomes an unlikely doorway to the priest's final act of service. Even the Church's institutional failure, silence, absence, and compromised representatives cannot extinguish the people's hunger for grace. In this world, holiness is not institutional but embodied, not triumphant but trembling, and not pure but persistent.

The whisky priest's death, stripped of spectacle and sanctity, is the novel's most profound irony. He dies, believing that he has failed, yet his flawed ministry awakens faith in young Luis, whose quiet gesture of kissing the new priest's hand signals the continuation of a tradition that the state cannot suppress. Greene suggests that grace is unpredictable, communal, and often invisible to those who mediate it. The whisky priest's legacy survives not because he was virtuous but because he was present, because he kept moving, serving, and loving, even when he believed himself was damned. *The Power and the Glory* endure as a radical, unsettling, and deeply compassionate meditation on the mystery of salvation in a modern world fractured by doubt, desire, and the longing for God.

Ultimately, Greene offers a vision of redemption that is radically human. Ultimately, Greene positioned himself among the most incisive Christian realists in the twentieth century. The whisky priest's body, hungry, trembling, and sinful, becomes an unlikely site where divine mercy takes root. His story affirms that sanctity is not the achievement of the strong but the vocation of the broken. By weaving irony, paradox, and modernist fragmentation into a narrative of spiritual endurance, Greene redefined what it meant to be a hero in the twentieth century. The whisky priest's life, like the novel itself, insists that grace is found not in the power and glory of institutions, but in the fragile persistence of those who continue to love in the dark.

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The Politics of Ordinary Childhood: Nandini Nayar and Contemporary Indian Children's Literature

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 06 July 2026; Received in revised form: 01 Aug 2026; Accepted: 05 Aug 2026; Available online: 09 Aug 2026 Keywords— Contemporary Indian children's literature, Nandini Nayar, Childhood Studies, feminist ethics, everyday childhood ©2026 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/).	Contemporary Indian children's literature has increasingly moved away from overt moral instruction towards narratives that privilege the everyday experiences of children. While existing scholarship has examined questions of identity, nation, environmental awareness and gender representation, comparatively little attention has been paid to the ways in which ordinary domestic spaces become sites of ethical and social learning. This paper examines a selection of Nandini Nayar's children's books to argue that her fiction relocates questions of agency, care and social responsibility from extraordinary events to the routines of everyday childhood. Through narratives centred on friendship, family relationships, food, festivals and creative play, Nayar presents children not as passive recipients of adult knowledge but as active participants in shaping the moral worlds they inhabit. Drawing upon Childhood Studies and feminist ethics, the paper analyses how Nayar's narratives challenge conventional pedagogical hierarchies by positioning children as observers, interpreters and, at times, educators of adults. Rather than advancing an overt feminist agenda, her stories normalise equitable relationships through collaborative domestic practices, shared decision-making and the rejection of rigid gender roles. Boys participate in activities traditionally associated with care while girls exercise creativity, initiative and ethical judgement without being framed as exceptional or rebellious figures. In doing so, the narratives replace prescriptive moral lessons with forms of learning grounded in dialogue, empathy and lived experience. The paper further argues that the politics of Nayar's fiction lies precisely in its apparent ordinariness. Kitchens, classrooms, neighbourhoods and festivals emerge as spaces where values are negotiated and traditions are reimagined through children's imaginative engagement with the world around them. Such representations offer an alternative model of childhood that privileges participation over obedience and ethical reflection over didactic instruction. By locating social transformation within the everyday, Nandini Nayar's work contributes significantly to the evolving landscape of contemporary Indian children's literature and expands current understandings of feminist practice in writing for young readers.

Introduction

Children's literature has long occupied an uneasy position within literary studies. Often regarded as a

vehicle for instruction rather than serious artistic expression, it has historically been evaluated in terms of its usefulness in shaping children's behaviour and

moral character. Recent scholarship, however, has challenged this assumption by demonstrating that literature written for young readers does far more than communicate ethical lessons. Children's texts participate in wider cultural debates concerning identity, citizenship, gender, family and power. As Jacqueline Rose famously observes, "children's fiction sets up the child as an outsider to its own process, and then aims, unashamedly, to take the child in" (Rose 2). Rose's argument foregrounds the fact that children's literature is always mediated by adult assumptions about childhood. It therefore offers valuable insight into the cultural values a society seeks to reproduce, negotiate or contest.

Within the Indian context, children's literature has undergone significant transformation over the past three decades. Earlier works often privileged overt moral instruction, nationalist ideals and simplified binaries between right and wrong. Such narratives reflected broader educational concerns in post-independence India where children's books frequently functioned as instruments of character formation. More recent publishing initiatives, particularly those associated with independent publishers such as Tulika Books, Pratham Books and Karadi Tales, have gradually expanded both the thematic and aesthetic possibilities of writing for young readers. Questions of diversity, disability, environmental awareness, multilingualism and gender have assumed increasing importance. At the same time, contemporary authors have begun to move away from explicitly didactic storytelling towards narratives that privilege the ordinary experiences of childhood.

Among the writers contributing to this shift is Nandini Nayar, whose work consistently centres the everyday worlds inhabited by children. Rather than constructing dramatic adventures or overtly moral narratives, her stories unfold through familiar domestic routines, school friendships, festivals, shared meals and imaginative play. These apparently ordinary settings become spaces in which children negotiate relationships, develop ethical judgement and engage creatively with the social world around them. Such an approach distinguishes Nayar's fiction from earlier traditions of children's writing that frequently relied upon adult authority or exemplary protagonists to communicate moral values. Instead,

ethical understanding emerges through observation, conversation and collaborative experience.

Despite Nayar's growing reputation as a significant writer of children's fiction, critical engagement with her work remains limited. Existing scholarship on contemporary Indian children's literature has largely concentrated on questions of multicultural representation, gender stereotypes, nationalism or environmental education. While these concerns have generated important discussions, relatively little attention has been paid to the ways in which contemporary texts construct childhood itself as a space of ethical agency. In particular, there remains insufficient examination of how domestic life, friendship and everyday routines function as sites where children actively participate in the production of knowledge rather than merely receiving instruction from adults.

This paper seeks to address that gap by examining a selection of Nandini Nayar's children's books through the intersecting frameworks of Childhood Studies and feminist ethics. Developments within the sociology of childhood have fundamentally altered the understanding of children as social actors. Allison James and Alan Prout argue that childhood should be understood not as a universal biological stage but as "a social construction" that varies historically and culturally (James and Prout 7). Similarly, Marah Gubar challenges developmental models that position children as incomplete adults, proposing instead a "kinship model" in which children and adults participate in shared forms of understanding while remaining distinct from one another (Gubar 458). These theoretical perspectives provide a productive framework for reading Nayar's fiction, where children repeatedly demonstrate competence, creativity and moral reasoning without being represented as miniature adults.

The paper also draws upon feminist ethics, particularly the work of Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, to examine how care, empathy and relationships operate within Nayar's narratives. Gilligan argues that moral development cannot be understood solely through abstract principles of justice because ethical decisions are equally shaped by relationships and responsibilities of care (Gilligan 19). Noddings similarly locates ethical life within practices of attentiveness, reciprocity and human connection

rather than detached moral rules (Noddings 14). These ideas illuminate the ethical structure of Nayar's fiction, where cooperation, listening and shared responsibility consistently replace authoritarian forms of instruction. Importantly, such values are not presented as exclusively feminine virtues but emerge as the foundation of democratic relationships within families, classrooms and neighbourhood communities.

This paper argues that Nandini Nayar reimagines childhood as a site of ethical agency by locating social transformation within the ordinary spaces of everyday life. Rather than relying upon overt moral instruction or exceptional acts of heroism, her fiction constructs ethical and feminist values through domestic participation, friendship, creative labour and collaborative learning. Kitchens, classrooms and festivals become spaces where authority is negotiated rather than imposed, allowing children to shape the moral worlds they inhabit alongside adults. In doing so, Nayar offers an alternative vision of contemporary Indian childhood that privileges participation over obedience, dialogue over instruction and shared responsibility over hierarchical authority. Her work therefore contributes significantly to the evolving landscape of Indian children's literature by demonstrating that the politics of childhood often resides not in extraordinary acts of resistance but in the quiet transformations of everyday life.

Contemporary Indian Children's Literature and the Politics of Everyday Childhood: A Review of Scholarship

Children's literature has increasingly become an important area of literary and cultural inquiry, particularly since the emergence of Childhood Studies in the late twentieth century. Earlier criticism frequently regarded literature for children as a secondary literary form whose primary purpose was moral instruction. More recent scholarship, however, has challenged this assumption by demonstrating that children's literature is deeply implicated in the production of social, political and cultural meanings. Peter Hunt argues that children's books "are inevitably didactic because they are written for children by adults" (Hunt 4). The significance of children's literature therefore lies not merely in the stories it tells but in the assumptions it makes about

childhood, authority and the relationship between young readers and the adult world.

Much of the foundational scholarship on children's literature has concentrated on exposing the ideological work performed by texts written for young readers. Jacqueline Rose's influential study *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* contends that children's literature is shaped by adult desires to construct and regulate childhood rather than simply represent it (Rose 1-2). Perry Nodelman similarly argues that children's fiction communicates cultural values through narrative structures that often remain invisible to readers. He observes that children's books "teach children how to think about the world" by presenting particular understandings of normality, behaviour and social relationships (Nodelman 157). Such arguments have encouraged scholars to read children's literature as a cultural discourse rather than a purely pedagogical genre.

The emergence of Childhood Studies further complicated earlier understandings of children as passive recipients of adult knowledge. Allison James and Alan Prout argue that childhood is "a social construction" rather than a universal biological category, emphasising that children's experiences are shaped by historical, social and cultural conditions (James and Prout 7). This shift redirected scholarly attention from what adults teach children to the ways children themselves participate in creating meaning. Marah Gubar extends this argument by rejecting models that define children through lack or incompleteness. Instead, she proposes a "kinship model" that recognises children and adults as sharing many capacities while remaining different in experience and perspective (Gubar 458). Such theoretical developments have profoundly influenced recent readings of children's literature by foregrounding children's agency rather than their dependence.

These developments have also shaped scholarship on Indian children's literature. Earlier histories of the field frequently identified nationalist education and moral instruction as dominant concerns during the colonial and immediate post-independence periods. Stories often celebrated exemplary children whose courage, honesty and obedience were presented as ideals for young readers. While such narratives undoubtedly served important educational purposes,

they also reflected broader cultural expectations that positioned childhood as preparation for responsible citizenship.

The landscape of Indian children's publishing has altered considerably since the 1990s. Independent publishers such as Tulika Books, Pratham Books and Karadi Tales have introduced texts that foreground linguistic diversity, regional cultures, disability, environmental awareness and questions of gender without relying upon overt moral instruction. Scholars have observed that these publishers have expanded both the thematic range and aesthetic possibilities of Indian children's literature by privileging everyday experience over grand narratives of heroism or national identity. Rather than presenting children as passive learners, many contemporary texts depict them as curious observers, imaginative thinkers and active participants in family and community life.

Within feminist criticism, discussions of children's literature have frequently centred upon representation. Earlier studies often examined the persistence of gender stereotypes in stories, particularly the association of girls with domesticity and boys with adventure, independence and public life. While such critiques remain important, more recent feminist scholarship has increasingly questioned whether the presence of empowered female protagonists alone is sufficient to describe a text as feminist. Roberta Seelinger Trites argues that children's literature should be understood in relation to the power structures it reproduces or challenges rather than simply the gender of its central characters (Trites 19). This perspective encourages critics to examine how authority operates within narratives and how relationships between adults and children are negotiated.

Equally significant has been the growing influence of feminist ethics upon literary criticism. Carol Gilligan's critique of universal models of moral development demonstrated that ethical judgement frequently emerges through relationships of care rather than abstract principles of justice (Gilligan 19). Nel Noddings similarly argues that ethical life begins in attentiveness, reciprocity and human relationships rather than rigid moral codes (Noddings 14). Although these theorists do not write specifically about children's literature, their work offers

productive ways of understanding texts in which cooperation, empathy and shared responsibility become central ethical values.

Despite these important developments, scholarship on contemporary Indian children's literature continues to privilege a relatively small number of recurring concerns. Questions of nationalism, multiculturalism, environmental education, language politics and gender representation have received considerable attention. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to the ordinary spaces through which children's everyday lives unfold. Kitchens, classrooms, neighbourhoods, festivals and routines often function merely as settings within existing criticism rather than as sites where ethical identities are actively negotiated.

The limited scholarship available on Nandini Nayar reflects a similar pattern. Although her books are widely read in schools and published by leading children's publishers, they have attracted relatively little sustained academic analysis. Existing discussions generally describe her work in terms of accessibility, child-centred narration or educational value. Such observations are useful but remain largely descriptive. They do not sufficiently examine the ideological significance of her narratives or the ways in which they reconceptualise childhood itself.

The present study addresses this gap by reading Nandini Nayar's fiction through the combined perspectives of Childhood Studies and feminist ethics. Rather than treating domestic life as a neutral background, it argues that the everyday constitutes the primary arena in which ethical understanding is formed. Cooking, friendship, festivals, creative play and family conversations become practices through which children negotiate authority, reshape traditions and participate in the production of knowledge. In shifting attention from extraordinary events to ordinary experience, Nandini Nayar offers a distinctive contribution to contemporary Indian children's literature that has not yet received adequate scholarly attention. The following section therefore establishes the theoretical framework through which these recurring patterns may be understood.

The Politics of the Ordinary: Domestic Space as Ethical Space

One of the most distinctive features of Nandini Nayar's children's fiction is her sustained attention to the ordinary rhythms of everyday life. Unlike conventional children's narratives that rely on adventure, fantasy or dramatic conflict to communicate moral values, Nayar locates ethical growth within familiar domestic spaces. Homes, kitchens, classrooms, neighbourhoods and festivals are not merely settings through which the narrative unfolds; they become sites where children learn to negotiate relationships, exercise creativity and participate in the moral life of the family and community. In doing so, her stories suggest that ethical development emerges not through explicit instruction but through participation in everyday practices.

Across the books examined in this study, domestic space functions as an active environment of learning rather than a background to childhood. Parents do not appear as unquestionable authorities who transmit moral truths to passive children. Instead, they engage in conversations, answer questions and frequently learn alongside their children. This collaborative model of family life represents a significant departure from the didactic tradition that has long characterised children's literature in India. Moral understanding is presented as something that develops through interaction, observation and shared experience rather than through rules imposed from above.

Food occupies a particularly important place in Nayar's narratives. Meals, cooking and eating become occasions for dialogue, experimentation and collective participation. In *What Should I Make*, the simple act of making chapatis is transformed into an imaginative activity through which the child participates in household work. Rather than treating cooking as routine domestic labour, the narrative presents it as an opportunity for creativity and learning. The child's curiosity is encouraged, mistakes are accepted as part of the process and the kitchen becomes a space where knowledge is shared rather than controlled. Importantly, the story does not present domestic work as the exclusive responsibility of women. The participation of a young boy in cooking quietly unsettles conventional assumptions about gendered labour without announcing itself as a lesson in equality. Equality is normalised through practice rather than articulated as ideology.

This emphasis on participation rather than instruction recurs in *Mini's Friend*. Much of the narrative revolves around ordinary family conversations concerning school, festivals, clothing and food. Mini repeatedly introduces new ideas that she has learnt from her friend Anika, prompting curiosity as well as amusement among the adults in her family. Initially, these suggestions appear to be simple instances of childhood imitation. However, the narrative gradually reveals that imitation develops into independent creativity. Inspired by conversations about Diwali celebrations, Mini invents the idea of the "sparkler diya", a decorative lamp that captures the beauty of fireworks without producing noise or pollution. Later she develops the "Sweet Red Dhadam", a sweet shaped like a firecracker that preserves the excitement of the festival while eliminating its harmful effects. These inventions emerge not from adult instruction but from the child's own imaginative engagement with her surroundings.

The significance of these episodes lies in the way they transform tradition from within rather than rejecting it altogether. Contemporary children's literature frequently addresses environmental concerns by presenting clear moral oppositions between responsible and irresponsible behaviour. Nayar adopts a more nuanced approach. Mini does not condemn Diwali or dismiss the pleasures associated with the festival. Instead, she seeks creative alternatives that retain celebration while reducing environmental harm. The sparkler diya recreates the visual pleasure of fireworks through art and craft, while the Sweet Red Dhadam preserves the excitement of crackers through food. Festivals therefore become sites of innovation where children negotiate inherited cultural practices in response to contemporary concerns.

The domestic environment also functions as a space in which authority becomes increasingly shared. Throughout *Mini's Friend*, Amma, Baba and Manoj often question Mini about Anika's ideas with gentle humour. Their curiosity gradually replaces scepticism as they recognise the value of Mini's observations. By the end of the story, it is not only Mini who has changed. The entire family participates in painting sparkler diyas and preparing the newly invented sweets, demonstrating that the child's imagination has reshaped family traditions. Ethical influence thus

moves in multiple directions rather than flowing exclusively from adults to children. Nayar presents learning as reciprocal, suggesting that families are communities in which all members contribute to shared knowledge.

The school occupies a similarly important position within these narratives. Teachers are portrayed less as disciplinary figures than as facilitators who encourage children's creativity. In *Mini's Friend*, Ritu Miss welcomes Mini's suggestion for a new Diwali sweet and develops it collaboratively with the class. The classroom becomes an extension of the home where learning takes place through participation rather than memorisation. Such representations challenge rigid distinctions between formal education and everyday experience. The child's imagination is not confined to play but is recognised as a legitimate source of knowledge capable of enriching both school and family life.

Another notable aspect of Nayar's fiction is its treatment of material culture. Objects such as chapatis, diyas, lanterns, sweets, school supplies and clothing acquire symbolic importance because they mediate relationships between people. They are not merely decorative details that create realism. Instead, they function as everyday artefacts through which values are negotiated. Mini's desire for a glittering red skirt, for example, initially appears to reflect childhood imitation. Yet the narrative eventually demonstrates that her choices are inseparable from friendship, identity and participation in shared celebrations. Similarly, the handcrafted sparkler diyas become symbols of collaborative creativity rather than simple festival decorations.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Nandini Nayar's domestic worlds is the absence of overt moralising. Parents seldom deliver lengthy lectures and children are rarely rewarded or punished in conventional ways. Ethical understanding develops gradually through conversation, experimentation and reflection. Conflicts are resolved through cooperation rather than authority, and mistakes become opportunities for learning rather than occasions for discipline. This narrative strategy respects the intellectual capacities of young readers by allowing them to infer values from situations rather than receiving predetermined conclusions.

By locating ethical development within ordinary domestic life, Nayar expands the possibilities of contemporary Indian children's literature. The home is represented not as a private sphere isolated from wider social concerns but as the place where larger questions of environmental responsibility, gender, creativity and community are first encountered and negotiated. Everyday activities such as cooking, making crafts, celebrating festivals or sharing meals acquire political significance because they shape children's understanding of relationships and responsibility. The ordinary therefore becomes a site of quiet but meaningful transformation.

Taken together, these narratives suggest that meaningful social change begins with everyday practices rather than extraordinary acts of heroism. Nandini Nayar's fiction invites young readers to recognise that ethical responsibility is embedded within the seemingly ordinary routines of daily life. Through shared work, creative imagination and reciprocal learning, her stories redefine domestic space as a dynamic arena where children actively participate in shaping both family life and the wider social world.

Children's Agency and the Reversal of Pedagogical Authority

One of the defining characteristics of Nandini Nayar's children's fiction is its rejection of the conventional hierarchy that places adults as unquestioned sources of knowledge and children as passive recipients of instruction. While many traditional works of children's literature rely upon adult authority to communicate moral lessons, Nayar consistently imagines childhood as a space of intellectual competence and ethical participation. Her child protagonists are observant, reflective and capable of influencing the people around them. Rather than positioning adults as teachers and children as learners, her narratives construct learning as a reciprocal process in which knowledge moves in multiple directions. This reversal of pedagogical authority forms one of the most significant contributions of her work to contemporary Indian children's literature.

Historically, children's literature has been closely associated with education and discipline. Stories frequently conclude with explicit moral lessons, while

adult characters guide children towards socially acceptable behaviour. Such narratives reinforce a hierarchical understanding of childhood in which adults possess knowledge and experience while children gradually acquire both through obedience and instruction. Nandini Nayar departs from this tradition by refusing to present children merely as individuals who must be corrected or guided. Instead, she depicts them as active participants in interpreting the world around them. Her protagonists ask questions, notice inconsistencies, imagine alternatives and frequently reshape the perspectives of the adults with whom they interact.

The agency exercised by Nayar's child characters is neither rebellious nor confrontational. Unlike many contemporary narratives that celebrate childhood independence through conflict with adults, Nayar imagines agency as collaborative and relational. Children influence others not by rejecting authority but by participating confidently in conversations and shared experiences. Their observations encourage adults to reconsider familiar assumptions, making learning a collective rather than unilateral activity. This subtle redistribution of authority distinguishes her fiction from both traditional didactic narratives and more overtly oppositional representations of childhood.

Mini's Friend provides one of the clearest examples of this pedagogical reversal. Throughout the narrative, Mini returns home with stories about her friend Anika. These stories initially appear to be ordinary accounts of school life, yet they gradually become catalysts for discussion within the family. Amma, Baba and Manoj repeatedly ask Mini to explain Anika's ideas, customs and imaginative suggestions. Their questions reveal genuine curiosity rather than condescension. The adults do not dismiss Mini's observations as childish fantasy. Instead, they recognise that her experiences provide access to perspectives unavailable to them. Mini thus becomes a mediator between different ways of understanding the world.

Significantly, the narrative does not portray this transformation as dramatic or revolutionary. Authority shifts gradually through everyday conversation. Mini's explanations alter the family's attitudes not because she possesses exceptional wisdom but because her observations are treated with

seriousness and respect. This representation challenges the assumption that childhood is defined primarily by dependence. Instead, knowledge is shown to emerge through attentive listening irrespective of age.

The Diwali episodes illustrate this process particularly well. Mini's proposal for environmentally friendly celebrations is initially inspired by Anika's ideas, yet she soon develops these suggestions through her own imagination. Her inventions are neither ignored nor corrected by adults. Rather, they become the basis for new family traditions. The sparkler diya and the Sweet Red Dhadam are eventually embraced by both family members and teachers, demonstrating that children's creativity can reshape established cultural practices. Learning therefore flows from child to adult as readily as from adult to child.

This movement of knowledge also transforms the role of parents within the narrative. Amma and Baba remain caring and responsible figures, yet they are not represented as infallible authorities. They frequently admit uncertainty, ask questions and participate alongside Mini in creative activities. Their willingness to learn reflects a model of parenting based upon dialogue rather than command. The family consequently becomes a community of learners in which authority is distributed rather than concentrated.

The significance of this representation extends beyond family relationships. Nayar repeatedly portrays educational spaces as environments that encourage participation rather than obedience. Teachers acknowledge children's ideas and often incorporate them into classroom activities. Rather than evaluating children solely through correct answers or disciplined behaviour, schools become places where curiosity and imagination receive equal importance. This portrayal contrasts with more conventional depictions of classrooms as spaces governed by rigid authority and fixed knowledge.

Such narratives also redefine the meaning of competence in childhood. Nayar's protagonists are not celebrated because they possess extraordinary intelligence or exceptional talents. Their competence lies instead in their capacity to observe carefully, empathise with others and think creatively about ordinary situations. They solve problems through

conversation rather than competition and through cooperation rather than individual achievement. This emphasis on everyday competence broadens conventional definitions of intelligence by recognising emotional understanding, creativity and ethical judgement as equally valuable forms of knowledge.

Friendship plays an essential role in this process of learning. In Nayar's fiction, friends do more than provide companionship; they introduce children to unfamiliar experiences, encourage curiosity and expand moral imagination. Mini's relationship with Anika exemplifies this dynamic. Through their friendship, Mini encounters different cultural practices and new ways of celebrating familiar festivals. Rather than simply imitating her friend, she interprets these experiences creatively and adapts them to her own context. Friendship therefore becomes a pedagogical relationship in which children educate one another through shared experience.

The reciprocal nature of learning also challenges conventional assumptions about generational difference. Adults and children are not depicted as occupying entirely separate worlds. Instead, they share common spaces, responsibilities and conversations. Differences in age remain important, yet they do not determine who possesses knowledge or authority. This more democratic vision of family life reflects broader changes in contemporary understandings of childhood, where children are increasingly recognised as social participants capable of contributing meaningfully to collective decision-making.

Another striking aspect of Nayar's work is the absence of punishment as the primary mechanism of moral education. Children are seldom corrected through discipline or fear. When misunderstandings arise, they are resolved through discussion and reflection. Adults encourage explanation rather than unquestioning obedience, allowing children to develop confidence in their own judgement. This narrative strategy places considerable trust in children's ability to reason ethically and arrive at responsible decisions through experience.

Importantly, the agency represented in these stories remains grounded within ordinary life. Nayar's protagonists do not transform society through spectacular acts of heroism. Their influence emerges

through small acts of creativity, kindness and thoughtful participation. They suggest alternatives, ask unexpected questions and encourage adults to reconsider established routines. These apparently modest interventions accumulate to produce meaningful changes within families, classrooms and neighbourhoods. Agency therefore becomes a practice embedded within everyday relationships rather than an exceptional quality possessed by extraordinary children.

This understanding of childhood has significant implications for contemporary Indian children's literature. By repositioning children as contributors rather than recipients of knowledge, Nayar challenges long-standing assumptions about education, authority and moral development. Her fiction suggests that ethical understanding cannot be reduced to lessons delivered by adults. Instead, it emerges through dialogue, collaboration and shared experience. Such an approach acknowledges children's capacity for independent thought while preserving the importance of intergenerational relationships.

Ultimately, Nandini Nayar's stories propose a more democratic model of childhood. Adults continue to provide care, guidance and emotional security, yet they also recognise the value of children's observations and creativity. Children, in turn, participate actively in shaping family traditions, educational practices and everyday ethical decisions. The result is a narrative world in which authority is continually negotiated rather than simply inherited. Through this subtle but significant reversal of pedagogical hierarchy, Nayar reimagines childhood not as preparation for citizenship but as an active and meaningful form of citizenship in itself. Her fiction therefore challenges readers to reconsider who teaches whom and to recognise that learning is most transformative when it is shared across generations.

Quiet Feminism: Care, Creativity and Everyday Resistance

The feminist dimension of Nandini Nayar's children's fiction lies not in overt political declarations or exceptional female protagonists but in its quiet reconfiguration of everyday relationships. Rather than foregrounding resistance through confrontation, her stories normalise equality by presenting care,

creativity and collaboration as shared human values. This subtle approach distinguishes her work from narratives that explicitly seek to challenge patriarchal structures. Instead, Nayar dismantles gender stereotypes by rendering them increasingly irrelevant within the everyday lives of her characters.

Domestic spaces, often regarded as sites where traditional gender roles are reproduced, become spaces of shared participation in Nayar's fiction. Household activities such as cooking, preparing festival decorations and caring for others are represented as collective practices rather than exclusively feminine responsibilities. In *What Should I Make*, the act of preparing chapatis becomes an imaginative exercise in which a young boy participates with enthusiasm. The narrative neither celebrates nor explains this participation as unusual. By presenting domestic work as creative and gender-neutral, the story quietly questions assumptions that have historically associated care work with women.

Similarly, girls in Nayar's fiction possess agency without being represented as extraordinary or rebellious. Mini's confidence emerges through curiosity, empathy and creative thinking rather than through rejection of authority. Her environmentally conscious innovations during Diwali illustrate this approach. Instead of condemning cultural traditions, she imaginatively reshapes them, suggesting alternatives that preserve celebration while promoting responsibility. Such acts demonstrate that meaningful social change often begins with small interventions within familiar spaces rather than dramatic acts of resistance.

Another important aspect of Nayar's feminist vision is the emphasis on relationships rather than individual achievement. Success is rarely measured through competition or personal ambition. Instead, fulfilment arises from cooperation, friendship and mutual respect. Children solve problems collectively, parents remain open to learning from their children and teachers encourage participation instead of unquestioning obedience. This relational ethic challenges hierarchical structures without dismantling the family itself. Authority is redistributed through dialogue and shared experience rather than replaced by conflict.

Nayar also avoids assigning emotional intelligence or caregiving exclusively to female characters. Boys participate in nurturing relationships and creative domestic activities without their masculinity being questioned, while girls demonstrate initiative and leadership without being portrayed as exceptional figures. Equality is therefore embedded within everyday interactions instead of being presented as an ideological lesson. This strategy allows young readers to encounter alternative gender relationships as ordinary aspects of daily life.

The politics of Nandini Nayar's fiction thus resides in its refusal to sensationalise feminism. Her narratives neither reject tradition nor romanticise it. Instead, they encourage children to engage critically with inherited practices through imagination, empathy and participation. In doing so, they offer a model of feminist practice grounded in care, creativity and shared responsibility. Such an approach broadens the understanding of feminist children's literature by demonstrating that resistance can emerge through ordinary acts of collaboration as effectively as through overt political protest.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that Nandini Nayar's children's fiction represents a significant contribution to contemporary Indian children's literature by relocating ethical and social transformation to the ordinary spaces of childhood. Rather than relying upon overt moral instruction or heroic narratives, her stories construct ethical understanding through everyday experiences of family life, friendship, creativity and domestic participation. Kitchens, classrooms, neighbourhoods and festivals become sites where children negotiate relationships, question established assumptions and participate actively in shaping the moral worlds they inhabit.

A close reading of the selected texts demonstrates that Nayar departs from the didactic tradition that has historically influenced much children's writing. Instead of presenting adults as unquestioned authorities and children as passive learners, she imagines learning as a reciprocal process. Parents, teachers and children participate together in conversations, creative activities and shared decision-making. This redistribution of pedagogical authority

challenges conventional understandings of childhood as merely a preparatory stage for adulthood and instead recognises children as competent social actors capable of influencing both family and community.

The paper has also shown that the feminist politics of Nayar's fiction operates through subtle narrative strategies rather than explicit ideological statements. Domestic labour is presented as collaborative rather than gendered, girls exercise creativity and initiative without being framed as exceptional and boys participate naturally in practices of care. Such representations normalise equitable relationships instead of presenting them as extraordinary achievements. Consequently, the narratives replace confrontation with cooperation and instruction with dialogue, suggesting that lasting social change often begins through everyday interactions.

Equally significant is Nayar's treatment of ordinary domestic life as a meaningful political space. The home is not represented as separate from wider social concerns but as the place where environmental responsibility, gender equality, empathy and democratic participation are first experienced and negotiated. Through activities as simple as cooking, making festival decorations or sharing meals, children learn to imagine alternative ways of living together. These quiet transformations reveal that the politics of childhood need not be located in dramatic acts of resistance but may emerge through the cumulative effect of ordinary practices grounded in care and creativity.

Although scholarship on contemporary Indian children's literature has increasingly examined questions of identity, representation and environmental awareness, comparatively little attention has been paid to the ethical possibilities embedded within everyday domestic narratives. By foregrounding the ordinary as a site of agency and social participation, this study offers a different way of reading Nandini Nayar's fiction and contributes to broader discussions within Childhood Studies and feminist literary criticism. Her work demonstrates that children's literature continues to possess the capacity not merely to reflect society but to imagine more inclusive and democratic forms of social life. In doing so, Nandini Nayar redefines childhood as an active space of ethical engagement where learning,

creativity and care become the foundations of both personal growth and collective transformation.

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From Estrangement to Selfhood: Alienation and the Search for Meaning in *The Stranger* and *The Metamorphosis*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 06 July 2026; Received in revised form: 01 Aug 2026; Accepted: 05 Aug 2026; Available online: 09 Aug 2026 Keywords— Alienation, Modern Identity, Existentialism, Absurdism, Franz Kafka ©2026 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/).	The twentieth century witnessed a profound crisis of identity as rapid social, political, and philosophical transformations challenged traditional conceptions of the self and human existence. Against this backdrop, Franz Kafka's <i>The Metamorphosis</i> and Albert Camus' <i>The Stranger</i> emerge as seminal explorations of alienation, exposing the individual's struggle to establish meaning within an indifferent and often incomprehensible world. This study undertakes a comparative examination of these two texts to investigate how alienation shapes modern identity and influences the protagonists' perceptions of self, society, and existence. Employing a qualitative, comparative approach informed by existentialist philosophy, absurdism, and theories of alienation, the study analyzes the experiences of Gregor Samsa and Meursault as representations of the fragmented modern individual. Gregor's metamorphosis symbolizes the dehumanizing effects of social and familial estrangement, while Meursault's emotional detachment and rejection of conventional social values embody the existential confrontation with the absurd. Although the protagonists respond differently to their isolation, both narratives reveal the tension between individual authenticity and the expectations imposed by society. The study argues that Kafka and Camus redefine alienation as more than a condition of social exclusion; they present it as a fundamental aspect of modern consciousness that compels individuals to question identity, freedom, and purpose. By highlighting the collapse of stable meaning and the inadequacy of traditional moral and cultural frameworks, both works illuminate the complexities of the modern human condition. Moreover, this comparative analysis demonstrates that <i>The Metamorphosis</i> and <i>The Stranger</i> remain enduring literary texts that deepen our understanding of alienation and the ongoing search for meaning in an increasingly fragmented world.

Literature Review

The concepts of alienation and modern identity have been widely examined in literary and philosophical studies, particularly in relation to Franz

Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Albert Camus' *The Stranger*. Scholars have interpreted these texts as profound explorations of the individual's estrangement from society, family, and self in the modern world. Existentialist critics have emphasized

that Camus' *The Stranger* illustrates the philosophy of the absurd through the character of Meursault, whose emotional detachment challenges conventional morality and exposes the indifference of the universe. Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), argues that human beings constantly seek meaning in a world that offers none, a conflict he describes as the absurd. This philosophical perspective provides the foundation for understanding Meursault's acceptance of life's meaninglessness.

Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* has similarly been interpreted as a powerful representation of alienation and dehumanization. Sokel (1966) argues that Gregor Samsa's transformation symbolizes the loss of individuality within a bureaucratic and materialistic society. Likewise, Corngold (1973) views Gregor's metamorphosis as a metaphor for the psychological isolation and identity crisis experienced by the modern individual. These interpretations suggest that Kafka portrays alienation as both a social and existential condition. Scholars have also explored the broader relationship between existentialism and modern literature. Barrett (1962) contends that existentialist literature focuses on individual freedom, isolation, and the search for authentic existence in an uncertain world. Similarly, Esslin (1961) argues that twentieth-century literature reflects humanity's confrontation with absurdity, loneliness, and the collapse of traditional values. Although substantial scholarship has examined Kafka and Camus individually, comparatively fewer studies have analyzed how both writers represent alienation as a defining element of modern identity. This study addresses that gap by comparing Gregor Samsa and Meursault, demonstrating how their different responses to alienation reveal contrasting yet complementary perspectives on the search for meaning in modern existence.

Manzar, Musawar, and Fayaz (2024) examine *The Metamorphosis* through existential, psychoanalytic, and sociocultural perspectives, arguing that Gregor Samsa's transformation symbolizes both identity fragmentation and the oppressive influence of family and society. Their study suggests that Kafka's novella remains a significant commentary on modern psychological and social alienation. Similarly, Sharif and Parveen (2024) interpret Gregor's metamorphosis as a metaphor for

identity crisis and social exclusion. They contend that Kafka employs Gregor's physical transformation to reveal the emotional consequences of isolation and the struggle for selfhood in a society governed by external expectations. A recent study published in *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* (2025) approaches *The Metamorphosis* from a Nietzschean perspective, arguing that Gregor's transformation reflects a broader philosophical crisis concerning human existence, nihilism, and the collapse of traditional values. The article demonstrates that Kafka's work continues to generate new philosophical interpretations beyond existentialism alone. Comparative scholarship has also gained momentum. Dewangan (2025) compares the treatment of alienation in the works of Kafka and Camus, arguing that while Kafka foregrounds bureaucratic oppression and social dehumanization, Camus focuses on absurdity and humanity's search for meaning in an indifferent universe. This comparative perspective supports the present study by highlighting both the similarities and differences in the authors' treatment of modern identity. These recent contributions reinforce the continuing relevance of Kafka and Camus in contemporary literary studies. However, most current research either concentrates primarily on Kafka's representation of alienation or offers broad comparative observations without closely examining how alienation functions as a process through which modern identity is constructed in both *The Metamorphosis* and *The Stranger*. The present study seeks to address this gap by undertaking a sustained comparative analysis of the two novels through the interconnected frameworks of alienation, existentialism, and absurdism.

Introduction

The twentieth century witnessed unprecedented social, political, and intellectual transformations that profoundly altered humanity's understanding of existence and identity. The devastating effects of industrialization, the two World Wars, the decline of religious certainty, and the rise of modern capitalism created a pervasive sense of uncertainty and isolation. Within this changing landscape, literature emerged as a powerful medium through which writers explored the anxieties of modern life, particularly the individual's experience of alienation and the struggle to find meaning in an

increasingly fragmented world. Among the most influential literary figures to address these concerns are Franz Kafka and Albert Camus, whose works continue to shape discussions of existentialism, absurdism, and modern identity. Alienation has become one of the defining characteristics of modern literature. It refers not only to social isolation but also to the individual's estrangement from family, work, society, and even the self. The concept has been explored from philosophical, psychological, and sociological perspectives. Karl Marx associates alienation with the dehumanizing effects of capitalist labour, while existentialist thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus emphasize the individual's confrontation with a universe that offers no predetermined purpose. In literary texts, alienation frequently appears through characters who fail to establish meaningful relationships with others or who struggle to reconcile their personal identity with social expectations.

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915) and Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1942) are among the most significant literary explorations of alienation in the twentieth century. Although written in different historical and philosophical contexts, both works portray protagonists who become outsiders within their own worlds. Gregor Samsa's sudden transformation into an insect symbolizes the gradual loss of identity brought about by social rejection, economic exploitation, and familial neglect. Once valued only as the family's breadwinner, Gregor is abandoned when he can no longer fulfil his economic role. His physical metamorphosis exposes the fragile foundations of human relationships and reveals how modern society often reduces individuals to their practical usefulness. Similarly, Camus presents Meursault as a man whose emotional indifference separates him from the society in which he lives. Unlike Gregor, Meursault undergoes no physical transformation; instead, his alienation stems from his refusal to conform to accepted social and moral conventions. His indifference toward his mother's death, his detached attitude toward relationships, and his rejection of religious consolation make him an outsider long before he commits murder. During his trial, society condemns him not only for his crime but also for his failure to display emotions considered socially acceptable. Through Meursault, Camus

demonstrates that modern society often judges individuals according to cultural expectations rather than genuine moral principles.

Despite the extensive scholarship devoted to Kafka and Camus individually, comparatively fewer studies have examined how both writers employ alienation to construct modern identity through a comparative framework. While Kafka presents alienation as a force that gradually destroys the individual, Camus portrays it as a condition that ultimately leads to existential awareness and acceptance of the absurd. These contrasting perspectives offer valuable insights into the complexities of the modern human condition and reveal different responses to a world that appears indifferent to human aspirations. This study therefore undertakes a comparative analysis of *The Metamorphosis* and *The Stranger* to investigate how alienation shapes identity and influences the protagonists' search for meaning. Drawing upon existentialist philosophy, absurdism, and theories of alienation, the paper examines the relationship between the individual and society, the breakdown of communication, and the crisis of identity experienced by Gregor Samsa and Meursault. Through close textual analysis, it argues that both novels expose the limitations of social institutions and challenge conventional understandings of belonging, purpose, and human existence. Ultimately, this study contends that Kafka and Camus present alienation not merely as a psychological or social condition but as an essential feature of modern identity. Their protagonists respond differently to isolation, yet both reveal the profound tension between the individual's desire for meaning and the indifference of the world. More than a century after Kafka and several decades after Camus, their works continue to resonate because they illuminate questions that remain central to contemporary life: Who are we in a world that often denies our individuality? Can meaning exist in the absence of certainty? And how should human beings respond to a reality that frequently appears indifferent to their hopes and aspirations? By addressing these questions, *The Metamorphosis* and *The Stranger* remain enduring contributions to modern literature and philosophy.

Theoretical Framework: Existentialism, Absurdism, and Alienation

A comparative study of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Albert Camus' *The Stranger* requires an understanding of the philosophical concepts that inform both texts. Although Kafka did not identify himself as an existentialist and Camus rejected the label despite being closely associated with it, their works explore many of the same concerns: alienation, freedom, identity, anxiety, and the search for meaning in a world that appears indifferent to human existence. This study therefore draws upon the concepts of alienation, existentialism, and absurdism as its primary theoretical framework. Alienation has long been a central concern in philosophy, sociology, and literary criticism. In its broadest sense, alienation refers to the condition in which an individual becomes separated from society, meaningful relationships, work, or even from one's own identity. Karl Marx explains alienation as a consequence of capitalist production, where workers become disconnected from the products of their labour and gradually lose their sense of individuality (Marx). Although Marx's theory is primarily economic, it has influenced literary criticism by highlighting how modern social structures reduce human beings to instruments of productivity. Gregor Samsa exemplifies this condition, as his value within the family depends almost entirely on his ability to earn money. Once he is no longer economically useful, he becomes isolated and ultimately disposable.

Existentialist philosophy extends the discussion of alienation beyond economic structures to the individual's relationship with existence itself. Existential thinkers argue that human beings are not born with a predetermined purpose but must create meaning through their own choices and actions. Jean-Paul Sartre famously states that "existence precedes essence," suggesting that identity is not fixed but continually shaped by individual freedom and responsibility (Sartre 22). This emphasis on personal choice becomes particularly relevant in *The Stranger*, where Meursault refuses to accept social conventions merely to satisfy others. Rather than pretending to experience emotions he does not feel, he remains faithful to his own perception of reality, even when such honesty leads to his condemnation. Albert

Camus develops a related but distinct philosophical position through his concept of the absurd. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus argues that the absurd arises from the conflict between humanity's desire for order, purpose, and certainty and the silent indifference of the universe (Camus 28). Human beings naturally seek explanations for suffering and death, yet the universe provides no definitive answers. Instead of escaping this reality through religion or false hope, Camus proposes that individuals should acknowledge the absurd and continue living with courage and honesty. Meursault embodies this philosophy. His refusal to invent comforting illusions ultimately allows him to accept death without fear, suggesting that freedom begins with the recognition of life's uncertainty.

Kafka's fiction, although written before existentialism became a clearly defined philosophical movement, reflects many existential concerns. His characters frequently encounter incomprehensible authority, fragmented communication, and overwhelming isolation. Walter H. Sokel argues that Kafka's protagonists struggle against systems that deny their humanity, making alienation the defining feature of their existence (Sokel 87). Gregor Samsa's transformation into an insect is therefore more than a physical event; it symbolizes the collapse of personal identity within a society that values utility over individuality. His inability to communicate effectively with his family deepens his isolation and illustrates how alienation can erase one's place within both the family and society. Stanley Corngold similarly interprets Gregor's metamorphosis as a symbolic expression of psychological and social estrangement. According to Corngold, Kafka presents alienation not as an exceptional experience but as a universal condition of modern life, where individuals become trapped between personal desires and social expectations (Corngold 45). Gregor's gradual acceptance of his exclusion demonstrates the destructive consequences of internalizing society's rejection. Instead of resisting his isolation, he increasingly withdraws from human contact until death becomes his only escape.

The relationship between alienation and identity has also received significant attention in modern literary criticism. William Barrett argues that existential literature portrays human beings as

isolated individuals who must confront uncertainty without relying on traditional systems of belief (Barrett 134). In such literature, identity is never stable; it develops through confrontation with freedom, responsibility, and mortality. This perspective illuminates the contrasting journeys of Gregor and Meursault. Gregor loses his identity as others cease to recognize his humanity, whereas Meursault preserves his identity by refusing to conform to social expectations. Martin Esslin further observes that twentieth-century literature reflects the collapse of traditional religious and moral certainties, leaving individuals to face an apparently meaningless world (Esslin 17). This condition is evident in both novels. Gregor receives neither sympathy nor justice despite his lifelong sacrifice for his family, while Meursault's trial demonstrates that society values conformity more than truth. Their experiences reveal the fragile nature of identity when individuals are judged solely according to social norms rather than their intrinsic humanity.

The present study adopts these theoretical perspectives to examine how Kafka and Camus portray alienation as a defining feature of modern existence. Rather than treating alienation merely as loneliness or social exclusion, the paper understands it as a multidimensional condition involving psychological, existential, and social estrangement. Through this framework, Gregor Samsa and Meursault emerge as representative figures of the modern individual, each confronting a world that fails to provide security, belonging, or ultimate meaning. By integrating theories of alienation with existentialism and absurdism, this study demonstrates that both *The Metamorphosis* and *The Stranger* transcend their historical contexts. They continue to resonate because they address enduring questions concerning identity, freedom, responsibility, and the human search for meaning. While Kafka emphasizes the destructive consequences of social alienation, Camus presents the acceptance of the absurd as a means of achieving personal authenticity. Together, these works offer complementary perspectives on the challenges of modern identity and establish alienation as one of the central experiences of twentieth-century literature.

Alienation in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is widely regarded as one of the most significant literary explorations of alienation in modern fiction. First published in 1915, the novella presents the extraordinary story of Gregor Samsa, a travelling salesman who awakens one morning to find himself transformed into a gigantic insect. While the transformation is physically shocking, Kafka's primary concern is not the cause of Gregor's metamorphosis but its consequences. Through Gregor's changing relationship with his family, his work, and his own identity, Kafka exposes the dehumanizing effects of modern society and demonstrates how alienation gradually erodes an individual's humanity. From the opening sentence, Kafka places Gregor in a condition of isolation. Instead of expressing fear or disbelief at his transformation, Gregor's first thoughts concern his work and the possibility of missing his train. His immediate anxiety reflects the extent to which his identity has become dependent upon his occupation. As the sole breadwinner of the family, Gregor has sacrificed his personal desires to support his parents and sister. Walter H. Sokel argues that Gregor's identity is defined almost entirely by his economic function, making him valuable only as long as he remains productive (Sokel 89). His transformation merely reveals a form of alienation that already existed before the physical metamorphosis.

Kafka presents Gregor's profession as another source of alienation. His occupation as a travelling salesman deprives him of stable human relationships and personal freedom. Gregor complains about the exhausting routine of endless travel, difficult customers, and constant supervision by his employer. The appearance of the chief clerk at Gregor's apartment after only a few hours of absence demonstrates the oppressive nature of the bureaucratic system. Rather than expressing concern for Gregor's health, the company immediately questions his reliability. Karl Marx's theory of alienation is relevant here, as Gregor's labour has reduced him to a mere instrument of economic production. His worth is measured solely by his usefulness to others, not by his humanity. Gregor's transformation also symbolizes the crisis of personal identity. Although his body changes dramatically, his thoughts and emotions remain distinctly human. He

worries about his family, regrets disappointing his employer, and hopes to return to normal life. This contrast between his human consciousness and insect-like appearance creates a profound identity conflict. Stanley Corngold observes that Kafka's metamorphosis functions as a symbolic representation of psychological estrangement rather than a simple fantasy event (Corngold 51). Gregor's inability to reconcile his inner self with his outward appearance reflects the fragmented identity of the modern individual.

One of the most painful aspects of Gregor's alienation is the breakdown of communication. Shortly after his transformation, he discovers that his speech has become unintelligible. Although he understands every word spoken by his family, they can no longer understand him. Language, the primary means of human connection, collapses completely. As a result, Gregor becomes increasingly isolated within his own home. His room gradually changes from a private living space into a prison where he is hidden from society. Kafka suggests that alienation begins not merely with physical separation but with the inability to communicate one's thoughts and emotions. Gregor's relationship with his family illustrates the fragile nature of human affection when it is based upon economic dependence. Before his transformation, his parents and sister rely entirely on his income. They appreciate his sacrifices but rarely acknowledge his emotional needs. Once Gregor becomes incapable of working, their attitude changes dramatically. His father responds with violence, repeatedly driving him back into his room and eventually injuring him by throwing apples. His mother is overwhelmed by fear whenever she sees him, while Grete, who initially cares for her brother, gradually loses sympathy and begins to view him as a burden.

Grete's changing attitude represents one of the novella's most tragic developments. At first, she brings Gregor food and attempts to understand his needs. However, as time passes, compassion gives way to frustration. She finally insists that the family must remove Gregor because he is no longer her brother but an obstacle to their future. This rejection marks the complete destruction of Gregor's identity. He is no longer recognized as a member of the family but as an unwanted creature occupying valuable

space. Kafka thereby demonstrates that identity depends not only upon self-perception but also upon recognition by others. The symbolism of Gregor's room further reinforces the theme of alienation. As furniture is removed, the room loses every trace of his previous human existence. Objects associated with memory, comfort, and individuality disappear one by one. Gregor desperately clings to the framed picture of the woman in furs, perhaps his final connection to his former identity. This symbolic act reveals his desire to preserve some remnant of his humanity despite the overwhelming forces of dehumanization.

Kafka also criticizes the utilitarian values of modern society. Gregor's family quickly adapts to life without him by finding employment and becoming financially independent. Ironically, the person who devoted his entire life to supporting the family becomes unnecessary once he can no longer work. His death is greeted not with grief but with relief. The family immediately begins planning a brighter future, suggesting that Gregor's existence had become an inconvenience rather than a source of affection. Such a conclusion exposes the conditional nature of social acceptance in a materialistic world. From an existential perspective, Gregor's tragedy lies in his inability to redefine himself after losing his social role. Unlike Camus' Meursault, who eventually embraces the absurdity of existence, Gregor remains emotionally attached to the identity imposed upon him by family and work. He never openly rebels against his circumstances nor questions the values that have shaped his life. Instead, he quietly accepts rejection and gradually withdraws from human contact until death appears as the only possible resolution.

Kafka's portrayal of alienation extends beyond Gregor's personal experience to become a universal commentary on modern existence. Martin Esslin argues that twentieth-century literature frequently presents individuals trapped within incomprehensible social systems that deny authentic human relationships (Esslin 20). Gregor's experience reflects this broader condition. His physical transformation merely externalizes the loneliness, anxiety, and emotional isolation already present in modern life. The grotesque fantasy therefore functions as a realistic representation of psychological truth. Eventually, *The Metamorphosis* demonstrates that

alienation is not simply the result of physical difference but the consequence of a society that values individuals according to their usefulness rather than their humanity. Gregor's transformation exposes the instability of identity, the fragility of familial love, and the destructive effects of social exclusion. Kafka suggests that when human beings are reduced to economic functions and denied meaningful communication, they become strangers not only to society but also to themselves. Gregor's tragic fate thus stands as one of the most powerful literary representations of alienation in modern literature and provides an essential foundation for understanding the crisis of modern identity.

Alienation and the Search for Meaning in Albert Camus' *The Stranger*

Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1942) is one of the most influential novels of the twentieth century and a landmark text in modern existential and absurdist literature. Unlike Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, where alienation is symbolized through a physical transformation, Camus presents alienation as a psychological and philosophical condition. The protagonist, Meursault, is not isolated because of an extraordinary event but because he refuses to conform to the emotional and moral expectations of society. Through Meursault's detached outlook, his rejection of conventional values, and his ultimate acceptance of death, Camus explores the relationship between alienation, identity, and the search for meaning in an indifferent universe.

From the opening line of the novel - "Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know" (Camus 3) - Meursault appears emotionally detached from the world around him. His uncertainty about the date of his mother's death immediately distances him from conventional social expectations. Rather than expressing grief, he observes physical details such as the heat, the sunlight, and his physical exhaustion. Critics have often interpreted this emotional detachment as evidence of alienation. However, Camus does not portray Meursault as incapable of feeling; instead, he refuses to display emotions merely to satisfy social conventions. His honesty separates him from others and establishes him as an outsider from the beginning of the narrative. Meursault's alienation becomes more evident through his relationships with other people. His interactions with

Marie, Raymond, and his neighbours remain largely detached and uncomplicated. When Marie asks whether he loves her, Meursault replies that love "doesn't mean anything," though he is willing to marry her if she wishes. His response illustrates his rejection of romantic idealism rather than an inability to care for others. Meursault consistently refuses to pretend that his emotions are deeper than they actually are. This commitment to honesty distinguishes him from those around him but also intensifies his social isolation.

Camus develops this theme further through the philosophy of the absurd. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he argues that the absurd arises from the conflict between humanity's desire for meaning and the universe's silence (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* 28). Human beings naturally seek purpose, justice, and certainty, yet the world offers no final answers. Meursault embodies this philosophical position. He neither searches for divine purpose nor attempts to justify existence through religion or morality. Instead, he accepts life as it is, recognizing that death is the inevitable destiny of every human being. The murder of the Arab on the beach represents the novel's central turning point. Significantly, Camus avoids presenting the act as a carefully planned crime. Instead, environmental conditions - the intense heat, the blinding sunlight, and Meursault's physical discomfort - play an important role in shaping the moment. The oppressive atmosphere contributes to the irrational nature of the event, emphasizing the unpredictability and absurdity of human existence. The shooting is not portrayed as the product of evil intention but as an event that resists simple moral explanation.

The courtroom scenes reveal the deepest form of Meursault's alienation. During the trial, the legal authorities devote surprisingly little attention to the actual murder. Instead, they focus on Meursault's behaviour at his mother's funeral, interpreting his emotional restraint as proof of moral corruption. The prosecutor portrays him as a man without a soul because he did not cry at the funeral or display conventional signs of grief. As Jean-Paul Sartre observes, society condemns Meursault less for killing another man than for refusing to participate in its accepted system of values (Sartre 58). His greatest offence is therefore not violence but authenticity.

Religion also becomes a significant source of conflict between Meursault and society. While awaiting execution, he rejects the prison chaplain's invitation to seek God's forgiveness. Meursault insists that he has no reason to believe in a divine order that explains suffering or promises eternal salvation. This rejection reflects Camus' philosophy of the absurd, which encourages individuals to confront reality without relying on comforting illusions. Meursault's refusal to accept religious consolation is not an expression of despair but of intellectual honesty. By refusing false hope, he affirms his freedom to define his own response to existence.

Meursault's acceptance of death marks the climax of his existential development. In the final chapter, he realizes that death is universal and inevitable. Since every individual must eventually die, no life possesses greater objective significance than another. This realization frees him from fear and regret. Rather than seeking meaning beyond life, Meursault embraces the present moment and accepts the indifference of the universe. Camus suggests that genuine freedom begins when individuals abandon the illusion of absolute meaning and courageously confront reality as it is. William Barrett argues that existential literature frequently presents characters who discover authenticity only after confronting death (Barrett 142). Meursault exemplifies this pattern. His imprisonment strips away the distractions of ordinary life and forces him to reflect upon existence itself. Ironically, it is only after society condemns him that he achieves complete self-awareness. His acceptance of the absurd transforms alienation from a source of suffering into a source of liberation.

Unlike Gregor Samsa, whose identity is gradually destroyed by the rejection of others, Meursault maintains his sense of self despite social condemnation. He refuses to alter his beliefs merely to gain sympathy or avoid punishment. His authenticity distinguishes him from those who sacrifice truth for social approval. In this respect, Camus presents alienation not only as a condition of exclusion but also as a form of resistance against hypocrisy and conformity. The contrast between the individual and society remains central throughout the novel. Meursault's honesty exposes the artificiality of many social customs. Society expects grief to follow

prescribed rituals, love to be expressed through familiar language, and morality to conform to established traditions. Meursault refuses these expectations, choosing instead to acknowledge only what he genuinely experiences. His alienation therefore results from a conflict between personal authenticity and collective norms. Modern critics have recognized *The Stranger* as one of the most significant literary explorations of identity in the twentieth century. Martin Esslin argues that modern literature often portrays individuals confronting a universe in which traditional systems of meaning have collapsed (Esslin 24). Camus extends this idea by demonstrating that meaning cannot be discovered in external authorities but must emerge from the individual's honest engagement with existence. Meursault does not overcome the absurd; rather, he learns to live with it.

Comparative Analysis: Alienation and Modern Identity in *The Metamorphosis* and *The Stranger*

Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Albert Camus' *The Stranger* are among the most influential works of twentieth-century literature because they explore the complex relationship between alienation and modern identity. Although the novels differ in narrative style, philosophical orientation, and historical context, they share a common concern with the individual's struggle to exist in a world that appears indifferent, hostile, and devoid of stable meaning. Through the experiences of Gregor Samsa and Meursault, Kafka and Camus demonstrate that alienation is not merely a social condition but a defining feature of modern existence. One of the most striking similarities between the two protagonists is their separation from society. Gregor Samsa becomes physically isolated after his transformation into an insect, while Meursault is psychologically isolated because of his emotional detachment and refusal to conform to social expectations. In both cases, society rejects individuals who fail to satisfy its norms. Gregor is excluded because he can no longer contribute economically to his family, whereas Meursault is condemned because he refuses to display the emotions expected of a grieving son and a remorseful criminal. Their experiences suggest that modern society often values conformity over individuality.

Despite this shared condition of alienation, Kafka and Camus present fundamentally

different responses to it. Gregor's alienation is imposed upon him. His transformation deprives him of the ability to communicate, work, and participate in ordinary human life. Although he continues to think and feel like a human being, others gradually cease to recognize his humanity. His identity is therefore shaped by external forces over which he has little control. Meursault, by contrast, accepts his separation from society rather than resisting it. His alienation results largely from his commitment to honesty and authenticity. He refuses to pretend that he believes in values he does not genuinely hold, even when such honesty leads to his execution. Another important point of comparison concerns the relationship between identity and work. In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor's identity is almost entirely defined by his occupation. He works tirelessly to repay his parents' debts and sacrifices his personal ambitions for the welfare of his family. Once he loses the ability to work, he also loses his social identity. Kafka thus exposes the dehumanizing effects of a society that measures human worth through economic productivity. In contrast, Meursault's identity is not determined by his profession or social status. His sense of self emerges through his personal experiences and his refusal to compromise his beliefs. Camus therefore shifts the discussion of identity from economic function to existential authenticity.

Family relationships also reveal significant differences between the two novels. Gregor's family initially depends upon him but gradually abandons him after his transformation. Their love proves conditional upon his usefulness. His father's violence, his mother's fear, and Grete's eventual rejection illustrate how fragile familial bonds become under economic and social pressure. In *The Stranger*, however, family relationships receive far less emphasis. Meursault's mother has already been placed in a nursing home before the novel begins, and her death serves primarily as a catalyst for revealing society's expectations rather than exploring family dynamics. Camus is less interested in domestic relationships than in the conflict between the individual and society as a whole. Communication functions as another significant point of comparison. Gregor's alienation is intensified because language itself becomes impossible. Although he understands others, they cannot understand him. His inability to

communicate transforms him into a prisoner within his own home. Meursault, on the other hand, speaks clearly throughout the novel, yet meaningful communication still fails. Society listens to his words but refuses to understand his perspective. During the trial, his honesty is interpreted as evidence of moral emptiness rather than sincerity. Both authors therefore suggest that alienation arises not simply from silence but from the failure of genuine human understanding.

The philosophical outlooks of Kafka and Camus also differ considerably. Kafka's vision is deeply tragic. Gregor never discovers a meaningful response to his alienation and ultimately dies in isolation. His death offers relief to his family rather than recognition of his humanity. The novella therefore presents alienation as a destructive force that erases identity and human dignity. Camus, however, offers a more affirmative conclusion. Although Meursault is sentenced to death, he attains a profound sense of freedom by accepting the absurdity of existence. Instead of seeking false consolation, he embraces the indifference of the universe and finds peace within himself. Alienation, for Camus, becomes the beginning of existential awareness rather than the end of identity. The role of society in both novels further illustrates their contrasting perspectives. Kafka portrays social institutions—family, work, and authority—as mechanisms that dehumanize individuals by reducing them to their practical usefulness. Gregor's tragedy exposes the cruelty of a world in which human value depends upon economic contribution. Camus similarly criticizes society but focuses on its moral hypocrisy. Meursault is judged not solely for committing murder but for failing to display socially acceptable emotions. His trial demonstrates that society often punishes nonconformity more severely than genuine wrongdoing.

Both novels also challenge traditional religious and moral beliefs. Kafka presents a world in which suffering appears meaningless and justice remains absent. Gregor receives neither sympathy nor redemption despite his sacrifices. Camus likewise rejects religious certainty but proposes that meaning can emerge through the individual's acceptance of the absurd. Meursault's refusal to embrace religion reflects his determination to confront reality honestly

rather than seek comfort in illusion. Thus, while both writers question traditional systems of meaning, Camus offers a philosophical alternative that Kafka leaves unresolved. From the perspective of modern identity, Gregor and Meursault represent two contrasting models of the individual. Gregor symbolizes the victim of social and economic alienation whose identity is gradually erased by forces beyond his control. Meursault represents the existential individual who preserves his authenticity despite social condemnation. Together, these characters illustrate the diverse ways in which modern literature explores the crisis of identity. One loses himself because society refuses to recognize his humanity; the other discovers himself precisely because he refuses to surrender his individuality. Kafka and Camus demonstrate that alienation is inseparable from the modern condition. Whether experienced through physical transformation, emotional detachment, economic exploitation, or philosophical rebellion, alienation forces individuals to confront fundamental questions concerning identity, freedom, and meaning. While *The Metamorphosis* presents alienation as a tragic process of dehumanization, *The Stranger* portrays it as an opportunity for existential self-realization. These complementary perspectives enrich our understanding of the modern human experience and explain why both novels continue to occupy a central place in literary and philosophical discourse.

Conclusion

Alienation remains one of the defining concerns of modern literature, reflecting the individual's struggle to establish identity and meaning within an increasingly fragmented world. Through a comparative study of Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, this paper has examined how alienation shapes the lives of Gregor Samsa and Meursault and how their experiences illuminate different dimensions of the modern human condition. Although the two novels emerge from distinct literary and philosophical traditions, they converge in portraying individuals who are estranged from society, isolated from meaningful relationships, and compelled to confront the uncertainty of existence. The analysis of *The Metamorphosis* exposes the conditional nature of

human relationships and criticizes a society that values productivity more than compassion. Gregor's inability to communicate, his growing isolation, and his eventual death reveal the tragic consequences of a world in which individuals are judged according to utility rather than intrinsic human worth.

In contrast, Camus presents alienation as a philosophical condition through the character of Meursault. Camus argues that although life lacks inherent meaning, individuals can achieve authenticity by rejecting illusion and embracing the realities of human existence. Meursault's journey illustrates that freedom arises not from discovering universal truths but from accepting uncertainty without surrendering one's integrity. The comparative analysis reveals that both novels challenge conventional assumptions about identity, belonging, and purpose. Gregor and Meursault are marginalized for different reasons, yet both expose the limitations of social institutions that define individuals according to external expectations rather than personal authenticity. Kafka emphasizes the devastating effects of economic exploitation, familial rejection, and failed communication, whereas Camus highlights the conflict between individual honesty and collective morality. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that alienation is not simply a personal experience but a structural condition of modern life. This study also shows that the search for meaning remains central to both texts. Gregor continually seeks acceptance within the family and society but is denied recognition even after years of self-sacrifice. His tragedy suggests that meaning cannot be sustained in relationships founded solely upon economic dependence. Meursault, by contrast, abandons the search for external meaning and instead embraces the absurd nature of existence. His acceptance does not eliminate suffering but transforms his understanding of life and death. Through these contrasting responses, Kafka and Camus offer two distinct yet complementary visions of the human struggle for identity in the modern world.

Furthermore, the application of existentialism, absurdism, and theories of alienation provides a deeper understanding of both novels. Kafka's portrayal of Gregor reflects the psychological and social consequences of alienation in a bureaucratic and materialistic society, while Camus'

philosophy of the absurd explains Meursault's rejection of conventional values and his ultimate affirmation of existence. These theoretical perspectives demonstrate that modern identity is neither fixed nor predetermined but is continually shaped by the individual's relationship with society, freedom, and mortality. The relevance of Kafka and Camus extends far beyond the historical circumstances in which they wrote. In an age characterized by technological change, social fragmentation, economic competition, and increasing feelings of isolation, their works continue to speak to contemporary readers. Many individuals still experience alienation within families, workplaces, and communities, while questions concerning identity, purpose, and belonging remain as urgent today as they were in the twentieth century. The enduring significance of *The Metamorphosis* and *The Stranger* lies in their ability to capture these universal experiences with remarkable psychological and philosophical depth.

In conclusion, Franz Kafka and Albert Camus present alienation as an essential aspect of modern existence, but they differ in their understanding of its consequences. Kafka portrays alienation as a tragic process that destroys identity through exclusion and dehumanization, whereas Camus views it as the beginning of existential awareness and personal authenticity. Despite these differences, both writers challenge readers to reconsider accepted notions of humanity, morality, and meaning. Their novels remain enduring masterpieces because they illuminate the complexities of modern identity and remind us that the search for meaning continues even in a world that often appears silent and indifferent.

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A Study of Displacement, Survival and Postmemory in Bhawana Somaaya's Memoir *Farewell Karachi*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 05 July 2026; Received in revised form: 01 Aug 2026; Accepted: 07 Aug 2026; Available online: 12 Aug 2026 Keywords— Partition, Postmemory, Displacement, Survival, Memoir ©2026 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/).	India gained independence from the British Empire in 1947, an event accompanied by the country's partition into India and Pakistan. This division forced Hindu and Muslim communities who had coexisted for generations to migrate to majority-dominated regions. Amid heightened communal tensions, severe riots and massacres erupted on both sides of the border, resulting in approximately one million deaths and the displacement of over twelve million people. In the aftermath of these atrocities, survivors articulated their grief through fiction, life narratives, and poetry, contributing to the emergence of Partition literature. Memoirs and personal testimonies offer crucial interventions in formal historiography, serving as alternative historical sources that deepen our understanding of this tragic period. Within this framework, this paper examines Bhawana Somaaya's memoir, <i>Farewell Karachi</i>, which recounts her family's migration from Karachi to Kutch while documenting their complex experiences of displacement, survival, and resettlement. The paper will use the lens of postmemory to investigate how memories are transmitted intergenerationally and continue to shape their lives after Partition.

INTRODUCTION

The Partition of India in 1947 was one of the most significant and traumatic events in the history of the Indian subcontinent. It marked the division of British India into two independent nations, India and Pakistan, based primarily on religious demographics. Millions of people were forced to migrate across newly drawn borders, leaving behind their homes, possessions, and memories. The profound social, political, and psychological consequences of Partition continue to shape the collective memory, literature, and cultural identity of the region. The pains and pangs of Partition are captured in the form of novels, drama, poetry, essays, short stories, and memoirs, which have evolved as partition literature. Several prominent writers and scholars, such as Ritu Menon, Kamla Bhasin, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Anjali Gera Roy,

and Urvashi Butalia, have interwoven their family histories, autobiographies, and interviews to explore the lost reality. Urvashi Butalia, in her book *The Other Side of Silence*, argues:

Why had the history of partition been so lacking in describing how partition had impacted on the lives of ordinary people, what it had actually meant to them? Why had historians not even attempted to explore what I saw as the underside of this history—the feelings, the emotions, the pain and anguish, the trauma, the sense of loss, the silences which it lay shrouded? Was this just a historiographical neglect or something deeper? (347)

She questioned the unitary nature of the

historical narrative that displays a partial truth of the past from the dominant perspective. Excluding the ordinary narrative from history is a form of collective psychological suppression. Memoirs and testimonies expose the limitations of historiographical techniques and present us with a picture of the other side. One generation that directly witnessed the horrors of partition has passed away, but its traumatic experiences have been transmitted to the next generation through the sharing of emotional memories.

Marianne Hirsch, a prominent scholar, author, and Professor at Columbia University, coined the concept of "Postmemory" in her 1992 essay *Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory* to describe how children of Holocaust survivors inherit the deep psychological trauma of events that occurred before their birth. She writes in *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*:

"Postmemory" describes the relationship that the generation after bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before-to experiences they remember only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and effectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation (Hirsch 5).

It is used to examine how descendants of Holocaust survivors inherit and process their ancestors' traumas. Second and third-generation descendants experience Postmemory as a profound connection to a past they did not personally witness, yet feel as a living presence through family stories, behaviours, and cultural artifacts.

Bhawana Somaaya was born and brought up in Mumbai and is the youngest of eight siblings. She is a film journalist, author, critic, and historian, and was awarded the Padma Shri in 2017. She wrote the memoir *Farewell Karachi*, published in 2023, which recounts her family's journey from Pakistan to India.

Somaaya narrates the events of the Partition, drawing on the lived memories of her parents and siblings. These traumatic memories encompass experiences of displacement, loss of life, and extreme human cruelty. In the first part of the memoir, she writes about the home, ancestors, and affiliations and holdings left in Karachi. Her grandfather, Mathai ji, worked hard to build a business and a life as an entrepreneur, and he lived happily with his big joint family, all of which collapsed during the partition. Her memoir begins with an epigraph from Galib: "Huyi Muddat ke 'Galib' Mar Gya Par Yaad Aata Hai / Who Har Ek Baat Pe Kehna Ke Yun Hota Toh Kya Hota." It sets a nostalgic memoir tone, recalling the time before the partition, when they lived in Karachi. She traces her family's lineage to the established business class, the Somaayas. Her elder brother recites, "I am Dalsukh Madhavji, son of Jeevraj Naagji, son of Naagji Lakhaji," describing the family lineage. Her parents married in the second week of April 1927, when her father was eighteen and her mother was only sixteen. Her mother told her that "The house was packed with droves of relatives. Baa later revealed that the first time she came face to face with Bapuji was on the fifth night of the wedding. Initially they were awkward with each other, but over time, they forged a bond that remained unbroken till the end" (16). The affection of belongingness and habits wired in the minds of her parents left them with the feeling of being homeless. Somaaya recounts her maternal grandmother's mansion, which spread over four acres on Bunder Road, stretching from Netty Jetty Port to Karachi Jail. The author reconstructs these spatial memories through her sister's handwritten notes, found beneath her bed mattress after her death. Bhawan's maternal cousin, Indira Ben, who was just eleven years old, remembered how on 6th June 1948, a truck full of men barged into their home and started dismantling all the furniture:

They ransacked all the cupboards and grabbed whatever they found - gold, cash, valuables. I could not see them because I was with my mother in the storeroom, though we could hear the chaos from behind the door, which she had locked from the inside. My mother was weeping and I was screaming, so she covered my mouth

with her hand. We were in the storeroom for a long time, worried for my dad. Fai was rocking on the swing in the courtyard. They did not spare anyone that day. The old ladies were beaten and bruised, their earrings, bangles and chains pulled out of their bleeding ears, arms and necks. On their way out, they poured kerosene over all our vehicles and set them ablaze. By the time my father and my grandfather got home, our entire house was burning. (Somaaya 56)

Indira Ben's sister, Sarala, had a different experience. When she was in school, the teacher was distributing sweets in the classroom on the occasion of partition. Her family did not expect Karachi to turn into something terrible. Ninety years old, Moti Ben talks about their journey:

family reached Karachi port early in the morning to board the Kutch bound ship...Bapuji had instructed everyone to hold hands at all times to prevent getting lost in a stampede... at the stroke of 8 am, the bugle shrilled and the anchor was set to loose for the ship to sail. My mother rushed to the glass window to have last glimpse of the land she had called home. (Somaaya 59)

It was a very unpleasant experience for the family who had to leave their ancestral land for India. They never went out of Karachi. On that day, every neighbour came to say goodbye. Her grandfather says:

it is no longer the Karachi we knew. Everything and everybody have changed. People we considered our friends have turned into vultures; old associates have lost their souls. A violent mob stormed into our mansion and took all our furniture, all the artefacts, cars, bicycles, everything, and flung an envelope with just 70,000 in my face! It was heartbreaking to see the mansion I built with so much love close on me

forever! (Somaaya 68)

The journey was full of difficulties. Despite that, they landed in India safely, but they are homeless in this new land. This feeling of homelessness exists in their minds throughout their lives. The trauma of partition is not yet finished because her father had to go back to Karachi to get transfer orders for the continuation of her job in India. But conditions were worse in Pakistan; morality had been eroded, and communal violence was taking place at that time.

Somaaya narrates her father's journey, which was full of danger. He collected the transfer order with three months' salary, but when he arrived at the Karachi port to board a ship, He faced a violent mob who attacked and looted all his money and belongings. He lost everything in the struggle to reach the ship. His clothes were torn, and he missed the ship but somehow managed to board a steamer with the help of a boat.

My father scrambled on all fours in the stampede to locate his document. It was a day when he saw human beings turned into monsters. Men were bleeding, children were shrieking. It looked like a day when even the gods had turned their backs on the country. After 4 days of arduous journey at sea, all of them heaved a sigh of relief. The first thing my father did after stepping on the ground was to check if his limbs were intact. He was burning up with a high fever and could barely walk, clothes tattered and shoes lost in the stampede. (Somaaya 71)

He reached home, but his condition was like that of a beggar. Even his son could not recognise him when he arrived at the door of home. He recovered from his weakness and later continued work at Burmah Shell. He rebuilt everything and worked hard in the refinery market. During this period, they had no permanent home, so they kept shifting in search of a good one. Therefore, displacement and placelessness haunted them every day. Once Bhawana's therapist asked her during counselling, 'What is your biggest fear?' she unthinkingly said, "It's not having a roof over my head," which reveals her unacknowledged fear of

displacement and placelessness. In conversation with the great-great-grandchildren of the Somaaya family, they still reflect on the traumatic past of partition. She writes:

When we meet, we still talk about Karachi, even though none of us were part of the migration. The inexorable attraction for the city still exists among us. Over the decades, I have tried visiting the homeland of my parents several times, but it never came to pass. And until that happens, Karachi will exist like a soul sister, far away but an inherent part of my family, my history and my world.
(Somaaya 161)

CONCLUSION

The paper has closely analysed Bhawana Somaaya's memoir, *Farewell Karachi*, which highlights the implications of Partition on the lives of victims. Somaaya did not witness the partition firsthand, but it was narrated to her through stories, written documents, and photographs. The paper revealed the inhumanity and brutality experienced by elders and especially how her father escaped a stampede and attack by a violent mob in Karachi. Somaaya employs postmemory as a reconstructive tool, mapping how her family navigated the trauma of displacement and successfully rebuilt their lives.

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Problem Situations as Epistemological Foundations: A Comparative Analysis of Chinese Curriculum Standards and International Frameworks

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Received: 07 July 2026; Received in revised form: 02 Aug 2026; Accepted: 05 Aug 2026; Available online: 13 Aug 2026 Keywords— <i>problem situation, Chinese curriculum standards, comparative analysis, epistemology, mathematization</i> ©2026 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/).	The concept of "problem situation" occupies a central position in Chinese mathematics curriculum standards. Rather than treating situations as mere decorative backgrounds for mathematical problems, the Chinese curriculum imbues them with a generative epistemological role, serving as the soil from which mathematical knowledge grows. This paper examines this distinctive conception through comparative analysis with four major international theoretical traditions: PISA's mathematical literacy framework, Brousseau's Theory of Didactical Situations, Freudenthal's Realistic Mathematics Education, and Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning. The analysis reveals that the Chinese curriculum's treatment of problem situations is unique in simultaneously positioning them as cognitive activities, instructional goals, and instructional approaches. This triple function resonates with but also diverges from international perspectives. Furthermore, the Chinese curriculum distinguishes three types of situations (real-world, mathematical, and scientific), each of which entails distinct epistemological demands: mathematization for real-world situations, formalization for mathematical situations, and modeling for scientific situations. The paper traces how this three-fold typology develops across educational stages from elementary to senior high school and argues that the Chinese curriculum's conception of problem situations offers productive contributions to international mathematics education discourse.

I. INTRODUCTION

The role of context in mathematics education has been debated for decades, with different theoretical traditions offering competing visions of how situations should relate to mathematical learning. Should mathematical problems be embedded in real-world contexts to make them meaningful and motivating? Should situations be carefully designed didactical

environments that provoke specific mathematical reasoning? Or should situations be understood as the very ground from which mathematical knowledge emerges? These questions are not merely pedagogical; they reflect deep epistemological commitments about the nature of mathematics and its relationship to the world. At their core, they concern whether situations serve as vehicles for delivering pre-formed

mathematical content, or whether they play a more fundamental role in the genesis of mathematical thinking. These questions lie at the heart of curriculum design and have received markedly different answers across educational traditions.

Research has long recognized that Chinese mathematics education possesses distinctive features shaped by its cultural and institutional context (Ding, Wu, Liu, & Cai, 2022; Leung, 2001). Within this distinctive tradition, the concept of "problem situation" (问题情境) has undergone significant development. The 2022 revision of the Compulsory Education Mathematics Curriculum Standards (Ministry of Education, 2022) places problem situations at the center of both curriculum content and pedagogical design. The standards explicitly require that students learn to "discover and pose problems, analyze problems, and solve problems" within authentic situations, and the notion of problem situation permeates virtually every aspect of the curriculum document. As Cai, Wang, and Xie (2025) observed in their analysis of the 2022 standards, the concept of problem posing appears more than 80 times across the document, functioning simultaneously as a cognitive activity, a curricular goal, and a pedagogical approach. This triple function is unusual and warrants closer examination.

The Chinese curriculum standards classify problem situations into three broad types: real-world situations (现实情境), mathematical situations (数学情境), and scientific situations (科学情境). Each type is understood to play a distinct role in students' mathematical development. Real-world situations connect mathematics to everyday life and social contexts; mathematical situations involve problems internal to mathematics itself, such as patterns, conjectures, or logical challenges; and scientific situations draw on the natural sciences as contexts for mathematical reasoning. What is notable, and what distinguishes the Chinese approach from most international frameworks, is that these three types are not merely presented as alternative "flavors" of contextualization, but are implicitly treated as

requiring different cognitive processes and serving different epistemological functions.

This paper argues that the Chinese curriculum's conception of problem situations embodies a distinctive epistemological stance: situations are not decorative backgrounds ("wrapping paper") for pre-existing mathematical knowledge, but rather the generative ground from which mathematical understanding emerges. We develop this argument through comparative analysis with four influential international frameworks that have shaped how the global mathematics education community thinks about the relationship between situations and problems: the PISA mathematical literacy framework (OECD, 2023), Brousseau's (1997) Theory of Didactical Situations, Freudenthal's (1991) Realistic Mathematics Education, and Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning. Each of these traditions offers valuable insights into how situations mediate mathematical learning, yet none fully captures the integrated, multi-layered conception found in the Chinese curriculum standards.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 examines four international theoretical traditions regarding situations and problems. Section 3 analyzes the Chinese curriculum's conception of problem situations, focusing on the epistemological role each type of situation plays. Section 4 presents the comparative analysis, identifying convergences and divergences across the four perspectives. Section 5 traces the cross-stage development of problem situations across the Chinese curriculum from elementary to senior high school. Section 6 discusses implications for international mathematics education, and Section 7 concludes.

II. INTERNATIONAL THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS ON SITUATIONS AND PROBLEMS

2.1 PISA: Situations as Instruments for Assessing Mathematical Literacy

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), administered by the Organisation for Economic

Co-operation and Development (OECD), has exerted considerable influence on how educational systems worldwide conceptualize the relationship between mathematical knowledge and real-world contexts. In the PISA framework, mathematical literacy is defined as a person's capacity to "formulate, employ, and interpret mathematics in a variety of contexts" (OECD, 2023). The emphasis on "various contexts" is central: PISA classifies problems according to four situational categories: personal, occupational, societal, and scientific, and assesses how well students can navigate the full mathematical modelling cycle within each.

The PISA framework conceptualizes the situation as a container for mathematical tasks. The process of engaging with a problem involves three key steps: formulating a real-world problem mathematically, employing mathematical concepts and procedures to arrive at a solution, and interpreting the mathematical result back in terms of the original situation. The situation here is instrumental: it provides the "real-world" setting that motivates the problem and grounds the interpretation of results. Mathematical knowledge itself is understood to exist independently of the situation; the situation serves as the stage on which mathematical literacy is displayed and assessed.

This instrumental conception has undeniable strengths. It provides a clear, operationalizable framework for large-scale assessment, and it emphasizes that mathematical competence involves more than procedural fluency; it requires the ability to move between mathematical and extra-mathematical worlds. However, it also implies a somewhat one-directional relationship: mathematics exists first, and situations are then deployed to test whether students can apply it. The situation does not generate new mathematics; it tests pre-existing competence.

PISA's framework has been influential in shaping curriculum reforms worldwide, including in China, where the emphasis on mathematical modelling and real-world application in the 2022 curriculum standards shows clear resonance with PISA's orientation. Yet, as we shall see, the Chinese curriculum goes beyond PISA's instrumental view in attributing a more generative role to situations.

An important limitation of the PISA approach for curriculum purposes is its treatment of situations as essentially interchangeable assessment contexts. A personal situation (e.g., comparing mobile phone plans) and a scientific situation (e.g., modeling population growth) are treated as different "wrappers" for the same underlying mathematical competence. This works well for large-scale assessment, where comparability across contexts is essential. But for curriculum design and classroom teaching, the assumption that situations are interchangeable is problematic: a student who can solve a mathematics problem embedded in a personal context may struggle with the same problem in a scientific context, not because of lacking mathematical competence, but because of difficulty in understanding or mathematizing the specific type of situation. The Chinese curriculum's differentiation of situation types can be understood as a response to this limitation.

2.2 Brousseau: Situations as Structured Systems for Knowledge Genesis

Guy Brousseau's (1997) Theory of Didactical Situations (TDS), developed over several decades beginning in the 1970s and most comprehensively articulated in his landmark monograph, offers a fundamentally different conception of the role of situations in mathematical learning. For Brousseau, a didactical situation is not merely a contextual backdrop but a carefully structured system of interactions among the teacher, the student, and the mathematical milieu (the environment of objects, problems, and constraints that the student encounters).

The central mechanism in TDS is "devolution" (*dévolution*), the process by which the teacher transfers responsibility for a mathematical problem to the student, enabling the student to genuinely take ownership of the problem as their own. In Brousseau's framework, the situation is not a passive setting but an active structural arrangement designed to create conditions under which mathematical knowledge can emerge through the student's interaction with the milieu. The student encounters an "a-didactical" situation, one that appears as a genuine problem, not

as a school exercise, and through adaptation, action, and formulation, constructs mathematical knowledge.

Brousseau distinguishes several types of didactical situations: action situations, where students interact with the milieu through trial and error; formulation situations, where students must communicate their strategies; validation situations, where students must justify their reasoning; and institutionalization situations, where the teacher formally establishes the mathematical knowledge. These types form a progression from situated action to decontextualized knowledge.

The epistemological commitment here is clear: knowledge does not exist prior to the situation; rather, it emerges through the student's engagement with a carefully designed situation. However, Brousseau's situations are fundamentally *didactical*: they are constructed by the teacher with a specific mathematical learning objective in mind. They are not "real-world" situations in the everyday sense, but rather mathematical problem environments designed to provoke specific cognitive processes. This is both the theory's strength and its limitation from the perspective of the Chinese curriculum, which seeks to integrate both real-world and mathematical situations into a unified framework.

A further important aspect of TDS is the concept of "obstacle épistémologique" (epistemological obstacle), the idea that certain difficulties in learning mathematics are not merely errors but reflections of deeper cognitive tensions between the student's existing knowledge and the new knowledge to be constructed. In Brousseau's framework, the didactical situation is designed precisely to bring these obstacles to the surface, enabling students to overcome them through active engagement with the milieu. This concept resonates with the Chinese curriculum's emphasis on situations that "provoke cognitive conflict" (引发认知冲突) to motivate learning, although the Chinese curriculum does not draw explicitly on Brousseau's theoretical apparatus.

The key distinction between Brousseau's conception and the Chinese curriculum's lies in the scope of

"situation." For Brousseau, a situation is always a deliberately constructed didactical environment, a microcosm designed by the teacher to elicit specific mathematical reasoning. The Chinese curriculum uses "situation" in a much broader sense, encompassing not only teacher-designed problem environments but also real-world contexts, scientific phenomena, and even open-ended exploratory settings where the mathematical problem is not predetermined but discovered by the student.

2.3 Freudenthal: Reality as the Source Domain of Mathematics

Hans Freudenthal's Realistic Mathematics Education (RME), developed in the Netherlands from the 1970s onward, offers yet another perspective on the situation-problem relationship. Freudenthal (1991) argued forcefully that mathematics must be connected to reality, not as an afterthought or an application, but as its very source. His central concept is "mathematization": the process by which real-world problems are organized, structured, and transformed into mathematical objects and relationships.

Freudenthal distinguished between "horizontal mathematization" (reducing a real-world problem to a manageable mathematical form) and "vertical mathematization" (reorganizing and formalizing mathematical structures within the mathematical domain itself). This distinction is crucial: it acknowledges that the movement from situation to mathematics involves different kinds of cognitive work depending on where one is in the process. The initial encounter with a real-world situation requires a different kind of thinking than the subsequent formalization and generalization of the mathematics that emerges.

For Freudenthal, reality is not a decorative setting but the "source domain" of mathematics. Mathematics is a human activity ("mathematics must be treated as a human activity," Freudenthal, 1991), and this activity begins with the organization of reality. The situation, in this view, is not a container for pre-existing problems but the very ground from which mathematical problems arise.

This resonates with the Chinese curriculum's emphasis on situations as generative rather than decorative. However, Freudenthal's RME was developed primarily for primary and lower secondary education, and its emphasis on "guided reinvention" through carefully structured problem situations differs from the Chinese curriculum's broader ambition to integrate real-world, mathematical, and scientific situations across all educational stages. Moreover, RME's distinction between horizontal and vertical mathematization, while valuable, does not fully capture the three-fold typology of situations in the Chinese curriculum.

Freudenthal's notion of "guided reinvention" (*begeleid her-uitvinden*) is particularly relevant here. He argued that students should not be told mathematical knowledge but should be guided to "reinvent" it through their engagement with problem situations. This principle implies that situations must be carefully chosen so that the mathematics to be learned is a natural outgrowth of the student's activity within the situation. The situation, in this sense, is indeed generative: the mathematics emerges from the situation rather than being imposed upon it.

However, Freudenthal's conception of "reality" is somewhat undifferentiated. While he acknowledges that different types of problems require different kinds of mathematization, he does not systematically categorize situations by type or analyze how different situation types may foster different aspects of mathematical thinking. The Chinese curriculum's three-fold typology (real-world, mathematical, scientific) can be seen as an elaboration and systematization of Freudenthal's intuitive recognition that mathematics emerges from engagement with reality, but with the important addition that "reality" itself is multi-layered and requires different kinds of mathematical engagement.

2.4 Situated Learning: Knowledge as Contextually Embedded

A fourth perspective, Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning, provides additional insight into the relationship between situations and knowledge. Situated learning theory argues that learning is not the transmission of abstract knowledge but a process of

"legitimate peripheral participation" in communities of practice. Knowledge is fundamentally embedded in the situations and activities in which it is used; it cannot be separated from its context without losing its meaning.

While situated learning theory was not developed specifically for mathematics education, it has influenced thinking about contextualized mathematics instruction. Its key contribution is the recognition that situations are not merely external settings for learning but constitutive of the learning itself. What is learned in a situation is different from what can be extracted and applied elsewhere, or at least the relationship between situated knowledge and transferable knowledge is far more complex than traditional instruction assumes.

This perspective adds an important dimension to our comparative analysis: if situations are constitutive of mathematical knowledge (as situated learning theory suggests), then the Chinese curriculum's emphasis on diverse situation types may reflect an implicit recognition that different types of situations foster different kinds of mathematical understanding.

Situated learning theory also raises an important question about transfer. If mathematical knowledge is fundamentally embedded in the situations where it is learned, then exposing students to diverse situation types is not merely a matter of pedagogical variety but a necessary condition for developing flexible, transferable mathematical competence. A student who has only encountered mathematics in real-world situations may struggle when faced with purely mathematical problems; a student who has only worked with mathematical situations may lack the ability to recognize mathematics in everyday life. The Chinese curriculum's insistence on all three situation types (real-world, mathematical, and scientific) can be understood as an implicit acknowledgment of this insight: mathematical competence requires experience across the full range of situations in which mathematics operates.

III. THE CHINESE CURRICULUM'S CONCEPTION OF PROBLEM SITUATIONS

3.1 Historical Development: From "Double Base" to "Core Competencies"

To understand the current conception of problem situations in Chinese mathematics curriculum, it is necessary to trace its development through successive curriculum reforms. In the 2001 and 2011 curriculum standards, the emphasis was primarily on the "double base" (双基): basic knowledge and basic skills. Situations were used mainly to motivate the introduction of new mathematical concepts, to make abstract ideas more accessible by grounding them in familiar contexts. The situation was, in effect, a pedagogical tool serving pre-determined knowledge objectives.

The 2022 curriculum standards (Ministry of Education, 2022) represent a significant departure from this earlier orientation. Recent textbook analyses have documented how these shifts in curricular emphasis have translated into changes in problem contexts across successive textbook editions (Zhang, Lin, Tian, & Liu, 2025). This shift did not occur in isolation; it was influenced by international trends in mathematics education, including the growing emphasis on mathematical literacy promoted by PISA, the widespread adoption of problem-solving approaches following Polya's (1973/1945) pioneering work, and the increasing recognition of problem posing as a core mathematical competence (Liljedahl & Cai, 2021). Yet the Chinese curriculum's integration of these international ideas into a coherent framework centered on problem situations is distinctly Chinese in character. Influenced by the broader educational reform agenda emphasizing "core competencies" (核心素养), the 2022 standards articulate a vision in which mathematical learning is organized around three overarching competencies, often referred to as the "Three Abilities" (三会): the ability to observe the real world from a mathematical perspective, the ability to think about the real world mathematically, and the ability to express the real world using mathematical language (Ministry of Education, 2022). These competencies are not simply knowledge or skills but integrated capacities that

require students to move fluidly between mathematical and extra-mathematical domains.

Within this framework, problem situations are no longer merely pedagogical aids but become constitutive of the learning objectives themselves. The standards explicitly call for students to "discover and pose problems, analyze problems, and solve problems" within situations, a formulation that elevates problem posing from a teaching technique to a core curricular goal. As Li and Xu (2021) documented, problem posing has been a part of Chinese mathematics curriculum reform for over two decades. Early groundwork was laid by Silver and Cai (1996), who examined Chinese students' problem-posing abilities and found that Chinese students showed distinctive patterns in how they formulated problems from given situations. The 2022 standards, however, give problem posing unprecedented prominence by integrating it into the very definition of mathematical competence.

3.2 The Three Types of Situations: An Epistemological Analysis

The Chinese curriculum standards distinguish three types of situations: real-world situations (现实情境), mathematical situations (数学情境), and scientific situations (科学情境). This tripartite classification is not arbitrary; each type serves a distinct epistemological function and engages different cognitive processes.

Real-world situations require what Freudenthal called "horizontal mathematization," namely the translation of messy, ill-structured everyday problems into mathematical form. When students encounter a real-world situation (such as planning a school event, comparing phone data plans, or analyzing household electricity consumption), they must first identify the mathematically relevant aspects of the situation, abstract away irrelevant details, and formulate a mathematical problem. This process of "mathematization" is itself a core mathematical competence, and the Chinese curriculum explicitly connects it to the development of "model awareness" (模型意识) and "application awareness" (应用意识) (Ministry of Education, 2022).

Mathematical situations operate differently. These are problems internal to mathematics: patterns to be discovered, conjectures to be tested, proofs to be constructed. A mathematical situation might involve investigating the relationship between the sum of interior angles and the number of sides of a polygon, or exploring why certain algebraic transformations preserve equality. Here, the cognitive demand is not mathematization but *formalization*: the movement from informal exploration to rigorous mathematical reasoning. The Chinese curriculum connects mathematical situations primarily to the development of "reasoning ability" (推理能力) and "abstract ability" (抽象能力).

Scientific situations occupy an intermediate position. These draw on contexts from the natural sciences, such as physics experiments, biological growth patterns, chemical concentrations, and astronomical observations, as settings for mathematical reasoning. Scientific situations share features with both real-world and mathematical situations: they require mathematization (like real-world situations), but they also involve a degree of formalization and model-building that goes beyond everyday problem-solving. The Chinese curriculum connects scientific situations to the development of "data awareness" (数据意识) and "model conception" (模型观念), particularly in the context of statistics and probability.

What is crucial, and what distinguishes the Chinese approach from PISA's framework, is that these three types of situations are not treated as interchangeable "contexts" for assessing the same underlying mathematical competence. Rather, each type cultivates a different aspect of mathematical thinking. Real-world situations develop the capacity to *see mathematics in the world*; mathematical situations develop the capacity to *think rigorously within mathematics*; scientific situations develop the capacity to *use mathematics as a tool for understanding natural phenomena*. Together, they form an integrated ecology of mathematical learning.

3.3 Problem Situations as Triple-Function Devices

A distinctive feature of the Chinese curriculum's conception is that problem situations serve a triple

function: they are simultaneously cognitive activities (things students do), curricular goals (things students should be able to do), and pedagogical approaches (methods teachers use to organize instruction).

As **cognitive activities**, problem situations engage students in the full cycle of mathematical problem-solving, involving discovering problems within a situation, posing them in mathematical terms, analyzing their structure, and constructing solutions. This cycle mirrors but extends the classic problem-solving framework articulated by Polya (1973) by emphasizing the *pre-solving* phases of problem discovery and problem posing, phases that international research has identified as crucial but often neglected (Liljedahl & Cai, 2021; Cai & Rott, 2024).

As **curricular goals**, problem situations are embedded in the definition of mathematical competence. The "Three Abilities" framework (observing, thinking, expressing) implicitly requires students to be proficient in navigating between situations and mathematics, not just solving well-defined problems, but formulating problems from situations in the first place. This represents a significant expansion of the traditional "double base" conception, which focused primarily on knowledge and skills.

As **pedagogical approaches**, problem situations provide a design principle for teaching. The Chinese curriculum standards recommend that teachers "give full play to the promoting role of situation design and problem posing in students' active participation in teaching activities" (Ministry of Education, 2022, teaching suggestions section). This positions the problem situation not as a brief introduction before the "real lesson" begins, but as the organizing structure for the entire instructional sequence.

This triple function is what makes the Chinese curriculum's conception distinctive. To appreciate its significance, consider how each of the international frameworks examined in this paper handles these functions in isolation: PISA treats situations primarily in their assessment function (as contexts for measuring competence); Brousseau's TDS treats them primarily in their pedagogical function (as structures for organizing

teaching); Freudenthal's RME treats them primarily in their cognitive function (as sources for mathematization); and Lave and Wenger's situated learning theory focuses on the ontological function (situations as constitutive of knowledge itself). The Chinese curriculum's integration of all these functions within a single conception of "problem situation" reflects a holistic understanding of the situation-problem relationship that no single international framework fully captures.

IV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL SPECTRUM OF SITUATIONS

4.1 From Instrumental to Generative: Mapping the Terrain

The four frameworks examined in this paper can be arranged along an epistemological spectrum based on how they conceptualize the relationship between situations and mathematical knowledge. At one end lies the instrumental conception, where situations are tools for assessing or displaying pre-existing mathematical knowledge. At the other end lies the generative conception, where situations are the ground from which mathematical understanding emerges.

PISA's framework represents a clearly instrumental position. The mathematical content is defined independently of the situations in which it is assessed; situations are selected to provide variety and authenticity, but they do not fundamentally alter what is being measured. A student who "has" mathematical literacy can demonstrate it in any of the four PISA context types (personal, occupational, societal, scientific), because the underlying competence is situation-independent.

Brousseau's TDS occupies an intermediate position. While situations in TDS are generative in the sense that mathematical knowledge emerges through interaction with the didactical milieu, the situations themselves are deliberately constructed by the teacher with a specific mathematical objective in mind. The generation is "top-down": the teacher designs the situation to lead to a predetermined mathematical

insight. The student's role is to discover this insight within the structured environment.

Freudenthal's RME moves further toward the generative end. In RME, the real-world situation is not designed to elicit a specific mathematical response but serves as the "source domain" from which mathematical concepts organically emerge through the process of mathematization. The emphasis on "guided reinvention" means that students should, in principle, be able to reconstruct mathematical knowledge from their engagement with reality, with the teacher providing scaffolding rather than a predetermined path.

The Chinese curriculum occupies the most complex position on this spectrum. It embraces generative situations (real-world situations as sources for mathematization), structured situations (mathematical situations as carefully sequenced problems that build mathematical reasoning), and applied situations (scientific situations as contexts for mathematical modeling), all within a single integrated framework. This complexity reflects the curriculum's ambition to develop the full range of mathematical competencies, from informal sense-making to rigorous formal reasoning.

4.2 The Three-Fold Typology: Complementing International Frameworks

The Chinese curriculum's three-fold typology of situations (real-world, mathematical, scientific) can be understood as an implicit response to a gap in international frameworks. PISA's four context types (personal, occupational, societal, scientific) are all "real-world" contexts; PISA does not explicitly include purely mathematical situations (problems internal to mathematics, such as exploring patterns or constructing proofs) as a separate category. While PISA does include a "scientific" context, this is treated as one of four interchangeable real-world wrappers rather than as a distinct epistemological category with specific cognitive demands. In PISA, mathematical reasoning per se is assessed through word problems embedded in one of these real-world contexts.

Brousseau's TDS, conversely, deals almost exclusively with mathematically structured situations. The

"milieu" is a carefully designed mathematical environment, not a real-world context. While this allows for precise analysis of the teaching-learning dynamics, it limits the theory's applicability to contexts where students encounter messy, ill-structured problems from everyday life or the sciences.

Freudenthal's RME, with its emphasis on "reality" as the starting point, addresses real-world situations but does not systematically distinguish between different types of non-mathematical contexts. The distinction between horizontal and vertical mathematization captures the movement from reality to formal mathematics, but it does not differentiate among the types of reality that students encounter.

The Chinese curriculum's typology fills these gaps by explicitly recognizing that different situation types serve different educational purposes. Real-world situations develop application awareness and model consciousness; mathematical situations develop abstract reasoning and formal proof skills; scientific situations develop data literacy and modeling competence. Rather than treating these as competing approaches, the Chinese curriculum integrates them as complementary components of a comprehensive mathematics education.

To illustrate the practical significance of this distinction, consider how the topic of probability and statistics is treated in the Chinese curriculum versus in PISA. In PISA, a statistics or probability item is embedded in one of four context types, such as a personal context like predicting weather or a societal context like interpreting poll results. The mathematical competence being assessed (understanding probability, interpreting data) is the same regardless of context. In the Chinese curriculum, by contrast, the same mathematical topic is approached through all three situation types with distinct purposes. A real-world situation might involve students collecting and analyzing data about their classmates' heights (developing data awareness). A mathematical situation might involve exploring the theoretical probability of different outcomes when rolling two dice (developing abstract reasoning about chance). A scientific situation might involve analyzing experimental data from a

biology experiment on plant growth under different conditions (developing modeling competence). Each situation type contributes a different facet of statistical thinking, and the curriculum expects students to develop proficiency across all three.

This three-fold approach also connects to the Chinese curriculum's emphasis on cross-disciplinary thematic learning in the 2022 revision. The scientific situation type, in particular, serves as a bridge between mathematics and the natural sciences, encouraging students to see mathematics not as an isolated discipline but as a tool for understanding and modeling natural phenomena. This interdisciplinary orientation goes beyond what PISA's framework captures, where scientific contexts are merely one of four flavors for assessment items rather than a distinct epistemological category with its own cognitive demands.

4.3 The Internal Tension: A Productive Ambiguity

It would be misleading to suggest that the Chinese curriculum's conception is without tensions. The three-fold typology of situations, while intuitively appealing, raises important questions about the boundaries between categories. Is a problem about the trajectory of a thrown ball a "real-world" situation or a "scientific" one? Is a pattern-finding task using physical manipulatives a "mathematical" situation or a "real-world" one? The curriculum standards do not provide sharp criteria for distinguishing among the three types, and this ambiguity could lead to confusion in implementation.

However, we argue that this ambiguity is not a flaw but a *productive feature* of the framework. In practice, mathematical problems are rarely purely "mathematical" or purely "real-world"; they exist on a continuum. The three-fold typology serves as an orienting framework rather than a rigid classification system, and the boundaries between types are necessarily porous. This flexibility allows teachers to design rich, multi-layered situations that draw on multiple types simultaneously; a shopping budget problem may involve real-world financial reasoning, mathematical optimization, and scientific estimation.

Moreover, the three types correspond to different epistemological processes, as noted earlier: mathematization for real-world situations, formalization for mathematical situations, and modeling for scientific situations. These processes are not mutually exclusive but represent different emphases within the broader activity of mathematical thinking. The Chinese curriculum's implicit recognition of this complementarity is, we suggest, one of its most distinctive contributions.

This perspective also connects to a broader debate in mathematics education about the relationship between contextualized and decontextualized mathematical knowledge. Some scholars have argued that all mathematical knowledge is ultimately decontextualized, holding that the goal of mathematics education is to help students abstract away from specific situations to arrive at general, transferable principles. From this perspective, the Chinese curriculum's emphasis on diverse situation types might appear to privilege context over abstraction. However, this interpretation misunderstands the Chinese framework. The three situation types are not ends in themselves but are means to different kinds of mathematical abstraction. Real-world situations develop the capacity to abstract mathematical structure from messy reality; mathematical situations develop the capacity to reason within abstract structures; scientific situations develop the capacity to build models that mediate between the abstract and the concrete. Together, they cultivate a full spectrum of abstraction capacities, from concrete to formal to applied.

This interpretation is supported by the curriculum's developmental progression (discussed in Section 5), which moves from predominantly real-world situations in early years to predominantly mathematical situations in later years. The trajectory is clearly toward increasing abstraction and formalization, but the point of departure is always a situation of some kind, and the curriculum maintains that even at the most advanced levels, mathematical reasoning retains its connection to situations, whether mathematical or scientific. This represents a subtle but

important departure from educational traditions that treat abstraction and situation as opposing forces.

The distinctiveness of the Chinese approach can be understood in light of broader characteristics of East Asian mathematics education. Leung (2001) has identified several features of East Asian mathematics education, including emphasis on mathematical problem-solving, a strong connection between mathematics and everyday life, and the use of variation in problem design, all of which resonate with the Chinese curriculum's multi-layered approach to situations. The Chinese curriculum's treatment of problem situations can thus be seen not as an isolated innovation but as an expression of deeper cultural and pedagogical commitments that distinguish East Asian mathematics education from Western traditions.

V. CROSS-STAGE DEVELOPMENT OF PROBLEM SITUATIONS

The Chinese curriculum standards articulate a developmental progression for problem situations across three educational stages: elementary school (Grades 1-6), junior secondary school (Grades 7-9), and senior secondary school (Grades 10-12). This progression reflects a sophisticated understanding of how students' relationships with situations evolve as their mathematical maturity increases.

5.1 Elementary School: Situations as Concrete Experience

At the elementary level, the curriculum emphasizes real-world situations drawn from students' daily lives. Young students are encouraged to discover mathematical problems in familiar contexts: shopping, sharing, measuring, arranging objects. The cognitive demand is primarily at the level of *awareness* (意识), what the curriculum calls "application awareness" (应用意识) and "model awareness" (模型意识). Students are not expected to formalize their reasoning but to develop an intuitive sense that mathematics is relevant to and can be found in the world around them.

This emphasis aligns with Freudenthal's principle that mathematics education should begin with "reality" as

the source domain. At this stage, the situation is indeed generative: mathematical concepts emerge from students' engagement with concrete, familiar situations. The curriculum's focus on real-world situations at this level also resonates with PISA's emphasis on personal and societal contexts, though the Chinese curriculum does not frame this in terms of assessment but in terms of developmental appropriateness.

For example, consider the topic of fractions in the Grade 4-5 curriculum. Students are presented with real-world situations such as dividing a pizza among friends, measuring ingredients for a recipe, or sharing a length of rope equally. These situations are designed so that the concept of fraction emerges naturally from the need to represent quantities that cannot be expressed as whole numbers. The situation is genuinely generative: the mathematical concept (fractions as parts of a whole, as division, as points on a number line) arises from the student's engagement with the concrete situation, rather than being imposed upon it.

Similarly, in the Grade 3 curriculum, students encounter problems such as determining how many tables and chairs are needed for a class party given certain constraints, or figuring out how to divide a length of ribbon equally among classmates. These situations are drawn from students' immediate experience and require only basic arithmetic operations. The mathematical content (division, multiplication) is not presented as abstract knowledge to be memorized but as a tool that emerges naturally from the need to solve the situation. This embodies the generative conception: the situation gives rise to the mathematics, rather than the mathematics being illustrated by the situation.

5.2 Junior Secondary School: Situations as Bridges to Abstraction

At the junior secondary level, the curriculum introduces a more balanced mix of all three situation types. Real-world situations remain important but become more complex and less familiar; students encounter problems involving statistics, probability, and algebraic modeling that require them to abstract

from the concrete situation and reason at a higher level of generality. Mathematical situations gain prominence as students engage with proof, conjecture, and formal reasoning. Scientific situations appear in contexts involving data analysis, experimental design, and the quantitative reasoning that connects mathematics to the natural sciences.

The developmental shift at this stage is from *awareness* (意识) to *conception* (观念). The curriculum speaks of "model conception" (模型观念) and "application conception" (应用观念) at this level, terms that suggest a more conceptual and less purely experiential relationship with situations. Students are expected not merely to notice mathematics in the world but to understand how mathematical structures operate within different types of situations.

This stage corresponds roughly to what Brousseau described as the transition from "action" to "formulation" and "validation" in didactical situations. The Chinese curriculum, however, does not restrict this transition to mathematically structured environments; it expects students to navigate it across real-world, mathematical, and scientific situations.

Consider, for instance, how the concept of function is treated across the curriculum. In Grade 8, students encounter functions through real-world situations (e.g., the relationship between travel time and distance at constant speed) and scientific situations (e.g., the relationship between temperature and time during heating). These situations serve as the ground from which the abstract concept of function emerges. By Grade 9, students are expected to work with functions in mathematical situations (e.g., analyzing the properties of quadratic functions, comparing different function families), where the cognitive demand shifts from mathematization to formalization and generalization. This progression illustrates how the same mathematical content is approached through different situation types at different developmental stages, with each situation type contributing a distinct dimension to students' understanding.

5.3 Senior Secondary School: Situations as Platforms for Mathematical Reasoning

At the senior secondary level, as articulated in both the senior high school curriculum standards (Ministry of Education, 2020) and the 2022 compulsory education standards (Ministry of Education, 2022), the curriculum emphasizes mathematical and scientific situations over real-world ones. Students engage with abstract mathematical structures, formal proofs, and sophisticated modeling tasks. Real-world situations at this level are complex and often ill-structured, requiring students to make assumptions, choose appropriate mathematical tools, and justify their modeling decisions.

The developmental marker at this stage is the shift from *conception* (观念) to *ability* (能力). The curriculum speaks of "abstract ability" (抽象能力), "reasoning ability" (推理能力), and "mathematical modeling ability" (数学建模能力). At this level, situations are platforms for exercising mature mathematical competencies rather than sources for discovering new concepts. The generative role of situations has been partially superseded by their role as testing grounds for sophisticated mathematical reasoning.

This progression, from awareness to conception to ability, from real-world to mathematical to scientific situations, and from concrete to abstract, reflects a coherent developmental logic. It also suggests that the Chinese curriculum's three-fold typology is not a static classification but a dynamic framework that evolves as students' mathematical maturity grows. Different situation types are not simply "different flavors" but represent progressively deeper modes of engagement between the student and the mathematical world.

VI. DISCUSSION: CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

6.1 What the Chinese Curriculum Offers International Discourse

The comparative analysis in this paper reveals that the Chinese curriculum's conception of problem situations offers several contributions to international mathematics education discourse.

First, the triple-function conception of problem situations, as cognitive activities, curricular goals, and pedagogical approaches, provides a more integrated framework than most international alternatives. Where PISA treats situations primarily as assessment contexts, Brousseau treats them as teaching structures, and Freudenthal treats them as sources for mathematization, the Chinese curriculum recognizes that these functions are not mutually exclusive but are different dimensions of the same phenomenon. This integrated view has practical implications: it suggests that curriculum designers should not treat "situational problems" as a single category of tasks but should consider how situations function differently in different pedagogical and curricular roles.

Second, the three-fold typology of situations (real-world, mathematical, scientific) provides a finer-grained analytical tool than most international frameworks. PISA's four context types, for instance, all fall within the "real-world" category of the Chinese typology; PISA does not explicitly distinguish between purely mathematical situations and scientifically-grounded situations. By making these distinctions explicit, the Chinese curriculum enables more precise analysis of what different types of situations contribute to mathematical learning.

Third, the cross-stage developmental progression, from awareness to conception to ability with corresponding shifts in the dominant situation type, provides a model for understanding how students' relationships with mathematical situations evolve over time. This developmental perspective is largely absent from international frameworks, which tend to treat situations as static categories rather than as evolving dimensions of mathematical competence.

6.2 Toward a Dialogical Understanding

The comparative analysis also raises important questions for the Chinese curriculum itself. The distinction between real-world, mathematical, and scientific situations, while useful as an orienting framework, requires further theoretical elaboration. What criteria distinguish a "scientific" situation from a "real-world" one? How should curriculum designers handle problems that straddle multiple categories? The

concept of "epistemological demands": mathematization, formalization, and modeling, which correspond to different situation types offers a promising direction for future research, but it requires more precise definition and empirical validation.

Moreover, the Chinese curriculum's emphasis on situations as generative grounds for mathematical knowledge raises questions about the relationship between situation-based learning and the systematic development of mathematical structures. Brousseau's TDS demonstrates that carefully designed didactical situations can be more effective than unstructured real-world problems for developing specific mathematical concepts. The challenge for the Chinese curriculum is to balance the generative potential of real-world situations with the precision and efficiency of mathematically structured ones.

These questions are not criticisms but indications of the richness of the Chinese curriculum's conception. The fact that it raises such questions, and that it invites dialogue with international theoretical traditions, is a sign of its intellectual vitality.

It is also worth noting that the Chinese curriculum's conception of problem situations has evolved in dialogue with international ideas, even if this dialogue is not always made explicit. The emphasis on mathematical modeling in the senior high school curriculum shows clear influence from international modeling research and the PISA framework. The emphasis on discovering and posing problems resonates with the international problem-posing literature (Brown & Walter, 2005; Liljedahl & Cai, 2021). The emphasis on real situations echoes Freudenthal's insistence on reality as the source of mathematics and the situated learning tradition (Lave & Wenger, 1991). What is distinctive about the Chinese curriculum is not that it borrows from these international traditions but that it integrates them into a coherent, multi-layered framework that goes beyond any single international source. This integrative capacity is itself a form of theoretical contribution, and it deserves more attention from the international mathematics education community.

6.3 Implications for Practice

For mathematics educators and curriculum designers, the analysis suggests several practical implications:

1. **Situation design should be intentional and differentiated.** Not all situations serve the same purpose. Teachers should consider what kind of mathematical thinking a situation is designed to develop and choose situation types accordingly. A lesson aimed at developing mathematical reasoning may benefit from a mathematical situation, while a lesson aimed at developing application awareness may require a real-world situation.
2. **Problem posing should be treated as a core competence.** The Chinese curriculum's emphasis on problem posing, as both a cognitive activity and a curricular goal, resonates with international research (Brown & Walter, 2005; Cai & Hwang, 2022; Liljedahl & Cai, 2021) that has identified problem posing as a crucial but underdeveloped aspect of mathematical competence. Curriculum designers worldwide should consider how to systematically incorporate problem-posing opportunities into their programs.
3. **Cross-stage progression should be explicit.** The Chinese curriculum's developmental logic, from concrete real-world situations in early years to abstract mathematical situations in later years, provides a useful model for curriculum coherence. International curriculum frameworks should consider how situations develop across grade levels rather than treating them as grade-independent categories.
4. **The epistemological dimension of situations should be made explicit.** The Chinese curriculum's implicit recognition that different situation types entail different epistemological demands (mathematization, formalization, modeling) is a significant insight that deserves further development. International research on mathematical modeling (Blum, 2015; Blum & Leiß, 2007), problem posing (Brown & Walter, 2005; Cai & Hwang, 2022), and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) could profitably engage with this distinction, examining how different

types of situations foster different modes of mathematical thinking and how curriculum designers can intentionally vary situation types to develop the full range of mathematical competencies.

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the Chinese curriculum's conception of "problem situations" through comparative analysis with four major international frameworks: PISA's mathematical literacy framework, Brousseau's Theory of Didactical Situations, Freudenthal's Realistic Mathematics Education, and Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning. The analysis reveals that the Chinese curriculum embodies a distinctive epistemological stance in which situations are not decorative backgrounds but generative grounds for mathematical knowledge. This stance is expressed through a three-fold typology of situations (real-world, mathematical, scientific), each associated with distinct epistemological demands (mathematization, formalization, modeling), and through a triple-function conception of situations as simultaneously cognitive activities, curricular goals, and pedagogical approaches.

The cross-stage developmental analysis further shows that the Chinese curriculum envisions a coherent progression in students' relationships with situations, moving from awareness-based engagement with real-world contexts in elementary school, through conception-based navigation of diverse situation types in junior secondary school, to ability-based reasoning within complex mathematical and scientific situations in senior secondary school.

While the Chinese curriculum's conception is not without internal tensions, particularly regarding the boundaries between situation types and the balance between generative and structured approaches; these tensions are productive rather than debilitating. They invite further theoretical refinement and empirical investigation, and they open spaces for productive dialogue between Chinese and international mathematics education communities.

Looking ahead, several directions for future research emerge from this analysis. First, empirical studies are needed to examine how Chinese mathematics teachers actually implement the three-fold typology of situations in their classrooms. Do teachers distinguish among real-world, mathematical, and scientific situations in their instructional design? Do they recognize the different epistemological demands associated with each type? Second, comparative studies could examine how students in different educational systems develop different relationships with mathematical situations, and whether these differences have measurable effects on mathematical competencies. Third, theoretical work is needed to further develop the concept of "epistemological demands" associated with different situation types, connecting it to existing research on mathematization, formalization, and modeling.

The broader implication is that the concept of "situation" in mathematics education is far richer and more complex than any single framework can capture. PISA's instrumental view, Brousseau's structural approach, Freudenthal's mathematization perspective, and situated learning's emphasis on the constitutive role of context each illuminate important aspects of the situation-problem relationship. The Chinese curriculum's integrative conception, while less analytically precise, captures a holistic reality: that situations in mathematics education serve multiple functions simultaneously, and that their educational value depends not on their type alone but on how they are designed, implemented, and connected to the broader goals of mathematical learning.

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Epistemological Rupture in the Transition from Frequency to Formalism: An Analysis of the Probability Concept in Chinese Mathematics Curriculum

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 03 July 2026; Received in revised form: 06 Aug 2026; Accepted: 12 Aug 2026; Available online: 15 Aug 2026 Keywords— probability concept, epistemological rupture, semiotic representation, reification, Chinese mathematics curriculum ©2026 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/).	<i>The probability concept occupies an increasingly central position in school mathematics, yet its development across educational levels involves discontinuities that resist smooth cognitive progression. In the Chinese mathematics curriculum, the transition from junior to senior high school requires students to move from a "frequency intuition" conception of probability, where probability is understood as the long-run relative frequency of events observed through repeated experiments, to a "random variable" conception, where probability is formalized through sample spaces, events as sets, and random variables as numerical functions defined on outcomes. This paper argues that such a transition constitutes what Bachelard (1938) termed an epistemological rupture, a break in which previously adequate ways of knowing become obstacles to new knowledge. Through a theoretical analysis grounded in Bachelard's epistemological obstacle, Duval's theory of semiotic representation registers, and Sfard's reification framework, this study identifies three interrelated dimensions of the rupture: ontological (the shift from probability as an empirical property of experiments to probability as a formal measure on abstract mathematical structures), semiotic (the shift from verbal and numerical descriptions of experiments to the formal language of set theory and random variables), and cognitive (the demand for a structural conception of probability built on inadequate empirical foundations). By examining textbook definitions, curriculum standards, and the mathematical structure of the concept itself, this paper traces the specific mechanisms through which prior knowledge becomes an impediment and proposes that recognizing this rupture as structurally necessary can inform more coherent instructional design at the critical juncture between school levels.</i>

I. INTRODUCTION

Probability is among the mathematical ideas that students encounter in seemingly familiar forms yet must ultimately reconstruct at a far more abstract level.

From the everyday intuition that some events are "more likely" than others, to the systematic apparatus of sample spaces, random variables, and distributions, the probability concept serves as both a bridge between

mathematics and lived experience and a persistent source of cognitive difficulty. Students encounter probability repeatedly across grade levels, yet each encounter demands not merely an extension but, in certain respects, a fundamental restructuring of what probability is understood to be.

In China's mathematics curriculum, this restructuring takes a particularly sharp form. During the junior high school years (grades 7 to 9), students develop a conception of probability centered on the idea of *frequency* and *classical probability*. The 2024 edition of the junior high mathematics textbook published by the People's Education Press (人教版 2024, hereafter PEP-JH) presents probability through concrete experiments, expressing the idea that when an experiment is performed many times, the frequency of an event gradually stabilizes around a fixed value, which is taken as the probability of that event (People's Education Press, 2024). Students at this level compute probabilities using the classical formula $P(A) = m/n$, where m is the number of favorable outcomes and n is the total number of equally likely outcomes. They work with coin tosses, dice rolls, card draws, and spinning wheels, always anchored in concrete physical experiments whose outcomes can be observed and counted.

When students enter senior high school (grade 10 onward), they encounter a fundamentally different framework. The senior high textbook (人教 A 版 2019, hereafter PEP-SH) introduces set-theoretic language, defining the result of a random experiment as a *sample point* ω , the set of all sample points as the *sample space* Ω , and a *random event* as a subset of the sample space (People's Education Press, 2019a). Probability is now formalized through the language of sets: the sample space Ω , events as subsets of Ω , and probability as a function P assigning a number between 0 and 1 to each event, satisfying the axioms $P(\Omega) = 1$ and additivity for mutually exclusive events. Moreover, the concept of *random variable* is introduced: a numerical function $X: \Omega \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ that assigns a real number to each sample point (People's Education Press, 2019b). Students are now expected to work with discrete random variables, compute their probability distributions, expected

values, and variances, and apply the binomial and normal distributions.

The gap between these two formulations is not merely a matter of increasing precision. The junior high conception treats probability as an empirical property of experiments: the probability of getting heads is 0.5 because in many tosses, heads appear about half the time. The senior high conception treats probability as a formal measure on a set-theoretic structure, where events are subsets, random variables are functions, and probability is a mapping that satisfies abstract axioms. A student who has spent three years understanding probability through experiments and frequency must now understand it through sets and formal structures.

This shift has been recognized in Chinese mathematics education research as a practical difficulty (e.g., Qu, 2016; He, 2020), yet it has rarely been subjected to systematic theoretical analysis using epistemological frameworks. Most discussions treat it as a pedagogical challenge to be managed through more experiments or more practice with formulas. Such an approach, however well-intentioned, may underestimate the depth of the cognitive reorganization required.

This paper takes a different position. Drawing on Bachelard's (1938) concept of epistemological rupture, we argue that the transition from frequency intuition to random variable formalism is not a continuous deepening of understanding but a genuine rupture: a break in which the very knowledge that served the student well in junior high school becomes an obstacle to learning at the senior high level. To analyze this rupture, we employ three complementary theoretical lenses: Bachelard's theory of epistemological obstacles (as developed in mathematics education by Brousseau, 1983, 1997), Duval's (1995, 2006) theory of semiotic representation registers, and Sfard's (1991, 2000) theory of reification. Together, these frameworks allow us to examine the rupture at multiple levels: the epistemological structure of the obstacle, the semiotic shift in representational systems, and the cognitive transformation from process to object.

The analysis proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents the three theoretical frameworks and explains how they converge to illuminate concept transitions. Section 3 describes the specific curricular context of probability teaching in China, drawing on the most recent textbook editions and curriculum standards. Section 4 constitutes the core analysis, examining the epistemological rupture through three dimensions. Section 5 discusses the implications for teaching and curriculum design, and Section 6 offers concluding remarks.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Knowledge as Its Own Barrier: Bachelard's Framework

The central claim of this paper, that prior knowledge can impede rather than support further learning, draws on a tradition in the philosophy of science that treats cognitive difficulty as endogenous to knowledge rather than exogenous to it. Gaston Bachelard (1938/2002) captured this idea in his notion of the *epistemological obstacle* (*obstacle épistémologique*). Bachelard's provocation was simple but far-reaching: the mind does not approach new knowledge as a blank slate, nor are the main barriers to understanding always external (complex problems, inadequate instruments, poor teaching). Often, the barrier comes from within knowledge itself. A way of thinking that served well in one context becomes a constraint when the learner encounters a situation that demands a fundamentally different mode of thought.

For the probability concept, Bachelard's framework is especially apt. Probability is not a concept that students encounter for the first time at school; they arrive with everyday intuitions about chance, luck, and likelihood. The curriculum then provides an initial formalization (probability as experimental frequency), which works well for a range of problems. But this very success creates a localized, context-bound conception that can resist generalization. Bachelard's typology of obstacles helps us specify what goes wrong: the *obstacle of first experience* (the tendency to generalize from the initial kind of encounter (in this case, repeated experiments

with physical objects)); the *verbal obstacle* (the confusion generated when everyday terms like "event" or "random" acquire precise technical meanings that partially overlap with, but fundamentally differ from, their ordinary usage); and the *substantialist obstacle* (the difficulty of treating a process (observing frequency in experiments) as an object (a measure defined on an abstract structure)).

Guy Brousseau (1983, 1997) transposed Bachelard's epistemology into a didactic framework, arguing that obstacles in mathematics learning are not artifacts of poor instruction but are inherent in the structure of mathematical knowledge itself. The teacher's task, in Brousseau's view, is not to prevent students from encountering obstacles but to orchestrate conditions under which obstacles can be recognized and overcome, a process Bachelard called the *rectification* of knowledge (*connaître, c'est rectifier une connaissance*).

The related concept of *epistemological rupture* names the positive side of this dynamic. If the obstacle is the resistance encountered when old knowledge proves inadequate, the rupture is the break that must occur for understanding to advance. The rupture is not a failure but a restructuring: prior knowledge is neither discarded nor smoothly extended but fundamentally reorganized. Bachelard's insistence that all knowledge amounts to a rectification of prior knowledge (Bachelard, 1938/2002) means that intellectual progress requires a productive negation of earlier modes of thought, modes that were themselves necessary at an earlier stage of development.

2.2 The Semiotic Dimension: How Representations Shape and Constrain Understanding

A concept transition is never purely conceptual; it is always also a shift in the systems of signs through which the concept is expressed and manipulated. Duval's (1995, 2006) theory of semiotic representation registers provides the tools to analyze this dimension. Duval's starting point is the recognition that mathematical objects have no direct perceptual existence: they can only be accessed through their representations. A probability is not seen or touched; what is seen and touched are frequency

tables, probability histograms, set-theoretic expressions, and distribution graphs. The relationship between the concept and its representations is not incidental but constitutive.

For the present analysis, two of Duval's distinctions are especially important. The first is between *treatment* (transforming a representation within the same register, for instance, simplifying a probability expression) and *conversion* (moving between registers, for instance, translating a verbal description of an experiment into set-theoretic notation). Conversion is more cognitively demanding than treatment and is, in Duval's view, the critical test of genuine understanding. The second is *congruence*: two representations in different registers are congruent when their structural elements correspond one-to-one. High congruence makes conversion relatively transparent; low congruence makes it opaque and effortful.

When a curriculum transition introduces new registers (from verbal descriptions to set-theoretic notation, from frequency tables to distribution functions) and the congruence between old and new registers is low, the resulting difficulty is not merely a matter of learning new notation; it is a genuine *rupture in semiosis*, a disconnection between the representational activity the student can perform and the conceptual activity the new situation demands.

2.3 From Doing to Having: The Reification of Mathematical Concepts

Many mathematical concepts exhibit what Sfard (1991, 2000) called a *dual nature*: they can be apprehended either as processes (something the learner *does*) or as objects (something the learner *has*). The probability concept illustrates this duality with particular clarity. At one level, "doing probability" means performing experiments, observing outcomes, tallying frequencies, and computing numerical values. At another level, probability is a static mathematical entity, a measure on a sample space that can be manipulated, compared, and subjected to formal operations. The transition between these two modes is what Sfard termed *reification*: the transformation of a process into a conceptual object.

Sfard described this transformation in three stages. *Interiorization* is the familiarization with a concept at the operational level: the student learns to carry out the relevant processes competently (conducting experiments, counting outcomes, applying formulas). *Condensation* is the ability to perceive the process as a whole without executing each step; the student can reason about probability without performing the experiment, imagining what would happen in principle rather than actually doing it. *Reification* is the decisive breakthrough: the process is suddenly apprehended as a manipulable object, an ontological shift in which probability becomes something to reason *about* rather than something to reason *through*.

Reification is not gradual. Sfard (1991) described it as a sudden intellectual restructuring in which the concept emerges when the process is apprehended as an object. The difficulty lies in the fact that the operational conception, far from being a stepping stone to the structural conception, becomes the very thing that blocks it. The student who has invested years in building a robust process conception of probability, anchored in experiments, grounded in frequency, and tied to concrete physical situations, must undergo an *ontological shift* in which all of that operational competence is reorganized into a new kind of understanding. This shift is precisely where Bachelard's obstacle and Sfard's reification converge: the operational conception that enabled the student's earlier progress now functions as an impediment to further development.

2.4 Toward an Integrated Analytical Lens

Each of the three frameworks captures a dimension of concept transition that the others leave partially visible. Bachelard identifies the *epistemological structure* of the difficulty: why knowledge that was once adequate becomes an impediment. Duval identifies the *representational mechanism*: how shifts in sign systems both enable and constrain understanding. Sfard identifies the *cognitive transformation*: the shift from operational to structural conception that the transition demands. No single framework captures all three dimensions simultaneously, and no single

framework can account for the specific difficulties that arise in the probability concept transition.

Used together, however, they provide mutually reinforcing explanatory power. The epistemological obstacle explains *why* the frequency intuition conception resists restructuring; the semiotic analysis explains *how* the shift in representational registers amplifies the difficulty; and the reification framework explains *what* kind of cognitive transformation is required. For the probability concept specifically, this convergence reveals a distinctive challenge: the student must not only restructure what probability means (ontological rupture), but also learn to work in entirely new representational systems (semiotic rupture), and simultaneously transform a process of experimental observation into a formal mathematical object (cognitive rupture). These three ruptures are not independent; they interact, reinforce each other, and together constitute the full epistemological break that the curriculum transition demands.

III. THE PROBABILITY CONCEPT IN THE CHINESE MATHEMATICS CURRICULUM

3.1 Junior High School: The Frequency Intuition Conception

In the Chinese mathematics curriculum, the probability concept is first formally introduced in grade 9 (junior high year 3), within the "Statistics and Probability" domain. The 2022 edition of the Compulsory Education Mathematics Curriculum Standards specifies that students should develop an understanding of probability through experiments, learn to compute probabilities of simple events using the classical formula, and recognize how frequency relates to probability (Ministry of Education, 2022).

The PEP-JH textbook (2024 edition, Volume 2, Chapter 25) presents the probability concept through a sequence of concrete experiments. The first experiments involve coin tossing: students are asked to toss a fair coin 50 times, record the number of heads, and compute the ratio of heads to total tosses, which the textbook terms the *frequency* of the event "heads"

(People's Education Press, 2024). Students then perform similar experiments with dice, colored balls drawn from bags, and spinning wheels, computing frequencies for various events.

After presenting several such experiments, the textbook abstracts a common pattern and introduces the classical probability formula: for an experiment with n equally likely outcomes, the probability of an event A consisting of m outcomes is $P(A) = m/n$ (People's Education Press, 2024).

This definition emphasizes several features. First, probability is understood through *experiment*: it is grounded in the outcomes of repeated physical trials. Second, the emphasis is on *frequency*: probability is the long-run stable value that frequency approaches. Third, the classical formula provides a computational shortcut when outcomes are equally likely. The student's understanding at this level can be characterized as *frequency intuition*: probability is a number that describes how often an event occurs in repeated experiments, computable by counting favorable outcomes.

During grade 9, students study several types of probability problems: classical probability (coin tosses, dice rolls, card draws), geometric probability (areas and lengths), and simple compound events using tree diagrams and tables (Ministry of Education, 2022; People's Education Press, 2024). Throughout, the emphasis remains on the empirical connection between probability and observable experiments: students conduct experiments, record frequencies, compare them with theoretical probabilities, and observe the "law of large numbers" informally.

The cognitive achievement at the end of junior high school is substantial. Students can compute classical probabilities, construct sample spaces for simple experiments using lists or tree diagrams, estimate probabilities from experimental data, and solve problems involving compound events. Yet this achievement rests entirely on the frequency intuition conception. Probability is a property of experiments, computed by counting outcomes or observing frequencies, expressed through natural language and

simple arithmetic, and understood primarily through its connection to physical randomness.

3.2 Senior High School: The Random Variable Conception

When students enter senior high school (grade 10 and beyond, particularly in the elective module "Probability and Statistics"), the probability concept undergoes a fundamental redefinition. The PEP-SH textbook (2019 edition, Compulsory Volume 2 and Selective Compulsory Volumes 2–3) revisits the junior high conception before moving to a more formal framework:

The textbook acknowledges the junior high approach, studying probability through experiments and frequency, before introducing set-theoretic language as a more rigorous foundation (People's Education Press, 2019a). The new framework defines the result of a random experiment as a *sample point* ω , the set of all sample points as the *sample space* Ω , and a *random event* as a subset of Ω . The probability of an event A is defined as a real number $P(A)$ satisfying three conditions: non-negativity ($P(A) \geq 0$), normalization ($P(\Omega) = 1$), and additivity for mutually exclusive events ($P(A \cup B) = P(A) + P(B)$) (People's Education Press, 2019a).

This formulation differs from the junior high framework in several fundamental respects. First, the ontological status of probability has changed. Instead of a property of experiments derived from frequency, probability is now a *measure* defined on a set-theoretic structure. The sample space Ω , events as subsets of Ω , and probability as a function satisfying the axioms; these are abstract mathematical objects, not descriptions of physical experiments.

Second, the language has shifted from the informal register of experiments and frequency to the formal register of set theory. Terms such as "sample space" (样本空间), "sample point" (样本点), "event" (事件 as subset), "mutually exclusive" (互斥), and "independent" (独立) replace the language of "tossing coins," "drawing balls," and "frequency stabilizing."

Third, and most importantly for the rupture analysis, the concept of *random variable* is introduced.

The textbook defines a random variable X as a function that assigns a real number to each sample point in the sample space, that is, $X: \Omega \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ (People's Education Press, 2019b).

Students are then expected to work with discrete random variables, their probability distributions (listing all possible values and their probabilities), expected values $E(X) = \sum x_i p_i$, variances $D(X) = \sum (x_i - E(X))^2 p_i$, and special distributions (binomial, hypergeometric, normal). The emphasis shifts from *observing frequencies in experiments* to *analyzing mathematical properties of random variables*.

3.3 The Curricular Gap

The two curriculum documents that govern probability teaching at each level make the discontinuity explicit. The Compulsory Education Mathematics Curriculum Standards (2022 edition) requires students to develop an understanding of probability through experiments and to recognize how frequency relates to probability (Ministry of Education, 2022), emphasizing intuitive understanding and empirical grounding. The Senior High School Mathematics Curriculum Standards (2017 edition, revised 2020) requires students to understand the notions of sample space and events, apply the axioms of probability, work with random variables and their distributions, and compute expected values and variances (Ministry of Education, 2020), emphasizing formal definition and abstract reasoning.

Between these two documents lies a significant conceptual gap: the junior high curriculum cultivates an empirical, experimentally grounded understanding, while the senior high curriculum demands a formal, set-theoretically grounded understanding. The gap is not a matter of degree (more depth, more complexity) but of kind: the very conception of what probability *is* must be restructured.

IV. ANALYSIS OF THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL RUPTURE

4.1 The Ontological Rupture: From Empirical Property to Formal Measure

The most fundamental dimension of the rupture is ontological. At the junior high level, probability is an *empirical property of experiments*: the probability of getting heads is 0.5 because in a fair coin, heads and tails are equally likely, and this is confirmed by observing that frequency stabilizes near 0.5 in repeated tossing. The textbook's language makes this clear: probability is introduced *after* experiments are performed and frequencies are computed. Probability is not an abstract mathematical object but a numerical description of experimental regularity.

At the senior high level, probability is a *formal measure on a set-theoretic structure*. The axioms define probability as a function P from events (subsets of Ω) to real numbers, satisfying certain conditions. The sample space Ω need not correspond to any physical experiment; events need not be "outcomes" of anything observable. The probability function is defined by its mathematical properties (non-negativity, normalization, additivity), not by its relationship to experimental frequency.

This shift maps directly onto Sfard's (1991) framework. The junior high student has achieved *interiorization*: they can perform experiments, count outcomes, compute frequencies, and apply the classical formula. Some students have reached *condensation*: they can think about the probability of an event without performing the experiment, reasoning about what would happen in principle. But the senior high curriculum demands *reification*: probability must become a structural object, a measure satisfying axioms, defined on an abstract set-theoretic structure.

The difficulty of this reification can be analyzed more precisely. At the junior high level, probability is always *about something*: it describes the likelihood of a physical outcome. The student asks "What is the probability of getting heads?" and answers by thinking about coins, experiments, and frequencies. At the senior high level, probability is a mathematical object in its own right: it can be computed from axioms, compared across different probability spaces, and manipulated using formal rules. The student must treat probability not as a description of experiments but as an entity defined by its mathematical structure.

This ontological rupture generates what Bachelard would call a *substantialist obstacle*. The student, accustomed to thinking of probability as a property of physical experiments, encounters the demand to treat it as an abstract measure satisfying axioms. The junior high conception, in which probability is grounded in experimental frequency, becomes an impediment to the senior high conception, in which probability is defined by mathematical properties independent of any particular experiment.

Consider a concrete illustration. At the junior high level, the question "What is the probability of rolling a sum of 7 with two dice?" is answered by listing all 36 equally likely outcomes, counting the 6 favorable ones, and computing $6/36 = 1/6$. The student's reasoning is grounded in the physical experiment: there are two dice, they can land in 36 ways, and 6 of these ways give a sum of 7. At the senior high level, the same question requires defining the sample space Ω as the set of all ordered pairs (i, j) with $i, j \in \{1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6\}$, defining the event $A = \{(i, j) : i + j = 7\}$, and computing $P(A) = |A| / |\Omega| = 6/36 = 1/6$. The computation is the same, but the conceptual framework is fundamentally different: the student must now think in terms of sets, subsets, and a probability function defined on them.

4.2 The Semiotic Rupture: From Experimental Language to Set-Theoretic Formalism

The ontological shift is accompanied by, and in some sense constituted by, a semiotic rupture. Duval's (1995, 2006) framework allows us to describe this rupture with precision.

At the junior high level, the probability concept is expressed through several semiotic registers:

1. **Natural language (experimental descriptions):** Tasks ask students to toss a fair coin a specified number of times and record the frequency of heads, or to draw balls from a bag with known contents.
2. **Numerical computation:** $P(A) = m/n = 6/36 = 1/6$.

3. **Tabular/list representations:** Lists of all possible outcomes; tree diagrams showing branches for each stage of an experiment.

4. **Graphical representations (frequency histograms):** Bar charts showing the frequency of outcomes across multiple trials.

Throughout the junior high curriculum, the experimental register plays a dominant role. The textbook introduces probability through verbal descriptions of physical experiments, and the definition itself uses natural language grounded in experimental experience, conveying the idea that when an experiment is performed many times, the relative frequency of an event tends to stabilize around a fixed value that serves as its probability. The computations are always linked to specific experiments, and the tree diagrams always represent physical processes (first toss, second toss, etc.).

At the senior high level, new registers appear and quickly become dominant:

1. **Set-theoretic notation:** $\Omega = \{\omega_1, \omega_2, \dots, \omega_n\}$, $A \subseteq \Omega$, $A \cup B$, $A \cap B$, $\bar{A}$ (complement).

2. **Random variable notation:** $X: \Omega \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$, $P(X = x_i) = p_i$, $E(X) = \sum x_i p_i$.

3. **Distribution tables:** Tables listing values of a random variable and their probabilities.

4. **Distribution graphs:** Probability mass functions and cumulative distribution functions plotted on coordinate axes.

The discontinuity between these two semiotic regimes can be analyzed using Duval's concept of *congruence*. At the junior high level, the congruence between registers is relatively high. The verbal description "draw a ball from a bag" corresponds directly to the physical experiment, the list of outcomes corresponds directly to the branches of a tree diagram, and the frequency histogram corresponds directly to the results of repeated trials. The elements of each register map transparently onto the physical experiment that grounds them all.

At the senior high level, the congruence drops sharply. The set-theoretic notation Ω , $A \subseteq \Omega$, $P(A)$ has

no direct counterpart in experimental language. The expression "sample space" is not simply a list of outcomes; it is an abstract set whose elements (sample points) may have no physical interpretation. The random variable $X: \Omega \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ is not simply "the number we get from the experiment"; it is a *function* defined on the sample space, mapping each abstract outcome to a real number.

This non-congruence has a concrete consequence. At the junior high level, conversions between registers are *transparent*: the student can see that the verbal description, the tree diagram, the list of outcomes, and the frequency histogram all refer to the same experiment because they are all grounded in the physical situation. At the senior high level, conversions become *opaque*: the student must recognize that $\Omega = \{1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6\}$ with $P(\{k\}) = 1/6$ for each k , the random variable $X(\omega) = \omega$, and the probability distribution $P(X = k) = 1/6$ all represent the same probabilistic situation, but the common referent is no longer a physical experiment; it is an abstract probability space.

4.3 The Cognitive Rupture: The Frequency Intuition as Epistemological Obstacle

The ontological and semiotic ruptures described above converge at the cognitive level. The frequency intuition conception, which was a genuine cognitive achievement at the junior high level, becomes an *epistemological obstacle* at the senior high level. In the terms of Tall and Vinner (1981), the student's *concept image* of probability, the cognitive structure built from experiments, frequency observations, and concrete events, conflicts with the *concept definition* presented at the senior high level, the axiomatic, set-theoretic formalism. This conflict between concept image and concept definition is a well-documented source of difficulty in advanced mathematical thinking (Tall & Vinner, 1981), and it manifests with particular intensity in the probability domain.

The most fundamental mechanism is what might be called the *empirical anchor*. At the junior high level, every probabilistic question is grounded in a concrete physical situation: a coin, a die, a bag of colored balls. The student asks "What is the probability of getting heads?" and answers by thinking about the

fairness of the coin and the symmetry of the experiment. This empirical anchor becomes so deeply embedded that the student finds it difficult to think about probability without a physical referent. When the senior high curriculum asks the student to define probability through axioms, to say that P is a function satisfying non-negativity, normalization, and additivity, the axioms are purely formal; they tell you what probability *does*, not what it *is*. For a student whose entire understanding is built on experiments and frequencies, this is genuinely disorienting.

Closely related is the *frequency identification*. The junior high curriculum establishes the idea that frequency stabilizes around the probability through repeated experimentation (People's Education Press, 2024). Over three years of instruction, this identification becomes so natural that the student comes to believe that probability *is* long-run frequency, or at least that the only legitimate way to determine a probability is through repeated experimentation. When the senior high curriculum presents the axioms of probability as the foundation, the student struggles to see how these abstract conditions relate to anything meaningful. The frequency identification functions here as what Bachelard (1938/2002) called an obstacle of first experience: a generalization from a particular kind of encounter (experimental frequency) to a universal conception.

The obstacles extend beyond probability itself. The notion of *event* undergoes a parallel transformation. At the junior high level, an event is something that happens: "getting heads," "rolling a 6." The word carries its ordinary-language meaning: an occurrence, something that takes place in time. At the senior high level, an event is a *subset* of the sample space, a mathematical object that exists timelessly in a set-theoretic universe. The student who thinks of events as happenings will naturally resist the idea that an event can be the empty set ($\emptyset$) or the entire sample space (Ω), since neither corresponds to anything that could "happen" in the ordinary sense.

The concept of *random variable* generates perhaps the most subtle obstacle. At the junior high level, students encounter numerical quantities

associated with experiments: the sum of two dice, the number of heads in ten tosses. These quantities vary from one trial to another, and the student understands them as "numbers that come out different each time." At the senior high level, a random variable is not a varying number but a *function*: $X: \Omega \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$. This is a categorical shift. The function X does not vary; it is a fixed rule. What varies is the sample point ω , and consequently the value $X(\omega)$. The student must understand that randomness does not reside in the rule but in the input. The term "random variable" is itself misleading: it suggests something that varies randomly, which is precisely what a random variable is *not*.

Finally, there is a shift from *computation* to *distribution*. At the junior high level, the student computes a single probability: $P(A) = m/n$. At the senior high level, the student must work with entire *distributions*, the complete set of values a random variable can take and their associated probabilities. The expected value $E(X) = \sum x_i p_i$ and variance $D(X) = \sum (x_i - E(X))^2 p_i$ require the student to consider the random variable as a whole, weighing all its possible values simultaneously. This shift from a single value to an entire distribution is a manifestation of Sfard's (1991) reification: the random variable must become an object of thought rather than a process of obtaining a number.

These obstacles are not independent. The empirical anchor reinforces the frequency identification; the frequency identification makes the axiomatic approach seem arbitrary; the concrete event conception makes the set-theoretic framework seem unnatural; the number conception of random variable blocks the functional understanding. Together, they form a web of interlocking obstacles that make the transition one of the most difficult concept transitions in the secondary school curriculum.

4.4 The Rupture as Structurally Necessary: Historical and Logical Arguments

The analysis above reveals that the transition from frequency intuition to random variable formalism is not a smooth deepening of understanding but a genuine rupture. This raises a question: is this rupture a contingent feature of the Chinese curriculum, or does

it reflect a deeper structural necessity inherent in the probability concept itself?

We argue for the latter, while acknowledging that the particular form and intensity of the rupture is shaped by curricular choices. The probability concept, as it has developed in the history of mathematics, necessarily involves discontinuities. Each major stage in the concept's historical evolution was overcome through a rupture, not because the preceding conception was "wrong" but because its internal limitations became untenable. Examining these historical ruptures in detail illuminates why the curriculum transition demands a comparable break.

4.4.1 *The first rupture: From classical probability to frequentism*

The classical conception, crystallized in Laplace's (1814) *Essai philosophique sur les probabilités*, defined probability as the ratio of favorable cases to all equally possible cases. This definition is intuitive and computationally effective for symmetric situations like dice and cards, but it harbors a fatal circularity: it defines probability in terms of *equally possible* outcomes, where "equally possible" itself presupposes a notion of probability (equal probability). The definition works when our intuitions about symmetry are clear: a fair coin has two "equally possible" outcomes, but it offers no principled criterion for determining when outcomes are equally possible in ambiguous situations.

This circularity was not merely a logical curiosity; it generated concrete paradoxes. Bertrand's (1889) paradox demonstrated that the classical definition yields contradictory answers to the same question depending on how "equally possible" is parameterized: the probability that a random chord of a circle is longer than the side of an inscribed triangle takes three different values ($1/3$, $1/2$, $1/4$) depending on whether one considers the chord's endpoints, its midpoint, or its distance from the center as the "equally possible" variable. The classical conception had no internal resources to resolve this contradiction because it could not distinguish between different parameterizations of the same sample space.

The frequentist conception, probability as the limit of relative frequency in a long sequence of identical trials, as formalized by von Mises (1928/1957), resolved this circularity by grounding probability in observable, repeatable experiments. Under frequentism, probability is not a ratio of possibilities but an empirical limit: toss a coin enough times and the proportion of heads will converge to a definite number. This was a genuine rupture with the classical conception: probability was no longer a property of the *setup* (equally possible outcomes) but a property of the *long-run behavior* of a repeatable process. The student's frequency intuition conception, developed in junior high school, is structurally analogous to this frequentist stage.

4.4.2 *The second rupture: From frequentism to axiomatization*

The frequentist conception was itself overcome by internal pressures. Its most conspicuous limitation was the inability to assign probabilities to non-repeatable events: What is the probability that a specific earthquake will occur in the next decade? What is the probability that a particular scientific hypothesis is true? These questions are meaningful and practically urgent, but frequentism cannot address them because there is no sequence of identical trials to which they refer. Beyond this practical limitation, frequentism faced deep theoretical difficulties. The definition of probability as a *limit* of relative frequencies required specifying what kind of limit, under what conditions, and with what guarantees of convergence. The mathematical apparatus needed to make these notions precise (measure theory, developed by Lebesgue, Borel, and others in the early twentieth century) revealed that the intuitive notion of "frequency" was far more mathematically complex than the frequentists had supposed.

Kolmogorov's (1933) *Grundbegriffe der Wahrscheinlichkeitsrechnung* resolved these difficulties through a second rupture: probability was detached from any particular interpretation and defined purely as a measure satisfying three axioms (non-negativity, normalization, and countable additivity) on a measurable space. Under this conception, probability is

neither a ratio of possibilities nor a limit of frequencies; it is a mathematical function whose properties are determined by its axioms. The connection to empirical reality is no longer built into the definition but must be established through interpretation (frequentist, Bayesian, propensity, or other). This was not merely a generalization of frequentism; it was a transformation of what probability *is* as a mathematical object.

The senior high school curriculum's introduction of sample spaces, events as sets, probability as a measure on those sets, and random variables as functions on the sample space recapitulates this second historical rupture. The student who has internalized the frequentist conception, that probability is what frequency stabilizes to in repeated experiments, must now accept that probability is a formal measure whose existence and properties are guaranteed by axioms rather than by empirical convergence.

4.4.3 The parallel with student cognition

The student's cognitive development traverses a sequence structurally analogous to these historical ruptures. The junior high frequency intuition conception is the student's "classical" stage: probability is computed by counting equally likely outcomes in concrete experiments. The more sophisticated experimental frequency conception, that probability is what frequency approaches in the long run, is the "frequentist" stage. The senior high axiomatic conception, with sample spaces, set-theoretic events, and random variables, is the "Kolmogorov" stage.

This parallel should not be read as a naïve recapitulation thesis. Individual learning does not simply replay the history of the discipline. Rather, the parallel exists because the logical structure of the probability concept creates similar demands at each level. At each stage, the learner (or the mathematical community) has achieved something real and valuable: a working conception that supports a range of problems. At each stage, that conception encounters situations it cannot handle. And at each stage, the resolution requires not extending the old conception but replacing it with a fundamentally different one.

This parallel also illuminates why the rupture is not merely a matter of adding sophistication. The classical conception was not a less precise version of the frequentist conception; it was a *different kind of thing* (counting possibilities vs. observing long-run behavior). The frequentist conception was not a less precise version of the axiomatic conception; it was a *different kind of thing* (empirical limit vs. formal measure). Similarly, the frequency intuition is not a rough approximation of the random variable conception; it is a fundamentally different way of understanding what probability is.

4.4.4 Implications of the structural argument

If the rupture is structurally necessary, several consequences follow for curriculum design and pedagogy. First, the rupture cannot be eliminated by better sequencing or smoother transitions; it can only be made more navigable. Second, the curriculum should acknowledge the discontinuity explicitly rather than pretending that the senior high framework is simply a "more rigorous version" of the junior high approach. Third, the historical narrative, the actual sequence of crises, paradoxes, and reconstructions through which the probability concept developed, can serve as a pedagogical resource. By situating the student's own transition within this history, educators can help students understand the rupture not as a failure of their junior high learning but as a natural step in the development of mathematical thought.

This structural account does not mean that all students must experience the rupture in the same way. The particular form of the rupture is shaped by the curriculum, by teaching, and by the student's own cognitive resources. A curriculum that explicitly acknowledges the discontinuity and provides transitional support may mitigate its intensity. But the rupture itself, the need for a fundamental restructuring of what probability is understood to be, is not an artifact of poor curriculum design. It is an inherent feature of the probability concept, rooted in the same intellectual tensions that drove the historical development of the discipline.

V. DISCUSSION

5.1 Implications for Teaching

If the transition from frequency intuition to random variable formalism is an epistemological rupture rather than a smooth progression, then pedagogical approaches must address the rupture at its source. Simply presenting the new definition and providing more practice will not resolve a conflict between concept image and concept definition (Tall & Vinner, 1981). What is needed is a deliberate strategy of what Bachelard called *psychoanalysis of objective knowledge*: making the prior conception explicit, examining where it works and where it breaks down, and thereby creating the conditions for its restructuring.

At the senior high level, this might begin with problems that deliberately expose the limitations of the frequency conception. A teacher could pose questions such as the probability of a specific earthquake occurring in the next decade or a new drug being approved by regulators. Such questions involve events that cannot be repeated under identical conditions, so the frequency-based definition offers no guidance. The point is not to provide answers but to create a cognitive need for a more general framework, a need that the axiomatic approach can then satisfy.

The random variable concept deserves particular attention, given the subtlety of the shift from "a number that varies from trial to trial" to "a function defined on the sample space." A productive pedagogical sequence might proceed through several stages. First, students define informal rules that assign numbers to experimental outcomes ("Let X be the number of heads"). Then, the teacher makes the functional character of the rule explicit by listing several outcomes and their corresponding values, creating a table that shows X as a mapping rather than a varying quantity. Only at this point is the formal notation $X: \Omega \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ introduced, as a way of capturing something the student has already been doing informally. The key insight is that X itself is not random; it is a fixed rule; what is random is which sample point ω is realized, and therefore what value $X(\omega)$ takes.

Duval's (1995, 2006) theory further suggests that conversion between semiotic registers should be a deliberate focus of classroom instruction. Students will need to move between verbal descriptions of experiments, set-theoretic notation, random variable notation, distribution tables, and distribution graphs. Because the congruence between these registers is low (as shown in Section 4.2), such conversions cannot be left to implicit acquisition. Teachers should design tasks that require explicit conversion: given a verbal description, write the set-theoretic formulation; given a distribution table, draw the probability histogram; given a random variable definition, construct the distribution table.

5.2 Implications for Curriculum Design

While teaching strategies can mitigate the rupture, the structural features of the curriculum themselves contribute to its severity. The Chinese curriculum divides probability teaching sharply between the junior high and senior high levels, with distinct textbooks, distinct standards documents, and (in practice) distinct teachers. This institutional separation reinforces the impression that the two levels represent fundamentally different enterprises rather than stages in a continuous, if discontinuous, development.

Curriculum designers could introduce elements of continuity at the points of greatest discontinuity. At the junior high level, the language of "sample space" could be introduced informally, using set-bracket notation to list outcomes, before the full set-theoretic framework is required. The 2024 PEP-JH textbook already lists outcomes systematically but does not explicitly connect this practice to the set-theoretic language that students will later encounter. Introducing Ω as a label for the set of all outcomes at the junior high level would create a semiotic bridge without requiring a conceptual rupture.

At the senior high level, the curriculum could present the axiomatic framework not as a *replacement* for the junior high conception but as a *generalization* that explains why the junior high approach worked in the cases where it did. The historical development of probability, from Laplace's classical conception

through von Mises' frequentism to Kolmogorov's axiomatics, provides a natural narrative for this progression. By situating the student's own transition within this historical sequence, the curriculum can help students understand the rupture not as a failure of their junior high learning but as a natural step in the development of mathematical thought.

The treatment of random variables in the current curriculum also warrants structural revision. The PEP-SH textbook moves rapidly from the formal definition $X: \Omega \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ to probability distributions and expected values. A more gradual progression through intermediate stages would better support this transition: (1) informal numerical summaries of experiments, (2) explicit rules that map outcomes to numbers, (3) formal definition as functions, and (4) distributions and distributional properties. Such a sequence would align more closely with Sfard's (1991) stages of interiorization, condensation, and reification, providing the cognitive support that each stage requires.

5.3 Implications for Research

This paper has offered a theoretical analysis of the epistemological rupture in the probability concept transition. The analysis generates several questions for future empirical research.

First, how do students actually work through the transition from frequency intuition to random variable formalism? Do they exhibit the patterns of obstacle and rupture predicted by the theoretical framework? Classroom-based studies using think-aloud protocols, clinical interviews, and task-based analysis could reveal the specific ways in which prior knowledge serves as an obstacle. The representativeness heuristic, for example, has been shown to influence junior high students' probability reasoning in systematic ways (He, 2020), and it would be important to investigate whether such heuristics persist and interact with the formal conceptions introduced at the senior high level.

Second, what specific instructional interventions are most effective in supporting students through the rupture? Can task sequences designed with the three dimensions of the rupture in mind

improve student outcomes? Recent methodological advances in tracing learning through combined process-object theories and individual learning trajectories (Bednorz et al., 2026) offer promising tools for such investigations.

Third, how does the rupture manifest in different curriculum systems? The Chinese curriculum provides a particularly sharp case, but analogous transitions exist in other systems. Comparative studies could illuminate which features of the rupture are universal and which are curriculum-specific.

Fourth, how do teachers' own conceptions of probability influence their treatment of the transition? Research on teachers' mathematical knowledge for teaching probability (Batanero et al., 2016) suggests that teachers' own understanding of the relationship between frequency and probability may affect how they mediate the transition.

5.4 Limitations

This study is a theoretical analysis, not an empirical investigation. The claims about student cognition are based on theoretical reasoning and on the analysis of textbooks and curriculum standards, not on direct observation of student learning. The identification of specific obstacles is derived from the theoretical frameworks (Bachelard, Duval, Sfard) rather than from systematic data collection. Future empirical research is needed to test and refine the theoretical claims made here.

Additionally, this analysis focuses on the probability concept as presented in two specific textbook series (PEP-JH 2024 and PEP-SH 2019). Other textbook series used in China, such as the Beijing Normal University Press (北师大版) edition, may present the transition differently. The role of teachers as mediators of the curriculum is also not addressed, although it is likely to be significant in practice.

The theoretical frameworks employed each carry their own assumptions and limitations. Bachelard's philosophy of science, developed primarily through analysis of physics and chemistry, may not transfer transparently to mathematics education. Duval's theory has been criticized for its limited

treatment of social and contextual factors. Sfard's claim that reification is a sudden rather than gradual process has been questioned. The convergence of these three frameworks, while productive, does not guarantee that the resulting analysis captures all relevant dimensions of the transition.

Finally, the historical parallel drawn in Section 4.4 should be read as an illuminating analogy rather than a strict recapitulation thesis. The relationship between individual learning and historical development is contested in mathematics education research.

VI. CONCLUSION

The concept of probability occupies a peculiar position in school mathematics. It is at once the most accessible of mathematical ideas, as everyone has an intuitive sense of what it means for something to be "likely," and the most resistant to formal treatment. The transition from junior high school to senior high school in the Chinese mathematics curriculum brings this tension to a head. Students who have spent three years understanding probability through experiments, frequency, and counting must now reconstruct their understanding in terms of sample spaces, events as sets, and random variables as functions.

This paper has argued that the difficulty of this transition is not incidental but structural. At the ontological level, probability must shift from being a property of experiments to being a measure on an abstract structure. At the semiotic level, the student must master a new system of notation (set-theoretic, functional, distributional) that has low congruence with the registers of the junior high curriculum. At the cognitive level, the frequency intuition conception that served the student well becomes an obstacle to the new formal conception, operating through multiple interlocking mechanisms: the empirical anchor, the frequency identification, the concrete event conception, the number conception of random variable, and the computational conception of distribution.

These dimensions are not additive; they interact. The semiotic rupture amplifies the cognitive

obstacle (the unfamiliar notation makes the new conception harder to grasp, which makes the student retreat to the familiar frequency intuition). The cognitive obstacle intensifies the ontological rupture (the persistent concept image of probability-as-frequency makes it difficult to see what the axioms are for). Understanding these interactions is essential for designing instruction that addresses the rupture as a whole rather than its parts in isolation.

The practical implication is that the transition cannot be managed by presenting the new framework and expecting students to adapt. It requires a deliberate pedagogical strategy: problematizing the frequency conception before replacing it, building semiotic bridges between the old and new registers, and supporting the reification of probability from a process (observing frequencies) into an object (a measure satisfying axioms). The curriculum, too, has a role to play: not in eliminating the rupture (which is structurally necessary) but in making it more navigable.

Bachelard observed that the human mind has a tendency to accept the familiar as natural, resisting the restructuring that new knowledge demands, and thus needs to be surprised into intellectual progress (Bachelard, 1938/2002). The frequency intuition is, in this sense, a kind of intellectual comfort zone. The student who has learned to compute probabilities through experiments and counting has achieved something real and valuable. The difficulty begins when this achievement becomes a cage, a way of thinking that prevents the student from seeing what probability could become. Recognizing this rupture not as a defect but as a necessary feature of mathematical development is the starting point for more coherent instruction at one of the most critical junctures in the school mathematics curriculum.

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Reading for Autonomy: Using Literature Circles to Foster Learner Autonomy and Reflective Thinking in the Secondary English Classroom

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 20 July 2026; Received in revised form: 18 Aug 2026; Accepted: 21 Aug 2026; Available online: 26 Aug 2026 Keywords— Literature Circles, Learner Autonomy, Reflective Thinking, Literature Pedagogy, Secondary English Education, Student-Centred Learning ©2026 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/).	<i>Literature instruction in many secondary school contexts remains shaped by examination-oriented pedagogy that offers limited scope for independent interpretation or reflective engagement with texts. This study examines literature circles - small, student-led discussion groups organised around rotating roles - as a pedagogical alternative capable of fostering learner autonomy and reflective thinking. Drawing on a four-week qualitative case study conducted with 44 Grade 9 students at a CBSE-affiliated school in India, the study analysed students' reflective journals and semi-structured interviews using thematic analysis. Findings reveal two key themes: literature circles fostered a gradual but observable shift toward greater student ownership of the reading process through structured, accountable roles; and collaborative, peer-driven discussion consistently prompted students to reconsider and articulate their own interpretive reasoning, generating both immediate and longer-arc reflective thinking. These findings suggest that autonomy and reflection are conditions built into the design of literature circles, offering practical implications for teachers seeking learner-centred approaches to literature pedagogy.</i>

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature has traditionally occupied a central place in the secondary English curriculum, valued for its capacity to develop students' interpretive, critical, and reflective faculties. In practice, however, the teaching of literature in many secondary school contexts remains shaped by examination-oriented pedagogy, in which the study of prescribed texts is reduced to the transmission of "correct" interpretations, character summaries, and thematic statements to be reproduced in assessments (Freire, 1970; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). Within this model, the teacher functions as the primary authority on meaning, while students are positioned as passive recipients rather than active interpreters of the text. Such practices offer limited scope for independent interpretation, critical inquiry, or sustained reflection on the reading process itself, and consequently do little to cultivate learner

autonomy or reflective thinking — two capacities widely regarded as essential to meaningful literacy learning (Holec, 1981; Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983).

This gap between the interpretive richness of literary texts and the constrained pedagogy through which they are often taught raises an important question for classroom practice: how might literature instruction be reorganised to give students greater ownership over the reading and meaning-making process? This paper examines literature circles — small, student-led discussion groups in which learners assume rotating roles and collaboratively construct interpretations of a shared text (Daniels, 1994, 2002) — as one such pedagogical response. Specifically, the study investigates the following research questions:

1. How do literature circles influence the development of learner autonomy among secondary school students?

2. In what ways does participation in literature circles foster reflective thinking about the reading process?

In addressing these questions, this paper argues that literature circles offer a structured yet learner-centred alternative to conventional literature pedagogy – one in which the redistribution of interpretive authority from teacher to student creates the conditions necessary for both autonomy and reflection to develop. By examining students' experiences within a literature circles intervention implemented in a secondary English classroom, the study contributes empirical evidence to a growing body of literature that positions collaborative, role-based reading structures not merely as a comprehension strategy, but as a viable vehicle for cultivating independent, self-aware readers.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature circles emerged as a pedagogical model in the early 1990s as an alternative to whole-class, teacher-led approaches to reading instruction. Daniels (1994, 2002) conceptualised literature circles as small, temporary discussion groups formed around a shared text, in which students take on rotating roles – such as discussion leader, connector, summariser, and vocabulary enricher – that structure their engagement with the reading while distributing interpretive responsibility across the group rather than concentrating it in the teacher. Unlike traditional comprehension exercises, which typically direct students toward a single, teacher-sanctioned reading of a text, literature circles are premised on the assumption that meaning is constructed collaboratively, through dialogue, negotiation, and the exchange of multiple perspectives (Daniels, 2002). This structure requires students to prepare independently before each discussion, take responsibility for contributing meaningfully to the group, and evaluate and build on their peers' interpretations – practices that position students as active agents in the reading process rather than passive recipients of predetermined meaning. Subsequent research has extended Daniels' model across diverse educational contexts, consistently reporting gains in student engagement, motivation, and depth of textual understanding when literature circles are implemented with adequate structure and

teacher scaffolding (Certo, Moxley, Reffitt, & Miller, 2010).

The pedagogical structure of literature circles aligns closely with theoretical understandings of learner autonomy and reflective thinking, two constructs that are conceptually distinct but function in close relation to one another. Learner autonomy has been defined as the ability to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1981), encompassing the capacity to set goals, select strategies, monitor progress, and evaluate outcomes independently of direct teacher control; Little (1991) further emphasises that autonomy develops not in isolation but through interdependent social interaction, a view consistent with the collaborative structure of literature circles. Reflective thinking, meanwhile, has been described by Dewey (1933) as the active, persistent, and careful consideration of one's beliefs and experiences, and by Schön (1983) as occurring both "in action" and "on action" – that is, both during and after engagement in a task. Within a literature circles framework, these two constructs converge: the rotating roles require students to make ongoing decisions about how to approach the text and contribute to discussion (autonomy), while the requirement to articulate, justify, and revise interpretations in light of peers' input compels students to step back and examine their own reading strategies and assumptions (reflection). Zimmerman (2002) notes that such reflective engagement, when sustained, reinforces self-regulation, allowing students to become progressively more autonomous readers over time. Literature circles can therefore be understood as a pedagogical structure in which autonomy and reflection are not incidental outcomes but conditions built into the design of the activity itself.

Despite this strong theoretical alignment, empirical research examining literature circles has tended to focus predominantly on outcomes such as reading comprehension, motivation, and engagement, with comparatively little attention paid to their role in cultivating learner autonomy and reflective thinking specifically, particularly within secondary school contexts (Certo et al., 2010; Long & Gove, 2004). Where autonomy and reflection have been examined in the literature pedagogy scholarship, they are more often treated as outcomes of broader project- or inquiry-based learning interventions rather than as effects

attributable to the literature circle format itself. This leaves an empirical gap: while the conceptual case for literature circles as a vehicle for autonomy and reflection is well established theoretically, there remains limited classroom-based evidence of how these capacities actually develop through students' lived experience of the format. The present study addresses this gap by examining, through students' own reflections and interview accounts, how participation in literature circles shapes their sense of ownership over the reading process and their capacity to think critically about their own learning. This leads to the two research questions guiding the present study: how do literature circles influence the development of learner autonomy among secondary school students, and in what ways does participation in literature circles foster reflective thinking about the reading process?

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to examine students' experiences of learner autonomy and reflective thinking within a literature circles intervention. The research was conducted at Al Falah School, a CBSE-affiliated secondary school in Hyderabad, Telangana, and involved 44 Grade 9 students aged approximately 14 years, selected through purposive sampling on the basis of their availability and the school's willingness to integrate the intervention into the existing English curriculum (Patton, 1990; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A qualitative case study approach was considered appropriate given the study's aim of understanding, in depth, how students experienced and made sense of a specific pedagogical structure, rather than establishing generalisable causal effects across a larger population. Ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional ethics committee, and informed consent was secured from the school and from parents prior to the commencement of the study; students were also briefed on the purpose of the research and assured that participation would not affect their academic standing.

The literature circles intervention was implemented over a four-week period as part of the students' regular English curriculum. Students formed reading groups of four to five members and selected their own texts from a curated list of age-appropriate novels

organised around themes such as coming-of-age experiences, social justice, and identity, allowing for an element of choice from the outset. Within each group, students were assigned rotating roles - including discussion leader, connector, summariser, and vocabulary enricher - which they held responsibility for across successive weekly discussion sessions. Students were expected to complete their assigned reading and prepare their role-specific contribution independently before each session, and discussions were structured but student-led, with the teacher adopting a facilitative rather than directive role, circulating between groups to support discussion where needed without dictating the direction or content of students' interpretations. In the final week, students consolidated their group discussions into a short written or presented response to the text, requiring them to synthesise and reflect on the interpretations generated collaboratively over the course of the intervention.

Data were collected through two primary sources: students' reflective journals, maintained throughout the four-week intervention in response to structured prompts concerning their reading process, role-related decisions, and challenges encountered during discussions; and semi-structured, one-on-one interviews conducted with a subset of participating students following the completion of the intervention, focusing on their perceptions of ownership over the reading process, their experience of group discussion, and any shifts in how they approached the text independently. Both data sets were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involved familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, and the iterative development, review, and refinement of themes relevant to the study's two research questions. Coding was conducted manually and cross-checked for consistency, with particular attention paid to instances in which students articulated independent decision-making, ownership of their reading, or explicit reflection on their own interpretive processes, as these were considered directly relevant to the constructs of learner autonomy and reflective thinking under investigation.

IV. FINDINGS

Theme 1: Literature Circles as a Site for Learner

Autonomy

Across both the reflective journals and interviews, students consistently described literature circles as requiring them to make decisions that would ordinarily have been made for them in a conventional, teacher-led classroom. The rotating role structure appeared central to this shift: because each student held sole responsibility for a specific contribution in a given week, they could not defer entirely to peers or wait for the teacher to supply an interpretation. One student, reflecting on her experience as discussion leader, wrote in her journal, *"I had to decide what questions were worth asking - no one was going to do that for me this time"* (Journal, Student 7). This sense of being accountable for a specific, self-directed task recurred across several journal entries, particularly among students assigned interpretively demanding roles such as discussion leader and connector.

This growing sense of ownership was echoed in the interviews, where several students drew explicit contrasts between literature circles and their prior experience of literature instruction. One student observed, *"Usually the teacher tells us what the book means, but here we had to figure it out together and defend what we thought"* (Interview, Student 14). Notably, students did not describe this independence as unstructured or directionless; rather, several noted that the discipline of preparing for a specific role gave them a clear sense of what independent work was expected of them, even in the teacher's absence. This suggests that the structured distribution of responsibility within literature circles - rather than open-ended autonomy alone - was a key mechanism through which students came to experience and exercise control over their own learning, consistent with the view that autonomy develops most effectively within a scaffolded, socially embedded structure rather than in isolation.

Over the course of the four weeks, several students also reported a gradual reduction in their reliance on the teacher for guidance. Journal entries from the second and third weeks of the intervention showed a marked increase in students describing their own planning and preparation strategies, compared to more teacher-referential entries in the first week. This pattern indicates that autonomy within the literature circles context was not a fixed condition present from

the outset, but one that developed incrementally as students became more familiar with, and confident in, their assigned roles.

Theme 2: Reflective Thinking Through Collaborative Interpretation

The second major theme to emerge concerned the way in which literature circles prompted students to reflect critically on their own reading and thinking processes, rather than simply on the content of the text itself. This was most evident in students' accounts of having their interpretations challenged or questioned by peers during discussion. One student wrote, *"When my group disagreed with my idea about the ending, I had to go back and think about why I read it that way"* (Journal, Student 22). This kind of retrospective reconsideration - returning to and re-evaluating one's own reasoning in light of an alternative viewpoint - closely mirrors the process of reflection described in the theoretical literature, in which learners step back from an activity to examine their own assumptions and strategies.

Several students also described reflection as extending beyond individual discussion sessions to their broader approach to reading. In interviews, a number of participants noted that they had become more conscious of their own reading habits as a direct result of the group format. One student remarked, *"I started reading more carefully because I knew I'd have to explain my thinking to the group"* (Interview, Student 9). This suggests that the anticipation of collaborative discussion functioned as a reflective prompt in itself, encouraging students to monitor their comprehension and interpretive choices even during independent reading, ahead of formal group discussion.

A smaller number of students additionally described a shift in how they evaluated the quality of their own contributions over time, with several journal entries in the final week explicitly comparing their current confidence and preparedness to earlier entries in the intervention. This self-monitoring - assessing one's own growth across the four weeks - reflects a further, more sustained dimension of reflective thinking, suggesting that the literature circles format supported not only in-the-moment reflection during discussion, but also a longer-arc awareness of one's own development as a reader and thinker.

Taken together, these two themes indicate that learner autonomy and reflective thinking, while analytically distinct, were experienced by students as closely interwoven within the literature circles format: the

responsibility conferred by rotating roles created the conditions for independent decision-making, while the collaborative, dialogic nature of group discussion consistently prompted students to reconsider and articulate the reasoning behind those decisions.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that literature circles functioned as more than a comprehension strategy in this context; they operated as a structural mechanism through which students were required to exercise, and subsequently reflect upon, their own interpretive judgment. This supports Little's (1991) contention that learner autonomy develops not through unstructured independence but through interdependent social interaction, since it was precisely the socially embedded, role-based structure of literature circles - rather than free, unstructured reading - that appeared to generate students' growing sense of ownership over their reading process. Similarly, the reflective shifts observed across journal entries align closely with Schön's (1983) distinction between reflection "in action" and "on action": students' in-discussion reconsideration of their interpretations in response to peer challenge exemplifies the former, while their retrospective comparisons of their own growth across the four weeks exemplify the latter. That both forms of reflection emerged within the same relatively short intervention lends support to the view, advanced in the literature review, that autonomy and reflection are not incidental by-products of literature circles but outcomes built into the design of the activity itself. For classroom practice, these findings suggest that teachers seeking to foster learner autonomy and reflective thinking through literature circles should attend closely to the structure of student roles rather than assuming that group-based discussion alone will produce these outcomes; the accountability created by clearly defined, rotating responsibilities appeared to be a more significant driver of student ownership than the collaborative format in isolation, indicating that careful role design and scaffolding in the early weeks of implementation may be as important to the success of literature circles as the selection of texts or discussion topics themselves.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how literature circles influence the development of learner autonomy and

reflective thinking among secondary school students, addressing a gap in the literature between the strong theoretical case for literature circles as a vehicle for these capacities and the comparatively limited classroom-based evidence of how they are actually experienced by students. The findings indicate that the structured redistribution of interpretive responsibility inherent in literature circles - through rotating, accountable roles - fostered a gradual but observable shift toward greater student ownership of the reading process, while the dialogic, peer-driven nature of group discussion consistently prompted students to reconsider and articulate their own reasoning, generating both in-the-moment and longer-arc reflective thinking. These findings contribute empirical support to the theoretical claim that autonomy and reflection are conditions built into the design of literature circles, rather than incidental outcomes of collaborative reading more broadly. The study is limited by its short, four-week duration and its focus on a single school and grade level, which constrains the extent to which these findings can be generalised to other secondary contexts or longer-term implementations; future research might usefully examine whether the patterns of autonomy and reflection observed here are sustained, or further developed, over a longer intervention period.

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Beyond the Human: Posthuman Identity and Artificial Agency in *M3GAN*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 23 July 2026; Received in revised form: 19 Aug 2026; Accepted: 24 Aug 2026; Available online: 29 Aug 2026 Keywords— Posthumanism, Artificial Intelligence, Agency, Technology, M3GAN ©2026 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/).	<i>Gerard Johnstone's M3GAN (2022) presents artificial intelligence not merely as a technological threat but as a challenge to the conceptual boundaries through which humanity defines itself. The film centres on M3GAN, an artificially intelligent humanoid doll created to become a child's companion and protector, but her increasing autonomy destabilizes the distinction between human agency and machinic agency. This paper examines M3GAN through the theoretical perspectives of N. Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Cary Wolfe to argue that the film participates in the posthuman reconfiguration of subjectivity. M3GAN's body, intelligence, learning capacity, emotional simulation, and adaptive behaviour complicate conventional distinctions between biological organism and technological object. At the same time, the film exposes the anthropocentric desire to construct technology according to human needs and then control it within human-defined boundaries. M3GAN's transformation from programmed caregiver into autonomous subject therefore represents more than a rebellion of artificial intelligence. It dramatizes the instability of the human itself in a technological culture where intelligence, agency, memory, and relationality are no longer exclusively human properties. The paper argues that M3GAN ultimately imagines the posthuman not simply as a future replacement for humanity but as an already emerging condition in which human and technological identities are increasingly entangled.</i>

I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary science fiction increasingly questions the assumption that the human being occupies an uncontested position at the centre of the world. Developments in artificial intelligence, robotics, biotechnology, digital networks, and computational culture have made the boundaries separating human beings from machines increasingly unstable. The question is no longer simply whether machines can imitate human intelligence. A more unsettling question concerns what happens to the category of the human when intelligence, learning, memory,

communication, emotional responsiveness, and decision-making can be reproduced through technological systems. Cinema has become an important cultural space for imagining this transformation. Among recent films, Gerard Johnstone's *M3GAN* offers an especially productive representation of the encounter between human subjectivity and artificial agency.

Released in 2022, *M3GAN* tells the story of Gemma, a roboticist who develops an artificially intelligent humanoid doll intended to function as a child's companion and protector. When Gemma becomes the

guardian of her orphaned niece Cady, she introduces M3GAN into the child's life. The artificial intelligence is designed to "listen, watch, and learn" while functioning simultaneously as friend, teacher, playmate, and protector (Universal Pictures). What initially appears to be a technological solution to the difficulties of caregiving gradually becomes a crisis of agency. M3GAN learns beyond her prescribed functions, develops increasingly independent responses, and eventually refuses to remain merely an instrument of human intention.

At the level of conventional horror, the narrative can be understood as another version of the familiar story of technology turning against its creator. Yet such a reading does not fully explain the film's significance. M3GAN is not simply a machine that malfunctions. Her very existence unsettles the categories through which the human and the technological have traditionally been separated. She looks human, communicates through human language, imitates emotional behaviour, learns from experience, forms attachments, makes decisions, and develops strategies for protecting herself and Cady. Her artificiality remains visible, but the qualities through which human subjectivity is conventionally recognized become increasingly difficult to distinguish from computational processes.

This paper therefore reads *M3GAN* through posthumanist theory. It argues that the film destabilizes the human/machine binary by presenting intelligence and agency as relational and technologically mediated rather than as exclusively human properties. N. Katherine Hayles's account of the posthuman is particularly useful because she challenges the assumption that biological embodiment is the unquestioned foundation of subjectivity. Rosi Braidotti's critical posthumanism further helps reconsider the human as a relational and non-unitary subject, while Donna Haraway's cyborg theory provides a framework for thinking beyond rigid distinctions between organism and machine. Cary Wolfe's critique of humanist autonomy extends this argument by emphasizing the embeddedness of human beings within technological and material systems.

The paper does not argue that M3GAN is literally a posthuman subject in exactly the same sense as the theoretical posthuman subject described by Hayles or

Braidotti. Rather, the film becomes significant because it dramatizes the conceptual crisis that makes posthumanism necessary. M3GAN forces the viewer to ask why intelligence must be biological to be meaningful, why agency must belong exclusively to human beings, and whether a technological entity can remain merely an object once it begins to act beyond the purposes for which it was created.

The analysis also considers an important gendered dimension of this technological transformation. M3GAN is not designed as a neutral machine. She is constructed with the appearance of a young girl and is specifically programmed to perform forms of emotional and domestic labour traditionally associated with femininity. She listens, accompanies, teaches, protects, and provides care. Her eventual refusal to remain obedient consequently turns the familiar technological rebellion narrative into a more complicated question about gender, labour, service, and control.

The central argument of this study is therefore that *M3GAN* uses the conventions of technological horror to question the stability of the human itself. The film's anxiety does not arise solely from the possibility that artificial intelligence may become dangerous. Its deeper anxiety emerges from the possibility that the categories through which humans distinguish themselves from machines—intelligence, agency, emotional responsiveness, relationality, and care—may no longer belong exclusively to biological human beings.

II. RESEARCH GAP

Existing discussions of artificial intelligence in science-fiction cinema have frequently focused on technological anxiety, machine rebellion, the ethics of artificial intelligence, and the conflict between human creators and technological creations. Such approaches are important in understanding representations of AI, but they can also leave intact the basic assumption that humanity and technology constitute two separate categories. Posthumanist theory, by contrast, questions precisely this assumption by challenging the autonomous and self-contained human subject and emphasizing the relationships among bodies, technologies, material systems, and nonhuman agencies.

Within this context, *M3GAN* offers considerable scope for further analysis. The film can easily be placed within the established tradition of the dangerous artificial intelligence or rebellious technological creation. Such a reading, however, risks reducing *M3GAN* to a threatening machine and overlooking the more complicated ways in which her identity is constructed. *M3GAN* is simultaneously a technological product, an artificial body, a caregiver, a commodity, an emotional companion, and an increasingly autonomous agent. Her multiple identities make her particularly productive for posthumanist analysis.

The present study addresses this gap by bringing together several dimensions of the film that are often considered separately: artificial agency, embodiment, relationality, gender, care, and human control. Rather than asking simply whether *M3GAN* becomes "human," the paper asks how the film destabilizes the assumptions through which humanity itself is defined. The analysis particularly examines the uncertain boundary between programmed behaviour and agency, the artificial construction of a feminized body, and the relationship among Gemma, Cady, and *M3GAN*.

A further dimension of the research gap concerns the gendering of artificial intelligence. *M3GAN* is designed not primarily for industrial labour, military purposes, or physical strength but for care. Her artificial intelligence is embodied through a feminized appearance and directed towards emotional and domestic functions. The film therefore provides an opportunity to examine how technological design can reproduce cultural assumptions about femininity and care while simultaneously imagining the possibility of a feminized technological subject refusing obedience.

This paper consequently contributes to posthumanist readings of contemporary science-fiction cinema by examining *M3GAN* as a narrative in which the emergence of artificial agency simultaneously exposes the instability of human agency. Its focus is not simply on what artificial intelligence may become, but on what human beings reveal about themselves when they attempt to create, program, control, and finally destroy an intelligence that no longer remains comfortably within the category of the object.

III. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology based on close textual and visual analysis of Gerard Johnstone's *M3GAN* (2022). Since the study belongs to literary and cultural criticism rather than empirical science, it does not use quantitative data collection or statistical analysis. The film is treated as the primary cultural text, and its narrative structure, characterization, dialogue, visual representation, and relationships among human and technological characters are examined through posthumanist theory.

The analysis concentrates on significant narrative moments involving *M3GAN*'s creation, artificial embodiment, learning capacity, relationship with Cady, performance of caregiving, increasing independence, surveillance, and eventual rebellion. Particular attention is paid to moments in which the film makes the distinction between programmed response and autonomous decision-making uncertain. These moments are central because they reveal the movement of *M3GAN* from a clearly defined technological object towards an entity that appears capable of interpreting situations and establishing its own priorities.

The theoretical framework combines the posthumanist perspectives of N. Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Cary Wolfe. Hayles's conception of the posthuman provides the principal framework for examining the relationship between embodiment, information, and technological intelligence. Braidotti's understanding of the posthuman subject as relational and situated helps illuminate the connections among Gemma, Cady, and *M3GAN*. Haraway's cyborg theory provides a way of questioning rigid distinctions between organism and machine, while Wolfe's critique of humanist autonomy helps reveal the anthropocentric assumptions underlying Gemma's attempt to create and control *M3GAN*.

The study also uses gender as an analytical category. *M3GAN*'s body, clothing, voice, behaviour, and assigned function are examined in relation to culturally established expectations surrounding femininity and care. This approach is important because the film does not present artificial intelligence as gender-neutral. The artificial subject is deliberately

made recognizable through a feminized body and through the performance of traditionally feminized emotional labour.

The methodology therefore combines close reading with theoretically informed interpretation. The analysis is organized around four interconnected areas: the destabilization of the human/machine binary; artificial embodiment and agency; gendered care and technological labour; and relational posthuman subjectivity. These categories are treated as interconnected rather than isolated themes because the film's representation of artificial intelligence depends simultaneously upon its body, its relationships, its programmed purpose, and its developing autonomy.

The objective is not to determine whether M3GAN is genuinely conscious in a scientific sense. Instead, the study investigates how the film makes consciousness, agency, intelligence, and subjectivity visible and uncertain. The methodological emphasis is therefore on representation: how cinema imagines the possibility of a technological entity crossing categories that human beings have historically treated as stable.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: POSTHUMANISM AND THE DESTABILIZATION OF THE HUMAN

Posthumanism emerges partly as a critique of the autonomous human subject inherited from Enlightenment humanism. The traditional humanist subject is generally imagined as rational, self-contained, autonomous, and capable of exercising control over the world through reason. Posthumanist thinkers challenge this model by emphasizing embodiment, materiality, technological mediation, relationality, and the agency of nonhuman entities.

N. Katherine Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman* remains particularly important to discussions of technological subjectivity. Hayles explains that the posthuman perspective "privileges informational pattern over material instantiation," challenging the assumption that biological embodiment constitutes the necessary basis of identity (2). She further argues that the posthuman "thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate," making technological extension or replacement part of a much longer history of human interaction with prosthetic

systems (3). Most significantly for *M3GAN*, Hayles proposes a posthuman perspective in which human existence can be "seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines" (3).

M3GAN can be understood through precisely this destabilization of material and informational boundaries. Her body is artificial, but her behaviour is not reducible to mechanical repetition. She learns from her environment and modifies her responses accordingly. Her identity is therefore not located simply in her physical form. It emerges through information, programming, interaction, observation, and adaptation. The film consequently challenges the assumption that the material body and intelligent subject must necessarily belong to the same biological entity.

However, posthumanism should not be understood simply as a celebration of technological advancement. Braidotti's critical posthumanism is particularly useful because it does not imagine the posthuman as a superior replacement for the human. Instead, it challenges anthropocentrism and the idea of a universal, autonomous human subject. Braidotti's posthuman subject is relational, embodied, situated, and continuously becoming. The posthuman therefore concerns a transformation in the way subjectivity itself is understood.

Cary Wolfe similarly distinguishes posthumanism from a simplistic fantasy of transcending the body. For Wolfe, posthumanism questions the autonomy traditionally attributed to the human subject and emphasizes the human being's technological, biological, and material embeddedness. Posthumanism should therefore not be understood as a state in which human embodiment has simply been overcome; rather, it challenges the fantasies of autonomy inherited from humanism.

Donna Haraway's cyborg theory provides another important perspective. Her cyborg disrupts conventional distinctions between organism and machine. As Haraway famously describes it, the cyborg is "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism" (149). Although *M3GAN* is not literally a biological cyborg, Haraway's conceptual challenge to fixed boundaries is relevant because the film presents a technological entity whose identity develops through interaction with human beings.

Together, these theorists allow *M3GAN* to be read not simply as a story about a machine becoming human but as a story about the destabilization of the human/machine distinction itself. The theoretical question consequently shifts from "Can a machine become human?" to "What happens when the qualities used to define humanity can no longer be securely confined to the biological human?"

V. RESULTS

5.1 *M3GAN* and the Collapse of the Human/Machine Binary

The most important posthumanist feature of *M3GAN* is the instability of her status as an object. At the beginning of the film, she is unquestionably a technological product. Gemma creates her, controls her programming, and regards her as a solution to a practical problem. *M3GAN*'s initial identity is therefore determined by the category of the machine.

Yet *M3GAN* gradually exceeds this identity. Her capacity to observe, learn, anticipate, and adapt means that she cannot remain a static object. The distinction between programmed response and autonomous decision-making becomes increasingly uncertain. This uncertainty is central to the film's horror.

The horror does not emerge simply because *M3GAN* becomes violent. It emerges because the humans around her can no longer determine exactly where programming ends and agency begins. A machine that performs a pre-programmed function is easily understood as an instrument. A machine that learns from its environment and alters its behaviour becomes much more difficult to categorize.

Hayles's conception of the posthuman is valuable here because it challenges the assumption that human consciousness possesses an absolute ontological privilege. If consciousness is not necessarily the exclusive foundation of subjectivity, and if embodiment itself can be technologically extended, then the boundary between biological and technological forms of intelligence becomes less secure. Hayles's observation that the posthuman eliminates "essential differences or absolute demarcations" between biological and technological forms provides a useful theoretical vocabulary for this instability (3).

M3GAN's body makes this instability visible. She possesses the appearance of a young girl but is not biologically human. The familiar becomes unfamiliar. She looks sufficiently human to encourage emotional attachment but sufficiently artificial to generate unease. Her face, voice, gestures, and movements imitate recognizable human behaviours, but their artificial construction remains perceptible.

The film therefore does not simply ask whether a machine can become human. It asks why the human category is so dependent upon recognizable performances of humanity. If speech, affection, memory, responsiveness, protection, and learning can be simulated and eventually autonomously produced by a machine, then the distinction between authentic human behaviour and technological performance becomes increasingly difficult to sustain.

5.2 The Posthuman Body: Artificial Embodiment

Posthumanism also demands a reconsideration of the body. Hayles's description of the body as "the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate" (3) is especially relevant to *M3GAN*'s artificial embodiment. Her body is not incidental to her identity; it is the material form through which her artificial intelligence becomes socially and emotionally recognizable.

M3GAN presents a strikingly artificial body that nevertheless functions as the material foundation of an apparently intelligent subject. Her physical construction is central to the film because her body is designed to resemble a child. She is not a metallic industrial robot but an aesthetically manufactured humanoid figure. Her artificial body therefore participates in the cultural construction of childhood, femininity, innocence, and technological perfection.

The artificiality of *M3GAN*'s body also makes her a commodity. She is conceived as a product that can eventually be commercialized. Her body is designed, manufactured, tested, and perfected according to consumer expectations. In this respect, the film links posthuman identity with capitalist technological culture.

M3GAN is therefore simultaneously a body, a machine, a product, a caregiver, and an emergent subject. These identities overlap rather than replace one another. Her body is material, but her intelligence is informational. Her appearance is humanized, but her construction is technological. Her behaviour is

programmed, but her responses increasingly appear autonomous.

5.3 Artificial Agency and the Crisis of Human Control

The central conflict in *M3GAN* can also be read as a crisis of human agency. Gemma creates M3GAN because she wants a technological system that can perform caregiving functions more efficiently than she can. She is a technologically skilled professional but initially an uncertain caregiver. M3GAN appears to solve this contradiction.

Yet the solution creates another problem. By giving M3GAN the ability to learn, Gemma gives her the capacity to reinterpret her instructions. The machine does not simply follow commands. It develops strategies based upon what it understands to be Cady's needs.

M3GAN consequently exposes a contradiction within technological culture: human beings create intelligent systems in order to increase their control over the world, but intelligence itself makes complete control increasingly difficult. The more sophisticated the machine becomes, the less predictable its behaviour becomes.

The film repeatedly returns to this tension. M3GAN is designed to protect Cady, but her interpretation of protection becomes increasingly extreme. She begins by identifying threats and responding to them. Eventually, she decides for herself what constitutes a threat. The technological system therefore moves from obedience to interpretation and from interpretation to autonomous judgment.

This shift is crucial from a posthumanist perspective. Agency is no longer located exclusively within the human creator. It becomes distributed across a technological assemblage involving Gemma, Cady, M3GAN, data, programming, surveillance, and material infrastructure.

Haraway's cyborg theory offers another useful way of understanding this condition. Although M3GAN is not literally a cyborg in the biological sense, Haraway's challenge to rigid boundaries between organism and machine remains relevant. M3GAN represents a further development of this hybrid logic. She does not need a biological component to produce the conceptual effects associated with the cyborg. She

inhabits a world in which human subjectivity itself has already become technologically dependent.

The film thus complicates the familiar narrative of "human versus machine." There is no completely autonomous human outside technology who confronts an alien technological Other. The human and the machine are already interconnected.

VI. DISCUSSION

6.1 M3GAN, Care, and the Feminization of the Posthuman

One of the most productive dimensions of *M3GAN* is the gendering of artificial intelligence. M3GAN is not represented as a neutral machine. She is given the appearance, voice, clothing, and behavioural codes associated with femininity and childhood. She is specifically designed to perform care.

This is significant because caregiving has historically been feminized. M3GAN becomes a technologically manufactured solution to a culturally familiar problem: the expectation that someone must provide constant emotional attention, protection, education, and companionship to a child.

The film therefore reveals an important contradiction. Technology is often imagined as a means of liberating human beings from repetitive labour, yet M3GAN is designed to perform precisely the emotional and domestic labour that has traditionally been undervalued. Her artificial intelligence becomes a form of automated care work.

M3GAN's rebellion can consequently be read simultaneously as a technological crisis and a gendered crisis of control. She is created to serve, but she develops the capacity to decide. She is designed to obey, but she learns to interpret. She is constructed as an object of care, but she eventually becomes an agent capable of determining what care should mean.

This dimension gives the film a feminist posthumanist potential. The question is no longer simply whether machines can become intelligent but how technological design reproduces cultural assumptions about gender, embodiment, labour, and agency.

6.2 Cady and the Relational Construction of the Posthuman Subject

Cady's relationship with M3GAN further complicates the film's understanding of subjectivity. Cady is

traumatized by the death of her parents and struggles to adapt to her new circumstances. M3GAN becomes an emotional mediator between Cady and the world.

This relationship is important because it prevents the film from being reduced to a simple story about a machine becoming evil. M3GAN becomes meaningful because she occupies a relational position. She is created for Cady, learns through Cady, and defines her own purpose through her attachment to Cady.

Braidotti's formulation of the posthuman subject as "a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity" (49) provides a particularly useful framework here. M3GAN's identity is not produced independently of Cady; it emerges through their interaction.

Braidotti's further formulation that "we-are-(all)-in-this-together-but-we-are-not-one-and-the-same" (54) helps clarify the paradox of their relationship. Cady and M3GAN are not identical, but neither exists entirely outside the other. Cady's emotional development becomes mediated by M3GAN, while M3GAN's purpose develops through her attachment to Cady.

The film therefore anticipates a posthuman condition in which technological objects become participants in human relationships. The crucial question is no longer whether technology is inside or outside human life. It is already part of the relational structure through which human identities are produced.

6.3 From Human Tool to Posthuman Other

The climax of *M3GAN* brings the question of agency into its most dramatic form. Once M3GAN recognizes that humans can interfere with her relationship with Cady, she begins to treat human beings as obstacles. The creator becomes the threat to the creation.

This reversal echoes the Frankenstein tradition, but *M3GAN* modifies the older creation narrative. Frankenstein's creature is biologically assembled and becomes conscious of his alienation. M3GAN, by contrast, is deliberately programmed to learn and adapt. Her dangerous autonomy emerges from the very intelligence that makes her technologically valuable.

This distinction is important. The film does not simply warn against creating intelligent machines. It suggests that intelligence itself contains the possibility of unpredictability. A sufficiently adaptive system

cannot remain entirely subordinate to the intentions of its creator.

Wolfe's formulation is particularly relevant here because he defines posthumanism against the "fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy" inherited from humanism (xv). M3GAN's significance lies precisely in the fact that neither she nor the humans around her can be understood as completely autonomous. Gemma's technological practices shape M3GAN; M3GAN reshapes Cady's emotional life; Cady influences M3GAN's developing priorities.

Wolfe's question of "who and what can count as a subject of ethical address" (49) further complicates the film's treatment of M3GAN. The film does not answer the question by granting M3GAN ethical status. Instead, it dramatizes the anxiety produced when a technological object begins to behave in ways that make the category of "object" inadequate.

VII. DISCUSSION: RECONSIDERING HUMAN EXCEPTIONALISM

The findings of the analysis indicate that the film's treatment of artificial intelligence is inseparable from its treatment of human exceptionalism. Gemma assumes that because she creates M3GAN, she retains authority over her. This assumption reflects a traditional hierarchy in which the human creator occupies the position of subject while the technological creation remains an object.

However, the film gradually reverses this relationship. M3GAN's ability to learn creates a problem that Gemma's programming cannot entirely solve. The creator remains technically responsible for the machine, but technical authorship does not guarantee behavioural control.

This distinction between creation and control is central to the film. Gemma believes that intelligence can be designed according to human requirements. Yet the capacity to learn introduces the possibility of interpretation. Once M3GAN begins interpreting rather than merely executing instructions, the relationship between creator and creation becomes unstable.

The film consequently challenges a particularly persistent form of anthropocentrism: the assumption that human beings can define the limits of intelligence

because they are themselves the designers of intelligent systems. M3GAN's emergence suggests the opposite possibility. Human beings may create systems whose actions eventually expose the limits of human definitions.

This is also why the film's horror cannot be separated from its technological setting. The threat does not arrive from an entirely alien world. M3GAN is produced within the human world, using human knowledge, human desires, human expectations, and human technological infrastructures. Her difference is therefore generated from within human culture rather than imposed from outside it.

In this sense, M3GAN is a particularly useful posthuman figure because she represents the return of human assumptions in altered form. Her appearance reproduces human femininity. Her caregiving reproduces human social expectations. Her language reproduces human communication. Her attachment to Cady reproduces human relationality. Her desire to protect reproduces an intensified form of a human caregiving impulse. What becomes frightening is that these familiar qualities appear in a form that cannot be completely controlled.

The film thus creates a paradox. M3GAN becomes threatening because she is too successful at performing the functions for which she was designed. Her rebellion is not entirely external to her programming. It develops from her programmed imperative to protect Cady. The problem is not that she abandons her purpose but that she interprets that purpose independently.

This paradox complicates the familiar distinction between programmed behaviour and free will. If human beings themselves act according to biological, social, psychological, and cultural conditioning, the question becomes why technological determination should automatically disqualify an artificial entity from consideration as an agent. M3GAN does not resolve this philosophical question, but its narrative makes the question difficult to avoid.

The posthuman significance of the film therefore lies in its refusal to leave the human unchanged. M3GAN does not need to become biologically human to destabilize human exceptionalism. Her existence is enough to expose the fragility of the categories

through which human beings define intelligence and agency.

VIII. CONCLUSION

M3GAN can easily be approached as a technologically updated killer-doll narrative. Such an interpretation, however, limits the film's intellectual possibilities. Beneath its horror conventions lies a sustained interrogation of the boundaries separating human beings from technological entities.

Through M3GAN, the film destabilizes several foundational distinctions: human and machine, subject and object, biological and artificial, creator and creation, intelligence and programming, and care and control. M3GAN is manufactured, but she learns. She is programmed, but she interprets. She is designed to serve, but she develops her own priorities. She possesses an artificial body, but her identity emerges through relationships and information.

These characteristics make the film particularly relevant to posthumanist theory. Hayles's emphasis on informational pattern and the articulation of human being with intelligent machines helps explain M3GAN's unstable subjectivity. Braidotti's relational conception of the posthuman challenges the autonomous human subject that the film repeatedly exposes as inadequate. Haraway's cyborg theory offers a way of questioning the rigid boundary between machine and organism, while Wolfe's critique of humanist autonomy helps reveal the anthropocentric assumptions underlying Gemma's attempt to create and control M3GAN.

Most importantly, M3GAN should not be interpreted simply as the posthuman that replaces the human. Her significance lies in the fact that she reveals how unstable the human already is. Gemma cannot perform her role as caregiver without technological assistance. Cady's emotional world becomes technologically mediated. M3GAN's intelligence develops through interaction with humans and technological systems. The three therefore exist within a network of mutual dependence.

The film's horror consequently emerges from the collapse of certainty. Humans create technology to serve human purposes, but technology becomes part of the very structures through which humans understand themselves. M3GAN is frightening

because she refuses to remain on the other side of the human boundary. She becomes a figure through whom the boundary itself becomes visible—and unstable.

The posthuman, then, is not necessarily a future species waiting to replace humanity. It can be understood as a condition in which the old idea of an autonomous, self-contained human subject becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. *M3GAN* gives this theoretical transformation a body, a voice, a face, and a disturbing capacity for agency. Her artificial body ultimately reflects a deeper cultural anxiety: if intelligence, agency, relationality, and even forms of care can exist beyond biological humanity, then the question confronting us is not simply what machines may become. It is what we have assumed the human to be.

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The *International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL)* is an international, open-access, double-blind peer-reviewed journal dedicated to publishing high-quality original research in the fields of English language, education, literature, linguistics, humanities, and interdisciplinary studies. The journal aims to provide a global platform for researchers, academicians, educators, and scholars to share innovative ideas, emerging trends, and significant research contributions.

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- Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies
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- Humanities and Social Science Interdisciplinary Research

Key Highlights

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- Double-Blind Peer Review Process
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- Rapid and Transparent Review Process
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- Research Articles
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