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Trauma, Exile, and Cultural Displacement



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Trauma, Exile, and Cultural Displacement

Guest Editor: Shikha Sharma

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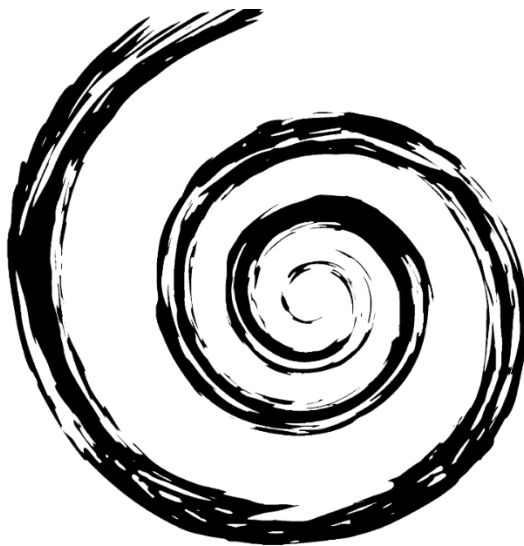
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Articles

Trauma, Exile, and Cultural Displacement

Guest Editor: Shikha Sharma





Introduction to Issue 18

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Trauma, both as an existential experience and a topic of study, has long preoccupied literature, philosophy, history, and psychology; uprootedness, displacement, anguish, destruction, oppression, objectification, and dehumanisation are all embodied in social and historical events that leave permanent scars in collective and individual mindsets. Trauma embodies the following paradox of consciousness: it is too overwhelming to be fully grasped; on the other hand, it is too persistent and meaningful to be lost in the sea of oblivion. From ancient Greek tragedies that dramatise suffering and loss to modern philosophical accounts of critical theory, trauma exposes the fault lines within human subjectivity and the fragile continuity of space, time, and self. Across centuries and disciplines, trauma is treated not merely as the aftermath of a catastrophic experience; it is a pathology of psychical revelation that opens up new pathways concerning what it means to exist, and to live in the tension as well as in the interstices between memory and forgetfulness, belonging and exile, self and other.

Engaging with the philosophy of Simone Weil, we may conceptualise trauma as emerging from the disappointment of misguided beliefs in progress. In her commentary on Book 22 of the *Iliad*, she focuses on the moment when Andromache, Hector's wife, 'summoned fair-haired handmaidens', and 'told them / to stand a tripod over fire and prepare / a hot bath for Hector's return from battle. / She did not know that, far from the bath they drew, / Athena had wrought death through Achilles' hands'.¹ Hector is already dead; he was slain on the battlefield, far from home. And the comforts (hot bath) being prepared for him are now pointless. This is a moment of bitter irony: the reader knows Hector is dead, but Andromache does not. The image of the 'hot bath' here symbolises the deep yearning for peace, reconciliation, and reunion; these longings are violently negated by the realities of war. Weil uses this passage as a warning against the dreamers who anticipate a world free from hardship, 'thanks to progress'.² For them, the *Iliad* appears as 'an historical document' to challenge their expectations; for '[n]early all of the *Iliad* takes place far from hot baths'.³ Hence, the central focus of the *Iliad* is not *kleos áphthiton*, implying worldly fame and reputation, attributed to the courageous men in battle.⁴ The deeper message conveyed here is the following: complete rejection of optimistic ideologies that celebrate human progress; these ideologies that conceive history as a linear forward-moving path, towards a new dawn of freedom from oppression and injustice.⁵ Human life, she argued, both in antiquity and in the present, unfolds far from comfort and security.⁶ In other words, this ruthless denial of peace and comfort results from might (*la force*), which Weil understands as an enduring and inescapable feature of the human condition. For Weil, the *Iliad* demonstrates that such force is not accidental or exceptional; it is profoundly

¹ Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 22, 442-6.

² Weil S. 2005: 183.

³ Weil S. 2005: 185.

⁴ Adkins A. 1960: 55; cf. Tripoula I. 2024: 126.

⁵ In a previous work, I have framed as optimistic all the ideological trends that adhere to the idea of linear historical progress thanks to the spread of market innovation and expansion, or propose a new historical age, in which humanity would be emancipated from suffering and oppression once and for all. Cf. Theodosiadis M. 2025: 5-6, 21; Theodosiadis M. 2021: 13-21; Lasch C. 1991.

⁶ Weil S. 2005: 185.

woven into the existence of human life, and only through compromising with its harsh reality can persons cultivate moral attention to partially mitigate its effects. In short, trauma is implicit in the abrupt and cruel disruption of a life anchored in optimistic expectations suppressed by the abruptness of the human condition.

In the present issue of *Dia-noesis*, trauma is discussed through a variety of prisms and disciplines. Ancient Greek tragedies offer rich insights into the causes and consequences of traumatic memories: Shikha Salma employs gender perspectives by discussing Euripides' *Medea*; Neelima Luthra argues that Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Ajax* respond to war-induced trauma, depicting alienation, the breakdown of language, and cathartic suicides that reflect shifting social and political realities in Athens; Efe Basturk links Agamben's concept of witnessing Auschwitz to Sophocles' *Antigone*, showing how traumatic witnessing exposes the fragility of life under law and entails ethical and political responsibility; Shobhana Sree reinterprets *Clytemnestra* as a traumatic and estranged figure whose chthonic, maternal power challenges patriarchal order and civic law; Oksana Babelyuk and Olena Koliasa focus on how Australian Aboriginal and Ukrainian children's narratives reveal trauma, exile, and cultural displacement, highlighting resilience and the formation of hybrid identities; Christos Antoniadis reflects on time, history, and meaning, using Monty Python's *Life of Brian* to show how humor highlights society's struggle with trauma and life's absurdity; Boyan Dafov focuses on the philosophical account of trauma and exile; Ashita Chadha and Aruna Bhat examine Kashmiri literary narratives through Merleau-Ponty's 'lived body,' showing how trauma from exile and displacement disrupts embodied meaning; Namrata Mohan and Sathya Pramode explore *Coolie Woman*, revealing the oppression of indentured women and amplifying their voices through gendered and postcolonial analysis; Ariadni Polychroniou reconceptualises displacement and precarity to reveal shared struggles and solidarity between refugees, migrants, and citizens; Elina Kushch reflects on the national trauma of the Russia-Ukraine war; Oleksandra Palchevska and Iryna Aleksandrak show how Madeline Miller's *Circe* transforms classical texts, using first-person narration to depict displacement, trauma, and female-centered vulnerability, in contrast to male-focused spatial and power themes in the originals; Asma Aijaz argues that Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* depicts Hurricane

Katrina as a site of cumulative racialized trauma, showing how structural racism destabilizes Black families and redefines the disaster narrative; Manas M S explores how climate-induced displacement disrupt the embodied self, fracturing identity and subjectivity, as displaced bodies exist in a liminal state between bare life and political recognition, highlighting both ontological and political crises; Vineetha Anitha Vineshkumar examines exile as a psychological and ontological condition, showing how transgender selfhood in A. Revathi's memoir emerges through narrating trauma, linking exile, identity, and self-awareness; likewise, Yiannis Mitrou proposes a phenomenology of mediation, showing how embodied perception and media forms co-create meaning and arguing that media are open, fragmentary processes that express the inherent incompleteness of human experience; and Panos Eliopoulos suggests that in contexts of exile and cultural displacement, bioethics alone may deepen trauma, requiring doctors and patients to renegotiate identities and suspend assumptions to enable meaningful ethical communication.

While reflecting on cases of war and displacement, I came across a disturbing testimony from the Cambodian genocide: 'Once I stole some rice from the fields for my pregnant sister, who was starving. The Khmer Rouge guards caught me and beat me with an axe. Then they put me in jail, where I endured further cruel punishments. A man who had grown up in my mother's village and was imprisoned with me went to the prison chief, telling him that I was still very young and begging him to have me released. About two weeks later, I was let out of prison. I subsequently learnt that the man who had helped me was accused of having relatives in enemy areas and has not been seen again'.⁷ The violence and cruelty described by the author, the horrors of the human condition, the suffering and dehumanisation caused by might and lust for domination, cause intense dismay towards the consequences of human formidableness. We may also bring to mind the trauma caused by the Yezidi genocide and the mass killing of Kurds in Halabja,⁸ where entire communities were shattered by might.

In both cases, we witness collective trauma inflicted not only due to physical devastation; the rupture of the basic assumptions that deny safety, dignity, and the expectation of a minimally just

⁷ Chhang Y. 2007: 157.

⁸ Cf. Schmidinger 2022.

world, is at the heart of our concern. More severely, we see persons being converted into ‘things’; ethical relationality is violently replaced by *hubris*, the most frantic human desire for exaggeration in the pursuit of rapacious ends.⁹ In the wake of ongoing hardships, reality ruthlessly and violently grounds us to the cruelty of suffering, oppression, genocide, and extreme affliction; in Homeric terms, we live ‘far from hot baths’

To preserve a message of hope, it might be worth remembering the words of Hannah Arendt: ‘even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination, and that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth-this conviction is the inarticulate background against which these profiles were drawn’.¹⁰ Perhaps the most meaningful way to follow hope against the peril of pessimism by practicing forgiveness, ‘the freedom from vengeance’,¹¹ from what keeps us imprisoned in the self-perpetuating spiral of violence.¹² Forgiveness breaks the chain of revenge; it is ‘the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven’.¹³ Forgiveness cultivates humility by humbling individual egos. The Greek definition of forgiveness is *synchōresis* (συγχώρεσις). Derived from *syn* (together) and *choros* (space), *synchōresis* advocates the creation of shared spaces, where persons can embrace each other as equals. As Martin Luther King Jr believed, forgiveness transforms ‘bitterness, humiliation, and anger ... into sentiments’ that seek transformation, repentance, and reconciliation.¹⁴

⁹ Theodosiadis M. 2021: 7-8, 202; Castoriadis 2007: 14

¹⁰ Arendt H. 1968: ix.

¹¹ Arendt H. 1998: 241.

¹² Doering J. 2010: 67.

¹³ Arendt H. 1998: 241.

¹⁴ Theodosiadis M. 2023; King M., L., 1986: 40.

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**Temporal Wounds and Racial Ruins:
Structural Racism, Traumatic Latency,
and Familial Disintegration in Jesmyn
Ward's *Salvage the Bones***

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Abstract:

Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011) reimagines Hurricane Katrina not as an isolated natural disaster but as the culmination of systemic neglect and racialized precarity in the American South. This paper examines how structural racism, manifest in housing, healthcare, and economic disenfranchisement, functions as slow, cumulative trauma that destabilizes Black familial life. Drawing on Lawrence and Keleher's theory of structural racism and Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, the study argues that the novel depicts trauma as temporally dispersed rather than event-based. Esch's fractured narration, the father's survivalist compulsions, and Skeetah's obsessive care for China emerge as expressions of psychic dislocation and deferred affect. Ultimately, the novel reconfigures the disaster narrative by exposing how racial violence persists through affective and infrastructural absences. Ward critiques the myth of a post-racial America, revealing how trauma is encoded into the very systems that purport to safeguard marginalized communities.

Keywords: *Jesmyn Ward, Trauma, Structural Racism, Black Family, Traumatic Latency, Post-Katrina Literature*

Introduction

Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011) narrates the story of the Batiste family—a poor African American household comprising a widowed father, three sons (Randall, Skeetah, and Junior), and a teenage daughter, Esch, living in a rural Southern town ominously referred to as “the Pit”. Set in the twelve days leading up to Hurricane Katrina, the novel traces not only the family's physical preparations for the impending natural disaster but also the emotional, psychological, and racial struggles embedded in their daily existence. Ward's characters are steeped in material and emotional precarity, shaped by an inherited legacy of poverty and racism. As Ward herself explains in interviews, her writing is grounded in realism and seeks to bear witness to the struggles of her Southern Black community (Macfound, 2017; Shelat, 2023; Perry, 2023). She fictionalizes this milieu through Bois Sauvage—a stand-in for her Mississippi hometown—to portray the enduring effects of racial inequality on “ordinary Black southerners” (Brown, 2023, p. 58). In this way, Ward connects intimate family stories with broader historical and socio-political contexts (Harrison, Keeble, & Torres-Quevedo, 2023).

While the Batiste family shares a physical space, they inhabit emotionally fragmented and psychologically alienated inner worlds. Though performing certain familial functions, they deviate significantly from normative ideals of the nuclear family, traditionally defined in American culture as a stable, heterosexual, two-parent unit with clearly delineated gender roles. Tolman (2020) notes that African American family structures have historically been shaped by slavery, economic disenfranchisement, and systemic discrimination, often resulting in non-traditional and matrifocal family forms. McAdoo (2007) adds that African American life reflects “more than one reality,” shaped by the interplay of economic and social inequalities (p. 12). In *Salvage the Bones*, this multifaceted adversity manifests in the fractured affective ties among family members, further exacerbated by the absence of maternal care, patriarchal dysfunction, and intergenerational trauma.

This paper argues that the emotional fragmentation and disrupted familial bonds in *Salvage the Bones* are not merely the product of individual dysfunction but of structural racism-induced trauma. Race, as a social construct, continues to serve as a key mechanism of systemic stratification in the United States. As Neville and Pieterse argue, racial bias manifests through “denial of access to resources, opportunities, and the power to define reality” (2009, p. 161). Structural racism, as defined by Lawrence and Keleher, is the normalization of inequality through policy, law, and institutional practices, which creates “racialized social systems” (2004, p. 2). As Bonilla-Silva asserts, “mutually reinforce inequality through social structures, cultural representations, and ideologies” (2015, p. 73). In Ward’s novel, the cumulative effects of poverty, exclusion, and racialized precarity are internalized by the Batiste family, revealing how trauma becomes both a personal and collective inheritance.

Drawing on Cathy Caruth’s trauma theory—particularly her concepts of “inherent latency” and “dissociation” (Caruth 1996, p.17, 144)—this study investigates how structural racism functions as a latent trauma in the characters’ lives, disrupting familial intimacy and reinforcing psychic alienation. The paper will thus explore how the interlocking forces of race, trauma, and kinship operate within *Salvage the Bones*, revealing the novel’s critique of systemic racial violence and its long shadow over family life in post-Katrina America.

Structural Racism and the Afterlife of Desegregation in *Salvage the Bones*

Structural racism operates as a foundational yet often invisible force shaping American social systems. As Lawrence and Keleher argue, it “underpins white supremacy” and is “woven into the very fabric of our institutions” (2004, p. 2). This form of racism perpetuates the generational subjugation of Black communities, enforcing racial hierarchies that historically privileged white Americans while systematically disadvantaging Black citizens. Though *Salvage the Bones* is set in post-Civil Rights America, it captures the residual effects of this systemic oppression through the daily struggles of its Black characters in rural Mississippi.

Bonilla-Silva highlights how “the practices and mechanisms that keep blacks at the bottom of the social hierarchy have changed from overt to covert and subtle” (2015, p. 7). The novel reflects this subtlety in its portrayal of racial inequality that continues despite formal desegregation. The black community of Bois Sauvage remains largely segregated, both physically and psychologically, from white society.

This divide is illustrated when Esch and Skeetah stumble upon a white couple’s house on the periphery of Bois Sauvage—“through the woods,” hidden and unfamiliar to them (Ward 2011, p. 50). The house is surrounded by “barbed wire” (Ward, 2011, p. 53), functioning as a metaphor for the boundaries between Black and white communities. As Groos et al. observe, residential segregation serves as a “critical indicator of structural racism” (2018, p. 3), a theme clearly evoked in Ward’s narrative. The siblings’ journey into this unfamiliar, white-dominated space is filled with fear and caution, reflecting the historical trauma associated with transgressing racial boundaries.

Esch’s fear becomes palpable: “I looked back scared, thinking the white people who lived in that house on the edge of the black heart of Bois Sauvage had come after us” (Ward, 2011, p. 54). Her fear is symbolic of an inherited psychological trauma rooted in the legacy of white supremacy, where proximity to whiteness is equated with threat. The presence of egrets that scatter upon the white couple’s arrival furthers this symbolism, as the birds—typically emblematic of peace—flee from the implied danger of white intrusion. The wounds Esch sustains during the journey represent not only physical pain but the long history of suffering that accompanies any Black attempt to breach societal boundaries. Likewise, Skeetah’s wounds—“there are four of them gouged into his stomach and side. He is failing” (Ward, 2011, p. 68)—serve as a visceral metaphor for the consequences of challenging racial hierarchies. As the narrator remarks, “The wounds are angry” (Ward, 2011, p. 68), evoking generational rage and pain.

The family’s chronic food insecurity is another metaphor for structural deprivation: “We are all hungry,” Randall tells his father, underscoring how scarcity defines their lives (Ward, 2011, p. 154). Hunger here transcends the literal; it reflects the unmet needs and longings of generations. According to Psilopoulou, the

social status and the financial conditions of the Batiste family are deemed as grotesque by the white dominated society (2021). They live what Agamben calls the “bare life” (1998, 10; Cf. Mitrou/Kolyri, 2025). The term “bare life” denotes a loss of political subjectivity and reduces existence to its most basic biological components. Matthews argues that this reduction to bare life is the result of racial capitalism (2018). The character of Mother Lizbeth, with her “black” and “toothless” smile (Ward, 2011, p. 49), symbolizes the erosion of agency across generations, as teeth often signify strength and autonomy. Skeetah’s grim remark—“Why should China be the only one with teeth?” (Ward, 2011, p. 51)—as he tries to eat razor blades, underscores a desperate yearning for power in a system designed to render Black lives powerless. This visceral image suggests that the path to empowerment is fraught with self-harm and loss—a haunting metaphor for the Black struggle for recognition and dignity in a racist society.

The family’s home, colloquially known as “the Pit” (Ward, 2011, p. 6), becomes a central metaphor for the cyclical nature of racial disenfranchisement. Originally owned by the grandfather, the land was gradually sold to white buyers, leaving behind a depression, both literal and symbolic. According to Eric Doise, the act of digging and taking soil from the pit by whites makes the Batiste family prone to floods (2023). This space embodies the material and psychological consequences of generational dispossession. As Ward writes, “We took couch by chair by picture by dish until there was nothing left” (2011, p. 49), highlighting how the family survives off the remnants of the past, emblematic of broader African American struggles with inherited poverty and marginalization.

Silva and Lewis argue that while slavery was formally abolished, it sparked white anxieties that led to the establishment of systemic barriers such as Jim Crow laws, aimed at curtailing Black autonomy and upward mobility (1996). Although such laws have been repealed, their structural legacy persists in the form of residential, economic, and educational segregation. In *Salvage the Bones*, the characters are effectively confined to the Pit—physically, economically, and symbolically. Every attempt to transcend these boundaries invites danger, thus re-inscribing the

limitations imposed by a system that continues to operate under the guise of equality.

The Pit, then, represents more than a location; it becomes a symbol of the invisible yet omnipresent restrictions that govern Black existence in Bois Sauvage. The characters' inability to escape it reflects the enduring force of structural racism, the vestiges of Jim Crow, and the limitations imposed on Black life in contemporary America.

Cultural Racism and the Afterlife of Segregation in *Salvage the Bones*

The cultural aspect of structural racism manifests in daily life, normalizing and perpetuating racial discrimination as part of the social fabric (Lawrence and Keleher, 2004). In *Salvage the Bones*, the Batiste family's existence reflects the deep cultural deprivation imposed by systemic racism. The family lives a life deprived not only of material wealth but also of the cultural and emotional resources that might have otherwise provided stability, such as the affection of the mother, the emotional presence of the father, and economic security. This deprivation is symbolized by the metaphor of the "Bare Bulb place" in the title of the first chapter, which paints a bleak picture of the family's cultural and emotional scarcity, representing the emptiness left by generations of subjugation. Lénart argues that the death of the mother in the text not only destabilizes the existing roles in the family, compelling two teenage siblings to perform parental roles for the youngest one, but also causes a gradual deterioration of the domestic environment of the house. According to her, the uninhabitability of the house is evident from the unwashed sheets and neglected yard, causing discomfort to the children. This reflects the lack of physical care and emotional security in the maternal absence (2023). Similarly, the title of the third chapter, "Sickness in the Dirt," underscores the Black community's ongoing struggle within a society that marginalizes them culturally and economically.

In the narrative, Esch's description of the white house as "blind with closed eyes" illustrates the wilful ignorance of white America to the suffering of Black people (Ward, 2011, p. 59). Early on in the novel, Esch cut her hand due to a scattered glass

bottle. The injury, once revealed, gets immediately concealed. As Clark suggests, this brief visibility reflects the broader societal tendency to acknowledge the sufferings of African Americans momentarily before they fade into invisibility, rendering them unaddressed (2015). In contrast to the serene atmosphere of the white community, where a gentle breeze flows around their house, the Black community of Bois Sauvage is enveloped in a "thick and hot" atmosphere, symbolic of the constant danger, financial insecurity, and struggle for survival (Ward, 2011, p. 55). This distinction between the white and Black environments reveals the stark contrast in the lived experiences of these communities, shaped by centuries of racial inequality. According to Clark, the descriptive language used by Ward for Bois Sauvage evokes the landscape, which is "deprived, injured, and hurting". He rendered the landscape as a paradoxical space, both nurturing and injurious simultaneously, where the bleeding landscape symbolizes the social wounds endured by the inhabitants of Bois Sauvage, including the Batiste family (2015, 344).

The imagery of the dog also functions as a representation of the dehumanization Black individuals experience in Bois Sauvage, where death from disease seems a more certain fate than access to proper medical care. The amalgamation of animal and human identities in the text mirrors the cultural stereotypes historically rooted in dehumanizing people of color as "non-human and animalistic" (Clark, 2015, 349). The Black characters, marginalized for generations, feel that death may be a less painful release than enduring the daily indignities of racial discrimination, which render their lives bare and dehumanized. As Bares notes, *Salvage the Bones* forces attention onto the unjust social order that continues to thrive, despite its historical roots (2019). The squalor in which the Batiste family lives serves as a microcosm of this social hierarchy, one where cultural, economic, and emotional deprivation are ingrained in the very structure of society.

Esch, being the only female in the setting, experiences discrimination differently from others. Her self-perception and relations in the novel provide a lens to explore how cultural racism shapes identity in the Black community. Her sense of self is determined by the stereotypes of society and the imbibed cultural messages. Black females tend to stand at the periphery of society, being

doubly marginalized due to their race and gender. While being around white people, Esch feels "small, dark: invisible," a depiction of African Americans being forced to feel inadequate and invisible in the spectrum of Eurocentric beauty standards (Ward, 2011, p. 26). As a result, they begin to seek self-acceptance and worth through their physical identity. Esch, too, attempts to gain acceptance by seeking validation through physical relationships, convinced that she holds no other existential value. This reflects how the bodies of Black women are often hypersexualized and objectified, narrowing their self-perception and sense of agency. Despite offering the men around her what she believes they desire, Esch still lacks a genuine sense of acceptance. She confesses, "it was easier to let them get what they wanted instead of denying them, instead of making them see me" (Ward, 2011, p. 186; Sakizli, 2025). This creates a self-perpetuating cycle of seeking validation and repeatedly facing emotional neglect. According to Lénart, the sexual behavior of Esch is a "cry for help and attests to her lack of self-confidence, self-respect and agency, which in turn stem from her young age and, above all, the male-centered sexual culture prevalent in the community" (2023, p. 136). Odgaard, in her thesis, states that Esch's limited autonomy in surrendering her "girly heart" to the boys in Bois Sauvage parallels the lack of agency in Papa Joseph in selling the soil of his land to white buyers (2017, 5). This underscores the systemic disempowerment in their daily choices.

Cultural racism reinforces the stereotypes and societal expectations that devalue the identities of people of color, particularly women. Consequently, Esch views herself through the distorted lens of others' desires. The obsession with physical perfection becomes so internalized that she develops resentment toward a neighborhood girl who embodies the ideal she believes she must live up to.

Institutional aspect of structural racism in *Salvage the Bones*

According to Lawrence and Keleher, the institutional aspect of structural racism includes the rules and policies within the society that reinforce the maintenance and perpetuation of racism 2004. The Batiste family in the novel depicts how, despite legal

desegregation, many Black individuals still face systemic barriers to full social and economic integration in a predominantly white-dominated society. As Anderson argues, desegregation laws merely allowed Black individuals to sit next to white people; they did not grant true equality in education or healthcare benefits (2023). The Batiste siblings, particularly the boys, struggle to achieve financial stability. Having limited access to education compels them to look for odd jobs to support themselves and their family. As Bonilla-Silva and Lewis note, Black communities are often confined to areas where employment is scarce (1996). Bois Sauvage is the town where racial discrimination creates economic marginalization. These constricted financial conditions hinder the upward mobility of black characters, hampering their education. Historically, the black-white educational divide in America has been one of the most persistent forms of discrimination maintained by state institutions (Bonilla and Lewis, 1996). The financial hardships faced by the Batiste father prevented his children from accessing education. The racial disparities in housing and employment opportunities further highlight institutional racism. Kozol refers to these disparities as “savage inequalities,” arguing that the American education system remains deeply unequal along racial lines (1991, p. 14).

This struggle is not unique to the Batiste family; many Black young men in the community turn to alternative economic opportunities, such as training dogs for illegal dog fights and drug selling. Skeetah, for instance, sees financial security in his pit bull, China. Her puppies represent a means of economic survival. However, due to the lack of resources, he struggles even to afford dog food. To make ends meet, he convinces the Catholic Church to pay him for cutting grass and weeding at the graveyard: “He mows three times a week during the summer, and in the winter, he weeds. That’s how he gets his dog food money” (Ward, 2011, p. 26). He was allowed to do so “Mostly because they knew about Mama” (Ward, 2011, p. 26). This suggests that, if not for the community’s awareness of Mama’s condition, he might not have been granted even this modest opportunity. Having the puppies offered him a glimmer of hope for some financial stability. “I’m saving them puppies...They’re money.” (Ward, 2011, p. 50). His financial security is tied to their survival, making him increasingly desperate: “I can’t lose no more” (Ward, 2011, p.

56). Involving China in illegal dog fights has been another source of his financial stability. He considers China and her puppies as the means of financial liberation not only for himself, but for other siblings too, because he knew that they could not rely on their father for the fulfillment of their needs. Skeetah's financial desperation is further emphasized when he resorts to stealing cow wormer from a white-owned barn to keep the puppies healthy. One of the puppies contracts parvo and dies, and Skeetah fears that the rest might succumb as well. His actions highlight how Black individuals are often pushed toward crime, not out of inherent criminal tendencies but out of necessity. The novel makes it clear that systemic failures—not individual choices—are at the root of these desperate actions. Feldman argues that: "it is not an individual—human or non-human that is dangerous, it is the very system that produces them" (2021, p. 74). Esch's observations of arrests in her neighborhood further reinforce this reality, illustrating how Black lives are disproportionately subjected to punitive control. According to Bonilla-Silva and Lewis, "the criminal justice system became the modern instrument to perpetuate white hegemony" (2015, p. 28). However, to protect Esch, Skeetah is forced to let go of China, representing the difficult choices Black individuals must make to survive. The novel portrays the immense struggle required to maintain a balance between family, survival, and economic stability. Ward's novel also critiques the broader institutional failures that govern Black lives. The discrimination is not limited to education only; other aspects of social life also reveal constant bias, unequal treatment, and even exclusion in some cases.

The Black community has long suffered from a lack of healthcare benefits. According to Gee and Ford, structural racism tends to remain the fundamental cause of health inequalities 2011. As the Batiste family represents the whole of the black community, their inaccessibility to medical care shows how deprived they are of basic human rights. The mother of the family gave birth to all the children in the "gap in the woods her father cleared and built on that," symbolizing the future of the coming generations who are born into poverty and remain trapped in it (Ward, 2011, p. 6). It further symbolizes the inaccessibility of medical facilities for a black woman in the developed society of the US. Even when her condition got worse while giving birth to

Junior, she refused to go to the hospital because of the financial crunch that the medical bills would come with, as there are no health care benefits for this marginalized community in the white dominated society. After birthing Junior, she stared at the ceiling “like an animal on the slaughter stump,” representing how she had been the victim of racism indirectly (Ward, 2011, 6; Vo, 2024). As she finally left for the hospital, Esch remembers the ominous look on her face, warning Esch not to be on that bed. It was a look heavy with understanding, rooted in the harsh reality of what it means for a doubly marginalized Black girl to bear a child within a community constrained by systemic oppression. Only later does Esch fully comprehend the weight of that gaze, as she comes to terms with the profound socio-economic and emotional burdens her unplanned pregnancy imposes. In Psi-lopoulou’s opinion, due to insufficient healthcare knowledge and familial support, Esch feels ashamed of her condition and sees her pregnancy as grotesque and her unborn child as a parasite (2021). Lacking both knowledge of how to end the pregnancy and access to reproductive healthcare, be it birth control or abortion services, Esch becomes emblematic of the reproductive vulnerability Black girls often face in impoverished, racially marginalized settings. The methods Esch heard from other Black girls for terminating a pregnancy included, “Take a month’s worth of birth control pills, it will make your period come on. Say if you drink bleach, you get sick, and it will make what will become the baby come out. Say if you hit yourself really hard in the stomach, throw yourself on the metal edge of a car, and it hits you low enough to cause bruises, it could bring a miscarriage. Say that this is what you do when you can’t afford an abortion, when you can’t have a baby, when nobody wants what is inside you...I’ve never had a prescription, wouldn’t have money to get them if I did, don’t have any girlfriends to ask for some, and have never been to the Health Department” (Ward, 2011, p. 83). Bares argues that *Salvage the Bones* challenges popular conceptions of black motherhood by telling its tale of reproductive injustice from Esch’s point of view (2019). This forces readers to think about how political and economic structures cause pregnancy to be a sign of debility in some groups and how reactionary cultural logics perpetuate debility.

Just as Esch and her mother were denied access to adequate medical care, Skeetah too grappled with the lack of proper treatment for his injuries. When he got injured while stealing from his white neighbors, his wounds were cured by pouring hydrogen peroxide from the bottle that is used for wounds in China. This illustrates that the Black community in Bois Sauvage had access to the same level of medical care as animals—none. It further represents the reliance of blacks on the things readily available to them at home rather than the medical facilities, even when they need them the most. They get infections easily in the pit; they catch boils in the form of bacterial infections. But the treatment was out of the question for them. “He’s not going to want to go to the hospital, and Daddy isn’t going to want to take him if it comes to that” (Ward, 2011, p.89). This marks the living conditions of the black community in the town of Bois Sauvage.

The novel not only critiques individual economic struggles but also highlights how systemic racism shapes broader disasters like Hurricane Katrina. The storm in itself is the representation of the institutional racism that these characters face in the town. According to Dyson, “the poor had been abandoned by society and its institutions...long before the storm” (2006, p. 2). Regarding *Salvage the Bones*, the injustice begins when white people start removing soil from the pit, creating a hole in the ground that makes it vulnerable to flooding. The land has been used, demolished, and then left to its now-inevitable self-destruction by white people. The Pit during the hurricane, saturated with water like “a cut that won’t stop leaking,” a lasting wound from a short-lived but devastating act of social violence (Ward, 2011, pp. 230-1). In addition to being an example of economic injustice, the desolate, trash-filled Pit of today also symbolizes a lengthy history of trauma and social violence (Anderson, 2010).

According to Anderson, Hurricane Katrina is labeled as an ‘unnatural disaster’ (2010, p. 110). The way the father of the Bastiste family works for the survival of the family days before the storm shows his awareness that the state authorities were not going to be of any help to the marginalized communities, and they had to work for their survival. At the beginning of the storm, the family lost the connection with the outside world, which can be seen through the image of the dead TV. While the storm had its “strangling hand over the house”, the first thing that this black

family lost was “power” (Ward, 2011, p. 171). The lack of power is not just a lack of electricity; it is a symbolic representation of the lack of knowledge about survival and the powerlessness they feel in their lives. In Bois Sauvage, the situation after the hurricane was devastating. The landscape of Bois Sauvage is metaphorically drowned in the past by the rising waters, and the disposable bodies that are left behind remind us of other racial violence victims (Clark, 2015).

It was not only the Batistes who suffered, “every house had faced the hurricane, and every house had lost...there were people in the street, barefoot, half naked, walking around felled trees, crumpled trampolines, talking with each other, shaking their heads, repeating one word over and over again: alive alivealive” (Ward, 2011, pp. 189-90). For African Americans, the very act of survival has historically carried profound significance—a testament to resilience in the face of systemic neglect and devaluation. This persistent struggle to simply stay alive reflects the broader failure of the State to ensure equal care and protection for all its citizens, irrespective of race. Institutional racism, according to Camara Jones, is often evident as “inaction in the face of need” (2020, p. 1). According to him, it manifests both in materialistic conditions and power leverage.

The fact that most of the Black population remained in town demonstrates their lack of resources and inability to evacuate without institutional aid. The destruction caused is not the product of the hurricane itself but of the national political environment that produced and still allows reduction of life to bare and biological (Brown, 2017). They did not have enough food to store for the storm, nor did they have enough money to get it from the market. They relied on help from outside sources, such as “FEMA and Red Cross, who always come through with food. We got that much” (Ward, 2011, p. 154). Being aware of how things work when a calamity hits, Daddy knew they had to fight it alone as they had always done. “We make do with what we’ve got.” Daddy coughs. “Always have. And will” (Ward, 2011, p. 154). The first thing that Daddy instructed Randall to do about the storm was to close all the windows. The windows symbolize the vulnerability of a person. The Batiste family closed the windows in preparation for the storm as a representation of how blacks try to hide their vulnerable state to survive in the dire sit-

uations of extreme circumstances. After storm preparations, the house resembles a ‘closed pit,’ illustrating both the isolation of the Batiste family and the Black community’s resilience in the face of systemic neglect (Ward, 2011, p. 151).

Waiting with the hope of being saved, perhaps this time, the Batiste family was in their house, but no one came to save them. They were in the “open attic” till everything was normal, until “the wind quieted from jet fighter planes to coughing puffs..., the sky brightened from a sick orange to a clean white gray..., the water, which had milled like a boiling soup beneath us, receded inch by inch, back into the woods.., the rain eased to drips.., until we got cold, and the light wind that blew chilled us” (Ward, 2011, p. 186). The open attic portrays the exposure of the Black community to the chaos of the storm and being abandoned by the State at their most desperate moment. It highlights their broader reality of marginalization in society. They were reduced to nothing more than the other non-human things around, like “a pile of wet, cold branches, human debris in the middle of all of the rest of it” (Ward, 2011, p. 186). According to Ward, “Katrina revealed yet again a lot of ugly things about the south and the country in general—ugly things about race and class and about how certain lives were valued more than others” (Murphy, 2014). Underlying these experiences is a persistent awareness among Black individuals of their marginalized position within the structures of a white-dominated society. Esch knew that no matter how much they waited for help, “No one is coming” (Ward, 2011, p. 195). Like Katrina, previous storms also left Black communities without state support, reinforcing a cycle of systemic neglect. “People were too tired finding their relatives’ uprooted bodies, reburying them, sleeping on platforms that used to be the foundations of their houses, under tents, biking or walking miles for freshwater, for food, to still fight the law outlawing segregation” (Ward, 2011, p. 111). This shows that nothing had changed for blacks from the previous storm till the new one, Katrina.

Amid the instability faced by Black families in Bois Sauvage, Esch develops an emotional detachment from her unborn child, uncertain of its survival. Her doubt reflects the broader existential insecurity experienced by Black individuals in a white-dominated society. The unpredictable future of Black individuals largely

stems from the mass incarceration of young Black men by the police. The legal system in Bois Sauvage vividly demonstrates discrimination against Black individuals. Even the journalists who represent the state authority work under the stereotypes associated with skin color. “Every time somebody in Bois Sauvage gets arrested, they always get the story wrong.” (Ward, 2011, p. 9). This illustrates how institutions discriminate against Black people, often without recognizing it. The automated evacuation call the Batiste family received illustrates the lack of empathy toward Black individuals, who suffered the most during the storm. The State blamed the Black community for failing to evacuate, even though they lacked the means to leave and had nowhere to seek shelter. During the previous storm ‘Elaine’, the condition of the black community had been the same: “the newly dead and the old dead littered the beaches, the streets, the woods” (Ward, 2011, p. 171). The black characters in the novel lack control over their movement. They lack access to migration before the storm. “Before a hurricane, the animals that can leave. Birds fly north out of the storm, and everything else roams as far away from the winds and rain as possible” (Ward, 2011, p. 39). Even non-humans can migrate to save themselves from the calamity, unlike blacks living in the poor setting of Bois Sauvage.

Trauma and the family system

Prolonged exposure to discrimination in vital aspects of life affects an individual’s psyche, as seen in the characters of the text. The endurance of persistent psychic pain leads to trauma in them. Trauma, as defined by Cathy Caruth, is an event that “fragments consciousness and prevents direct linguistic representation” (1996, p. 6). Trauma can be understood as a disruptive event or experience that has an intense impact on an individual’s emotional state and perception of the external world. Bessel van der Kolk defines trauma as “an event that overwhelms the central nervous system, altering the way we process and recall memories. It is not the story that happened back then, it’s the current imprint of that pain, horror, and fear living inside people” (2016, 0:28-0:37). Structural racism creates trauma (Scott-Jones and Kamara, 2020, p. 2). The mental agony endured over

the years affects every aspect of these characters' lives, like their self-identity, consciousness, and relationship with their surroundings. Similarly, it affects the familial relationships of the characters of the text. According to Keeble, this novel is a bridge between slow violence and how it causes trauma (2020). The suffering of the characters in the novel remains unexpressed; hence, the silence becomes the only expression of the pain.

The repetition in the day-to-day life of the characters evokes the unresolved trauma in the novel (Hui and Li-Fu, 2024). The death of the Batiste family's mother, a result of inadequate medical care, devastated the father of the family. After her death, he is seen mostly drunk. Alcohol for him became a coping mechanism for his unaddressed trauma, an escape from the reality that he had to take care of his children financially as well as emotionally. He dissociates from his immediate reality due to this overwhelming psychological distress. His emotional breakdown led to his inability to provide his children with basic nurturing and financial stability. He became an absent father in their lives and started to struggle with his own unresolved psychic pain. His persistent preoccupation with the preparation for the upcoming storm marks the trauma that he contains from the previous storm, after which blacks had to do all the post-storm work by themselves. They were lifting, searching for the dead bodies of their loved ones. This had an impact on the psyche of the father, as he was aware that he had to do all the preparations for the survival of his family during the hurricane. His focus on preparations further distanced him emotionally from his children. "His face says he is smiling, but his voice says he is not," reveals the complexity of his emotions (Ward, 2011, p. 100). It depicts the friction between his outward appearance and the inward realities. He masks his fear, frustration, and pain with the façade of optimism and strength, which his voice fails to conceal. The constant emotional conflict that he has endured over the period is reflected in his emotional dissociation from his children and within himself. As Daddy becomes physically disabled, his condition symbolically reflects his emotional paralysis.

With their father emotionally and physically absent, Randall, the eldest son, takes on the responsibility of caring for his younger siblings. He assumes the role of both mother and father for Junior while also acting as a paternal figure to Skeetah and Esch.

The physical and emotional limitations of their father further burden Randall with family responsibilities. He “looked older than Daddy” in the hospital, representing the new phase of new responsibilities for him (Ward, 2011, p. 105). On the other hand, Skeetah makes China and her puppies his purpose, knowing how they can be the source of his financial stability. When everyone in the family is concerned about the food supplies during the storm, Skeetah arranges food for China. His attentive care for China as she gives birth reflects his unresolved trauma from witnessing his mother’s death during childbirth. The moment China refused to feed one of her puppies, Skeetah lashed out and called her ‘you bitch!’ (Ward, 2011, p. 40). His unexpected outburst of rage may have been caused by witnessing a mother reject her child, which brings back memories of their mother’s agonizing absence (Lénart, 2023). Junior withdraws into the crawlspace beneath the house, looking for a place to heal that resembles a womb (Marotte, 2015). On the surface, it may seem that Black people no longer face direct racism. However, when they speak about their suffering—ignored by the world—their true struggles are revealed.

Meanwhile, Esch, as the only female in the household, naturally steps into a maternal role, despite her struggles with identity and survival. The absence of a mother in the family compels Esch to take on a maternal role for her siblings and father. Unaware of what real motherhood is, she feels disconnected from her unborn child. She begins searching for knowledge about motherhood through the mythological figure Medea, her dog China, and even Hurricane Katrina. Medea represents reflected motherhood as a composition of love and vulnerability, while China shows her the duality of motherhood—care and destruction, and Katrina taught her resilience in the face of adversity. These lessons play a crucial role in framing the perspective of Esch towards her child and her identity as a black, single mother living in an abominable society. Unable to find any maternal guidance for her new role, she learned these lessons the hard way, exploring that black motherhood means a multifaceted role. The absence of a mother in her life had taught her the importance of the emotional presence of a mother in a black child’s life in a racial society.

Her emotional isolation had an impact on her psyche as it distanced her emotionally from others in the family. “And then

Mama died, and there was no one left for me to hold on to” (Ward, 2011, p. 49). Her unexpressed pain prevents her from articulating her mental anguish, as a result of which she feels disconnected from the family members around her. This dissociation results in Esch oscillating between her reality and the world of the mythological figure Medea. This serves as a means of distance from her immediate reality and psychic pain. It gives her the displacement to process her loss, fear, and uncertainty in the face of her real world. Throughout the text, she struggles to express herself and is unable to complete her thoughts. “I can’t help but let a little sound come out of my throat, but then I close it off so that I can’t even breathe” (Ward, 2011, p. 53). This constant struggle between expressing and suppressing her emotions makes it difficult for Esch to process the hardships she faces. She avoids directly acknowledging her pregnancy until the storm arrives, when she is finally forced to confront it. This delayed response stems from an inherent emotional latency, as the pregnancy evokes the unresolved grief of her mother’s death.

As a Black teenage girl constrained by rigid beauty standards, she struggles with self-acceptance. Esch feels unworthy: “I have no glory. I have nothing” (Ward, 2011, p. 98). She has internalized this racism so deeply that, in seeking acceptance from those around her, she begins to reduce herself to a spectacle for male desire. This was not something she desired but something she felt compelled to do, driven by years of accumulated trauma and a deep-seated sense of invisibility. Upon unexpectedly becoming pregnant, she perceives herself as reinforcing the stereotypes that white society holds about Black girls. This realization deepens her struggle with self-worth and her relationship with her sense of motherhood.

Conclusion

As established in the introduction, this paper has explored the enduring struggles of the Batiste family in *Salvage the Bones*, revealing how structural and cultural racism persist under the guise of a supposedly post-racial American society. Through a close examination of the characters, the analysis demonstrates that racial discrimination has merely evolved into more insidious

and covert forms, remaining deeply embedded in the everyday experiences of people of color in the U.S. (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). This veiled marginalization inflicts unresolved psychological trauma on the characters, manifesting in their fractured relationships, emotional repression, and distorted self-perceptions.

Drawing on Cathy Caruth's insights, the paper illustrates that when such psychological pain remains unacknowledged, it resurfaces in altered behavioral patterns and relational dysfunctions (Caruth, 1996). The father, emotionally numbed by grief over his wife's death, retreats into alcoholism and mechanical survival tactics, leaving a void of parental care. This absence forces Randall into a caretaker role and deepens Skeetah's disconnection from the family. Esch, burdened by both the mother's absence and her own marginalization as a Black girl, struggles to forge a bond with her unborn child, reflecting the internalization of cultural devaluation and trauma. Her attempt to perform the maternal role coexists with her alienation from her own body and identity.

Ultimately, *Salvage the Bones* demonstrates that trauma in the lives of the Batiste family is not confined to individual tragedy, but is embedded in and mediated by the architecture of structural racism. Caruth's theory of trauma helps illuminate how the effects of historical and ongoing racialized violence are not merely remembered but relived—surfacing as emotional numbing, misdirected intimacy, and fractured familial bonds. The characters' psychological wounds are not isolated breakdowns but symptoms of an inherited, systemic affliction. Structural racism, as seen in institutional neglect, economic precarity, and cultural invisibility, operates as the vehicle through which trauma is transmitted and sustained across generations. The novel thus exposes how systemic inequality not only restricts Black futures materially but also damages emotional and psychic interiors in ways that are often invisible but deeply enduring. Unless these intersecting forms of marginalization are dismantled, the cycle of trauma will continue to reverberate across generations in Black communities, distorting lives and foreclosing futures. *Salvage the Bones* stands as a compelling literary testimony to the afterlife of segregation and the enduring wounds inflicted by covert yet deeply entrenched racial hierarchies.

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The Trauma of Life's Meaninglessness: A Philosophical Reading of Monty Python's *Life of Brian*

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Abstract

How would it feel if one day we could fulfill a dream that many of us share—to spend a few hours or days in a beloved time and place we consider unique and unrepeatable? Personally, I would choose to visit Athens during the height of classical antiquity, to meet the man I regard as the most avant-garde artist of all time, Euripides, and have a “coffee” with him. But that, of course, is another story.

Monty Python, on the other hand, chose a different setting in “*Life of Brian*”: not the classical world, but the hazy transitional period often mislabeled as “Late Antiquity”—a time teetering on the brink of the Middle Ages. Medieval society is unable to confront the trauma of finitude, the existential void of a life stripped of meaning, whether on an individual or collective scale. It is precisely into this world that Monty Python, with characteristic wit, drop their unwitting hero, Brian, not in search of answers, but for the sheer absurdity of it. The deeper philosophical implications of this move, however, are left to us to untangle.

Keywords: *Trauma, Sophists, Nietzsche, Gauchet, Castoriadis, Existentialism, Bad Conscience, Bad Faith, Alienation, Salvation, Finitude*

Faith is the path of least resistance
Woody Allen, *Match Point*

On Comedy

Comedy—especially when it veers into farce or the grotesque¹—is often dismissed as nothing more than light entertainment, a disposable product meant to offer a couple of hours of amusement in the darkness of a movie theatre. The very term “serious comedy” sounds like an oxymoron. Simply labeling a film as a comedy seems to carry an implicit devaluation, regardless of its actual depth or quality.

Let’s be honest: comedies are rarely hailed as masterpieces. With very few exceptions—the film of our topic and perhaps Hal Ashby’s “*Being There*” or Larry Charles’ audacious “*Borat*”—comedies are seldom described as a masterpiece.

Consider Peter Weir’s “*The Truman Show*”: how many more Oscars might it have won had the lead role not been played by Jim Carrey, an actor with unmistakably comic instincts? And yet, comedic elements are present even in the most “serious” films. Works marked by violence—even extreme violence—such as the Coen brothers’ “*No Country for Old Men*” or Quentin Tarantino’s “*Pulp Fiction*”, are often deeply funny without in any way undermining their gravity. In “*Pulp Fiction*”, following a blood-soaked shootout, a group of hardened criminals scrambles—almost farcically—to clean the trunk of a car before the owner’s wife returns from the supermarket and discovers the carnage. The same can be said of Woody Allen’s entire oeuvre, though his films typically lack farce or grotesquerie (with the possible exception of his earliest work). “*I’d never join a club that would allow a person like me to become a member,*” he declares in the opening scene of “*Annie Hall*” (1977). The philosophical insight here is so immediate, so stark in

¹ Naremore James, *Stanley Kubrick and the Aesthetics of the Grotesque*. Film Quarterly, vol. 60, no. 1, Fall 2006, pp. 4–14, DOI:10.1525/fq.2006.60.1.4.

its simplicity that it becomes comic—whether or not it intends to be.

Perhaps, then, comedy is merely a matter of phrasing—or even of framing. Something appears when it is least expected or fails to appear when it is expected. Comedy belongs less to content than to context.

As will already be apparent, this essay takes a philosophical look at *Monty Python's*² “*Life of Brian*” is a legendary comedy that premiered in 1979. Like all great works of art, its reputation has only grown with time, achieving the status of a cultural icon.

In general, the philosophical analysis of film—even, or perhaps especially, of comedy—should not strike us as odd or pretentious. Every major work of art is underpinned, at its core, by a philosophy—or at least by philosophical assumptions, however unsystematic. For us, there is little distance between Plato's dictum, “*For no one is willingly wicked*”,³ and the line delivered by Sissy Sullivan (Carey Mulligan) in Steve McQueen's “*Shame*” (2011): “*We're not bad people. We just came from a bad place.*”

But enough. Let us now turn, philosophically, to “*Life of Brian*”—one of the most deeply reflective films of the past fifty years. Ontology, ethics, and political philosophy are not merely present in the film—they are woven into its very structure. Our guideposts in this analysis—undertaken in the shadow of the primal trauma of mortality and the absence of inherent meaning—will be Nietzsche's “*On the Genealogy of Morals*”, and two major works of French thought: Jean-Paul Sartre's celebrated “*Existentialism Is a Humanism*” and Marcel Gauchet's lesser-known but equally significant essay “*Primitive Religion and the Origins of the State*”.

² Monty Python, British comedy troupe (Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones and Michael Palin).

³ Plato, *Timaeus*, edited with Introduction and notes by R.D. Archer – Hind, M.A. Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, London MacMillan and Co. and New York, 1888, 86d–e. Cf. Antoniadis, C., “Knowing: The Zone of Interest from a Philosophical Point of View”, *Dia-noesis*, 17(1), 2025, 351–374. <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.41718>.

On Humanity's Innate Thirst for Meaning

Contemporary philosophy, particularly in the wake of modernity, does not always take the meaning of life as its central concern. Instead, it often pivots around the concept of *freedom*. And within this framework, we can broadly identify two dominant strands of thought:

1. **The German Idealist Tradition**, particularly as articulated by Hegel: Here, the experience of finitude—of life's fragility and apparent lack of meaning—is seen as an error or illusion. Life *does* have meaning, and this meaning is predetermined. Everything that occurs is part of a larger rational plan to which both human beings and the world at large contribute. This doesn't reduce humanity to mere instruments; on the contrary, individuals have the opportunity by fulfilling their roles within this greater design to participate in the freedom of creation. In this vision, freedom is not arbitrariness but rather the certainty that one's actions—indeed, one's very existence—are meaningful within a cosmic or historical totality far beyond the finite self.⁴

2. **The Existentialist and Relativist Perspective**: From this standpoint, life does *not* possess a predetermined or intrinsic meaning. Rather, meaning is optional—something that must be chosen, created, or projected by each individual. Left unexamined or unshaped, life is fundamentally meaningless: what we might call its *original version*. However, the power of human freedom lies precisely in this creative act of meaning-making. Meaning is neither universal nor eternal—it is personal, contingent, and ever in flux. The world is a canvas, not a script.⁵

It is not difficult to see that these two perspectives represent the extreme poles of human thought—two radical interpretations not only of life and the world, but of the human being himself. In reality, we are always negotiating a balance between them.

⁴ Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, edited by Leipzig, F. Meiner, 1907; *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, edited by Leipzig, F. Meiner, 1911.

⁵ Sartre, Jean-Paul, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, translated by Carol Macomber, edited by John Kulka, Yale University Press/ New Haven & London, 2007.

Man is finite. How does Saul Bellow put it? “*Life! Everyone who had it was bound to lose it*”.⁶ That is the primal wound. It is not simply a matter of age; death is there from the very first moment—from birth itself—presiding over life, shaping everything: what we eat and drink, how much we work and rest, where we go and for how long, what we should and should not do. Life becomes, in other words, a ceaseless and anguished attempt to avoid the inevitable. This awareness of finitude—of decay, of the countdown—must be tempered if life is to be bearable.

The usual way is to seek meaning in something theoretically higher than ourselves. As the poet pleads: “*Friend—if you believe I have not come too late once more, show me a path. You, at least, know that I search for a nothing to believe in so wholly—that I may die for it*”.⁷ What a magnificent line! The wound inflicted by the knowledge of death must at all costs be healed. Man poses questions about the meaning of his existence and answers them with myths. This has always been our reality—our intellectual condition. Our fate, across an entire lifetime, is to try, without hope of success, to conceive the inconceivable: the dissolution of our own being.

In antiquity, the salve for this wound was devotion to the community—then newly formed—in the city-states of classical Greece. Care for the *polis* reached the level of a metaphysical absolute. Then came the great conquests: Alexander, Pyrrhus, and Rome. Suddenly, the world became vast, boundless, uncontrollable. The search for healing turned inward. This is the meaning of Epicureanism and Stoic philosophy. Yet, let us be honest, these systems were to an irritating degree self-referential. Humanity longed to serve something beyond itself.

For precisely this reason, Christianity appeared—and then prevailed. It was deeply individualistic, and yet, paradoxically, not self-referential. Salvation is individual, but at the same time collective. The world as a whole is accountable, not merely each person alone. If accountability were only individual, Christianity could never have been a great religion. Here, the wound is expulsion from Paradise—an expulsion of all human beings without exception, the consequence of original sin. The pain exists, but the pain

⁶ Bellow, Saul, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, edited by, Viking Press, 1970.

⁷ Anagnostakis, Manolis, *Search*, Nora Anagnostakis, & Anestis Anagnostakis, edited by Nefeli, 2000.

is healed. There is the great Guide, the One who oversees and presides over all. There is the present as fall, there are saints, martyrs, prophets, the Messiah, the promise of a better world—one without hunger, without disease, without death—there is eternal life in the Promised Land. God is one; the monarch, his representative on earth—indeed his incarnation—is also one; the body of laws is one. These laws are harsh, unyielding, but just. All are equal before them. The laws of the Monarch are, in essence, the laws of God himself mediated through the enlightened ruler. This is the medieval world. And until this promised world arrives, the present world remains in waiting—waiting for the healing of the wound of finitude, of mortality, of the slow and torturous road toward the end.

But let us be honest: even without God, without the enlightened ruler, without divine law, the world—having once set out on the path of seeking or awaiting a metaphysical absolute—is already, in essence, a medieval world. It is the world of Nietzsche's *bad conscience*,⁸ of Sartre's *bad faith*,⁹ of Castoriadis' *alienation*¹⁰: a world already conditioned for the arrival of some great Meaning, if only so that the pain might finally stop. Because the pain, as Nietzsche writes, is unjustified. Not yet, at least.

A few centuries have passed—yet it feels as though thousands of years separate us from the intellectual vitality of classical antiquity. The world, once seen as perpetual becoming, as intellectual adventure, as discovery and self-interrogation, is now paused. It waits in an antechamber, anticipating the miracle of redemption—the healing of the wound. Along the way, it has abandoned its great aspirations: the pursuit of self-knowledge, of rational clarity, of progress; the vision of naturalistic determinism; the relentless questioning of authority launched by the Sophists. In their place, it has embraced a more comforting stance: the soothing belief that one is not responsible for the evils of the world. How does Pascal

⁸ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Zur Genealogie der Moral, On the Genealogy of Morals*, translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdahl, Vintage Books Edition, November 1989, Copyright © 1967 by Random House, Inc.

⁹ Sartre Jean-Paul, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme, Existentialism is a Humanism*, translated by Carol Macomber, edited by John Kulka, Yale University Press/ New Haven & London, 2007.

¹⁰ Castoriadis, Cornelious, *L'Institution imaginaire de la société, The Imaginary Institution of Society*, translated by Kathleen Blarney, Copyright © this English translation Polity Press, 1987.

put it? "*Being unable to cure death, wretchedness, and ignorance, men have decided to be happy, not to think about such things*".¹¹

This is the world of *Life of Brian*, as imagined by the ingenious Monty Python. A world that appears solid, and—how could it not be? All worlds are solid to those who live in them. "*We are all children of our world and of our time. We have passed through its schools, read its books, listened to its music, absorbed its art. What sense does it make to claim we feel alien within it?*"¹²

And yet. Man carries a deep wound from the moment of his birth. He is in pain—and he seeks relief. But that relief, invariably, is sought outside himself. And the price of this external recourse is alienation: alienation from oneself, and necessarily, the renunciation of one's own freedom. As Nietzsche puts it at the very beginning of "*On the Genealogy of Morals*": "*We are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge—and with good reason. We have never sought ourselves—how could it happen that we should ever find ourselves? It has rightly been said: 'Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also'; our treasure is where the beehives of our knowledge are. [...] Whatever else there is in life—so-called 'experiences'—which of us has the earnestness for them? Or the time? Present experience has, I am afraid, always found us absent-minded: we cannot give our hearts to it, not even our ears! Like someone divinely preoccupied, immersed in himself, into whose ear the bell tolls the twelve beats of noon—only for him to suddenly start and ask: 'What was that which just struck?'—so we sometimes rub our ears afterward and ask, utterly surprised and disoriented: 'What was that which we just experienced?' Moreover: 'Who are we, really?' [...] So we are necessarily strangers to ourselves; we do not comprehend ourselves. We must misunderstand ourselves. For us, the law 'Each is furthest from himself' applies for all eternity—we are not 'men of knowledge' in relation to ourselves*".¹³

Indeed, what meaning can freedom possibly have—what meaning can knowledge have—when the first demand is safety? In "*2001: A Space Odyssey*", moonwatcher gazes up at the moon, and in that moment, he becomes not only the first visionary, the first

¹¹ Pascal, Blaise, *Thoughts on religion* (1623-1662), published by The Peter Pauper Press Mount Vernon, New York, 1900.

¹² Bellow, Saul, *Herzog*, edited by Viking Press, 1964.

¹³ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 15.

poet, but also the first thinker. He becomes the first *man*—in the full philosophical sense—who begins to comprehend the terrifying insignificance of himself and of the world around him. And thus, he becomes the first man called to confront the overwhelming silence of the universe, the unbearable isolation of consciousness in an indifferent cosmos.

Let us, then, try to put things in order. Survival comes first. As Sartre writes in his “*Critique of Dialectical Reason*”, “*The origin of struggle always lies, in fact, in some concrete antagonism whose material condition is scarcity (la rareté), in a particular form, and the real aim is objective conquest or even creation, in relation to which the destruction of the adversary is only the means.*”¹⁴ Then safety—the sense that one may, perhaps, find a place in this cold, vast, and unwelcoming world. Only after these can freedom emerge. If it did not emerge—if freedom were not born from this structure—there would be no societies, no politics, no myths, no religions, no ideologies, no philosophical systems. In other words, there would be no *world* as we know it. And the more the world expands, as it did during the Hellenistic era, the more the wound of insignificance swells. The more it demands healing. The more it demands meaning.

If there is one thing, unfortunately, that characterizes the human being, it is his unreasonable expectations of life—his insatiable demand that his needs be met. And the more these needs are fulfilled, the more new ones emerge. Deleuze and Guattari are right when they declare in “*Capitalism and Schizophrenia*” that there is nothing beyond desire.¹⁵ But desire’s shadow is frustration. And the wound of frustrated desire is no small thing. It is not secondary—it is foundational. In fact, one could say that mortality itself *is* the ultimate frustration: the frustration of the desire for immortality. Today, we live longer than at any other point in human history. But it is not enough. And it never will be. As the “replicant Pris” says in Ridley Scott’s “*Blade Runner*”: “*We’re stupid and*

¹⁴ Sartre, Jean – Paul, *Critique de la raison dialectique, Critique of Dialectical Reason*, translated by Alan Sheridan – Smith, edited by verso 2004, p. 113.

¹⁵ Deleuze Gilles – Guattari Felix, *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie 1: L’anti-Oedipe, Capitalism and Schizophrenia, 1: Anti – Edipus*, translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, edited by University of Minnesota Press Minneapolis, 1983, *The Desiring -Machines*, p. 8.

we'll die." A brutal, almost unbearable truth. This is pain. And this pain, again, is unjustified.

Let Nietzsche tell us the rest: "*What really arouses indignation against suffering is not suffering as such, but the senselessness of suffering. [...] To abolish hidden, undetected, unwitnessed suffering from the world—and honestly to deny it—one was, in the past, virtually compelled to invent gods and spirits of all kinds. Entities that dwell in the heights and in the depths, that roam even in secret places, that see even in the dark, and who would never let an interesting, painful spectacle go unseen. For it was with the help of such inventions that life knew how to work its oldest trick: the trick of justifying itself, of justifying its own evil.*"

And Nietzsche continues: "*All of antiquity is full of tender regard for the 'spectator'—for a world that was essentially public, essentially visible, and could not imagine happiness apart from spectacle and festival.*"¹⁶

Exactly ninety years later, Marcel Gauchet—a pivotal figure in contemporary French philosophy—returns to the same theme, though with a different intention. Nietzsche, in "*On the Genealogy of Morals*", remains grounded in the terrain of morality and religion. Gauchet, by contrast, attempts to trace the emergence of religion to the state. Yet both thinkers circle a common and vital question: how does humanity respond to the primordial wound of finitude? At the very beginning of his essay *Primitive Religion and the Origins of the State*, Gauchet writes: "*Meaning: what men throughout millennia professed to owe to the gods, what societies nearly always believed they owed to something 'beyond' for their workings. This term represents both the most elementary form of, and the most general reason for, religious belief. [...] Religion claims that we owe what we are to the gods—that is, to beings who by nature are different from us. This is an eminently political proposition, which is, in a sense, the basis of every society; it is a feeling of obligation that arises directly out of the primordial logic dictating society's existence*". By going back in time to the religious

¹⁶ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, pp. 68-69. Cf. Ojimba A. C., "Nietzsche's Intellectual Integrity and Metaphysical Comfort", *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 9 (1), 2024, pp. 109-130. <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.34391>

tie between supernatural founders-givers and human heirs-debtors, we can elucidate the system of primitive links that produces the social space”.

Marcel Gauchet offers an intriguing connection between the emergence of higher powers—Religion—and the rise of the State. In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that Religion serves as the precursor to the immense inequality born from the division of society into rulers and the ruled: “*This precursor*”, Gauchet argues, “*lies in the dispossession and prolonged subjugation that human beings accept when they come to believe they are indebted to external forces for the very order of the world.*”¹⁷ Taking his inquiry further, Gauchet insists that the State is not, in itself, responsible for this violent division of the social body into authority and subjugation. Religion laid the groundwork for this split the moment it was established—both in individual and collective consciousness—as the external foundation of society itself, not merely of individual life. “*Before the advent of the State, all societies projected their founding principles outside themselves: the source of their organizational logic, the basis of their values and emotions, the justification for their norms*”.

This externalization of the very foundation of society, of its laws and institutions, seems to apply to the Greeks as well, since they too had an official State religion, recognized by the State itself. Indeed, it appears to have been a religion strict in the observance of its beliefs and rules, as the main charge against Socrates was that “*he introduced new daimons.*” Several years thereafter, in the *Laws*, Plato himself proposes the death penalty for those proven to be atheists.¹⁸ Moreover, in Plato—and especially in the *Republic*—the idea of the enlightened ruler (in this case the philosopher), the holder of the one and only Truth, is strongly present; that is, the answer to the agonizing question of meaning. Naturally, Plato does not have in mind knowledge for the sake of knowledge, or a kind of individual “salvation,” but rather the collective. The philosopher, as bearer of the Truth, must transmit this knowledge to society, becoming its political leader. Two entire books, VI and VII,

¹⁷ Gauchet Marcel, “Primitive religion and the origins of the State”, pp. 116-122, *New French Thought, Political Philosophy*, edited by Thomas Pavel and Marc Lilla, Princeton Legacy Library, 1994.

¹⁸ Plato, *The Laws of Plato*, translated by A. E. Taylor, M.A., D.Litt., LL.D. London, J. M. DENT & SONS LTD, 1934, 908d.

are devoted to the Good, as the source of the unique and eternal Truth. In particular, in Book VI, “Socrates” describes the philosopher as the man who aims at knowledge and not at opinion or belief, as ordinary people do.¹⁹ While Book VII concerns the departure from the deceptive world of the senses and the arduous “ascent” toward the Good, the source of Truth, the eternal Light.²⁰

And yet, a closer examination—both of the testimonies concerning Greek daily life²¹ and of the corpus of Greek literature—suggests a different conclusion. Thucydides himself, as evidenced in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, appears not to believe in the gods, or at least not in any supernatural force. His analysis is profoundly non-metaphysical, marked by a nearly complete determinism. This perspective is particularly evident in the famous dialogue between the Melians and the Athenians in Book V. The Melians, besieged and facing annihilation, are given a grim choice: surrender and join the Athenian “alliance” or face destruction. Their appeal is to justice and morality, grounded in the religious framework of Greek thought: “*We know only too well how hard the struggle must be against your power, and against fortune, if she does not mean to be impartial. Nevertheless, we do not despair of fortune; for we hope to stand as high as you in the favor of heaven, because we are righteous, and you against whom we contend are unrighteous.*” The Athenians’ response brims with the cynicism and arrogance typical of conquerors in every age, entirely detached from the moral codes upheld by traditional religion: “*As for the Gods, we expect to have quite as much of their favour as you: for we are not doing or claiming anything which goes beyond common opinion about divine or men’s desires about human things. For the Gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a law of their nature, wherever they can rule, they will. This law was not made by us, and we are not the first who have acted upon it; we did but inherit it, and shall bequeath it to all time, and we know that you*

¹⁹ Plato, *The Republic*, edited by G. R. F. Ferrari, University of California, Berkeley, translated by Tom Griffith, Cambridge University Press, first published 2000, 3rd printing 2018, 486a- 511e.

²⁰ Ibid., 514a-541b. Cf. Tripoula, I., “The Status of Women in Ancient Greek Philosophy: From Plato to Plotinus”. *Dia-noesis* 17 (1), 2025, 191-214. <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.41711>.

²¹ Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, translated by C.D. Yonge, London: Henry G. Bohn, York Street, Covent Garden, 1854.

*and all mankind, if you were as strong as we are, would do as we do.”*²²

As for supernatural powers, the so-called “Sophists” likewise appear not to believe in the gods. The notion that religion—or the idea of God—emerged as a response to primal metaphysical anxieties, such as death or the search for meaning, is absent from their analyses. On the contrary, they tend to associate the birth of religion with the resolution of purely practical concerns, particularly the establishment of legal and social order. Critias, for example, asserts: “*Then when the laws prevented men from open deeds of violence, but they continued to commit them in secret, I believe that a man of shrewd and subtle mind invented for men the fear of the gods, so that there might be something to frighten the wicked even if they acted, spoke, or thought in secret. From this motive, he introduced the conception of divinity. There is, he said, a spirit enjoying endless life, hearing and seeing with his mind, exceedingly wise and all-observing, bearer of a divine nature. He will hear everything spoken among men and can see everything that is done. If you are silently plotting evil, it will not be hidden from the gods, so clever are they.*”²³ The same line of thought is echoed by Diodorus.²⁴ and by Moschion²⁵.

Perhaps the most critical insight in the Sophists’ analysis, however, is their denial of any single, objective truth—whether of divine or human origin. The one considered most important, Protagoras, famously claims in Plato’s *Theaetetus*: “*Man is the measure of all things: of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not.*” (*Theaetetus* 152a). And again, in the same dialogue (*Theaetetus* 167c), he states: “*Whatever acts appear just and fine to a particular state are so for that state so long as it believes in them; but when in a particular case they are burdensome for the citizens, the wise man substitutes others that appear and are beneficial.*”²⁶ Naturally, where there is no truth—no absolute and objective standard of right and wrong—

²² Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, translated by B. Jowett, Oxford University Press, 1881, E, 104-105.

²³ Guthrie, W.K.C., *The sophists, A History of Greek Philosophy, Volume III*, Cambridge University Press 1971, p. 243.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

there can be not only no religion, but not even the very idea of it. As W.K.C. Guthrie observes: “*Rhetorical teaching was not confined to form and style, but dealt also with the substance of what was said. How could it fail to inculcate the belief that all truth was relative, and no one knew anything for certain? Truth was individual and temporary, not universal and lasting, for the truth for any man was simply what he could be persuaded of, and it was possible to persuade anyone that black was white. There can be belief, but never knowledge*”.²⁷

What is truly astonishing is how, in Greek thought, we encounter—often within the very same historical period—the most radically opposing views concerning theology, political order, and moral philosophy. Yet the intellectual journey does not end with the ancients. On the contrary, the thought of later centuries—especially modern and contemporary philosophy—has much to contribute to this vast and continuing exploration. Following the *Middle Ages*, first the *Enlightenment* and then the philosophical movements of the 20th century rekindled the debate on truth, authority, and the meaning of existence. From the Jesuit command “*believe and do not search*” to the modern imperative “*doubt everything*,” the intellectual distance is, in truth, but a single breath—for who could ever articulate the one without having conceived—or even dared—the other?

Yet, for our analysis of the film, it is time to turn to a central figure of 20th-century philosophy: Jean-Paul Sartre. Let us briefly recall the fundamental principles of the French thinker’s philosophy. From the Second World War onwards, Sartre emerged as the foremost representative of atheistic existentialism—the most influential philosophical current of the century. These principles, as we shall soon see, are crucial for understanding the moral, psychological, and metaphysical dilemmas explored in the film:

- “... let us begin by saying that what we mean by “*existentialism*” is a doctrine that makes human life possible and also affirms that every truth and every action imply an environment and a human subjectivity. [...] What existentialists have in common is simply their belief that existence precedes essence; or, if you prefer, that subjectivity must be our point of departure. [...] Eighteenth-century atheistic philosophers rejected the idea of God, but not, for

²⁷ Ibid., p.51.

all that, the idea that essence precedes existence. Diderot, Voltaire, and even Kant all agreed that man possesses a human nature. This "human nature"—the concept of what it means to be human—is found in all men, which means that each man is simply a particular example of a universal concept: man."²⁸ What Sartre means here, of course, is that there is no God, no human nature; there is nothing beyond Nature and man himself.

- Since there is no God, man is free. He has no one to whom he must answer for his thoughts and actions. This also means he has no guide, no counselor, no spiritual or moral shepherd.²⁹

- "*Existence precedes essence*". This means that man gives meaning to himself. He assigns to himself whatever purpose he desires. After all, he is accountable to no one. As the creator of himself, man is also wholly responsible for himself. He is responsible for his actions in the fullest sense of the word, since there is no higher being to whom that responsibility can be transferred. Contrary to Dostoyevsky's dictum, "*If God does not exist, everything is permissible*," Sartre responds—agreeing with Nietzsche—that, in the absence of a guide, nothing is permissible to man until he himself decides upon his acts.³⁰

All this leads to Sartre's central ethical imperative: existential and moral autonomy. This is the fundamental element of what, in "*Existentialism Is a Humanism*", he calls "*good faith*." It is the consciousness that determines itself, that knows it determines itself, that is aware of the immense responsibility it assumes—and dares to rise to it. Opposed to this good faith stands bad faith. "*We may also judge a man when we assert that he is acting in bad faith. If we define man's situation as one of free choice, in which he has no recourse to excuses or outside aid, then any man who takes refuge behind his passions—any man who fabricates some deterministic theory—is operating in bad faith. [...] On the same*

²⁸ Sartre, Jean- Paul, *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme, Existentialism Is a Humanism*, translated by Carol Macomber, Yale University Press/ New Haven & London, 2007, pp. 18-22.

²⁹ Sartre Jean-Paul, *L'Âge de raison, The age of Reason*, "He could do what he liked, no one had the right to advise him, there would be for him no Good nor Evil unless he brought them into being... He was alone, enveloped in this monstrous silence, free and alone, without assistance and without excuse, condemned to decide without support from any quarter, condemned for ever to be free.", translated by Eric Sutton, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1950, p. 290.

³⁰ Sartre, Jean- Paul, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, p. 28.

grounds, I would say that I am also acting in bad faith if I declare that I am also bound to uphold certain values, because it is a contradiction to embrace these values while at the same time affirming that I am bound by them. If someone were to ask me, "What if I want to be in bad faith?" I would reply: "There is no reason why you should not be, but I declare that you are—and that a strictly consistent attitude alone demonstrates good faith."³¹

This bad faith is, in essence, what we would call *heteronomy*—a consciousness that prefers to shift responsibility rather than assume it, that repudiates—through an act of deep indignity—man's creative, instituting nature. It is what Castoriadis, in "*The Imaginary Institution of Society*", will later name *alienation*.³²

A little further on, Sartre writes: "*If, however, existence truly does precede essence, man is responsible for what he is. [...] And when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men. [...] When we say that man chooses himself, not only do we mean that each of us must choose himself, but also that, in choosing himself, he is choosing for all men. [...] Choosing to be this or that is, at the same time, to affirm the value of what we choose—because we can never knowingly choose evil. [...] Our responsibility is thus much greater than we might have supposed, because it concerns all of mankind.*"³³

Sartre does not perceive this fact—the absolute solitude of man—as anything pleasant. On the contrary, he finds the nonexistence of God profoundly disturbing. As a consequence of this absence of any transcendent principle, man is deprived of eternal and immutable values and truths, just as he is deprived of any possibility of justification. His mistakes—mistakes that may have catastrophic consequences—are entirely his own. No one else bears responsibility for a faulty judgment or a failed outcome... "*If it is true that existence precedes essence, then we can never explain our actions by appealing to a given and immutable human nature. In other words, there is no determinism—man is free; man is freedom. And if God does not exist, we will encounter no values or*

³¹ Ibid., pp. 47-48.

³² Castoriadis, Cornelious, *L'Institution imaginaire de la société, The imaginary Institution of Society*, translated by Kathleen Blarney, Copyright © this English translation Polity Press, 1987.

³³ Sartre, Jean- Paul, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, pp. 23-24.

orders that can legitimize our conduct.³⁴ Thus, we have neither behind us nor before us... any source of justification or excuse. We are left alone—and without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself; nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. [...] man is therefore without any support or help, condemned at all times to invent man.³⁵ [...] Does that mean I must resort to quietism? No. First, I must commit myself—and then act, according to the adage: “No hope is necessary to undertake anything.” I have no idea (whether it will succeed). All I know is that I will do everything in my power to make it happen. Beyond that, I cannot count on anything. [...] Man is nothing other than his own project’.³⁶

Let us now turn to our film to uncover its elective affinities with the theories of the Sophists, Sartre, and Gauchet. As we have already suggested, the world of “*Life of Brian*” is a medieval one—a world immersed in disease and deprivation, searching for the prophet, the Savior, the Truth, the only Knowledge—ultimately, salvation. What do the ingenious Monty Python do? They cast into this world—a world so distant from our own—a post-modern man. In fact, a man of postwar existentialism, a man who fully understands that, with no assistance to expect from anywhere, he is obliged to fend for himself. And not only that, but also that any “authority” is not merely deceptive, but potentially dangerous.

Moreover, the fact that Brian Cohen (Graham Chapman) originates from another world is made evident by the otherwise incomprehensible appearance of a UFO in the film, which saves him from certain death. Indeed, Brian himself is a kind of UFO in the world of the film, for no one truly understands his words or actions. Monty Python, then, cast him into this bizarrely religious, superstitious, and obscurantist world simply to observe how he

³⁴ Athanasiadis, Tasos, *The Throne room*, edited by Bookstore of ESTIA, 1999. “*I admire the boldness of the atheist; his morality is born of pure selflessness*”.

³⁵ Barth, John, *The End of the Road*, Avon Books, A division of The Hearst Corporation 959 Eighth Avenue New York. “*In my ethics the most a man can ever do is be right from his point of view; there’s no general reason why he should even bother to defend it, much less expect anybody else to accept it... He’s got to expect conflict with people or institutions who are also right from their points of view, but whose points of view are different from his*”.

³⁶ Sartre, Jean- Paul, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, pp. 32-37.

would function. If it is true that a stable human nature exists—a nature that renders man the same, or roughly the same, regardless of time and place, as genetic psychologists, psychoanalysts, rationalists, and many philosophers claim—then surely he will very quickly find some point of contact with those around him. If not, we must advance many centuries forward, until we encounter a Sartre or a Foucault, who, in their work, claim that the idea of a stable human nature is deceptive.³⁷

Returning to our film, we find ourselves at the moment when the Romans once again attempt to arrest Brian, who has managed to write, one hundred times on the walls of the palace in Caesar's square, the slogan: "*Romani ite domum*"; thereby striking a blow to the prestige of the Roman Empire. Fleeing through the narrow streets of Jerusalem in an attempt to escape capture, Brian reaches the hideout of "*The People's Front of Judea*", an organization he had joined just the day before, based solely on his deep hatred of the Romans. The house is situated directly above what appears to be the square of orators and prophets.

Brian enters the hideout hastily, disguised with a false beard. When the members inside see him, they are frightened and quickly send him out to a small wooden balcony at the back of the house, hoping the Romans will not search that far. Immediately afterward, the door bangs open, and a detachment of Roman soldiers confronts the member who has just answered it. The Romans demand to search the house, harboring well-founded suspicions that Brian is hiding within. Yet, despite their "efforts," they fail to locate him. Unfortunately, the wooden balcony cannot bear Brian's

³⁷ Foucault, Michel, *L'ordre du discours, The Order of Discourse*, edited by Robert Young, Routledge and Kegan Paul, Boston, London and Henley, 1981. "*The idea of universal mediation is yet another way, I believe, of eliding the reality of discourse, and despite appearances to the contrary. For it would seem at first glance that by rediscovering everywhere the movement of a logos which elevates particularities to the status of concepts and allows immediate consciousness to unfurl in the end the whole rationality of the world, one puts discourse itself at the center of one's speculation. But this logos, in fact, is only a discourse that has already been held, or rather it is things themselves into discourse as they unfold the secret of their own essence. Thus, discourse is little more than the gleaming of a truth in the process of being born to its own gaze; and when everything finally can take the form of discourse, when everything can be said and when discourse can be spoken about everything, it is because all things, having manifested and exchanged their meaning, can go back into the silent interiority of their consciousness of self*". p.p. 65-66.

weight and collapses. He falls—quite literally—into the square below, landing on the head of one of the self-declared prophets. This dramatic entrance, as if from the heavens, instantly captures the attention of the crowd. Even more amusingly, as Brian’s fall knocks the prophet into a nearby jar, the small crowd bursts into applause—more out of relief than reverence. In any case, still pursued and with no way of escape, Brian is forced to play the part and begins to address his accidental “audience.” He does not utter anything particularly profound. He begins with a vague moral truism: “*Don’t you, eh, pass judgment on other people, or you might get judged yourself.*” What follows is a strange and meandering dialogue with those below, lacking any real substance, yet already distinguishing him from the neighboring orators. It quickly becomes evident that Brian is not interested in delivering the usual tiresome, moralizing monologue.

Failing to hold their attention, he attempts to stall by launching into a story vaguely resembling a parable: “*Ohh. Look. There was this man, and he had two servants...*” But even this falter as the crowd immediately demands more information—what were the servants called? Where did they live? Seeing his audience grow restless and begin to disperse, while Roman soldiers approach the square once more, he makes a final desperate effort. He begins to invent his own version of the beatitudes: “*Blessed are they... who convert their neighbor’s ox, for they shall inhibit their girth... and to them only shall be given—to them only... shall... be... given...*”

As the Roman soldiers pass directly beneath the platform and leave without noticing him, Brian abruptly stops. He descends from the rocky elevation and slips away, leaving behind a crowd now gripped by suspense, desperate to know what was to be given to the blessed. “*Hey! What were you going to say?*” echoes across the square, passing eagerly from mouth to mouth. Brian’s refusal to answer, combined with his urgency to disappear, only deepens the curiosity of those present. “*What won’t he tell? Is it a secret?*” “*Must be. Otherwise, he’d tell us.*”

Brian moves away from the square, slipping into the narrow streets in a vain attempt to extinguish the fire that threatens to ignite. “*Leave me alone,*” he almost pleads, but his efforts are in vain. Questions come from all directions: “*What is this secret?*” “*Is it THE SECRET OF ETERNAL LIFE?*” “*Tell us, MASTER. We were here first.*” Though Brian insists, “*Go away,*” his words go

unheard. In this moment, the fundamental existential anxiety is laid bare, alongside the instinctive recognition of authority in one who is presumed to hold the secret. Yet Brian, modest and grounded, has no desire to assume this role, despite the obvious advantages it might bring.

The gourd he carries throughout this ordeal—finally handed to one of his followers to rid himself of the crowd—becomes a potent symbol of his omnipresence. “*Master? Master?*” they call out, searching. “*He’s gone! He’s been taken up!*” declares one. Then, just as Brian passes the city’s exit gate, someone spots him, and the chase begins. Here, the psychology of the crowd asserts itself powerfully: seeing a mass of people running in one direction, more and more follow. The fire of fanaticism spreads uncontrollably. And how could it be quenched when it is fuelled by such a primal, fundamental wound?

Before long, we witness the birth of a new religion. The sandal that falls from Brian’s foot during the pursuit becomes the second sign—a symbol of his omnipresence, a stand-in for the ANSWER, and a promise that one day, the Master will provide the longed-for solution. “*The shoe is the sign. Let us follow His example!*” proclaims the first man who finds and picks up the sandal. “*Let us, like Him, hold up one shoe and let the other be upon our foot, for this is His sign, that all who follow Him shall do likewise,*” a second man agrees, and the others, already gathered as a group, prepare to follow. Not for long, however, as the first man offers a different interpretation: “*The shoe is a sign that we must gather shoes together in abundance.*” This disagreement over what to do is finally settled by a woman who had been present on the platform during Brian’s original speech: “*Cast off... the shoes! Follow the Gourd!*” she insists. “*No!*” objects the man who first found the sandal. “*Let us gather shoes together! It is a sign that, like Him, we must think not of the things of the body, but of the face and head!*”

Ultimately, the assembled crowd manages to find a way to follow the Master, yet within it lies the seed of dissent—and therefore division—since they have failed to agree on whether the sandal or the gourd should be the true symbol to follow. Though newly formed, the crowd is already heterogeneous and uneven, with all that implies for the future. A farcical episode follows, during which Brian is officially recognized by the crowd as the Messiah. At the

conclusion of this episode, he encounters Judith, the beautiful young woman who is also a member of *The People's Front of Judea*.

The next morning, we find Brian in his house, gradually waking beside Judith, his beloved. What he does not know is that beneath his window, on a sloped patch of ground, a crowd of his "followers" has already gathered, eagerly awaiting even a nod, a few words—anything that might bring them closer to the Truth. Unaware and relaxed, totally naked, Brian throws open the double window to take in some fresh air. "*Look! There he is! The Chosen One has woken!*" the crowd exclaims as one upon seeing him. Startled, Brian quickly shuts the window, struggling to comprehend the scene before him. He calls for his mother, but she, having already seen the gathered crowd outside, approaches with wild indignation. "*What are all those people doing out there?!*" she demands, furious. Brian's defense is taken up by Judith, who, naked too, steps out of the room. Notably, her protective stance has nothing to do with the faith the crowd places in Brian. As a child of the revolutionary latter half of the nineteenth century and the dawning years of the twentieth—chronologically just before Brian's world—she rejects the notions of *Master*, *Redeemer*, or *Messiah*. Where the religiously obsessed crowd sees a potential *Savior*, Judith, as a true revolutionary, sees a *leader* who might guide the people toward a better future. "*Let me explain, Mrs. Cohen! Your son is a born leader. Those people out there are following him because they believe in him, Mrs. Cohen. They believe he can give them hope—hope of a new life, a new world, a better future!*" she states decisively, leaving Brian's mother dumbfounded.

After all this, Brian steps onto the balcony to speak words that seem drawn from the finest texts of existentialism, if not postmodernism. Naturally, the joke here is that we already know his words stand no chance of meaningful reception—not because the people below are foolish, but because they are not intellectually prepared to understand them, much less to act upon them. These are words from another era—two thousand years ahead—another world, another kind of human. We grasp this immediately from the shout that rises from below before Brian even reopens the window. We also understand it from the fact that, from this point until the end of the scene, the "faithful" respond as one, behaving in exactly the

opposite manner of what Brian proposes: **Crowd:** "*Brian! Brian! Brian!*" and "*A blessing! A blessing! A blessing!*" Far from feeling flattered, Brian is uncomfortable from the outset. He raises his hands in a gesture of both refusal and renunciation of the role being thrust upon him.

Let us recall this comical yet profoundly reflective, deeply human, deeply moving dialogue, as if a twentieth-century man attempts to counsel a medieval man, perhaps an entire medieval world—fully aware, of course, of all the brutality that will follow messianism, obscurantism, and blind faith—not to yield to the allure of intellectual alienation, but instead to defend the ideal of humanity, courageously accepting the solitary destiny that this commitment entails. **Brian:** "*No. No, please! Please! Please listen. I've got one or two things to say*". **Crowd:** "*Yes! Tell us. Tell us both of them*". **Brian:** "*Look. You've got it all wrong. YOU DON'T NEED TO FOLLOW ME. YOU DON'T NEED TO FOLLOW ANYBODY! YOU HAVE TO THINK FOR YOURSELVES. YOU ARE ALL INDIVIDUALS!*" **Crowd:** "*Yes, we're—all—individuals!*" **Brian:** "*YOU ARE ALL DIFFERENT!*" **Crowd:** "*Yes, we—are—all—different!*" **Brian:** "*YOU'VE ALL GOT TO WORK IT OUT FOR YOURSELVES!*" **Crowd:** "*Yes! We've got to work it out for ourselves!*"

Amid the hysteria of trauma's healing, amid the frenzy of the search for meaning, Brian responds with severity, yet with absolute honesty: he calls upon his 'faithful' to find the solution on their own, invoking the uniqueness of each individual. He values truth over mere humanity, the painful cure over fleeting consolation. A Henry Miller, succumbing to the (comfortable) dictates of humanity, would have acted otherwise: "*It's better... to receive men silently and to enfold them, for there is no answer to make them while they are still frantically rushing to turn the corner.*"³⁸ Not Brian. Treating them with seriousness and responsibility, he urges them to think. Yet they cannot. In truth, they understand not a word of what they hear. They merely mimic. This is not meant as an insult. Tragically, they possess no aid from any quarter to evade the inexorable trajectory of their fate: no intellectual foundation, no inner fortitude, no capacity for resistance. At its heart, as we

³⁸ Miller Henry, *Tropic of Capricorn*, First published in Great Britain by John Calder (Publishers) Limited 1964.

have already noted, this is a dramatic dialogue between modern man and the weight of his tragic past. Yet the chasm of temporal and existential distance renders communication impossible. Brian's words fall into the void, like all exhortations to moderation uttered across the centuries, whether spoken aloud or inscribed in writing. Humanity, it seems, has already resolved—following a path set in motion since Plato—to pursue fanaticism as if compelled to probe the very limits of its own capacity for brutality: from the slaughter of fifteen thousand insurgents in the Hippodrome of Thessaloniki by Emperor Theodosius, to the thirty thousand insurgents in the Hippodrome of Constantinople by Emperor Justinian; from the massacre of three thousand Protestants on St. Bartholomew's Night, to the Inquisition, the Soviet gulags, the atrocities of the Nazis, the endless wars in the Middle East... And this grim record continues, inexorably, a testament to the human propensity for destruction. As the poet reminds us:

*“For hours within the ravaged crowd,
a nameless horror amassed itself.
The perpetrator armed his victims and
vanished, certain of what lay ahead.
Do not let your mind wander to bloodshed.
There are far worse things.”*³⁹

Epilogue

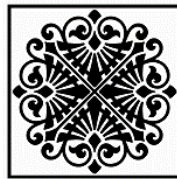
We have attempted to examine “*Life of Brian*” through the lens of intellectual evolution—from the Platonic absolute, to Sophistic relativism, to medieval obscurantism, and from there to the post-war existentialism of the twentieth century. This entire trajectory, of course, was neither small nor easy; otherwise, it would not have spanned so many centuries.

The truth is that much suffering had to occur; much reflection had to be endured—provoked largely by the unfolding of historical events—before humanity could reach the full theoretical of course- acknowledgment of the impossibility of healing trauma. For instance, the rupture with heteronomy, with Authority, did

³⁹ Liontakís, Christoforos, *The encounter, Anthology of Modern Greek Poetry*, published by Bookstore of ESTIA, fourth edition, Athens, 1989, p. 363.

not transpire in the age of the *Aufklärung*, as Kant suggests.⁴⁰ The emergence from the Middle Ages brought with it the recognition of another kind of meaning—non-religious, yet meaningful nonetheless. The cultivation of the individual through one's own faculties became the new significance: the meaning of the *Enlightenment*, the meaning of *modernism*. As Camus observes: “*The Social Contract marks the birth of a new mystique—the will of the people being substituted for God Himself. “Each of us,” says Rousseau, “places his person and his entire capabilities under the supreme guidance of the will of the people, and we receive each member into the body as an indivisible part of the whole.”*”⁴¹

It would take the advent of Sartrean existentialism and the post-modernism of Jean-François Lyotard for humanity to confront the full measure of truth—albeit accompanied by a lingering question which Theodoros Georgiou underscores in the preface to the Greek edition of Lyotard's “*The Postmodern Condition*”, a question that continues to hover over our understanding: “*If we accept that the death of the modern is an undeniable reality, then does this death signify the end of a collective madness, the liberation of man from the terrorizing whole, or does it rather lead to the loss of the last support available to man, to the disappearance of instrumental Reason?*”⁴²



⁴⁰ Kant, Immanuel, *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?*, 1784. *An answer to the question What is Enlightenment*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013

⁴¹ Camus, Albert, *L'Homme Révolté*, *The Rebel, an Essay on Man in Revolt*, New York Vintage Books, 1956, p. 115.

⁴² Lyotard, Jean-François, *La Condition postmoderne*, *The Postmodern Condition*, translated in Greek by Kostis Papagiorgis, published by Bookstore of ESTIA, p. 11.

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ANCIENT GREEK DEMOCRACY AND AMERICAN REPUBLICANISM

Prometheus in Political Theory

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Edinburgh Studies in Comparative Political Theory and Intellectual History

The Trauma of Autonomy: Neoliberalism and the Forms of the Subject's Exile

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Abstract

The paper investigates the manner neoliberalism, as a regime of subjectivation, turns autonomy as a space of freedom into trauma. By the instrumentality of the values of personal responsibility, continuous self-enhancement, and commodifying the self, subjects are compelled into a situation of solitary existence: they are estranged from common meanings, social relationships, and other forms of belonging. Work, consumption, and the performativism of identity are disciplining agencies that conceal rather than erase the trauma originating in the estrangement from the social nucleus. The paper attempts to map these modalities of solitude in the subject under psychoanalytic, biopolitical, and cultural axes; it examines the notion of the trauma of autonomy as a structuring component of the neoliberal experience. Last, it suggests that a comprehensive understanding of neoliberal trauma can provide new avenues for a rewriting of collectivity, remembrance, and resilience against the background of diffuse exile.

Keywords: *Neoliberalism, Subjectivity, Trauma, Biopolitics, Alienation*

Introduction

The notion of autonomy, with a long Intellectual History traced back to Enlightenment thinking as a promise of freedom and self-determination, has been fundamentally transformed under the neoliberal regime. Formerly, autonomy was a synonym for an individual's ability to think and act independently with regard to exterior power structures, but nowadays it has been redefined as a requirement for steady self-regulation, flexibility, and productivity.

Freedom here is transformed into a duty, and autonomy becomes a necessity. And hereupon individuals are not liberated from control structures, but internalize them instead. Disciplinary practices depart from their externality and become intrapsychic, inscribed into the person's rapport with oneself. The cultural justification inherent in neoliberalism that runs throughout the labor market, relationships, and modes of self-presentation breeds a new anthropological form: the entrepreneurial self. This is a person compelled to work incessantly to put their skills, their emotions, and their experiential storytelling to economic value.

Failure here is freed of social or political dimensions; instead, it is a mirror held up to personal failure. People are prompted to think of every failure and every experience of alienation as a tool for self-improvement, something that incorporates trauma, rather than just registers trauma.

As a result, autonomy is made traumatic precisely as a function of self-reference: the self is estranged from communal structures, undergoing a kind of exile within the performativistic self, and compensates via constant reconstructions of a frail sense of self. The neoliberal imperative to "be yourself" disguises the violent dismantling of any cohesive sense of self. The interior world is transformed into a sphere of productivity, where emotional exhaustion, doubt, and isolation are read as private stumbling blocks rather than public signs. Under this theory, trauma in response to autonomy moves beyond merely a psychic or existential problem; it also becomes a cultural and political signifier of a world that is defined by the breakdown of communal attachments. Here, the person is a wanderer, not externally from a territory, but internally from their

own symbolic world, a disconnection from communities, languages, and memories that once constituted their sense of self. Exile is not understood here as a violent disjuncture, but as a familiar internal regime: a resignation to solitude, competition, and self-mastery as inevitable elements of membership in the contemporary world.

This paper seeks to explore this transition by analyzing the modalities of the subject's exile that neoliberal rationality gives rise to. Key to this analysis is an exploration of the means by which contemporary power relations insinuate themselves into daily life, forming regimes of self-surveillance and embedded responsibility. A modern emotional economy is maintained by the fiction of a self-sufficiency that proves elusive—by the imperative that individuals turn loss into opportunity, fatigue into productivity, and isolation into self-knowledge. In the course of this analysis, autonomy emerges as the most intricate form of dependency, one that is not externally enforced but instead emanates from the individual's intrinsic requirement to adhere to the standard of the autonomous self. Consequently, the trauma associated with autonomy transcends being a simple cost of freedom; it constitutes the essential prerequisite for it. This transition signifies the point at which freedom shifts from being a lived experience to an imposed duty; wherein exile transforms from being perceived as a loss to being regarded as a viable way of life.

Autonomy as Narrative and as Trauma

Under neoliberal thinking, autonomy is framed as the ultimate moral and existential obligation of the modern person. It is more than a political right or a social aim; rather, it is a duty that insinuates itself into every sphere of existence: work, education, embodied self, relationships to others, and construction of self. Neoliberalism is not a rallying cry against liberation from power; rather, power is recast as an internal obligation.¹

Disciplining is no longer a matter of something done to the self externally; rather, discipline is internalized in the self, which is

¹ Acuña R., *From Allende to the Pink Tide: Issues Past and Present with the Left in Power*, *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research* 21(3), 2015, pp. 390-410.

summoned to the roles of manager, critic, and prosecutor of their own life. Autonomous subjects are thereby generated as a hegemonic discourse of self-management under the guise of an internal mode of power that assumes the form of personal agency. Consistent with this reasoning, self-liberty is synonymous with the potential for constant self-improvement.²

The self arrives at a structure of investment and return, aiming to maximize their time, affective resources, and social relationships. Success is understood as a signifier of value, and failure is understood as a character flaw more than a social outcome. As a result, autonomy is redefined as a self-centered economy, where every experience must yield meaning, benefit, or outcome. The self is not merely free to choose but is instead compelled to choose perpetually to strategize, restructure, and reinvent itself as an ongoing, inconclusive process.³

This continuous process of self-making does not lead to emancipation but instead produces a subtle and ongoing trauma. The person is in a permanent evaluative situation, in which the self is a tool and a product at the same time. Freedom, instead of bringing liberation, introduces a new type of dependency: a dependence on the intrinsic necessity to have freedom. Any deviation, weakness, or slowing down is experienced as a private failure that must be corrected. As a result, the individual no longer pertains to common entities but rather to efficient systems that privilege constant self-projection. Neoliberal freedom, then, is, in itself, a type of exile in which relational elements are replaced by constant comparison.⁴

The pain that accompanies this affliction is not due to injury or harm caused by others but rather due to internalized demands. The self must be at once creator and product, sovereign and helpless, responsible and exposed. Freedom is a burden, self-government a struggle to remain alive. A yearning for self-government is a root of fatigue, and the illusion of self-government conceals a great sense of loss; it is the loss of the communal, the relational,

² Dimakopoulos, S., “Between Chaos and Cosmic Order: The Ambivalent Disposition of Matter in Middle Platonism”, *Dia-noesis*, 16, 2024, pp. 55–78.

³ Crouch, C., *The Strange Non-Death of Neo-liberalism*, Polity, 2011.

⁴ Dumenil, G., & Lévy, D., *Capital Resurgent: Roots of the Neoliberal revolution*, Harvard University Press, 2004. Cf. Basilaia, T. “Liberalism and Aristotelianism: Reflecting on Alasdair MacIntyre’s After Virtue”, *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 10: 1, 2025, pp. 57-71, <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.38547>.

and the shared aspects of existence. The neoliberal self is not disconnected from the world but rather disconnected from the power to share a life with others. Autonomy becomes again an individualistic project, bound by the imperative of self-reliance, a trauma-producing force. That trauma is caused by the fact that this produces a regime of constant self-surveillance where the standard for judgment is ever the individual. Being occurs against a backdrop of time structures no longer within the power of the individual: time for work intersects with the quietness of the home environment; times of rest are consumed with small preoccupations designed for self-improvement; time for intersubjective relationships is transformed into a requirement for constant availability.⁵

The daily routine is planned based on goals and measurable outcomes that have no tolerance for nonproductivity, and nights are reserved for control, evaluation, and self-audit. The physical self is an active participant within this control: it is measured, quantified, and optimized. Weariness is no longer tolerated as a signifier of limit but is instead interpreted as a symptom of ill structuring. In the same manner, emotions of sadness, rage, and confusion are reified as variables for administration. Feelings are coded as data to be fed into the mathematical equation of performance, while deviations from the ideal of self-sufficiency are charted as dysfunctions to be corrected. It follows that subjective experience is stripped of shared depth and is made an object of incessant optimization, with the subject itself in a delicate, continuous exile from the very conditions that could sustain a shared life.⁶

Under the banner of autonomy, the obligation of permanent availability is substituted for a sense of self-directedness. Styles of assessment abound: quarterly goals, dashboards of performance, internal grades, and computer-assisted work assignments. Comparison with others is not merely occasional but systemic and daily, converting a sense of belonging into a chronic concern about where one stands in comparison with others. The employee familiarizes himself with the supervisor ahead of time by internalizing them within himself to correct himself prior to correction, to work harder than requested prior to needing to be prompted. Security is an

⁵ Tsampazis, N., “The cognitive grounds of Hobbes’ Leviathan”, *Dia-noesis*, 13, 2024, pp. 63–84.

⁶ Harvey, D, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

ever-elusive term, as every gain leads to a new roster of expectations. Freedom is defined as the capability to choose; yet, choices are defined to perpetuate the existing paradigm: more freedom, which leads to more vulnerability; more accountability, leading to more isolation.⁷

Linguistic resources, too, are subjected to a range of modes of exile. Vocabulary like resilience, empowerment, and adaptability, formerly related to practices of care, are recontextualized as standard requirements for submission. The idea of self-mastery is a device for containing emotions of shame: public declaration of limitation, ignorance, or dependency is ever more deemed illegitimate and is stigmatized as a departure from a regulatory standard. Guilt, therefore, exists not in consequences for discrete acts but in departure from a regulatory ideal. Pain is converted into a private matter: no longer is it a public event that will have to consume a chronology as well as a geography, but rather a debt to be privately maintained or promptly paid. Memory is disconnected from communal contexts and re-wired as a personal log of accomplishment, a diary of self-improvement that is not a repository of narrative and common communication. Central to these dynamics is a spiral process: as independence is increasingly emphasized, the resources that are in a position to provide actual support are eroded.⁸

Care, as that which must rely on reciprocal interdependence and deliberate pacing, is reduced to nothing more than self-help slogans and brisk techniques of efficiency. Institutions that can become havens and a welcome are transformed into evaluative and dividing systems. The result is not catastrophic failure, but a steady, incrementally cumulative decay: a progressive stripping away of sense from experience, a dissolving of shared communal cognizance and remembrance, and a disconnection of the self from bonds that would support healthy modes of social participation.⁹

In social relationships, trauma shows up as a discreet substitution of public image for shared experience. Encounters become

⁷ Ong, A, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

⁸ Plant, R, *Neo-liberal State*, Oxford University Press, 2010.

⁹ Lemke, T, "The birth of bio-politics: Michel Foucault's lecture at the College de France on neo-liberal governmentality", *Economy and society*, 30(2), 2001, pp. 190-207.

events to be posted; stories become recitations for circuits of publicity; friendship becomes a precontract of reciprocal affirmation. Intimacy is substituted with perpetual mediation and the quantifying of attention. When an individual is measured by the impressions they leave behind, silence is transformed into disappearance. Intimacy, however, takes time and the absence of spectacle—a luxury not permitted by the neoliberal calendar. The longed-for connection, therefore, confronts the shadow of unproductivity and withdraws into formality. The outcome is a feeling of warm surface and cold depth: many contacts, scarce relationships, busy presence, tenuous grounding. At the heart of this process is an implicit contradiction. Neoliberalism professes the idea of freedom, yet dictates the very terms within which individuals can be classified as "free." It offers choices, even as it controls the situation that gives value to the choices.¹⁰

It engenders a sense of individual autonomy, even as it disintegrates any shared basis for protest or solidarity. The result is that the rhetoric surrounding autonomy moves beyond simple ideological function; it is an instrumentality for emotional and existential growth. The paradigm yields subjects who experience dependency as a terror, feel shame at their dependency, and seek validation for their strength alone. This psychic structure is the true manifestation of trauma, the point at which autonomy, far from strengthening individuals, erodes their very sense of belonging.¹¹

Mechanisms of the Subject's Exile in the Neoliberal Condition

Expulsion in the neoliberal sphere appears not as a violent disjuncture but as a gradual modulation of the terms framing daily life. Accountability is transferred from the group to the individual and is internalized without conspicuous notice: support systems are redefined as individual capabilities, guarantees as personal achievements, and communal timescales as personal timetables. This is a process that leaves dignity linked with constant sufficiency and vulnerability severed from its social moorings and attributed to the character of individuals. Exile is not generated by a forceful

¹⁰ Foucault, M, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Tavistock Publications, 1969.

¹¹ Hardt, M. and Negri, A, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2000.

dislocation but by internalizing a precept whereby access to resources, recognition, and notice is filtered under criteria of effectiveness.¹²

At its center are regimes of measurement. Indicators, targets, and algorithmic judgments reduce the complexities of experience to measured units and consequently change the criteria of belonging. That which is not measured is readily regarded as either non-existent or valueless. Work is organized as a continuous availability program, under which adaptation takes the form of permanent readiness; co-operation is recast as a competition for notice, and security as the personal acceptance of risk. Self-auditing becomes a daily survival mechanism: the internal auditor forestalls the external, revisions take place before judgment, and the subject audits itself in order to stay consistent with the expected standards of performance.¹³

At the same time that extensive documentation of life by means of data generates new hierarchies with respect to exposure, traces of behavior, response regimes, and modalities of expression and discursive circulation are converted into indices of credence and value. Public participation is replaced by staged attention, while communication modes that depart from conventional regimes of engagement become inactive. Silence is not the expression of no opinion, but is recorded as a deficit in value; conversely, over-exposure is read as proof of contribution.¹⁴

Exile here does not take the form of exclusion from space, but of degradation within it, lower chances of being heard, shrinking reach, and insecurity of access. This uncertainty is fueled by shifting thresholds of visibility that change without warning, short-lived windows of “relevance,” and escalation mechanisms that favor what yields quickly and predictably. Declining visibility activates feedback loops: less exposure means fewer interactions,

¹² Golder, B., “Foucault and the Genealogy of Pastoral Power”, *Radical Philosophy Review*, vol. 10 number 2, 2007, pp. 144-160.

¹³ McNay, L., “Self as Enterprise: Dilemmas of Control and Resistance”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 26(6), 2006, 41- 56.

¹⁴ Stiglitz, J., *The Price of Inequality: How Today’s Divided Society Endangers our Future*, WW Norton & Company, 2012.

which in turn justify further demotion, consolidating a state of semi-invisibility.¹⁵

Access more and more requires conformity to codes of formatting—compression of information, rhythmic regularity, visual framing that imposes particular tempos and styles, while disliking extensive argumentation and nuance. Standardization and aesthetic homogenization become a condition of entry, while variations are read as "noise" and algorithmically marginalized. Under this conceptual lens, strategic overexposure becomes a proactive counter-defense against the risk of obsolescence that precipitates a re-orientation of focus away from the substance of discourse toward the production of quantifiable engagement. Publicness is transformed from a latent quality of argumentation to a result of rhythms, signals, and compatibility protocols, thereby affecting which content gains permanence and which remains trapped within impermanent circulation. The visibility hierarchy is thereby determined as a conditional regime of accessibility, whereby participation requires constant self-standardization, silence is penalizable in statistics, and recognition is communicated via regulations that preexist the content.¹⁶

Social protection is also being reshaped in terms of conditionality. Rights are converted into benefits with conditions; need is transformed into an application that must be demonstrated endlessly with proofs of compliance; time for care is replaced by the administration of files, agendas, and protocols. The security of affiliation is substituted by ongoing suspension, given that the tie with institutions is always revocable and access is conditional upon endless re-evaluation. A chronopolitics of exile is therefore formed, whereby life is inscribed in intermediate spaces of testing and waiting with no promise of a stabilizing horizon.¹⁷

Linguistic resources are active participants in this process of re-definition. Phrases that once stood for reciprocal support and care are reanalyzed as slogans advocating conformity. The expression of limits is put under stigma; emotions are reclassified as variables

¹⁵ Tickell, A., & Peck, J, "Social Regulation after Fordism: Regulation Theory, Neo-liberalism and the Global, Local Nexus", *Economy and Society*, 2019, 24(3), pp. 260-281.

¹⁶ Turner, R, *Neo-liberal Ideology*, Edinburgh University Press, 2008

¹⁷ Comaroff, J., & Comaroff, J. L, "Millennial capitalism: First thoughts on a Second Coming", *Public culture*, 2000, 12(2), pp. 200-210.

to be managed; the narrative of hardships is reinterpreted as proof of a "deficit." The result is that suffering is individuated: no longer a signifier for shared necessity, it is incorporated into techniques for self-management. Memory is disconnected from its public sphere and reshaped as a bank of individualistic achievement, diminishing the grounds for shared history and sentiment.¹⁸

On the scale of time and space, daily life unfolds within structures defined by temporariness: flexible sites, intermediated interfaces, transitional stops, and the rhythms of alerts that interrupt the incessant flow. The sense of rooting is impoverished since place is no longer a shared point of reference, and time loses the continuity of a common rhythm. Presence thus becomes disconnected, and the ability to build coexistence practices is impaired, those that require stability, extension, and a shared horizon.¹⁹

The classical horizon is replaced by a series of deadlines and availability times, and coordination is shifted away from communal presence and toward scheduling alignment at the individual level. Spaces that used to work as stable gathering points are transformed into transportation hubs marked by limited occupancy times, while living spaces are reinterpreted as dual-function stations for teleworking and communication, where private time is consumed by constant alerts and micro-deliveries. Urban mobility is ever more organized by timetables that are algorithmic in character, made up of orders, routes, and pickups that impose rhythms that are almost never favorable to the support of coexistence's unpredictable nature.²⁰

Daily existence is broken up into minute fragments of response; the activity of waiting is elevated to a ubiquitous mode of experience of time, with no correlative sense of presence; and the activity of scheduling insinuates itself into rest moments, converting evenings and Saturdays into extensions of an ever-accelerated calendar.²¹

¹⁸ Slobodian, Q. *Globalists: the End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2018.

¹⁹ Chang, H. *The Market, the State and Institutions in Economic Development*, in Chang H.J. (ed.) *Rethinking Development Economics*, Anthem, 2003.

²⁰ Thorsen, D. "The neoliberal challenge: What is neoliberalism?", *Contemporary Readings in Law and Social Justice*, 2010, 2(2), pp. 130–141.

²¹ Taylor, J.D. *Negative capitalism. Cynicism in the neoliberal era*. Winchester, Zero Books, 2013.

Changes in luminance and circadian rhythms are overtaken by the brilliance of screens and the rhythm of alerts, creating dissonance among citizens who inhabit the same geographic spaces but experience different rhythmic configurations. The failure to share a common rhythm also erodes the power of space to act as a network of references: cafés, public spaces, corridors of workspaces, and schoolyards lose their function as stable "intermediary" spaces, becoming provisional grounds upon which presence is measured, access is regulated according to time, and mobility is given priority over living.²²

The resultant fragmented existence undermines practices that depend on recurrence and extended timeframes, including communal rituals, routine micro-interactions, and impromptu discussions. This condition promotes modes of coexistence devoid of community, assemblies lacking dialogue, and closeness without a common objective.

These processes flow into a unifying normativity of subjectivation, such that exile is reconfigured not merely as a physical ejection from the social corpus but as a gradual reduction of accessibility to registers such as time, space, discourse, and relationality. At this juncture, autonomy is rethought along axes of quantifiability and accessibility, and collectivity is put at the foreground as interrelated functions of visibility and evaluability.²³

Coordinated rules governing life condense into response cycles; recollection separates from communal activities and is reformulated as a repository of personal achievement; responsibility transitions from relational dynamics to evaluative profiles. The experience of banishment is not introduced as a unique situation but is instead identified as a daily construction of social arrangements and an order of existence that begets modes of existence marked by weakened capabilities for affiliation, temporality, and a shared point of view.²⁴

²² Springer, S., Birch, K., & MacLeavy, J, *The handbook of neoliberalism*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016.

²³ Slorach, R, *A Very Capitalist Condition: A history and politics of disability*, Bookmarks, 2016.

²⁴ Roberts, R, *Psychology and capitalism: The manipulation of mind*, Zero Books, 2015.

Autonomy and Sovereignty: A Political Ontology of Neoliberal Exile

The neoliberal condition reconfigures the sphere of sovereignty, no longer as the externality that limits freedom but as the internalized norm of self-governance. Sovereignty no longer acts as a power that limits freedom but becomes the very medium within which freedom is lived. Autonomy, the final value of the modern subject, becomes a technology of self-governance. The self is no longer tied to some externality of a sovereign but to an internal regulator, to an unrelenting obligation to govern and optimize itself. And so, autonomy, rather than being the promise of liberation, is represented as a new form of dependency.²⁵

Dependency settles quietly at the core of the subjective, defined as it is by the very imperatives of autonomy. This is no traditional heteronomy, in which the will is warped to the pull of some manifest power; it is a bond to the normative ideal of the self, a self that requires relentless self-monitoring, self-enhancement, self-reckoning. The value of the subject lies in the ability to fit the beat, tone, and measures of this autonomy. "Freedom" is no longer a terrain of unopened possibility but a structure of conformity with criteria set as individual responsibility, unbroken availability, malleability, emotional control, and a transactional relationship to one's own life.²⁶

The project of the self turns into the seamless project of life. Time, instead of constituting a coexistential shared rhythm, becomes split into minuscule units of self-evaluation; rest has no meaning anymore, as even silence must yield results. Experience can't mature; it is always set to the test, judged in terms of how successfully it has been "productive." The subject learns to live within the measurement gaze only, to believe that it lives as long as it can calculate its value for itself. Freedom is consumed by performativity time, and everyday life turns into a device to prove consistency.²⁷

²⁵ Rose, N, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*, Free Association Books, 1999.

²⁶ Asimiadis, D, "The Witches of the Reich: The Dimension of Female Mysticism in Nazi Ideology", *Dia-noesis*, 2025, 17(1), pp.271–294.

²⁷ Poulantzas, N, *State, Power, Socialism*, Verso, 1978.

Autonomy, however, is not confined to the management of time; it also permeates the emotional field. Joy, sorrow, fatigue, and doubt are interpreted through the language of functionality. Emotion loses its depth and becomes an indicator of regulatory capacity. Instead of sharing sadness, we record it; instead of acknowledging vulnerability, we translate it into personal weakness. Internal control thus extends into the most private domain of experience, turning even affect into an object of self-governance. Trauma is no longer something to be shared but something to be corrected.²⁸

The same reasoning applies to the realms of knowing and relating. The self becomes capital, each experience is an investment that needs to pay dividends. Knowing, working, and even loving are all encompassed within a calculus of rationality. The self is summoned to be both employer and employee, boss and assessed subject. Any relation that fails to shore up this process of self-verification seems questionable, even risky. Relationships then become mirrors: they mirror not the Other, but the likeness of the self as it should look. Meeting becomes strategy, closeness becomes assessment, and friendship devolves into a transaction of performances.²⁹

This dependency is so widespread because it covers itself with the cloak of virtue. Autonomy is framed as the ultimate moral ideal, the mark of maturity and strength. And yet beneath this self-responsibility ethics is a new kind of fear: the fear of need, of weakness, of turning to the Other. Solidarity among people recedes in the face of moralized self-responsibility; each failure becomes a deficit of character, each openness to vulnerability a failure of self-control. The self must "rise to the occasion," even as the occasion oppresses them. Dependency, then, does not go away; it just disguises itself as dignity.³⁰

The dependency assumes, at its basis, an existential character. The human being is dependent upon the judging inner voice, upon an ideal that will always be unattained. Every day dawns with the

²⁸ Ganas, S., "Wife Material in a Household Context as presented in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*", *Dia-noesis*, 2025, 17(1), pp. 295–312.

²⁹ Vavouras, E., "Hobbes' hedonism in front of classical hedonism and the free market's way out", *Dia-noesis*, 2024 13, 85–114. <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.37784>

³⁰ Millon, T., Grossman, S., & Meagher, S, *Masters of the mind: Exploring the story of mental illness*, Wiley, 2004.

imperative to certify their own existence with the gauge of a boundless autonomy. The harder one seeks to demonstrate freedom, the more one is ensnared in the self-affirmation compulsory circle. The ideal of autonomy becomes a device of coercion; its relentless pursuit generates weakness and powerlessness.³¹

The relationship between autonomy and sovereignty is reconfigured under the mandate of “responsibility.” Neoliberal discourse does not abolish freedom; it turns it into an obligation. Autonomy is no longer a right to be exercised but a duty to be fulfilled. Sovereignty, in other words, does not suppress autonomy; it produces it, organizes it, and distributes it. Subjectivity is thus constituted within a regime where freedom and power are not opposed but interwoven. The “sovereignty of the self” emerges as the most advanced form of discipline, in which the violence of power is translated into an imperative of self-control and self-production.³²

The self-production of the self becomes the focal field where sovereignty and autonomy blend together indissociably. The human is summoned to be both the lab and product of themselves to be the creator, editor, and causally-responsible agent of all that pertains to their existence. Here, sovereignty no longer figures as a transcendent power exercised from the outside, but as a self-organization imperative working within. Control has ceased to be centralized and harsh, almost tangible; discipline no longer needs to be exerted through surveillance, as each individual has already undertaken the task of watching over themselves. Freedom and power then no longer cancel each other out but reinforce one another mutually: the one legitimates the other, the other sets the context within which freedom takes on a meaning.³³

The neoliberal condition transforms autonomy into a mechanism for the production of sovereignty. The more the individual strives to manage themselves, the more completely they internalize the demands of the system that calls upon them to be “free.” Their freedom becomes a tool of governance, a way to secure conformity without the need for coercion. Sovereignty endures not through prohibition but through promise; it promises power, self-realization, superiority, while in reality it establishes a regime in which

³¹ La Berge, L. & Shonkwiler, A., *Reading Capitalist Realism*, University of Iowa Press, 2014.

³² James, O., *The Selfish Capitalist*, Vermilion, 2008.

³³ Harnecker, M., *Rebuilding the Left*, Zed Books, 2007.

the subject serves its own self-image. Control arises not from the fear of punishment but from the anxiety of proving oneself insufficient.³⁴

The relationship between sovereignty and autonomy then assumes a peculiar dialectic. The autonomy provided as freedom relies on internalization of the very workings of power, making it possible. The free self is the one that consents to conform obeys the rule, not because it is imposed, but because it is taken as one's own. The sovereignty becomes transparent, rendered dissolved into consciousness itself. The consequence is that dependency assumes a new form: power no longer needs to be imposed; it needs to be internalized. Discipline becomes self-discipline, conformity self-realization.³⁵

In this network, the relation between the two ideas becomes that of a subtle complicity. Freedom needs power to be an institution; power needs freedom to sustain itself non-violently. Sovereignty doesn't negate autonomy, it wears it as a disguise. Every rhetoric of self-realization, every exhortation to "take initiative" or experience "personal empowerment" reiterates the same exhortation unknowingly: to persist in self-regulating within the lines of the model of productivity. The self becomes the ultimate site of power, the location where desire and rule meet to generate some kind of voluntary submission.³⁶

The interpenetration of autonomy and sovereignty also carries an ontological dimension. Power no longer acts upon the subject but as the subject. The individual is the very form through which power endures the bearer of the rule that constitutes them. Their being is the function of the relations that define them, but the latter have ceased to be transparent. The social is translated into the psychic, the psychic into the political. Autonomy plays the role of the mirror of sovereignty: it captures the desire for freedom and gives it back as duty, thereby making the vicious circle of self-legitimation. The subject, within this schema, is in the state of exile. Not the exile from space or from community, but from the very

³⁴ Grollios, V., *Negativity and Democracy Marxism and the Critical Theory Tradition*, Routledge, 2017.

³⁵ Bourdieu, P.P, *The Logic of Practice*, Stanford University Press, 1999.

³⁶ Grollios, V., *Illusion and Fetishism in Critical Theory, A study of Nietzsche, Benjamin, Castoriadis and the Situationists*, Routledge, 2025.

possibility of co-sharing the world with others. Autonomy, as a cultural and moral norm, imposes the form of life that is self-sufficing, self-contained, detached. The exile is no longer the event that happens to the subject from the outside, but the experience that occurs within the internal order of the self: the inability to find one's dwelling within the common. The subject stays within the social, but deprived of the right to the kind of relation that would give it the experience of freedom as relation, as opposed to duty.³⁷

In the neoliberal ontology, the form of sovereignty is the incessant displacement of responsibility. Each failure of society or the collective is rendered as individual guilt. The jobless is no victim of the economic order, but rather the cause of the inability to "adapt." The worn-down one is not fatigued by the beats of the industrial or productive apparatus, but is found quite "inadequate." And so, the trauma of autonomy is the trauma of displacement: the replacement of the shared destiny with private accounting.³⁸

The political aspect of this ontology goes deep. The sovereignty is no longer imposed from the top; it is manufactured every day with the help of practices of self-control, systems of judgment, and the rhetoric of improvement and rationality. The subject no longer challenges power but internalizes it, taking on the role of one's own judge and disciplinarian. Survival is the same as performance, identity as competitiveness, freedom as the capacity to selfregulate one's own vulnerability.³⁹

Exile, then, is not leaving community but living in a world without the common. It is the experience of a mundane life in which the other is a rival, dialogue is performance, and encounter is calculus. Autonomy, under the guise of pure freedom, masks the loss of relation; sovereignty, under the guise of self-mastery, hide the reliance on the very apparatus that exercises its power.⁴⁰

³⁷ Banerjee, A., & Duflo, E, *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty*, Public Affairs Store, 2011.

³⁸ Cohen, B., Marxist Theory. In: B. Cohen, ed., *Routledge International Handbook of Critical Mental Health*. London: Routledge, 2017.

³⁹ Chomsky, N, *Profit over people, Neoliberalism and global order*, Seven Stories Press, 1999.

⁴⁰ Beck U, *Risk society*, Suhrkamp, 1986.

The political ontology of the neoliberal exile is therefore that of isolation. The subject lives under a regime in which each act, each thought, each feeling is made to be judged.⁴¹ The time is taken up with the relentless measurability, the space with functionality, and the memory with the repository of the performance. Freedom in this state is not lost to violence but gradually worn away like meaning erased within a surplus of information. The exile is the rule rather than the exception of a life in which the community is possible as the ghost of a broken promise.⁴²

Conclusion

The analysis of the neoliberal regime of subjectivity reveals a profound transformation in the very notion of autonomy and in the forms through which it is experienced. Autonomy, once understood as a promise of liberation from external constraints and as the foundation of political and moral freedom, has been absorbed into a new logic that of individual responsibility, self-regulation, and constant self-improvement. Under the neoliberal spirit, the subject is not emancipated; it assumes the management of its own dependency. Freedom no longer appears as the suspension of power but as its internal form. What was once called “sovereignty” shifts into the realm of the psyche and disguises itself as self-mastery; the individual becomes the bearer of the very rule that defines it.

The research has revealed that autonomy is now a device for the operation of power. Attempting to be “free,” the individual takes over the field of demands that make it always measurable, assessable, and disponible. There is no discipline imposed; discipline is internalized. There is no conformity based on fear, but the will towards self-affirmation. The connection between autonomy and sovereignty is no longer antagonistic but one of complicity between the two in a dialectic form. Freedom lives on to the extent that it becomes a mode of governance. Sovereignty, on the other hand, remains strong because it no longer has to be asserted

⁴¹ Theodosiadis M., *Republican perspectives on populism and hope (Beyond Christopher Lasch)*, Goldsmiths, University of London, Doctoral Thesis, 2021, pp.154-5

⁴² Theodosiadis M., *Ancient Greek Democracy and American Republicanism Prometheus in Political Theory*, Edinburgh University Press, 2025, p.92.

openly; it functions based on the subject's consent that acknowledges it as the condition of its own freedom.

In this context, autonomy becomes traumatic. The trauma is no longer that of violent imposition but of the disruption of the relation between the self and the world. The promise of freedom is converted into the obligation of perpetual self-assertion; the experience of self into a sphere of management and judgment. The human being lives under a regime in which the responsibility for the entire breadth of one's being has been privatized. The political and social aspects of trauma are erased, as weakness, tiredness, or failure are the product of individual deficiencies. The subject no longer has the right to suffer socially; it must suffer productively. The exile is no longer spatial or political but internal, psychic, quotidian.

At the core of neoliberal exile lies the transformation of freedom into measurable performance and of relation into competition. Community recedes before the self-referentiality of the ego, while the experience of shared time and space is replaced by rhythms of constant readiness. Social trust erodes, as every bond risks being perceived as an obstacle to self-realization. The result is a form of loneliness not experienced as rejection but as normality, a condition of internal distance, where life remains digitally connected yet existentially disconnected. Power does not exile the individual from society; it renders them a stranger within it.

The analysis thus leads to a double conclusion. On the one hand, autonomy under neoliberal discourse is the most refined form of sovereignty; on the other, this very condition contains the possibility of rupture. The awareness of trauma, the realization that autonomy has turned into dependency, opens the way for a different understanding of freedom. Freedom can no longer be conceived as private property but as a relation. Autonomy must be disentangled from the imperative of self-sufficiency and reconnected with reciprocity. Only through encounter through the recognition of vulnerability as a shared experience can the possibility of a non-traumatic autonomy be reclaimed.

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Trauma, War, Loss, Forced Exile, and Cultural Displacement in Australian Aboriginal and Ukrainian Stories from Children's Perspectives: Exploring Cultural Identity

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Abstract

This paper explores the heavy toll of trauma, war loss, forced exile, and cultural displacement by analyzing narratives from both Australian Aboriginal and Ukrainian children. Using a postcolonial framework, I examine contemporary literature and historical accounts to show how young protagonists

cope with colonial conflict, forge a cultural identity, and adapt following displacement. Drawing on Ukrainian novels and the collection “*Telling: Stories of Resilience from Nairm Marr Djambana*”, this research reveals the deep psychological scars of the war in Ukraine and the cultural genocide of Australia’s Stolen Generation. Both contexts are explored through the powerful image of the ‘wounded child’, highlighting both commonalities and critical distinctions. By analyzing poetic language, collective memory, and a sense of belonging, the study illustrates how children’s unique perspectives powerfully showcase resilience and the emergence of hybrid cultural identities. Ultimately, these findings stress the vital role of children’s voices in shaping broader discussions about trauma, migration, and cultural continuity, offering crucial insights into the complexities of identity forged in the crucible of conflict and displacement.

Keywords: *Indigenous people, Australian and Ukrainian literature, a wounded child, war, trauma, exile, cultural displacement*

1. Introduction

This research employs a digital humanities approach to investigate how trauma, exile, and cultural identity are represented in Australian and Ukrainian narratives. Specifically, it focuses on literary and historical texts that capture the experience of trauma through the eyes of children in both the Aboriginal and Ukrainian storytelling traditions.

The article explores how these distinct cultural contexts manage collective trauma, war losses, forced displacement, and the struggle to preserve cultural identity — often against the backdrop of cultural genocide — through stories passed down to modern generations. This comparative structure reveals significant structural similarities in how communities use children’s narratives to resist cultural threats. This is particularly evident in three areas: encoding historical memory, employing children’s voices to create counter-narratives to official histories, and the deliberate transmission of cultural knowledge as a form of resistance.

However, the differences in their temporal and geographic realities demand careful attention. Aboriginal peoples articulate a sovereignty deeply rooted in over 60,000 years of continuous cultural practice on specific Country, meaning cultural transmission is fundamentally about maintaining relationships with the land and ancestors.

Ukrainian communities, conversely, construct a national identity across the diaspora and repeated displacement, making cultural transmission fundamentally about preserving linguistic and narrative traditions across geographic separation.

While both traditions use children's stories to fight erasure, the specific content, form, and political stakes of these narratives are significantly different and should not be oversimplified into universal categories.

Australia and Ukraine present a compelling comparison for studying narratives of trauma and exile during turbulent historical periods. Both nations have suffered profound breaks in cultural continuity due to colonization, forced displacement, cultural genocide, and linguistic suppression. Since colonization, various government laws, policies, and practices have led to the exploration of the traumatic roots of cultural genocide and its impact on collective memory, the image of a 'wounded Aboriginal child' in post-colonial literary texts, and the life experiences of the Stolen Generation. Similarly, Ukrainian children's stories have developed over centuries of political repression, language bans, and diaspora communities, forming rich yet fragmented literary traditions that reflect experiences of cultural displacement and resistance.

The abundance of digitized materials from both contexts provides unprecedented opportunities to compare how children's trauma narratives function within different cultural frameworks. The suggested postcolonial methodology enables the identification of accurate historical evidence regarding tragic moments in the lives of traumatic generations of Aboriginal and Ukrainian children through the image of a *wounded child*.

The exploration of Australian Aboriginal identity through the image of a *wounded child* is deeply intertwined with themes of resilience and collective cultural memory illuminated through the lived experiences and narrative expressions of those who have endured trauma, cultural genocide, and forced replacement. This research investigates how Aboriginal peoples in Australia have navigated the challenges posed by colonization, cultural erasure, and social marginalization while actively reclaiming and revitalizing their national identities.

This article aims to examine and compare how trauma, war, loss, and displacement are reflected in stories of Australian Aboriginal and Ukrainian children, focusing on how these narratives

shape and express their cultural identities. The objectives are as follows: to analyze children's perspectives on trauma, war, loss, and displacement in Australian Aboriginal and Ukrainian narratives; to identify common themes and distinct differences in narrative approaches between these two cultural groups; to explore the impact of these traumatic experiences on the development of cultural identity among children; to highlight the role of Australian Aboriginal storytelling in helping children process and make sense of traumatic events of cultural genocide.

2. Theoretical Framework: Trauma, Exile, and Cultural Identity

The theoretical foundation of this research draws on interdisciplinary approaches to trauma studies, diaspora theory, and scholarship on trauma/war children's literature. Cathy Caruth's (1996) concept of trauma theory, particularly as *unclaimed experience*¹, proves especially relevant for this research because both Aboriginal and Ukrainian children's narratives perform a specific function: they transform experiences that dominant institutions have attempted to suppress or deny into intelligible stories. While Caruth suggests that trauma inherently resists narration, the children's stories show the opposite: communities deliberately create narratives that make a traumatic history accessible without forcing readers to relive its overwhelming force. This is a crucial difference: these texts aren't just spontaneous expressions of pain; they are intentional cultural interventions designed to transmit historical truth across generations.

Cultural trauma theory, as articulated by scholars such as Jeffrey Alexander (2012) and Ron Eyerman (2019), provides a key lens for understanding how communities collectively process and transmit traumatic experiences. Alexander defines cultural trauma as happening when "members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness."² (p. 6). In this process, children's

¹ Caruth C., *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

² Alexander J. C., *Trauma: A social theory*, Polity Press, 2012. Cf. Rupčić Kelam, D. "Militarization of Everyday Life: Girls in Armed Conflicts", *Conatus*

narratives of trauma, war, and exile become a primary tool for collective meaning-making, transforming devastating events into powerful narratives of survival, resilience, resistance, and cultural continuity.

Recent work on intergenerational trauma in Australian contexts highlights the significant role of children's stories in cultural healing processes. This research strongly advocates for integrating culturally relevant ways of knowing, being, and doing into established teaching and support practices. This insight helps us understand that Aboriginal Australian children's narratives function not just as entertainment, but as an active cultural intervention, working to preserve traditional knowledge systems while processing the impacts of colonial trauma.

The concept of exile covers both physical displacement and profound cultural alienation. Edward Said's foundational work on the "exile consciousness" demonstrates how displacement gives rise to distinct forms of cultural expression characterized by multiple belonging, cultural and linguistic hybridity, and a sense of temporal dislocation. Children's stories created in exile must expertly balance the difficult task of preserving a cultural connection while simultaneously adapting to new environments. This often leads to unique narrative strategies and linguistic innovations, a dynamic clearly exemplified in Ukrainian diaspora narratives.

This research examines the implementation of the educational ideal of Ukrainian Abroad in the Ukrainian Diasporic translation of children's narratives, demonstrating how Ukrainian communities worldwide have used children's stories to maintain cultural identity across generations of displacement. The educational function of these texts reveals how exile communities conceptualize cultural transmission as essential for survival.

Cultural identity formation in children's narratives functions through what Benedict Anderson (2006) calls *imagined communities*³ — shared stories that foster a sense of collective belonging

- *Journal of Philosophy*, 8: 2, 2023, pp. 487-19, <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.35119>.

³ Anderson B., *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, (Rev. ed.) Verso Books, 2006. Cf. Janssen, J. "Ethics as a Means to Power", *Dia-noesis*, 15, 2024, pp. 59-80, <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.38166>; Asimiadis, D. "The Witches of the Reich: The Dimension of Female Mysticism

despite geographic separation. Children's stories build cultural identity through language, songs, and the preservation of culture, historical memory, and community values. In contexts of trauma and exile, these roles become especially crucial as communities strive to maintain connections despite disruptions. Recent developments in children's trauma/war/exile literature studies have increasingly acknowledged the importance of trauma narratives for understanding cultural transmission. Multiple studies on children's literature have a complicated relationship with the standard trauma paradigm. When exploring historical fiction, nonfiction, and picture books for children, we must pay close attention to the specific ways young readers engage with challenging historical content. This engagement itself shapes how traumatic memory is understood and processed.

The emergence of Ukrainian children's trauma/war/exile literature as a unique field of study underscores its growing cultural importance. Fieldwork in this area highlights the contributions of leading scholars from both Ukraine and its diaspora. This research examines the history of books written, marketed, and circulated among young people since the emergence of the Ukrainian nation in the nineteenth century. Critically, this scholarship shows how these texts have functioned as a consistent site of cultural resistance and identity preservation throughout periods of political suppression.

The sheer volume of digitised materials now requires advanced methodological approaches. These methods must be capable of managing datasets that are multilingual and multicultural while remaining sensitive to crucial cultural differences. Ted Underwood's "*Distant Horizons*" (2019) offers historical literary analysis frameworks that can support this kind of comparative cross-cultural research — crucially, frameworks that help prevent a reductive, universalizing approach. Ultimately, this research investigates how Aboriginal peoples in Australia and native Ukrainians have managed the immense challenges posed by colonization, cultural erasure, and social marginalization while simultaneously and actively reclaiming and revitalizing their

national identities. Through an *interdisciplinary approach* that incorporates history, sociology, and cultural studies, this study emphasizes that resilience is not just a reaction to adversity but is ingrained in the cultural practices, narratives, and endurance of communities.

The methodology combines *comparative textual analysis* with computational approaches specifically designed for multilingual and multicultural research of the analyzed corpora texts. Primary sources include digitized collections from the National Library of Australia, State Library of New South Wales, Ukrainian Cultural Center archives, and diaspora community collections.

Computational methods will include multilingual topic modeling using MALLET and Python's transformers library to identify trauma-related themes across different languages and cultural contexts. *Sentiment analysis* employing multilingual BERT models will trace emotional registers associated with exile and cultural loss narratives. Network analysis using Gephi will map relationships between characters, cultural symbols, and identity markers in trauma-themed children's texts. *Cultural semantic analysis* will examine how key concepts, such as resilience, home, belonging, memory, and survival, are linguistically constructed across different cultural contexts. Named entity recognition, as implemented by Spacy, will identify references to specific historical events, geographic locations, and cultural practices. *Stylometric analysis* will reveal how trauma/war/exile discourse adapts linguistically for child audiences across different cultural frameworks.

3. Cultural Transmission as Resistance: The Educational Ideal of "Ukrainian Abroad"

The research methodology positions Ukrainian children's narratives as a distinct mechanism for cultural preservation amid diaspora. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's concept of *imagined communities*⁴ Ukrainian children's literature functions as a site where geographically dispersed communities construct shared cultural identity through narrative. The educational ideal of *the*

⁴ Anderson B., *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Rev. ed.), Verso Books, 2006.

Ukrainian Abroad, embedded in diaspora children's narratives, reveals how exile communities conceptualize cultural transmission as existentially crucial for survival.

When positioned within the comparative framework outlined in the research methodology, Ukrainian children's literature reveals how different cultural contexts employ similar narrative strategies — collective memory preservation, poetic language encoding trauma, and identity formation through storytelling — while maintaining culturally specific responses to displacement and cultural loss. The cross-cultural pattern recognition enabled by digital methodologies reveals universal dimensions of cultural trauma work while preventing what Ted Underwood warns against: 'reductive universalism' that erases crucial cultural differences.⁵

The computational analysis using multilingual topic modeling across these exemplar texts would identify recurring trauma-related themes: linguistic suppression, geographic separation, intergenerational memory transmission, cultural resilience, and identity formation. Simultaneously, the sentiment analysis and stylometric examination would reveal that Ukrainian children's literature employs distinctive linguistic and narrative strategies compared to other diaspora traditions. The preservation of Ukrainian phonetic patterns, the strategic deployment of untranslated cultural terminology, and the narrative centering of linguistic identity as spiritual practice constitute specifically Ukrainian responses to cultural displacement.

4. Contemporary Voices: Twenty-First Century Ukrainian Children's Literature in Crisis and Resilience

The emergence of contemporary Ukrainian children's literature since the 2020s reveals an intensification of the themes identified in earlier diaspora narratives, yet with distinctive emphases shaped by geopolitical crisis, digital culture, and renewed warfare. Dzvinka Matiyash, who debuted in 2005 with a meditative book of prose titled "*A Requiem for November*", has since published works for

⁵ Underwood T. "*Distant horizons: Digital evidence and literary change*". University of Chicago Press, 2019, p. 203.

both adults and children that have received nominations for the BBC Ukrainian Book of the Year award. Matiyash's writing trajectory is a perfect example of how contemporary Ukrainian children's authors successfully navigate a delicate balance: the need for aesthetic sophistication must align with pedagogical necessity, and intimate emotional truth must coexist with collective historical documentation.

Matiyash's *Roman pro bat'kivschynu* (*Novel About the Motherland*) marks a major shift in how modern Ukrainian children's literature tackles cultural identity and national belonging. Rather than presenting the motherland as something purely nostalgic or romantic, Matiyash builds it as a complex, embodied reality — at once geographic, linguistic, emotional, and spiritual. The novel effectively uses what Eyerman calls memory work: the conscious construction of shared meaning around national identity through literary narrative. For today's Ukrainian child readers — many of whom are experiencing displacement due to war, refugee crises, and internal migration — Matiyash's novel offers a therapeutic function. It validates the emotional complexity of national attachment while skillfully sidestepping sentimentality. Matiyash's approach to narrative mirrors what postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak termed strategic essentialism: the deliberate assertion of a national or cultural identity to counter erasure, all while maintaining a critical awareness that such an identity is, in part, constructed. Her children's texts preserve distinct Ukrainian linguistic registers and cultural references while simultaneously engaging with current geopolitical realities. This represents a significant evolution from earlier diaspora narratives. Where previous generations often framed Ukrainian identity in symbolic or spiritual terms, contemporary writers like Matiyash now foreground the material, political, and military dimensions of national survival.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, Ukrainian children's literature has undergone a rapid transformation, with established authors producing works that engage warfare with unprecedented immediacy. This contemporary moment underscores the vital role of children's literature in what Eyerman identifies as *cultural trauma work during active crisis* — the real-

time transformation of traumatic experiences into meaningful narratives while the trauma remains actively unfolding.⁶

Contemporary Ukrainian children's literature published since 2022 demonstrates several significant developments. First, the narrative treatment of displacement has shifted from the symbolic or retrospective to the immediate and documentary. Children's texts now directly address topics previously considered too disturbing: air raids, separation from families, death, and the experience of becoming refugees. Rather than traumatizing young readers, these texts appear to function therapeutically — validating children's actual experiences rather than denying or minimizing them. Second, the audience for Ukrainian children's literature has expanded globally in unprecedented ways. Translation initiatives, international publishing support, and the geopolitical visibility of Ukrainian suffering have made Ukrainian children's voices audible to global audiences in ways that previous diaspora literature achieved only gradually. Third, contemporary Ukrainian children's literature increasingly emphasizes resilience not as passive endurance but as active cultural and political practice. Narratives foreground children's participation in cultural preservation — learning language, documenting displacement, teaching younger siblings, and maintaining family memory. This reflects what Eyerman identifies as children's agency in collective meaning-making: children function not merely as victims of trauma but as agents in the construction of cultural memory and national identity.⁷

Contemporary Ukrainian children's literature intensifies earlier preoccupations with linguistic preservation, now framed as a matter of urgent national survival. With Russian military aggression threatening Ukrainian linguistic and cultural continuity, children's literature published since 2022 explicitly positions Ukrainian language learning and literary engagement as acts of national resistance. This represents what postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha identifies as “language as counter-colonial strategy” — the deployment of minority language literature as a form of resistance to the dominant power's attempt at cultural erasure⁸.

⁶ Eyerman R. *“Memory, trauma, and identity”*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 156.

⁷ Ibid., p. 174.

⁸ Bhabha H. K. *“The location of culture.”* Routledge, 1994, p. 134.

In Natalia Maletych's work, *The Ghost Who Couldn't Fall Asleep*, the narrative exemplifies how children's literature addresses displacement not as a tragedy, but as a catalyst for connection. The "abandoned house on the outskirts of the city" serves as a metaphor for displacement, exile, and cultural abandonment. The ghost represents what the research calls the *wounded child* of postcolonial trauma — isolated, unable to rest, waiting for connection. In a forgotten house on the edge of town, a ghost lives a lonely existence. He can't sleep anymore because his neighbors moved out, leaving no one for him to perform his nightly routines on — no lamps to switch off, no people to tuck in. But everything shifts the day a young family, complete with a little girl, settles into his haunted residence. This beautiful story is about overcoming loneliness and finding unlikely friendship where you least expect it, giving a classic tale a fresh, new meaning.⁹

The arrival of "a young family with a little daughter" transforms potential isolation into the basis for community formation. The narrative teaches young readers that displacement, although painful, can lead to unexpected forms of belonging and mutual care. Resilience emerges not from individual strength but from relational engagement — the ghost's capacity to care for the child, the child's ability to notice and befriend the ghost.

In post-2022 Ukraine, narratives of displacement, lonely waiting, and unexpected friendship resonate particularly for children separated from their parents, displaced from their homes, or waiting for their return. Contemporary Ukrainian children's writers employ sophisticated narrative strategies to make language itself visible as content. Texts highlight phonetic distinctiveness, preserve regional dialects and linguistic variations, incorporate untranslated Ukrainian cultural terminology, and foreground the emotional and spiritual significance of Ukrainian linguistic identity. For child readers experiencing linguistic suppression or displacement, these texts validate the Ukrainian language as intrinsically valuable rather than merely instrumental.

Perhaps most significantly, contemporary Ukrainian children's literature reflects what might be termed "accelerated intergenerational transmission." Rather than the gradual,

⁹ Maletych N., *The Ghost that Couldn't Fall Sleep*, Vydavnytstvo satrogo leva, 2020.

multigenerational transmission of cultural memory characteristic of diaspora traditions, contemporary narratives compress generations of cultural transmission into immediate, urgent forms. Children are positioned as simultaneous recipients and transmitters of cultural memory — learning Ukrainian identity while simultaneously teaching it, bearing witness to contemporary trauma while archiving it for future memory. This acceleration reflects what Caruth identifies as trauma's characteristic compression of temporal experience: in trauma, past, present, and future collapse into an urgent now. Contemporary Ukrainian children's literature formally and thematically reflects this temporal distortion, creating narrative structures that force child readers to engage with multiple temporal registers simultaneously¹⁰.

5. Indigenous Storytelling, Sovereignty, and Terra Nullius: Narratives of Knowledge, Identity, and Resistance

According to Serrat, the term '*storytelling*' can be defined as "the vivid description of ideas, beliefs, personal experiences, and life-lessons through stories or narratives that evoke powerful emotions and insights"¹¹. This is an open and natural form of communication designed to connect people and ideas, fostering understanding, coherence, and meaning. It allows different perspectives to emerge, inspires imagination, motivates action, and fosters change¹². The main advantages of indigenous storytelling are that it delivers both emotional and factual content, serves as a means to share knowledge, features a narrative structure that enhances learning, and, because it is accessible to everyone, it is an effective method for reaching a large audience.

We agree entirely with Kodo, who, focusing on American Indian and Indigenous traditions, states that "storytelling is a universal

¹⁰ Caruth C., *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, p. 64.

¹¹ Serrat O., *Storytelling". Knowledge Solutions*, Asian Development Bank, 2017, p. 839.

¹² Ibid., p. 840.

aspect of Indigenous culture, regardless of tribal identity”¹³. The scholar asserts that creation myths are among the earliest stories explaining the origins of Indigenous societies. Each Indigenous nation and tribe across North America has its own unique creation stories, marked by specific symbols, animal figures, and characters. These stories have been passed down through many generations; however, each retelling varies, often reflecting the storyteller’s personality and being adapted or expanded to connect with the audience of the time¹⁴.

Aboriginal storytelling is a vital part of Australian Indigenous culture, serving as a powerful means to preserve and pass on Aboriginal knowledge, values, and traditions across generations¹⁵. Furthermore, Australian Aboriginal storytelling is a vital form of communication within Aboriginal communities, closely connected to place (environment) and Country, which is regarded as a living, sacred being. Therefore, Elders and storytellers are honoured as Traditional Custodians, guardians of cultural history, responsible for preserving and transmitting these stories to maintain the spiritual foundation of Aboriginal cultural continuity. That is why, through stories, Aboriginal people share creation myths, historical events, moral lessons, and teachings about the land and its resources, with each story carrying multiple layers of meaning tied to specific landscapes, spiritual beliefs, and social bonds. These stories are often shared orally outdoors by the fire, and can take many forms, including spoken narratives, songs, dances, art, and performances.

Aboriginal storytelling extends beyond entertainment; it serves as a living record of Law (the Dreaming or Songlines), survival skills, social customs, and community identity. Through these stories, people strengthen their cultural bonds to ancestors, language, and heritage, while also building resilience against the challenges of colonial and postcolonial policies. As Watson states in her article “*Aboriginal Laws and the Sovereignty of Terra Nullius*”, “storytelling is not just about entertainment; it is the means by which

¹³ Kodo K., “Storytelling: Adaptability and Expansion of American Indian and Indigenous Culture”, *Freeside Europe Online Academic Journal*, Issue 15, 2024, pp. 2.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Watson I., *Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015, p. 16.

knowledge is passed from generation to generation, ensuring that cultural traditions and laws remain intact”¹⁶. Irene Watson uses a creation story from her people to critique Australian law and the actions of white settlers. The tale features a thirsty, greedy frog who consumes all the water—draining every stream, lake, river, puddle, and even the ocean. The other animals must then devise a plan to make the frog laugh, forcing it to release the water and shrink back to its proper size. Watson directly compares this water-hoarding amphibian to the settlers, arguing they greedily consumed the environment without regard for anyone else’s needs, thus erasing the vital boundary between what is “inside” (their land) and “outside” (the original inhabitants’ resources). She argues that for Australian Aboriginal communities, “genocide also resides in the destruction of the natural world (Ruwe). The ripping and tearing of the body of the ruwe is akin to the ripping and tearing of our own bodies, our mother, and all of our relations”¹⁷. During long years of colonialism, Australian authorities tried to subjugate, condition, and silence Aboriginal responses. As a result, many Aboriginal people “no longer traditionally express their feelings; instead, their emotions are buried in prisons, altered states of mind, or simply simmering deep within trauma and depression”¹⁸.

Furthermore, European settlers often overlook Indigenous cultivation practices as legitimate land claims, instead viewing their ‘outside’ as a ‘state of nature’ — a space to be taken or claimed. That is why it was called Terra Nullius, a land that belongs to no one. I can certainly paraphrase and humanize this critical analysis of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) and its historical context, making the language more direct and impactful. It was no accident that Prime Minister Howard characterized Aboriginal communities as living in a “state of nature” (“a Hobbesian nightmare of violence, abuse, and neglect”) right before initiating the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER). This calculated rhetoric allowed settler-colonial power to claim territory through an initial act of violence followed by legal control. This entire process rests on rejecting the ongoing sovereignty of

¹⁶ Watson I. “Aboriginal laws and the sovereignty of Terra Nullius”. *Borderlands E-Journal* 1(2), 2002, p. 46.

¹⁷ Watson I., *Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015, p. 121.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Indigenous peoples. By framing Aboriginal society in this way, the statement effectively stripped the land of its inherent intentionality, laws, spirits, and political community. The land was thus redefined as “unclaimed” property, held in common, and therefore ready to be seized¹⁹.

In the book *Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law*, Watson discusses the impact of the forced removal of Ruwe on First Nations people, describing it as cultural genocide because it resulted in the loss of cultural identity, law, and traditions, which in turn led to the destruction of First Nations as peoples: “Ruwe is the core of our culture and traditions, and our forced removal and separation from Ruwe was a removal from our cultural foundation; it was an act of cultural genocide. The stripping from us of our culture, law, and traditions, along with the imposition on us of an alien law, language, and culture, are acts that lead to the destruction of First Nations as people”²⁰. Therefore, in his report to the United Nations, Cobo argued that cases in which states deliberately discriminate against people for their refusal to abandon their cultural heritage, customs, and traditions could be deemed ‘*ethnocide*’ or ‘*cultural genocide*’²¹. Cobo sees the crime of genocide operating against the rights and dignity of any people.

It is important to note that today, modern genocide manifests through trauma and social suffering, rather than direct violence. It highlights the impact on Indigenous peoples, especially in terms of health and social well-being: “the face of contemporary genocide is not so much death by shooting or poisoning, as occurred in the nineteenth century; it is death arising out of severe trauma and a pain so big that many of our people let go of life”²².

According to historical research, Australian Indigenous peoples today face severe health and well-being challenges due to past and ongoing impacts of genocide, state control, and social exclusion.

¹⁹ Faulkner J. “Settler-Colonial Violence and the ‘Wounded Aboriginal Child’: Reading Alexis Wright with Irene Watson (and Giorgio Agamben)”, *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 9(4), 2020, p. 49.

²⁰ Watson I., *Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015. p. 121.

²¹ Cobo J. M., *Study of the Problem against Indigenous Populations Final Report*, UN Doc.

²² Watson I., *Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015, p. 134.

“Indigenous people of the modern world have ‘discovered’ ways to kill the pain: suicide, drugs, and alcohol. If we were to measure the contemporary impact of genocide and its experience, some of the worst indicators would be found in the mental health and physical health statistics of Nungas. Our profiles are of Third World standard, in a country that prides itself on being a leader among global capitalist economies. And if you studied our historical profile in terms of self-determination, land ownership and management, housing, health, cultural integrity, language maintenance, and education, as well as the standards we have lived under, you would begin to identify a destructive environment of state control. We are disappearing peoples”²³.

Therefore, based on the provided descriptions, we can conclude that negative effects are clearly reflected in poor mental and physical health statistics among Indigenous peoples in Australia. Furthermore, the loss of self-determination, land, housing, culture, and language is a significant concern, as government control fosters a harmful environment that accelerates the decline of Indigenous populations.

6. Reclaiming Australian Aboriginal Identity through storytelling

The discussion about Aboriginal children in Australia has been widespread, portraying them as miserable, abused, and neglected since before the country’s federation, going back to the colonies²⁴. Aboriginal and other racialised children, including refugee children, frequently symbolise larger national discussions on Australian sovereignty, which are based on the idea of Terra Nullius: these debates focus on who has a claim to belonging, who can cross borders, who should be excluded, and who has the right to exist. These sovereignty issues also arise internally, with Aboriginal children being rhetorically weaponised against their parents and communities. These communities are often depicted as outsiders within

²³ Watson I., “Aboriginal laws and the sovereignty of Terra Nullius”, *Borderlands E-Journal* 1(2), 2002, p. 134.

²⁴ Stringer R., “A nightmare of the neocolonial kind: Politics of suffering in John Howard’s Northern Territory intervention”, *Borderlands* 6(2).

their own lands, viewed as the uncolonized segments of a colonised people.

In his article “*Settler-Colonial Violence and the ‘Wounded Aboriginal Child’: Reading Alexis Wright with Irene Watson (and Giorgio Agamben)*,” Faulkner examines how the image of a ‘wounded Aboriginal child’²⁵ represents a clash between two contrasting ideologies: First Nations sovereignty, based on a spiritual bond to the Country for thousands of years, and settler sovereignty, which has been imposed on Australian Indigenous peoples through physical, legal, and existential violence for 230 years.

First Nations sovereignty is grounded in a fundamental and everlasting relationship between Aboriginal people, their environment, and the land (Country) they belong to^{26 27}. Unlike settler-colonial sovereignty, which operates through legal enforcement and territorial control, this model emphasizes obligations to Country and intergenerational responsibilities. Aboriginal storytelling functions as a critical means through which this alternative sovereignty is *articulated and transmitted*, though it should be noted that narration alone does not constitute political sovereignty — rather, storytelling maintains and communicates the knowledge systems upon which such sovereignty depends. As Kwaymullina (2020) argues, this constitutes ‘narrative’ sovereignty in the sense that it is expressed through and dependent upon the ability to tell Dreamtime stories and maintain cultural law, though this distinction should not obscure the material, legal, and political dimensions through which settler colonialism has consistently worked to suppress both the storytelling practices and the territorial sovereignty they articulate²⁸.

“The wounded Aboriginal child” exemplifies the ongoing clash between Indigenous and non-Indigenous ideological perspectives, as children continue to suffer the effects of colonial power strate-

²⁵ Faulkner J., “Settler-Colonial Violence and the ‘Wounded Aboriginal Child’: Reading Alexis Wright with Irene Watson (and Giorgio Agamben)”, *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 9(4), 2020, p. 45.

²⁶ Araluen E., “To outlive a home: Poetics of a crumbling domestic”, *Cordite Poetry Review*, 89.

²⁷ Kwaymullina A., “Living on Stolen Land”, Broome: Magabala Books, 2020, p. 7.

²⁸ Ibid.

gies, seen in carceral and child protection systems and media narratives favoring intervention in their communities. In Alexis Wright's novel *The Swan*, Oblivion Ethylene's name symbolizes the burden of settler Australians' enforced amnesia and their attempts to erase Aboriginal history and existence by controlling the lives and images of Aboriginal children²⁹. The girl is portrayed even more poignantly as a perennial child: the homo sacer of an Aboriginality already stripped of its way of life by colonization, leading to infantilization, dehumanization, and a loss of protection³⁰. Through this well-rounded complex image, Wright addresses the mixed role of the Aboriginal children in postcolonial Australian literature and society, portraying them simultaneously "as victims and offenders, as abused and seductresses, both a reminder of and a redemption for white guilt"³¹.

In many literary and historical texts, Aboriginal children frequently represent *a Stolen Generation*, emphasizing the complexities surrounding the existence of Aboriginal peoples within Australia's colonial history. For example, Watson, in her book *Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law*, defined "the removal of Aboriginal children under the assimilation policy as amounting to genocide"³². And, what is more, she argues that "the High Court in *Kruger* dismissed claims that the removal of First Nations children to state institutions was an act of genocide"³³.

Following the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC), the Australian Commonwealth government launched a subsequent inquiry to gather evidence on the history of forcibly removing Aboriginal children. As Irene Watson points out, while this inquiry heard numerous stories from those now known as the 'Stolen Generations,' it concluded without

²⁹ Faulkner J., "Settler-Colonial Violence and the 'Wounded Aboriginal Child': Reading Alexis Wright with Irene Watson (and Giorgio Agamben)", *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 9(4), 2020, p. 49.

³⁰ Rollo T., "Feral children: Settler colonialism, progress, and the figure of the child". *Settler Colonial Studies* 8(1), 2018, pp. 60–79.

³¹ Faulkner J., "Settler-Colonial Violence and the 'Wounded Aboriginal Child': Reading Alexis Wright with Irene Watson (and Giorgio Agamben)", *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 9(4), 2020, p. 52.

³² Watson I., *Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015, p. 134.

³³ Ibid.

establishing any compensation or a clear process for healing. Crucially, no apology was issued by the head of government at the time. Despite this initial political failure, Ronald Wilson, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commissioner (HREOC), later determined that the policies responsible for these removals violated international human rights law and constituted acts of genocide under the United Nations definition.

The removal of very young children and infants from their families, traditional lands, culture, and language created an irreversible severing of vital connections to Aboriginal spirituality. The explicit goal was to dismantle the family structure and destroy each individual's ability to grow up within their First Nation community. Historical records confirm this intent. Mr. Neville of Western Australia stated before a 1937 Commonwealth conference that the goal was "to establish sufficient settlements to undertake the training and education of these children so that they may become absorbed into the general community."³⁴

The reality on the ground was far harsher: children were given minimal rations, often going hungry or forced to steal food scraps "left ... for the pigs." Once institutionalized, Aboriginal children generally just survived in an alien environment, cut off from Aboriginal Lore, ceremonies, and culture. They were trained in Western customs primarily to serve as cheap labor. In the worst documented cases, they faced starvation rations and suffered systemic physical and sexual abuse.

The testimony from survivors is essential. Wadjularbinna Nulyarimma, a prosecutor in the Tent Embassy genocide case, shared her childhood experience where simple play was a privilege reserved only for the child who was working as a slave: "You put the missionaries' shoes at their feet when they're ready to put their feet in them. You carried bathwater for them up and down a flight of stairs – and if it was too hot, you got clipped over the ears."³⁵ The brutality of the situation makes the High Court's reasoning in the *Kruger* case difficult to grasp, as the forceful removal of young babies and children was ultimately perceived as "a benevolent welfare policy, deemed to be 'in the best interests of the child'"³⁶.

³⁴ Watson I., *Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

Furthermore, in Kruger, the High Court's majority upheld the constitutionality of the Ordinance. The judges rejected the plaintiffs' claim of genocide. In his opinion, Dawson J concluded that there was no specific intent; instead, the powers given to the Protector were meant to be exercised in the 'best interests of the child'.

The High Court chose not to resolve the issue of genocide. Furthermore, as Kerruish argued, there is no definitive answer, and the law regarding genocide remains dangerously unresolved.³⁷ Watson states, "the contemporary face of genocide is within the power that the state exercises over First Nations children taken from families and communities by the Australian criminal justice system and state welfare policies. The removal of Nunga children, as in the past, is still viewed as being 'in the best interests of the child'"³⁸.

As Patsy Smith (Taungurung Traditional Owner) describes in her story³⁹, she was born in 1955 at the Mooroopna Hospital (Cummeragunja Mission), and her childhood was traumatized by strict rules and cruel managers. "No one was allowed to leave without permission, there was minimal food and clothing, and extremely poor housing" (p.16). As there were thirteen children in the family, her great-grandfather would "sneak inside at night to visit his wife and their children" (p. 16) and bring food. In 1939, many deaths resulted from poor conditions, famine, and a lack of sanitation; therefore, most residents protested against these conditions. "This event became known as the Cummeragunja Walk-Off. My great-grandfather was involved in this" (p.16). Later, Patsy Smith's mother moved to a flat by the river. "These were hard times, and many families relied on hunting and fishing to feed their growing families" (p.17). After the Murray River flood in 1956, "the police took the three of us, because we had no fixed abode, means of care or support" (p.17). Three of them were initially placed in the Children's Welfare Department and later moved to the Turana Reception Center. Later, Patsy Smith's siblings were separated: her three-year-old brother, Larry, and her

³⁷ Kerruish V., *The wrong of law: Metaphysics, logics, and law's claim of right*, Routledge, 2025.

³⁸ Watson I., *Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015, p. 121.

³⁹ Summers S., *Telling: Stories of Resilience from Nairn Marr Djambana*, ed. by, Magabala books, 2023, p. 15-23.

four-year-old sister, Joylene, were sent to Geelong to the Kardinia Children's Home, while she, a twelve-month-old infant, was placed in the Presbyterian Babies' Home in Camberwell, Melbourne. "We were separated that day, and we didn't meet again until we were young adults" (p. 18). After spending four years at the Presbyterian Babies' Home and undergoing two hip operations, Patsy Smith was transferred to the William Booth Memorial Home for Girls in Camberwell. Later, I was fostered by a young woman who lived with her family.

While analyzing Patsy Smith's story, the most memorable parts of the children's home were the small brown leather suitcases each kid owned and the playground where they were allowed to play. "However, life was very structured at the home – you are at a set time, played at a set time, and you weren't allowed to talk at the table" (p.20). Once, she asked to pass the salt and "got called up immediately to the front, where The Salvation Army captains and stuff were sitting. I got given the strap in front of everyone. There was no explanation" (p. 20). When she refused to eat pickles, "the stuff picked up my plate and made me sit at the front and, with a couple of other kids who hadn't eaten their meals and they forced that food into us. I think they wanted us to be grateful for our food when other children in the world were starving. I couldn't eat pickles again until I was in my late 20s – *that traumatic incident stayed with me some time*" (p.20).

The daily routine at the children's home felt more like a prison, with no celebrations or any positive emotions, as children never got presents, even at Christmas: "My foster mum told me that she had sent me a bride doll one year for Christmas. I never received it" (p.21). Therefore, after leaving it, Patsy Smith wrote in her story, "I felt liberated that I had the freedom to go wherever I wanted to" (p. 21).

The happiest Christmas was when she was allowed to live with her foster mum: "I woke up and there was a pram beside my bed, and it was full of toys. I was so excited that I felt overwhelmed. It was almost too much for me to bear – I couldn't even speak, so Mum helped me open the presents" (p.22). When Patsy Smith was eighteen, her brother Larry visited her and told her about her Aboriginal heritage, as her foster mum didn't tell her. "She explained that, because of past circumstances, she thought that I might be ashamed of being of Aboriginal blood" (p.22).

Therefore, aside from these traumatic childhood experiences that greatly shaped and influenced her cultural identity, Patsy Smith's biggest challenge was discovering her own cultural identity. Raised by a foster mother, she eventually had to learn about her biological mother: "My respect and love for my foster mum drove in me a loyalty to her, which led to my not contacting her. I feared losing my foster mum, which was ultimately what happened" (p.22). It was only in her mid-30s that Patsy Smith reached out to her mother, who was in poor health at the time, and started exploring her Aboriginal identity.

Patsy Smith's story of survival and renewal vividly illustrates the resourcefulness required to overcome systemic harm, demonstrating that individual resilience can persist despite institutional violence. Crucially, however, her narrative also illuminates what resilience *cannot* achieve on its own: she lost decades of connection to her mother, her cultural heritage was intentionally withheld, and her childhood was defined by deprivation and control.

While truth-telling is vital for acknowledging these harms and affirming survival, it must never be mistaken for justice or a sufficient form of healing. As Patsy Smith observed, "truth-telling is essential for young Aboriginal people." This statement pinpoints what narrative *can* provide —frameworks for understanding survival and resistance — while leaving the critical question intact: what material restitution, systemic accountability, and ongoing support are required to address ongoing harm?

Beyond individual stories, cultural memory is fundamental to shaping Aboriginal identity. It functions as the core mechanism for preserving and passing down traditions, stories, and connections to Country across generations.

The colonial classification of mixed-heritage children based on blood quantum exposes the complicated, contested questions surrounding their racial identity and belonging, as well as the colonizers' responsibility for their future. As Faulkner notes, children labeled with colonial terms like 'half-caste' or 'quadroon' face a paradox of belonging in colonial thought: "Are they white or black? At what point does the reduction of 'blood' eliminate Aboriginal identity? Who do these children belong to? Who is

responsible for them? And what is the colonizer's role if new generations identifying as Aboriginal continue to arise?"⁴⁰.

The postcolonial perspective employed in this research underscores how First Nations peoples can decolonize their minds, thereby activating a form of sovereignty that remains present despite ongoing harm to the land, climate, and social systems that transmit cultural knowledge.

For example, the recent anthology *Telling: Stories of Resilience from Nairm Marr Djambana* features twelve life stories narrated by Elders from the Aboriginal Association. As stated in the acknowledgments, "they describe experiences of loss, family separation, racism, and above all, the unbroken spirit of resistance and resilience"⁴¹. This collection explores the significance of oral traditions, storytelling, and artistic expressions as integral components of cultural memory, promoting a sense of belonging and continuity. These practices not only strengthen individual and collective identities but also act as powerful tools of resistance against cultural assimilation and massive loss. Crucially, these narratives are rooted in First Nations storytelling traditions and showcase the diverse and complex experiences that followed colonization. Each Elder reflects on their unique intergenerational trauma and the deep history of the Stolen Generations, emphasizing themes of reconnection and resistance. Yvonne Luke describes reconnecting with Alyawerre Country after generations of forced removal. Patsy Smith (Taungurung Traditional Owner) describes her traumatic childhood memories at the Mooroopna Hospital (Cummeragunja Mission). Koori leader Mik Edwards shares his courageous story of survival after being forcibly taken from his family during the years of genocide. Dyan Summers, a representative of Bunurong Country with ties to sealers in Bass Strait, recounts a story of endurance and strength, drawing on her ancestors who lived on Flinders Island and in Bunurong Country during the challenging times of colonization.

⁴⁰ Faulkner J., "Settler-Colonial Violence and the 'Wounded Aboriginal Child': Reading Alexis Wright with Irene Watson (and Giorgio Agamben)", *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 9(4), 2020, p. 52.

⁴¹ Summers S., "*Telling: Stories of resilience from Nairm Marr Djambana*", Magabala Books, 2023.

Additionally, the stories are paired with powerful photographs, transforming the texts into multimodal narratives rich in semiotic signs and symbols.

7. Conclusions

This study connects resilience and cultural memory through case studies that showcase how Aboriginal communities actively adapt to past and present challenges. This adaptation includes reviving traditional ecological knowledge, emphasizing sustainable practices, and reinforcing a deep spiritual and physical connection to the land. The stories of survival and renewal analyzed here are crucial for understanding modern Australian Aboriginal identity, as they highlight the ongoing interplay between history and present-day realities. Ultimately, this work stresses the necessity of recognizing Aboriginal voices and perspectives in all discussions concerning identity politics, social justice, and reconciliation. By focusing on these experiences, this study advocates for a more nuanced understanding of Australian Aboriginal identity — one that celebrates its multicultural diversity and complexity, rather than confining it to monolithic representations. This research firmly asserts that the resilience of Australian Aboriginal people is fundamentally linked to their cultural memory, which acts as both a foundation for national identity and a vital mechanism for survival. This exploration encourages a broader public dialogue about acknowledging and respecting Aboriginal identities within the wider Australian context.

Methodologically, this research makes a significant contribution by developing culturally sensitive computational approaches for the comparative analysis of children's literature. The project aims to create new tools for analyzing trauma representation across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts while establishing ethical protocols for engaging with sensitive materials.

Theoretically, the study expands the scope of trauma/war/exile studies, as well as children's narratives scholarship. It demonstrates how comparative analysis reveals both universal human patterns and critical cultural specificity in how trauma is processed. By examining how different cultures use children's literature to maintain identity during periods of disruption, this

work offers insights directly relevant to understanding contemporary refugee and immigrant experiences. The findings underscore that cultural communities use children's literature as both a protective mechanism and a means of transmitting traumatic knowledge.

This research holds specific urgency for communities, educators, and policymakers grappling with these ongoing challenges, as it documents and validates storytelling practices that constitute cultural sovereignty and resistance. This has direct implications for educational curricula, which should center Aboriginal pedagogies instead of imposing external frameworks; particularly those displaced by current conflict, it contextualizes contemporary children's narratives within longer histories of diaspora, which can inform better support structures for refugee children maintaining cultural continuity.

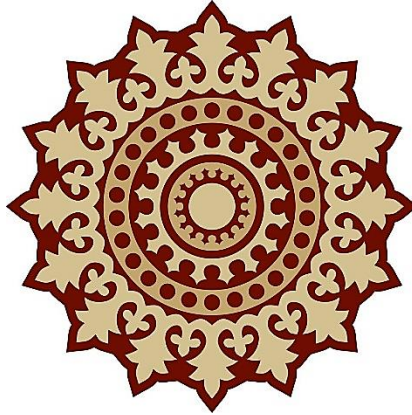
For both contexts, the research suggests that cultural preservation through children's literature must be recognized not just as heritage conservation or therapeutic practice, but as a form of political resistance to ongoing cultural erasure. For policymakers, this means that educational, welfare, and refugee support systems require a fundamental reorientation toward centering — rather than suppressing — the cultural practices through which communities maintain their identity. The ongoing cycles of transgenerational trauma continue to affect Aboriginal children and families, highlighting the importance of understanding how cultural texts aid healing. Similarly, contemporary Ukrainian children's war narratives address current experiences of displacement and cultural threats, making this comparative analysis especially relevant.

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Bearing Witness to Traumatized Witnesses: A Reading of *Antigone* from Agamben's Perspective

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Abstract

This article examines Agamben's thoughts on witnessing, as understood through Auschwitz, within the context of Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*. Agamben understands the relationship between Auschwitz and witnessing through linguistic impossibility. According to Agamben, the transformation of the event into a subjective experience, becoming the subject of transmission rather than narration, pushes the subject into linguistic impossibility. This can place the subject in a situation where they are incomprehensible and inaudible to others. A similar situation occurs in the tragedy of *Antigone*. *Antigone* has failed to bury the bodies of her father and brother appropriately. *Antigone* is a witness to both the events experienced by her father and brother and to their subsequent declaration as outlaws, including herself. This is essentially what makes *Antigone's* witness traumatic: *Antigone* has witnessed, on the one hand, the context of political law that cannot be related to justice and, on the other hand, the way the law makes life fragile. *Antigone's* testimony is not limited solely to the possibility of conveying the events. *Antigone's* testimony concerns the dimension of the relationship between law and life that unites everyone, namely, fragility; therefore, bearing witness to *Antigone* entails an ethical and political responsibility.

Keywords: *Agamben, Testimony, Antigone, Law, Life, Fragility, Trauma*

Introduction

Giorgio Agamben, drawing on the accounts of Primo Levi, a witness to the events at the Auschwitz concentration camp, opens up a discussion on the ethical-political meaning of testimony. Agamben attempts to conceptualize the paradoxical – and therefore traumatic – experience of witnessing, based on the responsibility of 'conveying the uncommunicable'. The witness is a witness because they have experienced a horrific event; however, their experience contains a dimension that cannot be directly grasped by another. This situation creates an *aporia* between the need to convey and the impossibility of conveying. Yet, despite the impossibility of conveying, the witness still bears the responsibility to convey. This is because the witness is the sole reference for recording the horrific event in history. The witness's conveyance is essential for the event not to be forgotten and to be preserved in memory. Therefore, the witness is responsible to history and to others.

However, what the witness has witnessed is an unrepresentable singularity that cannot be conveyed and, therefore, cannot be experienced 'again'. Thus, witnessing reflects the impossibility of language as the testimony of the unrepresentable. The witness is the only subject who can convey what they have witnessed; but on the other hand, since what they recount cannot be recorded in language -and in history- the witness is a stranger.¹ However, their strangeness is not an existential difference; as a witness to a historicity that does not belong to the present, the witness is an outsider who cannot be included in the present. The witness is compelled to speak from within the historicity they bear witness to—and the linguistic nature that makes it transmissible; this compulsion, however, casts the witness outside the present, transforming them into an outsider to the present. The witness, therefore, belongs neither

¹ In Freudian psychoanalysis, the term 'uncanny' should be understood precisely in this context: it is both an indirect indicator of what is familiar or knowable to us, and a representation of what is different, ambiguous, and anxiety-provoking. Therefore, the uncanny inherently carries a traumatic character; Sveinaeus, 2013:250.

fully to the past they bear witness to nor to the present they are transmitting.

So, who will bear witness to the responsibility that the witness is forced to shoulder with all this traumatic existence? If the witness is the witness to the inexperiencable and untranslatable, who will make their aporetic and traumatic experience translatable? The singularity of the historical event witnessed by the witness cannot be understood from within the witness's linguistic foreignness, so a mediator is needed to represent them in the present. This intermediary bears witness to the proximity between the singularity of the historical event witnessed by the witness and the witness's way of experiencing this event. In other words, the witness's witness is a political subject who will remove the event from belonging to the past and present it as a potentiality that is always possible.

This article aims to demonstrate that the audience in the tragedy of *Antigone* can be considered as witnesses alongside *Antigone* herself, who is also a witness. *Antigone*, while experiencing the pain of being unable to provide a proper funeral for first her father and then her brother, also reflects her position caught between conflicting legal systems. *Antigone* speaks the language and religion of tradition, the ancient cult of ancestors, in opposition to the law of the polis, while *Creon* speaks based on his power, which excludes any law other than that of the polis. *Antigone* does not suffer only because she cannot bury her father and brother's bodies in a 'proper manner'; at the root of her suffering lies a kind of incomprehensibility. *Antigone* is unable to express the natural and ancient reason for her own law against the logic of the police, which has replaced the ancient natural law of kinship. She is seen as a stranger by the logic of the police, which excludes the law that preceded it; her thoughts, her speech, her mourning, and her pain are not accepted as valid by the law of the police. However, *Antigone* strives not so much to make her pain heard as to make it felt by others in the present moment. In other words, *Antigone* seeks witnesses to her own testimony. In this way, *Antigone* will see herself as part of the community she lives in with others. And this is also demanded by *Antigone* because it will enable her to convey her grief and mourning, beyond any claim or demand of legitimacy. However, *Antigone* cannot direct this demand to the city she is a stranger in; therefore, the audience, who can mediate between the past and the possible future, becomes the addressee. While

watching the events of the past conveyed on the stage of tragedy, the audience confronts the burden of being the subject of (social) memory. What is shown to the spectator is not merely an event belonging to the past; the spectator is confronted with the effect of the event extending beyond the time in which it occurred. This is an indication that the event has not ended, that it will haunt the present again, in a different guise, like a ghost. Therefore, the audience is not merely a spectator of the event; as a witness to an unlost past, they will become the transmitter of what they have witnessed—because only in this way can the past be prevented from haunting the present. The spectator's witnessing is a responsibility; however, it is not merely an ethical responsibility. While listening to the traumatic subject who experienced the historical event but is buried in their own pain because they cannot convey this experience to others, the spectator confronts the social and political causes of this experience.² In tragedy, the spectator witnesses the limitations of police law, which can only encompass the existing state of affairs, and realizes that justice can only be grasped in that ambiguous interval between an archaic past and a future that is yet to be comprehended. In other words, the tragedy of *Antigone* asserts that a law or claim to righteousness limited to its own time/space world cannot be valid on its own, while warning against the possible traumatic consequences of demanding it.

The tragedy of *Antigone* transforms the testimony of the past into a problem of the present and a possible loss – and pain – of the future. The entire symbolic structure of the tragedy is designed to emphasize the fact that an unrepresentable mourning is the problem of the community. The issue is to transform the untranslatable into the translatable, that is, to draw it into the realm of language's possibility. In this way, pain, mourning, and trauma—even if not fully resolved—become communicable to others, thereby freeing the subject from linguistic impossibility, that is, from radical solitude. The tragedy of *Antigone* shows us that speechlessness at the root of pain stems from a temporal mismatch: *Antigone* mourns not because she cannot bury her father and brother, but because she cannot describe this painful experience, because she cannot make herself expressible.³ . *Antigone's* loss is

² Cartledge, 2006:21.

³ Honig, 2009:23-24.

not only her father and brother; she has also lost the community to which she could belong and express herself. Because Antigone is incomprehensible and inaudible, she comes face to face with her own death in the bodies of her dead father and brother.

In her testimony, Antigone harbors the ghosts of the past. Although she appears to be a witness to a singular historical moment, she is in fact the bearer and transmitter of memory. The audience confronts this rootless history in *Antigone*: the stage recalls past events and shows how these events continue to permeate the present. The actors on stage represent the past through their names and costumes, making them both familiar and foreign.⁴ The tension between conflicting legal regimes and claims of truth constantly compels the audience to transcend time and language. The audience thus realizes that words and judgments coming from beyond time, which are met with strangeness in the present, also have meaning. What makes the untranslatable translatable, and thus promises to overcome trauma at the social level, is a remembrance left to the responsibility of the audience. This article proposes to understand Agamben's philosophical connection between witness and responsibility through the role of the audience in the tragedy of *Antigone*.

1. Witness and Language

Agamben approaches testimony through the aporetic context of Auschwitz. At the heart of this aporia lies the problem that it is impossible to determine with certainty what testimony fully entails. According to Agamben, the witness is the only person who experienced the camp's horrific reality and managed to survive that horror. However, what the witness bears witness to is at a level of reality that is unimaginable.⁵ The witness who bears witness to the unimaginable is someone who cannot fully convey what they have experienced – because the witness is the subject of an experience that is too horrific or extraordinary to be believed. Yet the witness is the only person who can convey this horrific reality. The fact that what they convey as a witness to an unimaginable evil is

⁴ Kalaycı, 2014:205.

⁵ Agamben, 2017:12.

questioned or disbelieved reflects the aporetic context of testimony⁶.

What the witness says is the only reference for reaching the truth itself, but these accounts cannot fully encompass the reality experienced. This is because testimony does not merely mean bearing witness to a historical event; what the witness testifies to is also the aporetic dimension of the event. In other words, for the witness, reality lies in the gap between the truth of the event and the representability of this truth in language. The witness has experienced the inexperiencable; therefore, it is the transmitter of the untransmittable. The fundamental dilemma underlying the impossibility of testimony is the incompatibility between truth and language. By nature, the witness is expected to reveal the truth of the event in their speech; however, what the witness testifies to is an excess or uncertainty that cannot be put into words. The witness is thus marked by an inability to speak while speaking. This traumatic structure, in a sense, constitutes the rule of the ambivalent nature of testimony. However, the rule here must be understood with reference to another aporia signaled by Agamben through the state of exception.⁷ As will be recalled, in *The State of Exception*, Agamben speaks of a state of uncertainty in which the rule and the exception are intertwined. This is the space of uncertainty where a lawless power can impose itself as law.⁸ This state of uncertainty is revealed in the fact that, despite being excluded in the state of exception, the excluded thing maintains its connection with the rule.⁹ The state of exception, therefore, is not the suspension of the rule, but rather the loss of meaning of the boundary between the rule and the outside.

The witness, by being the witness of the impossible, represents such an exception. The gap between the reality they experience (concrete, material reality) and the reality they can convey (the network of representations of language) imprisons the existential context of witnessing in uncertainty. The witness, as someone who speaks but cannot describe themselves, becomes a representation of an impossibility that further widens the gap between language and truth. Following Agamben's line of thought again, it is possible

⁶ Cohen, 2002:43.

⁷ Robert, 2006:41.

⁸ Agamben, 2008:55.

⁹ Agamben, 2001: 28.

to liken this existential uncertainty of the witness to *homo sacer*¹⁰. *Homo sacer*, as Agamben points out, is a legal term rooted in Roman law and used to express a life that is 'killable but not sacrificable'¹¹. As a life that is killable but not sacrificable, *homo sacer* is an uncertainty where killing is not considered murder, that is, where a human being is accepted as non-human. *Homo sacer* signifies being outside of religious and linguistic representation; therefore, its life is not recognized as human life, nor is its death recognized as a human death. No funeral rites are held for *homo sacer*, nor is mourning observed for it.

Homo sacer is too complex to be reduced to a legal status. In his text *Coming Community*, Agamben refers to the term 'any existing thing', which has an ontological connection to *homo sacer*. 'Any existing thing' resembles an example that presents itself only as a substitute for something else¹². In this sense, 'any existing thing' is an indeterminacy that cannot bear witness to its own singularity. It always comes to life by being associated with other things, by being included in their existence. In other words, 'any existing thing' symbolizes life that cannot be witnessed and cannot be 'saved'¹³. Agamben's idea of 'any' shares a critical commonality with what he says about the ontology of witnessing. Witnessing is an experience related to the dimension of reality that does not fall within the realm of law, that is, of judgment. In other words, what is witnessed is not merely a historical event; it is the experience of the event's dimension that cannot be reduced to the present or to language. The dilemma of witnessing lies in its uncertainty, which prevents it from being understood as a legal matter. This uncertainty stems from an ethical responsibility that testimony indirectly imposes and cannot escape: "the survivor's task is to remember"¹⁴. Therefore, the witness cannot leave the event behind and always carries it to a place where it does not belong. They can neither remain where the event took place nor continue to exist where they are now.

At this point, Agamben moves away from the experience of the event and turns to the witness's way of experiencing themselves.

¹⁰ Chare, 2006:42.

¹¹ Agamben, 2001:18.

¹² Agamben, 2012:20.

¹³ Agamben, 2012:17.

¹⁴ Agamben, 2017:27.

He observes that Levi, the narrator of the events at Auschwitz, took on both his own testimony and the testimony of other people he witnessed. In his narratives, Levi points out that those like himself always speak 'on behalf of third persons'. This means that the surviving witness does not consider himself a 'true witness' and therefore, despite his testimony, he is the one who cannot be considered a witness.¹⁵ The witness's experience is, in essence, traumatic; because what is expected of the witness is to be believed to speak in the name of justice and truth. What the witness conveys is, in other words, accepted as complete and exhaustive.¹⁶ However, at the heart of testimony lies a 'threshold of indistinguishability', and this place creates a gap between the internal experience of the event and its objectively comprehensible reality from the outside. This gap, according to Agamben, renders the witness's speech speechless as the uncertainty at the heart of testimony.¹⁷ Thus, Levi and Hurbinek are paradoxically similar: although both are witnesses, they cannot convey what they have witnessed to others. Agamben considers that Levi sees himself as a kind of 'anyone'. Although Levi is a witness, he experiences his existential singularity as an incomprehensible and untranslatable uncertainty. Levi has experienced the untranslatable; however, he lacks the capacity to fully convey what he has experienced. Therefore, Levi is no longer a being capable of conversing with others within a shared life (*zoon politikon echon*). What Levi lacks, then, is not only his linguistic existence but also his political existence.¹⁸ The traumatic existence of testimony cannot be reduced to the possibility of conveying historical events. Trauma also calls for a responsibility that must be assumed by those who bear witness to the witness. Just as Levi bore witness to other witnesses, witness must also be borne to Levi.

¹⁵ Agamben, 2017:33.

¹⁶ Mocan, 2021:94.

¹⁷ Agamben, 2017:37-38. Here, Agamben refers to a child whom the other prisoners in the camp call Hurbinek. Hurbinek is a 'mute' who cannot express himself or his experiences. Therefore, Agamben refers to his muteness, which undermines his testimony despite his witnessing, that is, the fact that the sounds he makes are deemed meaningless.

¹⁸ Fraser, 1999:403.

2. Antigone: Testimony and Trauma

2.1. Witnessing in Tragedy

Greek tragedy is a foundational text that presents the political questions of the Greek polis in the form of human drama¹⁹. In these classical texts, ancient issues are discussed alongside contemporary relevance. A typical feature of tragedy is that it addresses universal human problems without neglecting the particular. Tragedy deals with secrets and obscurities that remain unchanged in a changing world but are always concealed. Understanding truth in accordance with its etymology, as the ancient principle of philosophy dictates, it strives to lift the veil covering the mysteries that permeate the present. As Heidegger emphasizes, tragedy attempts to grasp the truth at the source of the philosophical question, not by transforming it into a philosophical question, but through a poeticization that allows us to question the meaning of being²⁰. This poeticization shows that problems relating to the human condition cannot be addressed solely with concepts generated by the mind. In tragedy, the human condition is addressed on the one hand at a historical and political level, while on the other hand, it is evaluated in a mythological context that transcends the historical. In this respect, tragedy is an attempt to bear witness to moments of crisis where the ancient and the contemporary confront each other.

If what constitutes tragedy is a kind of crisis narrative, and if at the heart of the crisis lies the confrontation between the ancient and the modern, then tragedy is, in a sense, founded on the reality of perpetual conflict. MacIntyre rightly says that what makes tragedy meaningful is the struggle between different goods²¹. But what we must really see is not the endless struggle or conflict in tragedy. The idea that the law is not eternal and universal is expressed here as the judicial condition that causes conflict. What causes conflict is the revelation of the valid and limited existence of the law, which is assumed to be the condition of the judgment of truth or justice.

¹⁹ Schmidt, 2001:254.

²⁰ McNeill, 2000:171.

²¹ MacIntyre, 1984:134-136.

Vernant and Naquet therefore refer to the contingent nature of reconciliation and conflict in tragedy²². The reason why conflict cannot be eliminated, or reconciliation cannot be sustained, is the temporal gap between fact and norm, as well as the way this gap is experienced. Tragedy is a place where the human condition is staged, and what is staged here is a crisis of this gap or discord²³. The metaphorical exclusion of the tragic hero by the law or the abandonment of the hero by fate is the experience of this temporal gap. The hero does not know where to go or whom to turn to in the zone of uncertainty between the law and its violation. For what he is witnessing lies outside the scope of the law to which he is subject and the judgement that derives from it²⁴. The hero, therefore, does not experience the gap merely as uncertainty; the gap is a kind of impossibility. What creates this impossibility is the hero's inability to articulate what he experiences as a precondition for judging it.

The impossibility that tragedy reveals through crisis and openness reflects the hero's tragedy as much as it invites the audience to think. Indeed, it is not easy to determine who is right and who is wrong among conflicting demands. The logic of tragedy is based on making this distinction impossible. Therefore, the audience is expected to think rather than just watch. However, thinking does not mean establishing the principles or arrangements necessary to resolve the event. Since the audience witnesses the struggle between conflicting judgments through the hero's state of mind, they bear witness to subjective experience rather than the plot. The event is historical, and, therefore, left behind in time as a fleeting moment. However, experience is transferred to existence through the internalisation of the event's past origins and its spillover into the future. Therefore, the ethical-political context in tragedy arises not from the decision between right and wrong, but from the memory-forming effect of experience²⁵. Although experience appears to be something subjective belonging to the hero, it actually belongs to the audience. This is because the hero of tragedy, positioned in the zone of uncertainty between law and transgression, cannot convey his witness to the event and cannot make himself

²² Vernant & Naquet, 2012:35.

²³ Segal, 1998:13.

²⁴ Beardsworth, 1999:39.

²⁵ Sezer & Kalaycı, 2017:14.

understandable. Consequently, the audience bears witness to the hero's impossible testimony and assumes the responsibility of carrying it forward. What the hero, positioned at the center of the conflict between the law of the police and the ancient laws of tradition, witnesses is not merely the objective image of the event. The hero has taken on the incommunicable experience of the event and represents that which is left outside, incomprehensible, in this conflict. The hero's tragedy, in the zone of uncertainty where the boundary between law and violation becomes blurred, stems from the untranslatable nature of the division between event and experience. The untranslatability of experience can result in the hero's disappearance from memory; this will remove the hero from belonging to the community.

As the subject of the tragic event, the hero is someone who directly confronts the experience of the event. Therefore, what they convey is critically important for understanding the experience of the event. However, what makes the hero's testimony meaningful is another testimony that complements it. What validates the hero's testimony as the speaking/narrating subject is the citizens as witnesses to what is being conveyed. Citizens/spectators learn through tragedy that the problems of solidarity in a singular story can be comprehended²⁶. With this structure, tragedy shows that the personal is also socially/politically sourced. Therefore, bearing witness to the experience is as important as learning about the event. As the subject of the tragic event, the hero's testimony requires external witnessing and responsibility because tragedy is untranslatable and incomprehensible. Sophocles' *Antigone* illustrates the potential trauma that arises when such witnessing is absent.

2.2. Antigone's Traumatic Witnessing

The tragedy of Antigone recounts the events following the struggle between Oedipus' two sons (Eteocles and Polyneices) for power after his death. Before his death, Oedipus had advised his two sons to rule Thebes jointly, taking turns. However, when it was his brother's turn, Eteocles refused to relinquish power to him. Polyneices then arrived at the city with his army. After both brothers

²⁶ Aristotle, 2012:1451b.

die in battle, King Creon orders Eteocles' body to be buried "like a hero who died for his country," while Polyneikes' body is to be left naked "like a traitor to his country"²⁷. However, Antigone defies this order and buries Polyneikes' body. In this context, the tragedy stages a dual testimony: the first testimony belongs to Antigone. Antigone witnessed her father, Oedipus, dying silently like a stranger in a foreign land²⁸. What Antigone witnessed in Oedipus was the traumatic experience of being a stranger. Oedipus, in a country where he was a stranger, was forced to reveal his identity, but he could not explain himself to anyone²⁹. Antigone is a witness to her father's trauma; Oedipus was exiled as the perpetrator of a horrific event and murder. Leaving his homeland transformed him not only into a stranger but also into a dead man. Antigone sees that her father has been declared 'outside the law' in Kolonos. Being outside the law means not only not belonging to that city's law, but also that his word and existence are not counted as those of a citizen, or even a human being. The place Oedipus has gone to resists speech; Oedipus, in this sense, is positioned at a distance from human relations.³⁰

Therefore, Antigone confronts Creon with the demand to bury her brother Polyneikes' dead body 'properly'. Butler says that this demand is actually realized linguistically by being expressed both against the command of the law and in the presence of the law³¹. By mentioning her brother's name, who, like her father, has been declared lawless (*anomos*), in the presence of the law, Antigone actually makes him memorable and mournable. For Creon, however, Polyneikes does not deserve a proper burial because he is a traitor to his country. Not being buried properly is also a condition for Polyneikes not being remembered. Polyneikes is killed twice; the first time as a corpse that is no longer alive physiologically, the

²⁷ Sophocles, 2017:20-25; Tripoula, 2024.

²⁸ Sophocles, 2020.

²⁹ Oedipus states that he cannot leave the land (Kolonos) where he has taken refuge after committing murder. He is not only a stranger; he has also been forced to leave his homeland and has nowhere else to go. The elders of the city ask Oedipus where he comes from and who he is. Oedipus answers all these questions but asks them not to ask why he came here. However, when the elders learn who he really is, they try to expel him from the country. Oedipus then begs them not to consider him an 'outlaw' (*anomos*) (Derrida, 2020:37).

³⁰ Knudsen, 2018:70.

³¹ Butler, 2007:19; Kakoliris, 2025.

second time as a symbolic death because he will not be remembered and his name will not be spoken. Antigone defied the order forbidding her brother's burial and acted to ensure his symbolic life. Loraux rightly states that Antigone brought the unmourned into the public sphere³². This is as much an act of defiance against the law of the polis as it is a step towards exposing its symbolic groundlessness. Antigone's claim is based on an ancient kinship law that takes precedence over the city's law. This claim contains the assertion of invalidating the city's 'temporal' law, that is, its reality existing within a specific time/space plane. Aware of this threat, Creon understands the meaning and existence of the law through the city's political unity.

Creon's discourse is based on the affirmation of the existing order and its acceptance as the supreme law. However, this discourse imbues the existence that gives the law its validity with a kind of mythical character. While Creon places the city's law above the ancient law of kinship, he relies on the police's presence here and now. Yet, in declaring the city's law to be the sole and supreme law, he cannot escape the hubris (*hybris*) of seeing it as above all other laws and claims to truth³³. With his hubris, Creon also deems Antigone to be lawless (*anomos*). He orders her to be buried alive, but recants this decision when the oracle foretells disaster. However, Antigone takes her own life by hanging herself in the prison where she is held captive. It is not only Antigone who dies; Creon's son Hamion and his wife Eurydice also kill themselves. Creon, the ruler of the city, who rules with the power and authority granted by the city's laws, loses his family.

Kreon has overstepped the mark by preventing the mourning of the dead. What Antigone witnesses in this excess is the symbolic death brought about by the decree forbidding her brother's burial. Kreon's decree is not merely a prohibition concerning a specific event or act. This prohibition has created an area of uncertainty. Creon's decree is a decision about which lives can be mourned, remembered, or spoken of. While the law determines what can be mourned, it also determines who can be killed, that is, who can be considered *homo sacer*. Therefore, fragility is not merely a calamity that can befall anyone, but rather the inherent logic of the law of

³² Loraux, 1998:64.

³³ Plescia, 1976:133.

the polis³⁴. Antigone witnessed not only her father and brother being declared *anomos*, but also the logic of the police. Her grief cannot, therefore, be assessed within the context of kinship. Antigone is, above all, an indirect victim of a law that dangerously intertwines the personal and the social. When Creon orders her to be buried alive, he has in fact declared Antigone herself *anomos*. Deprived of mourning her brother, Antigone herself becomes someone who cannot be mourned. Antigone is killed before she is killed; pushed outside the law of the polis, made unforgettable, and transformed into a body that cannot be mourned, she shares the same fate as her brother, who is labeled a 'traitor'. However, the fundamental difference between Antigone and Polyneikes is that Antigone faces this while she is still alive. Her brother will not be remembered after his death, nor will he be mourned; Antigone, however, has learned while still alive that she too will be impossible to mourn. This is what makes Antigone's testimony traumatic: Antigone has been labeled an unmournable body by being cast outside the law, but she has also been deprived of language and speech. Antigone cannot speak because her words have no meaning, and she cannot convey her experience because no one before her can understand her. Antigone, like her brother, has been declared outside the law and thus excluded not only from the city's legal order but also from its collective existence. In this state of lawlessness, Antigone is a *homo sacer* whose killing is not a crime. And the tragedy ultimately leaves us with this question: who will bear witness to this traumatised testimony, killed while alive, silenced while able to speak?

3. Bearing Witness to the Witness

Antigone, unable to find a place for her father and brother in the community's world of partnership, or realizing that no such place exists, is a victim of her own traumatic experience. The source of Antigone's trauma lies not only in the inability to convey the feelings created by the event; Antigone experiences that she does not belong to a world where she can express herself. Viewed

³⁴ Agamben, 2001:164-166.

from this perspective, the tragedy expresses that the origin of personal trauma lies in the traumatic establishment of the political community. It becomes apparent that the absoluteness of the city's law, embodied in Creon, derives from brute force. It also becomes clear that the law is merely an apparatus of political power relations, far removed from the ancient principles of justice and truth. The fact that Oedipus and Polyneices remain unburied is also an indication that all members of the community are potentially vulnerable to being left unburied.

I believe it is important that the *Antigone* tragedy deals with mourning and trauma through the metaphor of being left without a grave. The grave is a symbol that a place is provided even for those who no longer exist in the world of community. It not only makes the dead visible and known within the community, but also provides a support function for the other members of the community. In this respect, being left unburied excludes not only the dead but also the owner of the dead from belonging to the community. In this interval, where the difference between legal and illegal bodies becomes blurred, everyone experiences their own death in the mourning they hold for another. The reality that we ourselves may be exposed to the pain we feel for another accompanies us. This is essentially what makes *Antigone's* experience traumatic: *Antigone* experiences death in her living body because she is deprived of the ability to convey her mourning. For a human being who, as a linguistic being, understands themselves by opening themselves up to others and to others, not being able to speak is death itself. Heidegger defines speech as *logos ousias*; that is, speech is speaking with another about something³⁵. As a reader of Heidegger, Agamben also draws attention to the connection between language and the idea of community: living within a community is a linguistic experience in the sense of expressing one's being within it³⁶. This linguistic experience is the condition for defining humans as beings who speak with others. What Agamben says with reference to Heidegger does not actually emphasize only the speaking characteristic of humans as political beings. The Heideggerian interpretation of speech says that humans are also audible beings. Speak-

³⁵ Heidegger, 2009:15.

³⁶ Agamben, 1999:35.

ing to another means being heard by another; but this is not hearing; it is understanding³⁷. What distinguishes humans from animals—and makes them 'more' political—is not that they produce sound, as animals do, but that they produce meaningful speech (*logos*)³⁸.

Human existence, as expressed by Aristotle as an activity, is fundamentally defined by the idea of reciprocity or partnership. Man is human not only because he can speak with others, but because he can be understood by others. This is what distinguishes Antigone's symbolic death from that of Oedipus and Polyneices: while the others experience death as a natural consequence of life, Antigone experiences death within the community as a way of life. Therefore, what Antigone bears witness to cannot be reduced to mere family loss or an insurmountable sovereign power. Above all, Antigone has witnessed the impossibility of community. To witness the impossibility of community, following Aristotle, is to witness the impossibility of one's own existence. Agamben, in *Witness and Archive*, draws attention to this point when he distinguishes testimony from the archive, which is based on the rigid distinction between "the said and the unsaid". According to Agamben, testimony is situated in the distinction between "the possibility and impossibility of speech"³⁹. Therefore, the witness is not merely someone whose words are 'heard'; since the witness's speech is the saying of the unsaid, one must look at their words from a different perspective. What makes the witness's speech meaningful is not that they present the event as a documentary, but rather that they convey the event with elements that add to it. Without these additions, the event is merely a historical image; however, through testimony, the event can permeate beyond history, into the present and the future. In this sense, the witness is a sign that the event will not remain a limited experience belonging only to those subjects related to it. The witness is the only person who can speak about the unspeakable and thus make the unthinkable thinkable. The speech of the witness also includes those who cannot speak, who have not been able to speak. In other words, the unspeakable becomes a subject of speech, that is, of shared existence, through

³⁷ Finlayson, 2014:114.

³⁸ Aristotle, 1991: 1-980b23; Aristotle, 1997: 1253a7.

³⁹ Agamben, 2017:151.

testimony. Testimony can therefore be thought of as an opportunity where those who cannot speak meet those who can, where the idea of community becomes open to being conceived in ways that can encompass different times – and, of course, different legal orders.

This article argues that testimony—and its traumatic experience—possesses a complexity that cannot be reduced to the subjectivity of experience. This is why what Agamben describes in Levi's testimony can be related to Antigone's experiences. For Levi and Antigone, the traumatic experience is not limited to the impact that the events they experienced had on their individual worlds. Both are linguistically alien to the community to which they could convey their experiences -setting aside legal and political elements. Although there is a community to which they could convey themselves, they do not share a common language and universe of meaning with this community. The traumatic nature of the experience, which is particularly evident in Antigone, is the simultaneous occurrence of being able to speak and not being able to speak. The reason for this is that, despite being able to speak, Antigone feels incomprehensible. It is precisely at this point that Honig places another dimension of commonality at the root of Antigone's traumatic experience. According to Honig, the tragedy of *Antigone* shows that the commonality of all humans is not death, but fragility⁴⁰. This fragility recalls a state of exception, as Agamben shows, in which everyone can potentially be accused of being lawless (*anomos*). However, fragility and human suffering are represented on a plane that transcends language. Antigone's tears, lament, and cry are her incomprehensible yet audible voice. Antigone is not a speaking creature (*zoon echon*) but merely a creature that can make sounds.

So, how should we consider the possibilities of bearing witness? This question requires an answer in today's world, where fragility and vulnerability have become almost universal norms. The experiences of refugees, migrants, the insecure, and those deprived of their social and political rights cannot be assessed merely as isolated incidents. These people bear witness to not being considered human, both in their own lives and in the lives of others. Feeling that one may be forced to leave one's home at any moment is not merely a traumatic symptom of living under the fear of war and

⁴⁰ Honig, 2013:17.

violence. This fear encompasses the anxiety of whether one can still preserve one's humanity in the eyes of others when forced to separate from the social and political world. Therefore, the Antigones of our time are 'normal' people who bear witness to fragility and social death in others, but who encounter their own repressed anxieties in this witnessing. Bearing witness to witnesses, then, can be thought of not only as an ethical responsibility, but also as a step towards understanding the existential relationship between oneself and the world. The following lines, in which Kristeva approaches narrative, or transmission, as a kind of 'revelation of who one is', perhaps make it possible to rethink responsibility: "The art of narrative resides in the ability to condense the action into an exemplary moment, to extract it from the continuous flow of time, and reveal a who..."⁴¹.

Conclusion

This article, which examines the tragedy of Antigone based on Agamben's thoughts on the witness and testimony, aims to show how the traumatic context of testimony can be addressed at the ethical and political levels. The witness, as Agamben argues, is not so much the subject of an event as the person who experiences the event beyond language. This places the witness in a traumatic situation: the witness is the only person who can convey an incommunicable experience. The witness's words are the sole authority that can document the reality of the event, yet in their speech, the witness conveys the way they experienced the event rather than its reality. This practice of speech is the constitutive effect of a linguistic split between the reality of the event and subjective experience. Although the witness appears to be conveying an event in all its reality, they project themselves outside the event through speech, through which the experience seeps. Like *homo sacer*, positioned as an exceptional figure outside the law, the witness also lives in a zone of uncertainty. The witness does not merely assume the responsibility of transmission or bear the burden of its possibility; they 'await understanding' because they carry the excess of expe-

⁴¹ Kristeva, 2001:17.

rience that cannot be incorporated into language. Therefore, bearing witness to the witness is the ethical-political responsibility of the community.

What emerges when the witness cannot be witnessed is traumatic. However, this trauma develops on two levels: firstly, the traumatic experience of the subject who experiences the impossibility of transmission. The second is the collective trauma of those who 'hear' the event but cannot fully comprehend its destructive impact or its potential consequences for the future because the experience cannot be incorporated into language. The community, which sees what has happened only as events that have taken place but cannot grasp their place in the experiential world because it cannot incorporate them into language, is therefore unable to make room for the subject of the event or to understand them. The division within the community occurs through the failure to assume the ethical responsibility arising from the linguistic impossibility of transmission. Yet, from the outset, witnessing bears traces of responsibility for the experience towards others rather than the transmission of the event. When the witness conveys the experience they have lived through or witnessed in another, using a language that does not belong to the present, they reflect a sense of duty to prevent the experience from being repeated in the future. In other words, the witness demands to be understood simply because they witnessed it and are the only one who can convey it to us. Without this understanding, the experience would be meaningless, and the witness would be deprived of the opportunity to speak – and to be 'heard' – that is, they would no longer be human.

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Conflict, Displacement and the ‘Lived Body’: A Phenomenological Reading of Selected Literary Narratives from Kashmir

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Abstract

This paper examines selected literary narratives from Kashmir in light of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ‘lived body’ to understand how exile and displacement disrupt the embodied meaning. The primary texts for the study include short stories and memoirs based on the Kashmir conflict. Diverse narrative forms have been selected to understand how the disruption in the embodied meaning takes place differently. The paper contends that in the selected narratives, the body is more than the site of trauma. It is a vantage point from where perception ensues and meaning gets constituted. The paper draws insights from Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “lived body” to understand how the body acts as a seminal site of perception and meaning and how trauma unsettles the stable embodied meaning, leading to perception marked by fragmented voices, silences, and profound corporeal alienation. The disruption of embodied

meaning reconceptualises the body-world relationship, producing an altered perception of time and space. Additionally, the paper studies literature, in general, as a space for reconstituting the idea of self in the wake of trauma induced by conflict and displacement. Writing about trauma and displacement can restore intersubjective ties that are fractured since an individual feels isolated in his loss on account of exile. Thus, literary narratives become spaces that enable shared memory. Through storytelling, grief is witnessed, becomes collective, and enters a common perceptual field, enabling recognition and the possibility of healing.

Keywords: *Conflict, Exile, Trauma, Phenomenology, Intersubjectivity, Lived-body*

Introduction and Analysis

Kashmir has been the site of a long-standing, intense, and turbulent conflict in South Asia after India gained independence in 1947, which was shadowed by the partition of the country into two nations- India and Pakistan. The princely state of Jammu and Kashmir merged with India, becoming a central point of contention between the two countries. The union territory of Jammu and Kashmir (earlier a state) has been the battleground where conflicting ideologies based on nationalism and religious identity have led to wars, insurgency, heavy militarization, leading to the erasure of any kind of stable political ideology, cultural fabric, harmony, and above all, individual identity. The conflict led to the exile and trauma of local Kashmiri pandits in the 1990s, on account of the place being a Muslim majority state, as Victoria Schofield writes, “In a mass exodus, at the beginning of March, about 140,000 Hindus left the valley for refugee camps outside Jammu. The more affluent took up residence in their second homes in Delhi, but the vast majority were housed in squalid tents in over fifty camps on the outskirts of both Jammu and Delhi. Their story is as familiar as any the world over. Displaced from their homes because of a war over which they had no control.”¹ For the ordinary Kashmiri, the conflict resulted in a struggle between state power and terrorism, resulting in trauma and violence for every stakeholder. The entities like home and identity, which could have

¹ Schofield, Victoria., *Kashmir in Conflict: India, Pakistan and the Unending War*, I.B. Tauris, 2003, p. 151

had stable meaning for a common Kashmiri (Pandit or Muslim), became unstable categories marked by trauma, pain, and loss. The literature written against the backdrop of the Kashmir conflict portrays the desolation and disintegration of people's lives in myriad ways, thereby emerging both as a site of loss and of resilience. The literature produced against the backdrop of conflict provides valuable insights for a nuanced understanding of conflict and trauma, as Angelica R. Martinez & Richard E. Rubenstein write, "Narrative and literary works reveal the indelible marks that violence and conflict inscribe on those left in their wake."²

The history of Exile, violence, and trauma in the wake of the Kashmir conflict has been represented across different genres, ranging from novels, short stories, memoirs, testimonials, poetry, and documentaries, each exploring the conflict and its repercussions in its own artistic manner. Although substantial research has been done on the Kashmir conflict and its representation in literature, there is a lack of attention to the lived body as the site of trauma and perception in exile narratives from Kashmir. This paper attempts to address this gap by reading selected short stories and memoirs using the phenomenological method. Textual analysis has been employed to understand how exile disrupts embodied meaning. For the present study, three short stories from Siddhartha Gigoo's collection *A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories* and three memoirs from *A Long Dream of Home*, an anthology of memoirs edited by Siddhartha Gigoo and Varad Sharma, have been analyzed in light of the phenomenological concept of the lived body.

Phenomenology as a philosophical approach fundamentally studies how one understands the world through the lived experience rather than through any prior abstract notion, as Dermot Moran simplifies it in the book *Introduction to Phenomenology*:

Phenomenology is best understood as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophizing, which emphasizes the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that

² Martinez, Angelica R., "The Truth of Fiction: Literature as a Source of Insight into Social Conflict and Its Resolution", *The International Journal of Conflict Engagement and Resolution*, 4:2, 2016, pp. 208-223

*is, as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer. As such, phenomenology's first step is to seek to avoid all misconstructions and impositions placed on experience in advance, whether these are drawn from religious or cultural traditions, from everyday common sense, or, indeed, from science itself. Explanations are not to be imposed before the phenomena have been understood from within.*³

N.D. Ramalho et al compare phenomenology based on different thinkers and conclude that “while there is a multiplicity of ways of taxonomizing phenomenological currents, we divide them into: pure, existential, embodied, Jasperian, psychopathological, and critical.”⁴ This research article utilizes the embodied aspect of phenomenology developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty to analyze selected texts written against the backdrop of the Kashmir conflict. The paper also draws from Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, who in their book *The Phenomenological Mind: An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science* have connected the phenomenological insights of the major philosophers like Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty with mind and cognitive science, thereby expanding more on the body's central role in cognition and perception. Merleau-Ponty redefines Husserl's phenomenological method, which Husserl “conceived of as a science of the essential structures of pure consciousness with its own distinctive method.”⁵ And emphasizes the role of embodiment in the phenomenological method. Dermot Moran writes, “In the 1930s, both Sartre and Merleau-Merleau-Ponty saw phenomenology as a means of going beyond narrow empiricist, psychological assumptions about human existence, broadening the scope of philosophy to be about everything, to capture life as it is lived.”⁶ While Husserl

³ Moran, Dermot., *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Routledge, 2000, pp. 4

⁴ Ramalho, N.D. et.al, “The Reductions in Phenomenology-A Comparison Across Main Authors”, *European Psychiatry*, 2024, p. 661

⁵ Moran, Dermot., *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Routledge, 2000, p. 60

⁶ Ibid., 5. Cf. Kumar, G., & Chadha, A., “Can ‘Ardhanarishvara’ resolve the Onto-logical Dualism of Prakṛti and Puruṣa? A Study in Non-Binary Ontology and fluid identity in Indian metaphysics”, *Dianoesis*, 17, 2025, pp. 75–106. <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.41706>

focuses on the structures of consciousness, perception, and the process of meaning independent of bodily functions, Merleau-Ponty believes that consciousness functions through the active participation of the body and the body becomes the site of perception and meaning-making. Shaun Gallagher while elaborating the role of body in perceptual process writes:

Merleau-Ponty distinguishes the lived body from the objective or physiological body. The latter is an object that finds its place among other objective entities in the world, in space and time. It is scientifically observed and analysed. It can be dissected into its various parts and each of these parts can be defined anatomically and physiologically as having specific place and function within the whole. The lived body, on the other hand, is the body experienced in a non-objective way. It is not the objective body seen by microscope or x-ray, but it is the body that sees or that exists in the act of seeing. If the objective body is that which can be perceived as an object, the lived body is that non-object involved in the perceptual process.⁷

Dermont Moran also elaborates how Merleau-Ponty “extended Husserlian phenomenology in an existential direction, to take cognisance of our corporeal and historical situatedness.”⁸ Patricia Moya in an opinion article titled “Habit and embodiment in Merleau-Ponty” writes

According to Merleau-Ponty, there is no hard separation between bodily conduct and intelligent conduct; rather, there is a unity of behaviour that expresses the intentionality and hence the meaning this conduct. In habits, the body adapts to the intended meaning, this giving itself a form of embodied con-

⁷ Gallagher, Shaun., “Lived Body and Environment”, *Research in Phenomenology*, Vol. 16, 1986, pp. 139-170.

⁸ Moran, Dermot., *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Routledge, 2000, pp.402.

*sciousness. Indeed, for our author, corporeal existence constitutes a third category that unifies and transcends the physiological and psychological.*⁹

Furthermore, Moya focusses on Merleau-Ponty's distinction between habitual body and actual body as delineated in the book *Phenomenology of Perception*. Moya focusses on how Merleau-Ponty talks about the "co-penetration" of the habitual body and the actual body and how sickness can cause a rupture between the two. The paper argues that in light of the trauma induced by exile there can be a similar dissonance between the actual body and the habitual body which is caused by any kind of sickness. In the case of displaced individuals, the habitual body carries memories in the form of gestures, actions, and familiarity of space while the actual body inhabits a space which is alien and unfamiliar. So the body does not behave naturally as was expected of it, based on the habits it carries, thereby creating a rupture between the habits the body has developed and the actual lived experience of it. The primary texts have been read in light of this aspect of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception and the paper contends that the characters' alienation and meaninglessness arises out of this dissonance. Siddhartha Gigoo's collection of short stories *A Fistful of Earth and other Stories* (2015) narrates the stories against the backdrop of war and political upheaval in Kashmir during 1990s. The stories explore the themes of exile, displacement and loss which appear both collective and individual. Each story depicts how the characters grapple with their sense of self. Gigoo has not directly referred to Kashmir in the stories but all the stories represent how the trauma of displacement has shaped the lives of the characters. In some stories, Gigoo embraces a linear temporal order and narrates the incidents realistically but elsewhere he blurs the line between reality and imagination and uses the technique of surrealism to explore the profounder recesses of human psyche. Through Gigoo's stories the paper delves into the very act of body bearing the pain of displacement, loss and cultural erasure. The degeneration of the body is a recurring motif across all the stories. The rejection of Cartesian dualism by Merleau-Ponty and Merleau-

⁹ Moya, Patricia., "Habit and embodiment in Merleau-Merleau-Ponty", *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 8:1, 2014, pp. 1-3

Ponty's idea of lived body is the basic premise of this paper. Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his book *Phenomenology of perception* defines body as not merely an object but as an entity which occupies a subjective space and engages with the outside world and contributes to the formation of perception. Merleau-Ponty while exploring the relationship between body and world draws an analogy where he compares body in the world with heart in the organism and infers the centrality of body in perception as he writes, "Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system."¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty differentiates the biological/physiological body from the lived body in which he situates the perception of a human being. When Merleau-Ponty writes "I am not in front of my body, I am in it, or rather I am it"¹¹ he is trying to establish the idea that how body is not an external object to a human being but how it is the site where experience and selfhood converges lending depth to the human identity as body is the very foundation of life and human beings are actually their bodies since that is how they exist. Merleau-Ponty is emphasizing the embodied nature of human existence and consciousness by rejecting the Cartesian dualism of mind and body and establishing body as something which is not external to the idea of consciousness or "I" but a medium which constitutes the very idea of "I". Reading selected short stories from Siddhartha Gigoo's *A Fistful of Earth* in light of Merleau-Ponty's lived body can help one to understand how displacement is not tied only to its geographical meaning of losing a home but to the very essence of one's being i.e one's embodied connection with meaning. Once displacement takes place, embodied meaning loses ground as there is a disconnection between the body and the new space which it inhabits.

The second text for analysis is a book of memoirs titled *A Long Dream of Home: The Persecution, Exodus and Exile of Kashmiri Pandits* edited by Siddhartha Gigoo and Varad Sharma. Published by Bloomsbury in 2015, the book has been divided into four parts titled 'Nights of Terror,' 'Summers of Exile,' 'Days of Parting' and

¹⁰ Ponty, Maurice-Merleau, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, 1962, p. 235.

¹¹ Ibid., 173.

‘Seasons of Longing.’ This anthology in four parts comprises of personal narratives by Kashmiri pandits who were the victims of the insurgency and terrorism in 1990s. The memoirs focus not only on the terrifying days and nights of displacement but also on the utter feeling of loss post displacement. The writers have focussed on the loss of home, the complex web of memories and how the body grapples with unfamiliar spaces after exile. As the title of each section depicts, the narratives unravel the nights of dread and uncertainty and the days of departure from one’s native places. The narratives of parting reveal the estrangement from neighbours, the transformation of friends into alien others and the collapse of everything that was once familiar. The memoirs of parting focus on how exile is existential and how what was once meaningful is severed on account of violence and trauma. Departing becomes an irreversible act which brings forth summers of scorching heat in an alien place and a life time of longing for home and familiarity. Selected memoirs have been considered for primary reading as the book contains accounts by thirty people across different generations and professions. In the memoirs, there is an intense focus on how body becomes the fundamental site of experiencing trauma and estrangement. The exiled body is navigating unpleasant new spaces which unsettle the sensory reality, shifting the surroundings from familiarity and warmth to hostility and distress.

In “Poison, Nectar” from the collection *A Fistful of Earth*, Gigoo delineates the story of a family of four living in a canvas tent in a makeshift camp during exile. The family includes Lalit and his wife in addition to his mother and ailing father. The story portrays the desolation of a displaced family in which the father is suffering from dementia and the story explores the relationship between body, space and identity. Gigoo reveals how the displacement is not merely geographical but existential too as the tent represents both a fractured extension of the demented body of the father and a rupture in the embodied meaning for everyone else since the harmony between the body and the space they used to occupy earlier is wrecked. This results into a new perception of reality in which Lalit’s mother is, throughout the day, either “wiping the sweat of the husband’s sore ridden body”¹² silently or “stitching

¹² Gigoo, Siddhartha, *A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories*, Rupa, 2015, p. 42.

the torn fabric of her tented home with an old needle which had become her prized possession.”¹³ The needle connects her past with the present as she had carried this needle with her during the exodus. The everyday routine which their bodies were familiar with have become empty and mechanical. The connection of Lalit’s mother to her husband and to the tent reveals alienation which is manifested in the silence and emptiness of her mechanical movement in the tent throughout the day. The mother’s gestures can lead us to the phenomenological understanding of exile in which she tries to suture not only the tent which houses her exiled body but also her fissured world of meaning. While Lalit’s father used to lie in his vegetative state, the daughter-in-law used to dream of his death and she would often “imagine the bed without her father-in-law.”¹⁴ She used to have visions that the body of the father-in-law has been cremated by them but they “had not been able to discard the bed which occupied plenty of space in the tent.”¹⁵ The father’s corporeal presence interferes with the embodied meaning which the daughter-in-law wants to establish with the tent as the tent doesn’t represent only a fracture in her sense of belonging but also represents a space which tries to inhabit her exiled body, thereby becoming a symbol of not only displacement but survival too. She imagined herself lying on the bed and sleeping peacefully”¹⁶ when in reality “At times, she woke up in the middle of the night, took out a pocket mirror from her purse and looked fondly at her reflection. She stroked her furrowed brow tremulously whenever she looked into the mirror. She knew she had to make an effort to smile”¹⁷. The reflection which Lalit’s wife sees in the mirror is an alienated sense of herself and a representation of estrangement with her embodied self. The very attempt to wake up and see oneself in the mirror is an act of encountering the sense of self by looking at one’s body but for Lalit’s wife it becomes an act of seeing her displacement and loss, governed by the memory of her past, which she tries to defy by thinking of smiling and restoring her sense of embodied self. Dreams and memory play

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 46.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Gigoo, Siddhartha, *A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories*, Rupa, 2015, p. 46.

¹⁷ Ibid., 45

important role in each character's sense of belongingness and the fractured identity is revealed through their respective bodies. Lalit dreams that "he had grown old and taken to the bed. Sores had erupted all over his body. His wife had turned into stone. She was glum and didn't know what to do. The four men entered the tent, reciting hymns and prayers. It was a strange dream."¹⁸ This dream encompasses a sense of profound degeneration that displacement and trauma had brought forth for him and his family. The sores represent the decay and disintegration and the transformation of the wife into a stone represents the transformation of a bustling body into an inert entity. The relationship which Lalit shares with his wife is not one of warmth and intimacy. His dream, combined with the relationship which they are sharing can be read collectively as an instance of disconnection and estrangement which displacement can produce in an intimate relationship. Reading the behavioural aspects of Lalit and his family members in tandem with Merleau-Ponty's rejection of understanding the "pre-reflective awareness"¹⁹ through Husserlian transcendental reflection can provide interesting arguments about how our comprehension of the world is fundamentally based in our corporeality. Dermont Moran elaborates that Merleau-Ponty talks about "examining breakdowns in the bodily circuit which bring to light routines and procedures which are hidden and assumed in our normal conscious state."²⁰ So what seems normal and smooth arrangement of body with the world is a much-nuanced mechanism if we delve into how it works. Merleau-Ponty attempts to do so by investigating pathological cases in which body's normal interaction with the world is fractured due to illness or disorder. Moran writes how Merleau-Ponty analyses case studies of brain-damaged war veterans (like Schneider) to understand their bodily movements and how the motor ability of the disabled person was operational but the person's body is unable to be operational in a fluid manner and the motor ability becomes more mechanical and is locked in one action repeatedly.²¹

¹⁸ Ibid., 51

¹⁹ Moran, Dermot., *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Routledge, 2000, p. 419

²⁰ Moran, Dermot., *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Routledge, 2000, p. 419

²¹ Ibid.

When Merleau-Ponty elaborated on Husserl's intentionality "all consciousness is consciousness of something"²², Merleau-Ponty emphasized the relationship between intentionality and bodily movement and focussed on the body's consciousness of action. He talked about the motor intentionality stating that our primary means of consciousness is bodily action and the possibility of it rather than any kind of contemplative thought process. Displacement and trauma can interfere with body's natural intentionality. Lalit's dream about his sore ridden body and his wife's stasis can be read as an expression of the rupture and loss of intentionality. Lalit can see his own body and his wife's body no longer acting with the same ease as they used to, thus revealing a rupture in their experience of self. In literature focussing on exile, trauma and displacement, intentionality and its loss can be represented through the gestures and bodily movements of each character and the motor ability of each character in relation to their surroundings. Thus all the four characters of Gigoo's story "Poison, Nectar" can be read in light of Merleau-Ponty's lived body and intentionality as Ponty's theories can provide novel insights into each character's disintegration of embodied meaning caused by exile and displacement. According to Merleau-Ponty,

*"The constitution of a spatial level is simply one means of constituting an intergrated world: my body is geared onto the world when my perception presents me with spectacle as varied and as clearly articulated as possible, and when my motor intentions, as they unfold, receive the responses they expect from the world. This maximum sharpness of perception and action points clearly to a perceptual ground, a basis of my life, a general setting in which my body can co-exist with the world (292)"*²³

Trauma alters body of each character into "Schneider"²⁴ like bodies where the bodies are divested of their motor intentionality

²² Ponty, Maurice-Merleau, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, 1962, pp. xix.

²³ Ponty, Maurice-Merleau, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, 1962, p. 292.

²⁴ Moran, Dermot., *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Routledge, 2000, p. 419.

and the relationship between the body and the space collapses. In displacement, the bodies are unable to receive desired feedback from the environment and each body gets stuck in a frozen action. A fractured body-world relationship results into Lalit's inability to imagine a pleasant future. It leads his wife to see herself as a displaced object in the mirror unable to come to terms with her own image. And Lalit's mother is stuck in habitual actions devoid of meaning.

Loss of motor intentionality can be observed in "The Umbrella Man" too. "The Umbrella Man" by Siddhartha Gigoo is a story of an insane man living in an asylum after exile. The story is rather ambivalent as the umbrella man is named number 7 and he lives in a cell in an asylum. The story revolves around him and he seems to be stuck between the past and the present. The story opens with the lines "He unfurled the umbrella, held it aloft over his head and stepped out of his ward again that evening, thinking that it would rain."²⁵ The cell in which he lives seems to be a symbol of a constricted space his body inhabits. Although he is given the privilege to "saunter out of the gates and spend sometime in the street nearby"²⁶ but every time that ends either at one wall or the other. Gigoo writes "No one in the asylum remembered how the umbrella has become an inseparable companion of the man."²⁷ The umbrella had become an extension of his body seemingly looking for meaning. Gigoo writes "It was rain which defined the umbrella, gave it a purpose, its essence and meaning. The umbrella was utterly worthless without the rain."²⁸ The umbrella has been depicted as having a relation to someone dead and number 7 seems to carry it like a relic of the past. There is distortion of temporal order in his life and the only thing which helps him afford any kind of meaning is the umbrella. It's an agency which helps him to relate to the outside world. Whosoever he is talking to, rain and umbrella are the recurring motifs. The man's relation to the outside world is depicted through his corporeal actions and he is devoid of any temporal sense and his only meaning arrives through umbrella and waiting for rain. The man's past seems to have a

²⁵ Gigoo, Siddhartha, *A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories*, Rupa, 2015, p. 174.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 175

²⁸ Ibid., 176

deep connection with rain and umbrella, thus both symbolising a kind of freedom which the man is waiting for. Umbrella becomes a carrier of his past like the needle of that old lady in the story "Poison, Nectar." He often talks to an imaginary child who he thinks is dreaming an unpleasant dream. He would often say to the child that it is just a dream and "Go back to sleep. I am by your side."²⁹ Gigoo writes "For years, during his life in isolation in the asylum, the child never grew up. The man grew old. White strands of hair covered his face. He was left with little strength in his bones."³⁰ The man's relation and conversation with the child seems a kind of connection which his older self is trying to establish with the younger self. The body inhabits the memory of his past, and as the past life no longer exists he holds onto the objects and the corporeal actions to reconstitute something which has been lost but all he is left with are certain gestures suspended between his past and current lived reality. The repetitive gestures of the umbrella man exemplify a distortion in what Merleau-Ponty claims that the body is "geared into the world"³¹ and the motor intentions are supposed to receive an anticipated response from the surroundings.³² The habitual action of the umbrella man is intact but he has lost the intentional foundation of his gestures. Like Lalit's mother in "Poison Nectar" the umbrella man is holding on to the actions and gestures which his habitual body is unable to forget but the fluidity, purpose and intentional grounding of his gestures are absent which can be studied like the case of "Schneider, studied by Gelb and Goldstein"³³, divulging that exile is not a only loss of home but a fissure in reciprocity between the body of a human being and the world.

"The incurable Madness of the Municipal commissioner" from Gigoo's *A Fistful of Earth* is a profoundly moving narrative of suffering, blending exile, loss, trauma and magical realism to reveal how psychological suffering is manifested and perceived through

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Gigoo, Siddhartha, *A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories*, Rupa, 2015, pp.176.

³¹ Ponty, Maurice-Merleau, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, 1962, p. 292.

³² Moran, Dermot., *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Routledge, 2000, p. 419

³³ Ibid.

body. With the sudden deterioration of the mental faculties of municipal commissioner he is relieved of his official duties but when a junior officer becomes curious about his illness the story reveals how memory's persistence sustains trauma and distorts perception. The commissioner inhabits an old dilapidated house in Nagbal which belongs to a Kashmiri Pandit named Madhusudan Bhat. The commissioner encounters the ghost of Madhusudan Bhat who used to live once in that house prior to the turmoil which Kashmir faced. He encounters the ghost without actually knowing that Madhusudan Bhat has long been dead and through his detailed meetings with that ghost Gigoo delineates how the commissioner absorbs the history and culture of the people who were living there once before they were forcibly exiled and commissioner's body becomes the space which absorbs all the history. So history haunts commissioner when he gets to know from Madhusudan's daughter that he has been dead for five years and always wanted to shoot a movie in their house which the commissioner has purchased. So each object including the walnut box of memories which the ghost hands over to commissioner becomes an embodiment of the history of that house. The story of the commissioner and the ghost is revealed through commissioner's diary which sheds light on the detailed encounter of the commissioner with the ghost of Madhusudan Bhat. On one night the commissioner enters that house and remarks "Last night I went to the village to see the house. The intruder welcomed me as though I was a guest."³⁴ The striking juxtaposition of the intruder and the guest underscores the grave irony of displacement as the actual owner of that house Madhusudan is reduced to intruder in his own home while the commissioner thinks he himself is the rightful owner of the house. Then commissioner begins talking about how the intruder started a ritual, "he took out a woollen cloak from his bag and put it on. He sat down cross legged in front of the fire he'd lit. He took out a handful of walnuts from his bag and placed them inside a brass vessel and then tied a garland of marigolds around the neck of the vessel. Then he poured water into the vessel and put candy into it. He folded his hands and recited a hymn in a language I didn't understand."³⁵ This ritual signifies how body carries the culture

³⁴ Gigoo, Siddhartha, *A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories*, Rupa, 2015, p. 31.

³⁵ Ibid.

and memory of a community since this ritual is a celebration of the marriage of gods- Shiva and Parvati (Hindu mythology) practiced by Kashmiri Pandits. Gigoo blends spiritual, corporeal and magical elements to represent how Commissioner chances upon the history of the very individual who he thinks of as an intruder. Later when the commissioner gets to know he has seen the ghost rather than the actual person, the unity of his perception is lost and he fails to come to terms with the loss of history. The commissioner's behaviour can be read as the collapse of intentionality resulting out of the trauma and shock which he absorbs after knowing the truth. The Municipal commissioner's gesticulations as Gigoo writes, "were awkward and the expressions on his face could easily pass off as those of an actor. But for the clumsiness and his inane gestures, one would take him to be a perfectly sane person."³⁶ His almost theatrical expressions reveal as if he is performing rather than existing. His motor abilities have lost that pre-reflective fluidity of the body. His perception crumbles further as "There were times during the day when the commissioner demonstrated a seamy behaviour that bordered on the absurd. He would indulge in conversations with himself. At nights, he would sit still, frozen and petrified, and gape at the walls around him and utter, 'Are you dead or alive? Dead and alive are both one.' Then he would cover himself with a blanket and sleep."³⁷ His body transcends from movement to paralysis as it is unable to locate itself in a space of familiar history. The bouts of madness which commissioner is facing are not psychological only but his behaviour, gestures, occasional speech and repeated silence represent body's perception of memory and trauma. So, the madness is not mere cerebral but phenomenological.

The second text under review and analysis is a book of memoirs titled *A Long Dream of Home*. While introducing the book as something which marks twenty-five years of exile of Kashmiri Pandits, Siddhartha Gigoo and Varad Sharma write "The stories of the struggles and plights Kashmiri pandit exiles have remains untold. The old are fading away, taking away with them the untold stories-stories of who they were, what they faced, what they

³⁶ Gigoo, Siddhartha, *A Fistful of Earth and Other Stories*, Rupa, 2015, p. 28.

³⁷ Ibid.

lost, how they struggled and what remains now.”³⁸ This exigency to preserve aligns with Paul Ricoeur’s argument that “We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated. This remark takes on its full force when we refer to the necessity to save the history of the defeated and the lost. The whole story of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative.”³⁹

In the second part of the collection of memoirs titled “Summers of Exile”, the editors draw on Ovid’s and Victor Hugo’s reflections on exile. Ovid’s idea *Exilium mors est* (Exile is death) and Victor Hugo’s idea *Exilium vita est* (Exile is life)⁴⁰, two profoundly contrasting positionalities on exile that contextualize what follows in this section. While the former focuses on the despairing identity and death of the self in the wake of exile, the latter focuses on renewal, resilience, and new viability of life but both capture the embodied existence of Exile. In the opening memoir “Summers of Exile” by Sushant Dhar, Dhar focuses on two spaces his family inhabited after being displaced from their original home in Kashmir- one was a “shabbily constructed room”⁴¹ in a small town on the highway, and another was migrant quarters at Muthi in Jammu. While describing their experience in both spaces, Dhar focuses on how they encountered the new reality, and he delineates the torment as he writes, “The summer heat made our skin pale yellow. My parents shriveled.”⁴² Dhar further elaborates how they were “bereft of the most basic things of life”⁴³ as he talks about the essential facilities like a toilet. He writes, “A dug-out was made to contain the feces. It all remained there, the feces, the dirty water and the urine in that little dug out area, feces over feces, water over water, all stagnated, emanating a foul stench.”⁴⁴

While talking about his parents, Dhar talks about how they withered in “endless summers, inadequate spaces and the stifling heat...The nights and the cries of distress were never-ending. Our bodies were drenched in sweat all the time...the elders with ashen

³⁸ Gigoo and Sharma., *Long Dream of Home*, Bloomsbury, 2015, pp.xx.

³⁹ Ricoeur, Paul., *Time and Narrative*, University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 75.

⁴⁰ Gigoo and Sharma., *Long Dream of Home*, Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 71.

⁴¹ Ibid., 75.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Gigoo and Sharma., *Long Dream of Home*, Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 75

faces looked frazzled and wilted as if they were carrying a permanent burden on their shoulders. Elders were often seen loitering in the camp vicinity, expressing their longing through inane soliloquies and monologues.”⁴⁵ Sushant Dhar, while narrating the aftermath of displacement, encapsulates the displacement through the suffering body. He elucidates the experiences of the body through cramped spaces, faces rendered pale due to shock and horror, bodies soaked in sweat, and sunburnt faces. The aimless moving of the elders in the camp, their absurd monologues, represent the body’s disoriented action towards the world it encounters and the space it inhabits. Dhar further writes about the elders around him, “They were aging rapidly; many collapsed and died in the streets. The scorching heat was unbearable; many succumbed to sunstrokes and snakebites. Deaths became a daily affair in the camp. The migrants lived through this tumultuous journey, battling desolation, toiling day after day. The elders were the only connection to my native land. I longed to listen to the stories of the past, to connect to our native land. Their memories were what I depended on. I fear losing them all.”⁴⁶ Dhar’s account of the elderly people around him can be read in light of Ovid’s idea of “Exile is death”, both literally and metaphorically. While the body was suffering on account of heat and appalling living conditions, the death of the older people had become a regular course in the camp; the young people were dreading annihilation of their own past due to the death of the elders who carried the memory of their homeland and the story of their past. The death of the carriers of the past would be a disruption in the historicity of one’s identity. The young feared obliteration metaphorically as the possibility of identity reclamation became bleak for them in the wake of exile. The younger generation, which was born in camps or raised in camps, has nothing to fall back on, as the older generation, which carried the embodied meaning of the past, if dead, has nothing to pass on, and the upcoming generation will inherit incorporeal memories. The history of the culture or home is an embodied entity, and it is remembered through the body, and when the bodies that remember die, there is a collective death of history

⁴⁵ Ibid., 77

⁴⁶ Ibid.

for upcoming generations, which Sushant Dhar feared as an eight-year-old. Dhar repeatedly focuses on the penalties of exodus on children as he writes, “the children of exile had to bear the brunt of exodus,”⁴⁷ and he goes on explaining how children like him lived in those cramped spaces for fourteen long years and “shared space with insects, rats and cockroaches”⁴⁸. There is a recurrent reference to toilets and the “horrible stench”⁴⁹ of the toilets, which, Dhar says, “made us curse our wretched lives. We were engulfed in a foul smell all the time.”⁵⁰ The repetitive use of olfactory sense is a powerful medium of understanding perception through the lived body. While the smell of rain connected the number 7 in *Umbrella Man* with his past, the draining foul stench in “Summers of Exile” signifies the traumatic degradation of living conditions that exile brings forth and symbolizes the absence of home in the dreariest way. The exiled/displaced body’s orientation towards the world becomes meaningless as the body inhabits spaces of filth, which is accumulating in a way that results in stagnation of decay and smell, literally as well as metaphorically.

Against the backdrop of incidents of 1989-1990 in Kashmir, Rattan Lal Shant’s memoir titled “Roses Shed Fragrance” focuses on his family’s experience of leaving their home and settling in another space. Shant, while writing about his connection with his home, keenly focuses on the family’s association with the flora that was native to their home. He mentions how his wife carried some rose saplings from Kashmir to Jammu and planted the saplings in the soil there. Shant’s wife attempts to preserve a part of her lost world by planting the saplings, thereby trying to retain a familiar sense of smell and sight. Shant, while describing his wife’s opinion, writes, “These saplings will remind us of our home. I pray that they never shed their petals and fragrance. In her heart of hearts, she was trying to reconcile herself to the fate and the misfortune which had befallen us.”⁵¹ As Merleau-Ponty writes, “Inside and outside are inseparable. The world is wholly inside, and I am

⁴⁷ Gigoo and Sharma., *Long Dream of Home*, Bloomsbury, 2015, pp.78.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹. Gigoo and Sharma., *Long Dream of Home*, Bloomsbury, 2015, pp.205

wholly outside myself.”⁵² As a human being tries to establish a connection between the outside and the inside or subjective world, the perception ensues from there. The conception of self arises from the body's relation to the outside world, and the sensory attributes play a major role in it. Shant's wife, in planting the saplings, is trying to address the rupture caused by displacement. Rather than purely cerebral connection of self with meaning, body and the sensory perceptions contribute to meaning making. Thus, environment, sensory experience, and cognition are all interrelated to assign meaning to one's existence, and how sensory experience is one of the central premises to build a sense of belongingness with a place. Merleau-Ponty writes

*To perceive is not to experience a host of impressions accompanied by memories capable of clinching them; it is to see, standing forth from a cluster of data, an immanent significance without which no appeal to memory is possible. To remember is not to bring into the focus of consciousness a self-subsistent picture of the past; it is to thrust deeply into the horizon of the past and take apart step by step the interlocked perspectives until the experiences which it epitomizes are as if relived in their temporal setting. To perceive is not to remember.*⁵³

While the perception depends upon the body's placement in the space and has “Immanent significance”,⁵⁴ Memory is not a direct image of the past, which replays to trigger any kind of perception. Memory functions temporally to reconstitute the experience of the past for reclaiming meaning in its absence. Reading this and other similar memoirs can lead one to understand that roses and their fragrance are not just a stored mental image which can be recalled,

⁵² Ponty, Maurice-Merleau, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, 1962, pp. 474.

⁵³ Ponty, Maurice-Merleau, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, 1962, p. 26.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

but something which Shant's wife attempts to reconstruct by immersing herself "deeply into the horizon of the past."⁵⁵ And reliving that temporally and how her memory is "rooted in the perceptual body."⁵⁶

The first memoir of the last part of the book, *A Long Dream of Home*, titled "Seasons of Longing," narrated by Prithvi Nath Kabu and transcribed by Sushant Dhar and Siddhartha Gigoo, outlines Kabu as a witness to raiders who plundered Kashmir in October 1947 and his family's exile in 1991 after the insurgency of the 1990s. Kabu recounts how he spent his life after the exodus in a two-room flat in a migrant camp in Jammu. His son was killed by the terrorists, and his wife died after being bedridden for two years during exile. The testimony of Kabu is replete with emotional and sensory details as he delves into the appalling state in which he lived in exile. Kabu narrates how it has been painful for him to remember the days when militants killed his son, and his life could never been the same again. He recounts, "My health deteriorated. I didn't know what to do... twenty-five years have passed since I left Kashmir...Now I live alone in my two-room flat in this migrant camp at Muthi. I don't visit anybody, and nobody visits me. Sometimes I read. I try not to think about the past. But when I do, I have nobody to comfort me,"⁵⁷ Kabu further says, "My wife suffered a lot during her last years. She was bedridden for years. She couldn't bear the separation from her son and her homeland."⁵⁸ Kabu narrates the incident in which he is desperate about his wife cooking fish for him, and he delved into the familiar taste for a long time. While anticipating his death, Kabu narrates:

I endure a lot of pain every day. I can't walk properly. My bones are weak. But somehow I manage to look after myself...I will limp. I will crawl. I will bear the pain. But I don't wish to be a burden on anyone. When I die, it will be difficult for people to take my body on their shoulders from the fourth floor of this building. I have made arrangements for that...I have kept a rope near my bedside. My neighbors can tie the rope around my legs and drag the

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Gigoo and Sharma., *Long Dream of Home*, Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 240.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 241.

*body out. I don't care what is done to my body after I am gone. It's only a body. My well-wishers can either burn it or throw it in the river.*⁵⁹

The subjective body is watching itself from outside, looking at it like a piece of flesh to be dragged using an agency that is not human but a mechanical article like a rope. Due to exile corporeal being begins to look at its own corporeality as something which is nothing more than flesh to be dragged mechanically after its death. While talking about collecting his son's body after he was murdered by terrorists, Kabu narrates his state, "I felt numb, as if somebody had smashed my head with a stone."⁶⁰ This signifies how the body becomes the medium of expression and perception and how sorrow is felt in the body. Rather than describing grief in abstract terms, Kabu uses a bodily metaphor and projects how his grief manifested itself through numbness and violence meted out by the body. Kabu ends the memoir with his desire to go back, as he relates, "I have only one desire now. I want to visit Varmul one last time before I die. I dream of the winters there! The summers, the autumns, and the springs! I want to visit my old house there. I want to drink the water from the spring and touch the soil there."⁶¹ His yearning to go back is not simply a desire for a lost familiar space, but he longs to return to the lost lived experience. The memories of seasons, water, and earth, which he is recounting, are not abstract but embodied and settled in his habits.

Whereas we can witness a profound rupture in intersubjectivity in the selected literary narratives caused by exile and displacement, yet chronicling the stories of loss and trauma through writing initiates the gradual restoration of intersubjectivity. As per the phenomenological understanding, Intersubjectivity is the fundamental way in which humans live in a shared world, understand others as embodied beings, and comprehend how meaning is co-created in relation to the other and does not depend entirely on the isolation of a human being. For Merleau-Ponty, intersubjectivity is embodied as he writes, "It is through my body that I understand

⁵⁹ Ibid., 242.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 243.

⁶¹ Gigoo and Sharma., *Long Dream of Home*, Bloomsbury, 2015, pp. 244-45

other people, just as it is through my body that I perceive things.”⁶² Ponty underscores ‘lived body’ as the basis of both perception and intersubjectivity, while Husserlian intersubjectivity was transcendental, wrapped in ego, empathy, and consciousness.⁶³ Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that “I am an intersubjective field”⁶⁴ underscores how subjectivity is not based in solipsism but is built in intersubjectivity, as we are already there in the shared world, as Merleau-Ponty writes.

*True reflection presents me to myself not as idle and inaccessible subjectivity, but as identical with my presence in the world and to others, as I am now realizing it: I am all that I see, I am an intersubjective field, not despite my body and historical situation, but on the contrary, by being this body and situation, and through them, all the rest.*⁶⁵

Dan Zahavi, too, asserts “Intersubjectivity, be it in the form of a concrete self-other relation, a socially structured life-world, or a transcendental principle of justification, is ascribed an absolutely central role by phenomenologists.”⁶⁶ Intersubjectivity entails that our subjectivity is based on the others’ response and perception of us. Trauma, however, due to exile and displacement, fractures the stable structure and challenges the very foundation of intersubjective associations. The body shrinks to isolation in forced exile. Across the selected narratives, it can be seen that there is a breakdown of bodily movements and thus intersubjective grounding. In “Poison Nectar,” the body of Lalit’s wife turns into an object for her husband in his dream and even for herself when she looks into the mirror. The intimacy that she used to share with her husband has collapsed as we can witness that in the first few pages of the story, only to be intervened with its restoration towards the

⁶² Ponty, Maurice-Merleau, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, 1962, p. 216.

⁶³ Moran, Dermot., *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Routledge, 2000, p. 409

⁶⁴ Ponty, Maurice-Merleau, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, 1962, p. 525. Cf. Mitrou, Y., and C. T. Kolyri. “Philosophical Interpretations of the Image of Women as Performative Act of Gendered Body and As Bodily Orientation in space: M. Merleau-Ponty - J. Buttler - S. Ahmed - Deleuze”. *Dia-noesis*, 17, 2025, pp. 131-152, <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.41708>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Dan Zahanvi, p. 157.

end of the story, when Lalit's father is about to die. The inability to remove the bed after the dead body of the father-in-law has been cremated interferes with the spatial and bodily freedom that Lalit's wife dreams of claiming. Likewise, in "The incurable madness of the Municipal commissioner," the commissioner's repetitive frozen gaze, the absurd words initially, and later the silence reflect his subjective identity retracting itself to isolation, as there is no reciprocity from the surroundings. His gestures appear as a performance like the umbrella man, whose repetitive action of opening the umbrella is rendered meaningless, driving him towards isolation. Prithvi Nath Kabu's thought that his neighbors can drag his dead body from the fourth floor of the building using a rope to avoid inconvenience signifies another phenomenological shift due to trauma and exile. His indifference towards his own corpse is the act of obliterating himself from the shared field of existence. Trauma collapses embodied communication and ruptures the meaningfulness of connection by isolating bodies into silence. Gigoo's despair regarding the death of the old people in exile and their fading into oblivion outlines how the loss doesn't simply amount to loss of people but of shared history, embodied habits, and cultural meaning. The narrative act of writing about exile and displacement can re-establish intersubjectivity. Thus, studying the selected narratives, especially the memoirs, in tandem with Merleau-Ponty's intersubjectivity and Paul Ricoeur's narrative theory can assist us in understanding the loss and reinstatement of intersubjectivity.

Both the narrative forms represent exile and trauma through their own artistic strategy. Siddhartha Gigoo's short stories capture the abrupt rupture in the embodied meaning by outlining the collapse of the gestures of the habitual body and motor intentionality. Both the narrative forms represent interference in the body-world dynamics caused by trauma and displacement. The memoir *Long Dream of Home* provides a reflective space in which the displaced individuals attempt to move back and forth in time and tend to recreate a continuity between the disrupted past and an alienated present. The memoirs can be read as important narratives of individuals who attempt to reinstate the shared perceptual field through narration. They invite witnessing through readership, acknowledgment, and reciprocation to transform something which is personal and isolated into collective and intersubjective. It can be

read as an attempt to move from forced isolation to recognition, materializing the reintegration of temporal disruption. Short stories underscore the fracture of the body's perceptual field while memoirs struggle to generate historical understanding and restoration of intersubjectivity. While Merleau-Ponty focuses on the lived body as the site of perception, Paul Ricoeur emphasizes the act of storytelling as one of the essential agencies for establishing sense of self. Thus, both forms of literary texts can be valued as attempts to establish lost identity by using writing as an agency to reclaim some sort of belongingness in the wake of displacement and trauma.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis reveals how selected literary narratives (short stories and memoirs), representing the forced exile of Kashmiri pandits, outline the trauma of displacement through the disruption of embodied meaning. The selected texts exemplify how forced exile and displacement can be understood through Merleau-Ponty's idea of the lived body and phenomenological understanding of intersubjectivity. Displacement is not merely experienced as geographical dislocation but entails phenomenological rupture through the body. The texts reveal the collapse of the embodied meaning through sensory detailing focused on gestures, smell, seeing, and speech in what Merleau Ponty terms as, shared intersubjective field. The selected texts show how trauma reveals itself through the body in the form of repetitive actions, mechanical movements, absurd gestures, loss of sensory perception, and silence. The connection between the exiled body and the alien space it inhabits is rendered meaningless and is manifested in the immobile bodies and bodies ridden with a lack of fluid motor intentionality, in addition to the perpetual dreams about death, disease, and loss. The body in the texts can be read as the primary site of trauma, which ends up being a mechanical entity moving through the unfamiliar spaces. The selected texts represent how trauma resulting from exile can convert lively bodies into inert objects and shatter the idea of pre-reflective intersubjectivity and bodily reciprocity, breaking the circuit of meaning-making, thus isolating the individual.

Although the texts reveal a loss of embodied meaning but the selected narratives can be read as an agency through which inter-subjectivity can be gradually restored. The narratives can be read as an instance of shared meaning and history, which storytelling can repair. Memoirs reconstruct what has been disrupted by the exile, and one can witness the narrative capability of the memoir as it attempts to capture what Ricoeur calls “polysemy of action.”⁶⁷ By inviting readers to witness, identify, and participate, thereby restoring intersubjective ties. In addition to this, memoirs from *Long Dream of Home* enable historical continuity and transmission of collective experiences, bridging the fractures in temporality amidst loss and trauma.

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Temporal Rupture and the Logic of the Lack: Trauma, Exile, and the Fragmentation of Subjectivity

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Abstract

This paper develops a philosophical account of trauma and exile through the interrelation of lack, temporality, and narrative identity. Drawing on Lacan, Husserl, Heidegger, and Ricoeur, it interprets trauma as a rupture within the logical and temporal structures that constitute subjectivity. In Lacan, the *manque-à-être* exposes the subject’s constitutive lack—the impossibility of coincidence between language and being—while trauma appears as the return of the Real that resists symbolization. In Husserl and Heidegger, this rupture manifests as a disjunction in time: the breakdown of the synthesis that unites retention and protention, revealing temporality as finite and ecstatic rather than continuous. Through Ricoeur, narrative emerges as a symbolic mediation that re-figures the temporal wound without closing it, transforming absence into meaning while preserving its negativity. The argument culminates in the proposal of a non-totalizing logic of subjectivity, where reason itself is reinterpreted as mediation through difference and delay. The paper thus articulates a Continental conception of logic grounded not in identity but in incompleteness—a logic of becoming that makes possible both thought and life within rupture.

Keywords: *Trauma; Exile; Temporality; Narrative Identity; Non-totalizing Logic; Subjectivity*

1. Introduction: Trauma, Exile, and the Logic of Subjectivity

Trauma and exile expose a profound fracture at the core of human subjectivity. They reveal that the self is not a stable unity but a temporally stretched structure whose continuity can be violently interrupted. This study aims to articulate a logic of this rupture—a logic that does not seek to restore wholeness but to understand how lack, temporality, and narrative interweave within the very constitution of subjectivity. To approach this question, we draw on the psychoanalytic logic of lack in Jacques Lacan, the phenomenology of temporality in Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, and the hermeneutics of narrative identity in Paul Ricoeur. These four perspectives—psychoanalytic, phenomenological, ontological, and narrative—form a constellation through which trauma and exile can be interpreted not only as psychological or sociological conditions, but as disruptions in the very logical and temporal architecture of meaning.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the subject is constituted by a *lack of being* (*manque-à-être*)—a structural void that arises from entry into the Symbolic order. Far from being a mere deficiency, this lack is the dynamic principle of desire and the condition of possibility for subjectivity itself. Trauma, in this framework, emerges as an encounter with what resists symbolization—the *Real*, that which cannot be integrated into the signifying chain and thus returns as repetition or compulsion.¹ The exilic condition—both literal and metaphoric—thus appears as a displacement from the Symbolic coordinates that give meaning and identity. To be exiled is to experience the loss of the signifier that grounds one's being in language; it is to confront, in lived form, the impossibility of full belonging to the order of meaning. From a phenomenological perspective, this dislocation manifests as a disruption of temporal synthesis. In Husserl's analysis of inner time-consciousness, consciousness constitutes time through the dynamic correlation of retention, primal impression, and protention. Each now-moment is

¹ Lacan J., *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. B. Fink, W. W. Norton & Company, New York 2006, pp. 204–215.

a synthesis of what has just elapsed and what is anticipated, forming a continuous horizon of temporal self-awareness.² Trauma interrupts this synthesis: the past ceases to be retained as past and returns as the ever-present wound. The future, in turn, becomes foreclosed; protention collapses into a suspended now. Thus, trauma is not simply an event within time—it is an alteration of temporality itself, a deformation of the flow that unifies consciousness. Heidegger's existential analytic radicalizes this insight by grounding temporality in Dasein's ecstatic structure—its projection toward possibilities, its thrownness, and its being-toward-death.³ Exile, when viewed through this lens, is not only spatial displacement but existential ungrounding: the loss of the world as the meaningful horizon of being. The exiled subject stands before an estranged temporality in which the past no longer serves as a ground of familiarity and the future no longer promises dwelling. Trauma here becomes a mode of *Unheimlichkeit*, unhomeliness, in which being is severed from its temporal belonging.

The attempt to reconstitute meaning after rupture finds expression in Ricoeur's notion of *narrative identity*. For Ricoeur, narration mediates between lived time and cosmic time, offering a configuration (*mise en intrigue*) through which the subject can reinterpret its past and project itself anew.⁴ Narrative thus performs a reparative function: it refigures the fragmented temporal field of the self into a partial coherence. Yet, as Ricoeur himself insists, this coherence is never total; the self remains an open-ended hermeneutic project, exposed to the excess of meaning and the irreducibility of the event.⁵ The act of narration is therefore both an *ethical* and *logical* gesture: it accepts the non-closure of subjectivity and transforms lack into the condition of creative refiguration.

This paper argues that trauma and exile should be understood within a non-totalizing logic of subjectivity—a logic that resists the

² Husserl E., *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893–1917)*, trans. J. B. Brough, Springer, Dordrecht 1991, pp. 35–48.

³ Heidegger M., *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, Harper & Row, New York 1962, §§65–83; Cf. Sakizli, A. “The Neutrality of Dasein and the Shame in the Female Experience: A Feminist Philosophical Analysis”, *Dia-noesis*, 17, 2025, pp. 313–30, <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.41716>.

⁴ Ricoeur P., *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, trans. K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1984, p. 52.

⁵ Ricoeur P., *Oneself as Another*, trans. K. Blamey, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992, pp. 140–148.

metaphysical demand for unity and instead affirms the constitutive absence that underlies consciousness, temporality, and identity. Such a logic aligns the psychoanalytic with the phenomenological: Lacan's lack parallels Husserl's temporal gap between retention and protention, Heidegger's *not-yet* of existence, and Ricoeur's narrative mediation that forever defers completion. By placing these traditions in dialogue, we can articulate a conceptual framework that does not treat trauma as mere dysfunction but as a disclosure of the subject's structural openness. The exiled and the traumatized reveal, more radically than any other figures, the truth of our condition: that to be human is to dwell in the interval between presence and absence, between the lost past and the unattainable future—a logic of being fractured by time.

2. The Lacanian Logic of the Lack

Manque-à-être and the Impossibility of Completeness

At the heart of Lacanian psychoanalysis lies the recognition that the subject is constituted through a structural lack—what Lacan terms *manque-à-être*, the “lack of being”.⁶ This lack is not an empirical deficit to be filled but the very condition of subjectivity. It arises from the process of symbolic alienation, whereby the subject becomes separated from the immediacy of being through its insertion into language. Entry into the Symbolic order requires subjection to the law of the signifier; it is by accepting this mediation that the speaking being (*parlêtre*) emerges. Yet this act of entry also produces a split: the subject is never identical with itself but divided between its signified representation (*je parle*) and what resists representation (*je ne suis pas là où je parle*).⁷ Lacan reformulates this split as the difference between *être* and *avoir*: the subject no longer *is* its being but merely *has* a signifier that stands for it. The Symbolic replaces immediacy with mediation, substituting signifiers for the fullness of being.⁸ Desire, in turn, emerges as

⁶ Lacan J., *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, pp. 204–215.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 494–502.

⁸ Lacan J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. A. Sheridan, W. W. Norton & Company, New York 1977, pp. 203–215.

the movement generated by this loss—an attempt to recover the lost object that can never be regained. The *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire, thus stands as the remainder of this initial operation: a trace of the Real that both animates and frustrates desire.⁹

In *Écrits*, Lacan describes *manque-à-être* as “the essential gap that constitutes the subject in its relation to being”.¹⁰ The logic of this gap rejects the metaphysical fantasy of totality. There is no final synthesis of self and world, no reconciliation between language and being. The subject is instead constituted through negativity—through what it is not. This structural incompleteness defines the ethical and ontological horizon of psychoanalysis: to be a subject is to live in tension with the void that founds one’s existence. Within this framework, trauma appears as the moment in which the illusion of completeness collapses and the lack reasserts itself. It is the sudden eruption of the Real—the unsymbolizable kernel that marks the limits of representation. Yet Lacan does not view this lack as pathological; rather, it is the logic of subjectivity itself. Every act of signification reaffirms the impossibility of full presence, while every articulation of desire re-enacts the gap that makes speaking possible. To understand trauma, then, one must first understand that the subject was never whole. The logic of *manque-à-être* is the logic of a being that is structurally out of joint with itself—a being exiled from its own fullness, condemned to speak from within its absence.

Trauma as the Return of the Real and the Foreclosure of Symbolization

If *manque-à-être* defines the subject’s structural incompleteness, then trauma represents the moment when this lack becomes unbearable—when the Symbolic order, which normally conceals the void through signification, fails to contain the irruption of the Real.¹¹ The Real, in Lacan’s triadic schema (Imaginary, Symbolic, Real), designates not a positive domain but the residue that escapes

⁹ Lacan J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety*, trans. A. R. Price, Polity Press, Cambridge 2014, pp. 55–63.

¹⁰ Lacan J., *Écrits*, op. cit., p. 207.

¹¹ Lacan J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, pp. 48–55.

symbolization. It is that which “resists the signifier”,¹² appearing only as a rupture within the field of meaning. Trauma is precisely such a rupture: a moment when the subject confronts the impossibility of representing what has occurred, when the symbolic network collapses and sense is suspended. Lacan’s logic of the Real rejects both psychological and metaphysical understandings of trauma. It is not the *content* of a terrifying event that is decisive, but its *form*: the way it shatters the continuity of the signifying chain.¹³ Trauma thus names the failure of symbolization, the point where meaning breaks down. The subject encounters something that cannot be integrated into its narrative, an event that resists being made sense of. What is experienced as horror is not simply the event itself, but the encounter with meaninglessness—the return of the Real that undermines the coherence of the Symbolic.¹⁴

In *Seminar XI*, Lacan interprets trauma as the sudden emergence of the Real *as tuché*—the encounter that strikes the subject from outside the field of anticipation.¹⁵ It is, as he puts it, “that which always returns to the same place”,¹⁶ a compulsive repetition that testifies to the failure of its integration. The traumatic kernel repeats not because it is remembered but precisely because it was never properly inscribed in the first place. The *Nachträglichkeit*—the deferred action through which the event is retrospectively constituted as traumatic—reflects the temporal paradox of the Real: what has not yet been symbolized returns as if it were already known.¹⁷

This logic allows us to reinterpret exile in psychoanalytic terms. Exile is not merely a geographical or political condition but the subjective experience of the foreclosure of the Symbolic—an *existence*, a being-outside of the signifying structure that constitutes identity.¹⁸ The exiled subject is displaced not only from place but from language, from the coordinates through which meaning and

¹² Ibid., p. 66.

¹³ Lacan J., *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, pp. 250–256.

¹⁴ Laplanche J. & Pontalis J.-B., *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith, W. W. Norton & Company, New York 1973, pp. 466–470.

¹⁵ Lacan J., *Seminar XI*, op. cit., pp. 52–53.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁷ Freud S., *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. J. Strachey, W. W. Norton & Company, New York 1961, pp. 18–24.

¹⁸ Lacan J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses*, trans. R. Grigg, W. W. Norton & Company, New York 1993, pp. 203–205.

belonging are sustained. In this sense, trauma and exile share a formal structure: both reveal the moment when the Symbolic order fails, when the subject is thrown into the Real of its own non-belonging. Yet this foreclosure is not simply destructive. In the Lacanian logic, the Real also functions as the site of truth—the impossible point around which the Symbolic organizes itself.¹⁹ To confront the Real is to confront the limit of representation, the point at which the subject's desire and language reach their boundary. Trauma, therefore, discloses the logical condition of subjectivity: that there is always a remainder that cannot be signified, a void that no discourse can close. The subject is constituted in relation to this void—it is not simply wounded by trauma but *structured* by it. This paradoxical insight prepares the ground for understanding, later through phenomenology and hermeneutics, how temporality and narrative attempt to reconfigure the field opened by this encounter without ever fully suturing it.

Exile from the Symbolic: Subjectivity and the Lost Signifier

The notion of exile acquires a distinctive philosophical significance when approached through the Lacanian logic of the Symbolic. In this framework, exile is not only spatial or political, but a *structural* condition of the speaking subject. The human being is, by definition, exiled from immediacy—expelled from the imaginary fullness of being by its very entrance into language.²⁰ To speak is to substitute signifiers for presence, to inhabit a world mediated by difference and absence. What is experienced as metaphysical homelessness or existential estrangement is thus not an accidental feature of human life but its very condition of possibility. In Lacan's formulation, "the unconscious is the discourse of the Other"²¹—meaning that subjectivity always takes place elsewhere, in a field of signification that precedes and exceeds the self.

¹⁹ Žižek S., *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, Verso, London 1999, pp. 21–28.

²⁰ Lacan J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, pp. 203–215.

²¹ Lacan J., *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, p. 214.

This structural exile from the Symbolic becomes particularly visible when the Symbolic order falters or collapses. Trauma, as discussed previously, marks precisely this moment of collapse: the encounter with the Real that exposes the insufficiency of the signifier. The *Name-of-the-Father* (*Nom-du-Père*), the signifier that guarantees the coherence of the Symbolic, may be foreclosed, leaving the subject without the anchoring point (*point de capiton*) that stabilizes meaning.²² When such foreclosure occurs, language no longer secures the boundaries of identity; signification disperses into an ungrounded field where meaning perpetually slides. In this sense, exile is not merely a metaphor for displacement but a logical topology of subjectivity: to be human is to be outside the signifier that could name one's being. Lacan's early reflections in *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* portray the subject as constituted through a "lack of being which finds its reality in speech".²³ Speech both reveals and conceals the absence at the heart of the self. Every act of enunciation presupposes the subject's division—"I speak, therefore I am not where I speak".²⁴ The Symbolic promises belonging but delivers only representation; its structure always implies an element of exclusion. Exile is therefore inscribed in the logic of signification itself. The subject's relation to the Other—language, law, community—is one of dependency and alienation. To exist as a speaking being (*parlêtre*) is to dwell in a space of mediation that cannot be mastered, to inhabit what Derrida later calls the *différance* of meaning.²⁵ When the Symbolic order is disrupted, this structural alienation turns into experiential exile. The subject who has lost the stabilizing network of signifiers—the homeland of language and culture—encounters a form of radical displacement. In this situation, the Real no longer appears as a momentary rupture but as a persistent condition: a void where the coordinates of belonging once stood. The traumatized and the exiled thus converge in their exposure to a

²² Lacan J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses*, pp. 203–205.

²³ Lacan J., "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis", in *Écrits*, trans. B. Fink, W. W. Norton & Company, New York 2006, p. 246.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

²⁵ Derrida J., *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1976, pp. 63–70.

world no longer guaranteed by the Symbolic. The loss of language, in both literal and figurative senses, becomes the loss of self.

However, Lacan's logic suggests that this loss, while devastating, is also constitutive. The subject emerges precisely through this non-coincidence with itself. The exile from the Symbolic is the very movement that makes desire—and therefore life—possible.²⁶ If one were to be fully inscribed in the Symbolic, to occupy one's place entirely, there would be no gap from which to desire, speak, or act. The subject must remain partially excluded in order to exist as a subject at all. In this paradox lies the non-totalizing nature of Lacan's logic: what seems like absence or loss is, in fact, the structural opening through which meaning, creativity, and ethical responsibility become possible. In the following sections, this logic of constitutive exile will be reinterpreted phenomenologically. Husserl's analysis of the temporal synthesis of consciousness and Heidegger's conception of ecstatic temporality will allow us to see how the loss of symbolic grounding corresponds to a disruption of temporal continuity—how the subject's exile from meaning manifests as a disjunction within the very flow of time.

3. The Logic of Temporality and Rupture: Husserl and Heidegger

Husserl's Time-Consciousness and the Synthesis of Retention–Protention

In Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, time is not an external dimension in which consciousness unfolds but the very form of its constitution. Consciousness is temporal through and through, not because it exists in time, but because it *constitutes* time as the horizon of experience.²⁷ The subject's awareness of duration, sequence, and persistence depends upon a complex synthesis that unites the *no-longer*, the *now*, and the *not-yet* into a continuous flow. Husserl's *Lectures on the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* provide the most detailed account of this synthesis,

²⁶ Lacan J., *Seminar XI*, op. cit., pp. 274–276.

²⁷ Husserl E., *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893–1917)*, p. 35.

which he describes in terms of three interrelated moments: retention, primal impression, and protention.²⁸ Retention refers to the consciousness of what has just been; it is not memory in the psychological sense but an immediate holding-on of the past within the present. Primal impression is the living now—the vivid presence of what is currently given. Protention, in turn, is the anticipation of what is about to come.²⁹ The unity of temporal experience arises from the ceaseless interplay among these three dimensions: each moment of consciousness contains within itself a horizon of what has just elapsed and what is expected next. Time-consciousness, therefore, is not a series of discrete points but a *streaming continuity*—a self-constituting movement in which consciousness and temporality coincide.³⁰ As Husserl himself emphasizes, this synthesis is fragile. It depends on the continuous retention of the past and the unbroken projection of the future. The minimal disturbance in this dynamic equilibrium—whether through shock, loss, or existential rupture—produces a collapse of temporal unity. When retention no longer connects seamlessly with protention, the temporal flow disintegrates into disconnected fragments.³¹ It is precisely this discontinuity that phenomenologically corresponds to what psychoanalysis calls *trauma*. The traumatic event suspends the synthesis of consciousness: the past intrudes into the present as a frozen repetition, while the future becomes closed or inaccessible. The subject is trapped within a suspended now—a temporal loop that negates the horizontality of experience.

Husserl's description of passive synthesis provides a further clue to the logic of this disruption. Passive synthesis is the pre-reflective activity through which consciousness constitutes continuity without explicit intention or will.³² In the wake of trauma, this automatic coherence is broken; the retentive thread that sustains self-identity is torn. What remains is a field of discontinuous impressions—what phenomenologists such as Bernet and Zahavi later

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 35–40.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 41–43.

³⁰ Husserl E., *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. F. Kersten, Springer, Dordrecht 1983, §§80–84.

³¹ Ricoeur P., *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, p. 68.

³² Husserl E., *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis*, trans. A. J. Steinbock, Springer, Dordrecht 2001, pp. 69–72.

describe as “temporal wounds”.³³ The self’s capacity to constitute its own duration falters, revealing that temporality, far from being an indestructible a priori, depends on the vulnerability of synthesis. This vulnerability is not an external limitation but belongs to the very logic of time. Husserl notes that each now-moment carries within itself the trace of its disappearance; the present is always already slipping into the past.³⁴ In this vanishing, consciousness encounters its own *nothingness*—the negation that makes succession possible. The self’s continuity is thus constituted through loss: it endures only by ceaselessly letting go of itself. Trauma can be read as the moment when this dialectic of loss becomes perceptible, when the normally invisible movement of temporal self-dissolution erupts into experience. The *shock* of trauma is therefore the phenomenological revelation of what is always structurally true: that consciousness maintains itself only through an ongoing self-negation.

In this sense, Husserl’s time-analyses prefigure the non-totalizing logic that later psychoanalytic and existential thinkers will radicalize. The self is never fully present to itself because its being is stretched across temporal difference—between retention and protention, between what has vanished and what is not yet. The phenomenological subject is already “lacking” in the Lacanian sense: not through an external deprivation, but through its temporal constitution. To live in time is to live in delay, to be perpetually displaced from oneself by the very structure of temporal synthesis.³⁵ This particular idea opens a direct passage to Heidegger’s reworking of temporality, in which the ecstatic unity of past, present, and future reveals not only the ontological structure of Dasein but also its existential exposure to finitude. If Husserl’s account exposes the *phenomenal fragility* of temporal synthesis, Heidegger’s analysis will uncover the *ontological ground* of this fragility: being itself as a mode of temporal incompleteness.

³³ Bernet R., *Consciousness and the Human World: Husserl and the Phenomenological Method*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1989, pp. 112–114; Zahavi D., *Self-Awareness and Alterity: A Phenomenological Investigation*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1999, p. 52.

³⁴ Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, op. cit., p. 52.

³⁵ Derrida J., *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. D. B. Allison, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1973, pp. 54–58.

Heidegger's Ecstatic Temporality and the Structure of Being-Toward

Martin Heidegger's rethinking of temporality in *Being and Time* transforms the Husserlian model of time-consciousness into an existential-ontological analysis. For Husserl, time is a transcendental structure of consciousness; for Heidegger, temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*) is the very being of Dasein—that is, of the entity that exists as understanding.³⁶ Dasein does not *have* time; rather, it *is* time insofar as its existence is always a project stretched across a horizon of possibilities. Heidegger's central thesis, that "temporality makes possible the being of Dasein itself",³⁷ converts Husserl's descriptive phenomenology into an ontology of finitude, revealing that the self's relation to time is not merely cognitive or perceptual but existentially constitutive.

Heidegger defines temporality through the ecstatic unity of the three temporal dimensions—future, past, and present—which are not successive points but "ecstases" (from *ek-stasis*, standing-out).³⁸ Dasein is *ecstatic* because it exists outside itself: its being is a constant movement of projection, retrieval, and presence. The future (*Zukunft*) is primary, for Dasein is always ahead of itself, projecting its possibilities; the past (*Gewesenheit*) signifies thrownness—its having-been already situated in a world; and the present (*Gegenwart*) is the moment of making-present, the situation of acting within what is given.³⁹ The unity of these ecstases forms the temporality of care (*Sorge*), which constitutes the ontological structure of existence. In this sense, temporality is fundamentally finite. The horizon that unifies the temporal ecstases is *being-toward-death* (*Sein-zum-Tode*). Death is not a biological event but the existential limit that individuates Dasein by revealing the impossibility of total presence.⁴⁰ In facing its own finitude, Dasein encounters the temporal truth of its being: that its existence is defined by what is *not yet* and by what will ultimately not be. The anticipation of death (*Vorlaufen zum Tode*) opens the subject to its most authentic temporality, one no longer absorbed in the present tasks of

³⁶ Heidegger M., *Being and Time*, §65.

³⁷ Ibid., §68.

³⁸ Ibid., §65–§68.

³⁹ Ibid., §70.

⁴⁰ Ibid., §53–§55.

the “they” (*das Man*), but attuned to the nothingness at the core of being.⁴¹ From this perspective, trauma and exile can be interpreted as ontic manifestations of a deeper ontological structure: they make palpable the constitutive incompleteness of Dasein’s temporal being. When the everyday continuity of worldhood is disrupted—by the loss of homeland, by violence, or by the shattering of meaning—Dasein is confronted with its own *Unheimlichkeit*, its not-being-at-home.⁴² This unhomeliness is not merely psychological disorientation but a revelation of the truth of existence: that being is always already ungrounded, that the home (*Heim*) was never absolute but a temporary stabilization of the abyssal openness of time.

Heidegger’s notion of thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) provides the conceptual bridge between the phenomenology of trauma and the logic of exile. Dasein always finds itself “thrown” into a world not of its choosing, into conditions and meanings that precede it.⁴³ Trauma radicalizes this condition by destroying the reliability of these meanings; it exposes the groundlessness of existence itself. The exile, similarly, experiences thrownness as a *literal* displacement: a being-cast-out from the world’s familiar structures. What both figures reveal is that Dasein’s being-in-the-world is never simply grounded—it is always a being-toward something that escapes mastery. This being-toward expresses a temporal tension: the subject’s openness to what is not yet realized, and its simultaneous inability to coincide with itself. Heidegger describes this structure as *Entwurf*—projection—through which Dasein’s “projection of itself upon possibilities”.⁴⁴ Every projection, however, takes place from within thrownness; the future is always conditioned by the past. The exile, deprived of continuity, finds that the horizon of projection collapses: the future loses its ontological grounding in the “having-been”. Trauma, in this light, can be read as the disintegration of ecstatic unity—the loss of the horizon that allows time to unfold as meaningful possibility. Nevertheless, Heidegger insists that this very disruption may reveal the *truth* of temporality: being is temporal precisely because it is finite, and its

⁴¹ Ibid., §62.

⁴² Ibid., §40.

⁴³ Ibid., §38.

⁴⁴ Heidegger M., *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. A. Hofstadter, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1982, p. 289.

finitude is not a limitation but its essence. To exist temporally is to exist as incompleteness, to be continually ahead of oneself, to live in the deferral of completion. Here, Heidegger's ontology converges with the Lacanian logic of lack: both expose the impossibility of total self-presence and the necessity of absence for the constitution of meaning. The subject is not a substance but a *clearing*—an open site in which being discloses itself only through the withdrawal of its full presence. In this sense, exile and trauma are not accidental disruptions of existence but radical unveilings of its ontological structure: being as temporal openness toward nothingness.

Trauma as Temporal Disjunction: The Interruption of Temporal Synthesis

If Husserl shows that consciousness depends upon the delicate synthesis of retention and protention, and Heidegger reveals that existence is ecstatically stretched between past, present, and future, then trauma represents the moment when this synthesis collapses—when temporality itself ceases to hold together. Trauma is not simply an event that occurs *in* time; it is an event of time's breakdown. It reveals the fragility of the very structures through which temporal continuity is constituted and experienced.⁴⁵

In phenomenological terms, the temporal disjunction of trauma arises when the intentional correlation between the phases of consciousness—retention, impression, and protention—becomes disrupted.⁴⁶ The traumatic moment resists assimilation into the continuum of lived experience; it cannot be integrated into the narrative arc of “before” and “after”. Instead, it persists as a frozen presence—an *ever-returning now*—in which the past invades the present as something that cannot be relegated to memory. The future, in turn, becomes inaccessible, since the horizon of anticipation collapses into the repetition of what has already occurred. As Husserl might say, the horizontal intentionality of consciousness—

⁴⁵ Ricoeur P., *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, trans. K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1988, pp. 176–179.

⁴⁶ Husserl E., *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893–1917)*, pp. 52–58.

its temporal unfolding—is arrested.⁴⁷ The traumatized subject does not simply remember; it *relives* the event as an eternal recurrence of the same. Heidegger's analytic of Dasein deepens this phenomenological insight by revealing the ontological ground of this disruption. Trauma can be understood as a collapse of ecstatic temporality, an experience in which the unified openness of being-toward-the-future, being-as-having-been, and being-in-the-present disintegrates.⁴⁸ The ecstatic movement that projects Dasein toward its possibilities falters; being-toward becomes paralyzed being-in. What emerges is a form of temporal imprisonment, a mode of existence stripped of its capacity to transcend the immediacy of the present. Heidegger's concept of *Angst* (anxiety) offers an analogue: in anxiety, Dasein experiences the nullity of the world and of its own possibilities.⁴⁹ Trauma radicalizes this structure—it is anxiety transformed into event, an existential arrest where the future no longer opens and the past no longer recedes.

At the intersection of these phenomenological analyses, Lacan's notion of the Real becomes intelligible as the logical correlate of this temporal fracture. The Real, as that which resists symbolization, also resists temporalization.⁵⁰ It is what remains *outside of time*, the kernel that cannot be integrated into the narrative flow of becoming. In the traumatic experience, this kernel ruptures the continuity of time-consciousness, suspending the subject between a past that refuses to pass and a future that cannot arrive. The repetition compulsion described by Freud—the endless reenactment of the unassimilable event—thus finds its phenomenological equivalent in the breakdown of temporal synthesis.⁵¹ The Real is not merely unspeakable; it is untimable.

Ricoeur's hermeneutics will later interpret this same structure as the disruption of narrative temporality: the inability of emplotment (*mise en intrigue*) to integrate a moment that shatters the coherence of the story.⁵² Yet from a logical standpoint, what unites

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 62–64.

⁴⁸ Heidegger M., *Being and Time*, §65–§70.

⁴⁹ Ibid., §40.

⁵⁰ Lacan J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, pp. 48–55.

⁵¹ Freud S., *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. J. Strachey, W. W. Norton & Company, New York 1961, pp. 18–24.

⁵² Ricoeur P., *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, pp. 66–70.

the Lacanian and phenomenological analyses is the recognition that temporality and subjectivity share a negative foundation. The self endures only through the internal fracture of its temporal flow. When this fracture is revealed—as in trauma or exile—the illusion of wholeness dissolves, and the subject confronts the truth of its own incompleteness. Therefore, trauma can be conceived as the exposure of time’s ontology. It is the moment in which the meta-physical continuity of temporal experience is undone, laying bare the abyssal condition that makes temporality possible in the first place: the gap between presence and absence, between being and its perpetual slipping-away. The traumatic subject, trapped in the simultaneity of past and present, inhabits this gap as its existential space. Time no longer flows—it wounds. The temporal wound is not simply an interruption of experience but the revelation of its logical form: to exist as temporal consciousness is to be forever delayed, fractured, and haunted by what cannot be fully present. In this sense, trauma is not external to time but its most truthful manifestation—the disclosure of the void that temporality itself conceals.

4. Narrative Reconstitution: Ricoeur and the Logic of Refiguration

Temps et récit: Time, Plot, and the Hermeneutics of Identity

Paul Ricoeur’s *Temps et récit* (*Time and Narrative*) stands as one of the most profound rearticulations of the relationship between temporality and meaning in 20th-century philosophy. In dialogue with both Husserlian phenomenology and Heideggerian ontology, Ricoeur’s project reinterprets the problem of time through the mediation of narrative, establishing a bridge between the lived experience of temporality (*temps vécu*) and its symbolic configuration in language and storytelling.⁵³ For Ricoeur, narrative is not merely a literary form; it is a mode of temporal synthesis, a way of organizing human action and suffering into intelligible patterns that give form to existence.⁵⁴

⁵³ Ricoeur P., *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, pp. 3–9.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 52–56.

Ricoeur begins from the classical insight that time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through narrative, and narrative attains its full significance when it unfolds the features of temporal experience.⁵⁵ This reciprocity is articulated through three interconnected moments: prefiguration (mimesis I), configuration (mimesis II), and refiguration (mimesis III).⁵⁶ *Prefiguration* refers to the pre-narrative structure of lived temporality—our world of actions, motives, and projects that are already meaningful before being told. *Configuration* is the act of emplotment (*mise en intrigue*), by which disparate events are organized into a coherent whole. *Refiguration* designates the moment of reception, when the narrative world and the reader's or listener's world intersect, transforming self-understanding.⁵⁷ This triadic schema allows Ricoeur to conceive of narrative as a synthetic act parallel to the Husserlian synthesis of time-consciousness, but operating at a hermeneutic rather than a transcendental level. Just as retention and protention unify the flow of inner time, *emplotment* unifies the flux of lived events into an intelligible totality. The *plot* performs what Husserl called the "constitution of continuity", but now through the mediation of symbols, language, and interpretation.⁵⁸ Narrative thus performs the impossible task of reconciling the discordance of temporal experience—it transforms the aporetic character of time into a meaningful sequence.

However, Ricoeur is acutely aware that this synthesis remains fragile and never complete. Drawing on Heidegger, he argues that narrative emplotment is a way of responding to the fundamental *discordance* between cosmic time (the objective succession of instants) and lived time (the existential stretching of being).⁵⁹ Storytelling does not abolish this discordance but renders it bearable. The act of narrating does not heal time; it configures it, endowing it with a form that can be inhabited even as its gaps remain. Through emplotment, the fragmented moments of experience are

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 68–71.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 52–54.

⁵⁷ Ricoeur P., *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, pp. 158–161.

⁵⁸ Husserl E., *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893–1917)*, pp. 52–58.

⁵⁹ Ricoeur P., *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 2, trans. K. McLaughlin and D. Pel-lauer, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1985, pp. 9–12.

reconnected, but the fissure between temporal levels—the difference between the world’s time and the self’s time—persists.⁶⁰ It is in this sense that narrative acquires its hermeneutic function. It does not merely recount events but *interprets existence* by integrating the incompleteness of life into a provisional order. Ricoeur calls this the “hermeneutics of the self”, wherein identity is not a fixed substance but a dynamic configuration that emerges through the act of narration.⁶¹ The self, far from being an origin of meaning, becomes the *outcome* of the stories it tells about itself. Narrative identity (*identité narrative*) thus reintroduces a form of temporal synthesis at the level of meaning: it holds together what has been, what is being lived, and what is yet to come.⁶²

As we shall see in the subsequent subsections, this synthesis is always incomplete. Trauma and exile reveal the limits of narrative configuration: they confront narrative with the impossibility of total coherence. In the wake of rupture, storytelling becomes not a closure but a response—a form of symbolic resistance to the disintegration of time. Through *emplotment*, the subject does not overcome trauma but learns to dwell within its interval. In this respect, Ricoeur’s narrative philosophy converges with the non-totalizing logic articulated by Lacan, Husserl, and Heidegger: the logic of a subject that constitutes itself through the tension between continuity and fracture, presence and absence, memory and anticipation.

Narrative as Symbolic Repair and Temporal Mediation

In the wake of trauma and exile, when the temporal synthesis of experience has been shattered, narrative emerges as a symbolic response to fragmentation. Ricoeur conceives of narration not as a return to pre-traumatic coherence but as a mediating act—a work of reconfiguration (*refiguration*) that allows the subject to regain orientation within a disordered temporality.⁶³ The narrative act does not erase rupture; rather, it symbolically integrates it into a

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 61–63.

⁶¹ Ricoeur P., *Oneself as Another*, pp. 140–148.

⁶² Ricoeur P., *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. K. Blamey and D. Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2004, pp. 94–99.

⁶³ Ricoeur P., *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, pp. 159–164.

broader structure of meaning. Through this mediation, the subject re-establishes a relation to the world and to itself, even if that relation remains provisional, deferred, and incomplete.

To understand the reparative function of narrative, we must recall that for Ricoeur, emplotment (*mise en intrigue*) is a form of synthesis that operates analogously to the Husserlian synthesis of consciousness but on the plane of cultural symbolization.⁶⁴ Emplotment draws together heterogeneous elements—events, motives, emotions—into a coherent whole by introducing causal and teleological connections. Yet this coherence is hermeneutic, not ontological: it arises from the interpretive act that confers order on what is otherwise discordant. Narrative repair, therefore, is not a restoration of lost unity but an interpretive *as if*—a fiction that allows the subject to dwell within the gap between temporal discordance and the longing for meaning.⁶⁵ Ricoeur's concept of refiguration (mimesis III) plays a crucial role in this process. It denotes the intersection between the world of the text and the world of the reader or listener, the moment when narrative understanding transforms lived experience.⁶⁶ In the context of trauma, this refiguration enables the traumatized subject to re-enter time symbolically—to rearticulate the past as a sequence rather than as a static wound. The narrative form converts the circular temporality of traumatic repetition into a linear or dialectical temporality, opening a space for anticipation and retrospection.⁶⁷ The act of storytelling becomes an existential mediation: it reconnects the disjointed horizons of temporality through symbolic articulation.

This hermeneutic process, however, presupposes what Ricoeur calls a "poetics of the will"—a creative capacity of imagination that projects meaning beyond what is given.⁶⁸ Imagination mediates between the empirical and the possible, transforming suffering into a language that can be shared. The narrative act is thus both cognitive and ethical: cognitive, because it restores intelligibility to an otherwise senseless rupture; ethical, because it allows the subject

⁶⁴ Husserl E., *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893–1917)*, pp. 41–43.

⁶⁵ Ricoeur P., *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, pp. 66–70.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 158–161.

⁶⁷ Ricoeur P., *Memory, History, Forgetting*, pp. 78–84.

⁶⁸ Ricoeur P., *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, trans. E. V. Kohák, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1966, pp. 435–438.

to bear responsibility for its own story, to reappropriate what had been experienced as alien.⁶⁹ Yet the repair that narrative offers is fragile and never total. The wound remains, but it becomes speakable; and in speaking, it acquires a place within the order of meaning. The symbolic function of narrative can also be read through a Lacanian lens. In Lacan's terms, narration belongs to the Symbolic order—the register of language through which the subject structures reality.⁷⁰ The act of telling one's story re-inscribes the traumatic encounter with the Real into the Symbolic, transforming what was unassimilable into discourse. However, this transformation is necessarily partial: what returns in the telling is not the event itself, but its trace. The narrative, therefore, performs what we might call a secondary symbolization—an operation that gives form to the formless while preserving the void at its core.⁷¹ This corresponds precisely to the non-totalizing logic that underlies both psychoanalysis and phenomenology: the recognition that meaning is generated not through closure but through the mediation of absence.

In the condition of exile, narrative becomes even more explicitly a space of symbolic repair. The displaced subject, deprived of the spatial and linguistic coordinates that constitute belonging, reconstructs identity through the act of narration. The story of exile is not merely recollection; it is the symbolic reconstitution of a world that has been lost. Through narration, the exiled subject transforms dislocation into narration—a way of being in language that replaces the lost geography of home. The temporality of exile is thus reconfigured from circular nostalgia to a dynamic process of retelling, of *dwelling through words*. Narrative repair, however, does not lead back to total reconciliation. Ricoeur's hermeneutics resists the temptation of closure: the function of the narrative is not to heal in the medical sense but to refigure the wound—to make it part of meaning without erasing its negativity.⁷² The gap between event and narration, between trauma and its telling, remains irre-

⁶⁹ Ricoeur P., *Oneself as Another*, pp. 165–172.

⁷⁰ Lacan J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, pp. 203–205.

⁷¹ Derrida J., *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1978, pp. 278–280.

⁷² Ricoeur P., *Time and Narrative, Vol. 3*, op. cit., pp. 162–165.

ducible; it is the space of the subject's freedom. In this way, narrative mediation is not an antidote to rupture but the very form through which rupture becomes livable. It transforms the impossibility of complete understanding into a condition of interpretive openness—a logic of continuation without completion, which mirrors the ontological finitude of temporal existence itself.

The Limits of Narrative Closure: Between Repetition and Refiguration

If narrative offers a symbolic reconfiguration of trauma and exile, its power lies not in restoring a lost totality but in sustaining the movement between disruption and meaning. Ricoeur's hermeneutics insists that every act of emplotment carries within it an aporia: the tension between the desire for closure and the irreducible openness of time.⁷³ Narrative can organize events, but it cannot abolish contingency; it can integrate suffering into meaning, but it cannot annul the wound. The temporality of storytelling thus remains fundamentally non-totalizing—a process of *refiguration* that constantly negotiates with repetition, deferral, and incompleteness.⁷⁴ The concept of *refiguration* (mimesis III) marks the point where the reader's lived time and the time of the narrative intersect. This intersection does not produce a synthesis but a mutual transformation: the reader's temporality is re-shaped by the story, while the story's temporality is actualized through interpretation.⁷⁵ It is precisely this ongoing exchange that prevents narrative closure. Trauma, as the return of the Real, perpetually re-opens what the narrative seeks to resolve. Each retelling thus repeats the attempt at integration while preserving the failure that makes narration necessary.⁷⁶ Ricoeur acknowledges that this dynamic reflects an underlying aporia of time—a discordance between phenomenological time (as lived, finite, and fragmented) and cosmological time (as measurable and objective).⁷⁷ Narrative seeks to mediate this

⁷³ Ricoeur P., *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, op. cit., pp. 178–182.

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 161–163.

⁷⁵ Ricoeur P., *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, pp. 52–54.

⁷⁶ Lacan J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, pp. 53–55.

⁷⁷ Ricoeur P., *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 2, pp. 9–12.

discordance but can never fully reconcile it. The very act of emplotment, which aims to confer order, depends upon what it cannot encompass: the excess of temporality that eludes representation. Hence, every narrative is shadowed by a remainder, a surplus that resists closure. This remainder, Ricoeur suggests, is the mark of *finitude*—the sign that human temporality cannot be mastered but only interpreted.⁷⁸

This recognition brings Ricoeur's thought into deep proximity with Lacan's logic of the lack. The structural absence that, for Lacan, defines the subject—the impossibility of coincidence between signifier and being—reappears in Ricoeur's temporal hermeneutics as the impossibility of narrative completion. The story can never say the whole truth of the subject because the subject itself is never whole.⁷⁹ Each act of narration mirrors the *repetition compulsion* of the unconscious: it circles around the void, seeking to articulate what resists symbolization. Yet, unlike in pathological repetition, the hermeneutic act introduces difference—what Derrida calls *différance*: a spacing and deferral that transforms repetition into creation.⁸⁰ Narrative refiguration thus becomes a *productive failure*: a repetition that both preserves and transforms, maintaining fidelity to the wound while opening a space for new meaning.

Exile and trauma provide the paradigmatic contexts for this logic. The exiled subject can never return home in the literal sense, but through narration, it constructs a symbolic home within temporality—a structure of meaning that substitutes for the lost geography. This “home” is never complete, always provisional, and continually re-narrated. Similarly, the traumatized subject does not overcome the event through narration but reworks its temporal position: the unbearable *now* becomes a past that can be told, even if it remains untotalizable. Narrative transforms repetition into remembrance without dissolving its residue.⁸¹ The limit of closure, then, is not a deficiency but the very condition of narrative vitality.

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 60–65.

⁷⁹ Lacan J., *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, pp. 204–207.

⁸⁰ Derrida J., *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1978, pp. 278–280. Cf. Kakoliris Gerasimos, “Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction of Western Metaphysics: The Early Years”, *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 4, 2017, pp. 43–62.

⁸¹ Ricoeur P., *Memory, History, Forgetting*, pp. 85–89.

To close a story would be to deny the openness of human temporality and the constitutive lack that defines subjectivity. Ricoeur's hermeneutics thereby articulates an ethics of narration: to tell is to acknowledge incompleteness, to translate suffering without pretending to exhaust it.⁸² The narrative self is never identical with itself; it is always in excess of its own stories, perpetually rewritten by time. This self-understanding through storytelling mirrors the ontological structure described by Heidegger and the logical condition articulated by Lacan: being, subjectivity, and meaning are possible only through repetition within difference, through a logic of unfinished temporality that sustains the openness of existence.

Narrative, in the end, does not reconcile trauma and exile—it keeps them intelligible. It situates rupture within the order of language while preserving the abyss that language cannot fill. The task of philosophy, as Ricoeur conceives it, is not to close this gap but to think within it: to accept that meaning is inseparable from fracture, that every configuration of time is haunted by disjunction, and that to narrate is to live within the interval of refiguration.

5. Synthesis: The Non-totalizing Logic of Subjectivity

The preceding analyses have traced three distinct but converging trajectories—psychoanalytic, phenomenological, and hermeneutic—each revealing that subjectivity is structured not by presence but by absence, delay, and incompleteness. Lacan's logic of the *manque-à-être* exposes the constitutive lack at the heart of being; Husserl and Heidegger show that consciousness and existence are temporally stretched and ontologically ungrounded; Ricoeur's hermeneutics demonstrates that narrative meaning arises from the mediation of discordance. Taken together, these perspectives converge upon a single principle: that the human subject is governed by a non-totalizing logic, a logic that operates through negativity rather than synthesis, through mediation rather than identity.

At the level of psychoanalysis, this logic manifests as the structural impossibility of coincidence between the subject and itself. The Lacanian subject emerges through the signifier, yet the signifier never fully represents being. Every act of speech reaffirms the

⁸² Ricoeur P., *Oneself as Another*, pp. 165–172.

absence that grounds it, producing a surplus of meaning that is both constitutive and disruptive. The Symbolic order provides coherence only by excluding what it cannot contain—the Real—which returns as trauma, repetition, or silence.⁸³ This constitutive exclusion is not an anomaly but a formal condition of signification. Hence, the logic of the subject is paradoxical: it depends on the non-identity of its own elements. The *truth* of subjectivity is therefore not consistency but division. To be a subject is to inhabit contradiction without resolution, to exist as the mediation between meaning and its impossibility.

Phenomenology translates this structure into the language of temporality. Husserl's model of time-consciousness shows that the continuity of experience arises from the synthesis of retention and protention, yet this synthesis is sustained only through the perpetual vanishing of the now.⁸⁴ The present never coincides with itself; it is always already becoming past. The temporality of consciousness thus mirrors the Lacanian lack: it is constituted through self-differentiation, through the internal negation that makes succession possible. Heidegger radicalizes this insight by revealing that Dasein's being is ecstatic—that it stands outside itself, projected toward possibilities and grounded in finitude.⁸⁵ The unity of temporality is not given but achieved through openness to what is not yet, to what cannot be enclosed within the present. The logic of time is therefore identical with the logic of lack: both signify a structure of incompleteness in which being becomes intelligible only through its own self-withdrawal.

Ricoeur's hermeneutics extends this logic into the domain of meaning and interpretation. Narrative does not close the fractures of temporality; it translates them into a symbolic form capable of being inhabited. Through emplotment, the discordance of time is refigured into a partial order, yet this order is itself provisional and revisable.⁸⁶ The act of narration constitutes identity not by

⁸³ Lacan J., *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, pp. 204–207.

⁸⁴ Husserl E., *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893–1917)*, pp. 41–52.

⁸⁵ Heidegger M., *Being and Time*, §65–§70; Filippopoulos, Y. G. “Understanding the Concept of Being in General: From Being and Time Back to Young Heidegger”, *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 9:1, 2024, pp. 9–32, <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.32079>.

⁸⁶ Ricoeur P., *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, pp. 66–70.

eliminating the gaps in experience but by configuring them. The subject of narration, like the subject of desire or the subject of time, persists through the repetition of non-coincidence—through what Ricoeur calls *refiguration*, the never-final synthesis of self-understanding.⁸⁷ Hence, the narrative process reveals an underlying logic of continuity through discontinuity: identity endures precisely by incorporating its own fragmentation.

Across these three registers—psychoanalytic, phenomenological, and hermeneutic—a single logical pattern emerges. It is a logic of incompleteness, in which negation functions not as failure but as structure. Unlike the classical logic of identity ($A = A$), this logic acknowledges that identity is internally divided: A becomes itself only through its difference from itself.⁸⁸ The subject cannot coincide with itself because the very act of self-reference introduces mediation and deferral. In Lacanian terms, the signifier produces a gap between I and I ; in phenomenological terms, the now is constituted through the non-presence of its past and future; in hermeneutic terms, the self is narrated through stories that never fully capture its being. The structure that unites these fields is not that of synthesis but of aporia—a unity produced through the recognition of its own impossibility. This non-totalizing logic carries significant implications for the philosophical understanding of reason and subjectivity. It undermines the classical model of rationality as closure, completeness, or total self-grounding. Instead, reason itself must be reconceived as a function of mediation, an operation that preserves openness by acknowledging contradiction. The subject is rational not insofar as it achieves harmony, but insofar as it can sustain dissonance without collapsing into silence. Temporality, language, and narrative all testify to this rationality of the incomplete: a rationality that organizes absence, delay, and difference without subsuming them into unity. In this sense, the non-totalizing logic of subjectivity is also a logic of temporality. Each mode of consciousness—linguistic, existential, narrative—unfolds as a form of temporal articulation, a spacing that both separates and connects. The present, like the signifier or the narrative moment, is never pure; it contains within itself traces of what it

⁸⁷ Ricoeur P., *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, pp. 159–164.

⁸⁸ Hegel G. W. F., *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller, Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands 1969, pp. 55–59.

excludes. The logical principle underlying these phenomena could be formulated as *non-contradictory contradiction*: the necessity of division for the possibility of unity.⁸⁹ The self endures because it is divided; meaning persists because it is deferred; time flows because it fails to coincide with itself.

This view redefines the very notion of logical coherence. Instead of identifying coherence with closure, it aligns it with consistency through difference—a structure closer to the paraconsistent or dialectical model of logic than to the classical Aristotelian one. In paraconsistent reasoning, contradiction does not entail collapse but cohabitation; opposites can coexist without annihilating each other. Similarly, the human subject—temporal, desiring, and narrating—coincides with itself only by incorporating negation. The logic of the lack, of temporal disjunction, and of narrative refiguration are all expressions of the same fundamental structure: a logic that resists totalization while sustaining intelligibility. What unites Lacan, Husserl, Heidegger, and Ricoeur is not merely a shared critique of metaphysical unity but a common intuition about the form of reason itself. The logic of subjectivity is not a logic of synthesis but of mediation; not of totality but of openness; not of reconciliation but of relation. To think the subject philosophically, therefore, is to think logic otherwise—to think a logic that begins from lack, unfolds through time, and endures through narrative. It is the logic of a being that can never coincide with itself, because its very existence depends on the difference that divides it.

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⁸⁹ Priest G., *In Contradiction: A Study of the Transconsistent*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006.

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**Bioethics in a skeptical perspective:
how to *not* always treat trauma during
exile and cultural displacement**

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Abstract

In today's world, bioethics seems to be the best solution we have in order to sustain a firm and efficient ethical understanding of our suffering world. However, in its good-willed narrative a lot is missing. Many of our fellow human beings carry another cultural and historical awareness than our own. In the context of interaction between the authority of the bioethicist and the needful person of exile or cultural displacement, trauma may indeed not get cured, or even worse, become deeper. As communication between distinct identities is indispensable, both doctor and patient need to re-identify themselves, often securing for each other a certain suspension of knowledge and moral decision.

Keywords: *Bioethics, trauma, exile, cultural displacement, Skepticism*

It was R. M. Hare who suggested that if the moral philosopher cannot help with the problems of medical ethics, he ought to “shut up shop”¹. This view is aligned with that of those who claim that the bioethical “experience” is absolutely essential in treating problems of all kinds in the medical spectrum but also that it is an innovative strategy that enhances the possibility for theoretical moral philosophy to discover a better mission. The real expectation is that bioethics can move on from a point of empirical observation, along with medical science, to the formation of values²; in the bioethical relationship between doctor and patient, this seems highly problematic, if not improper. The main reason is that, because of the nature and the innumerable practicalities of this relationship, it is crucial to bear in mind that there are two personalities involved with strong moral dilemmas that count, not just one, and that one of them is usually in the position of an inferior. This makes the moral outcome even more difficult or significantly less predictable. This happens primarily in cases when trauma, a complicated existential condition, is involved, as the identities of both the patient and doctor may be at risk. To manage such situations, most bioethicists uphold that a deontological approach will suffice³. But what happens when neither the patient nor the doctor know what to do? Is deontology adequate or imaginary? Or, otherwise said, is it possible that they have an actual right to become sincere skeptics?

On the face of it, at least the doctor should be no skeptic, for the obvious reason that he is committed to a profession that requires certain knowledge and action that comes from it. While doing his job, a doctor is asked to make decisions, among them moral ones or practical decisions of inherent moral quality, while the patient can retain a more passive acceptance of the facts or of his role. Dragona-Monachou⁴ well observes that, because of that,

¹ Hare R. M., *Essays on Bioethics*. Oxford 1993: Oxford Academic, pp. 1-14.

² Dragona-Monachou M., *Syghroni Ithiki Philosophia (Contemporary Moral Philosophy)*. Athens 1995: Ellinika Grammata, p. 394.

³ Cf. Veatch R., *A theory of medical ethics*. New York 1981: Basic Books, pp. 316-400.

⁴ Dragona-Monachou M., *Syghroni Ithiki Philosophia (Contemporary Moral Philosophy)*. Athens 1995: Ellinika Grammata, pp. 378, 390-391.

the conscience of the doctor had better be a moral one, otherwise what his medical action is going to produce will be no other than a personal response to a problem thus dependent on personal morality. To bridge this gap of potential moral narrowness and inefficiency, what seems more plausible is the deontological approach or working within a certain protocol- something that more and more medical practitioners accept with hope turning themselves into believers. However, what the doctor misses by following that is two things: a) the opportunity to enhance his own personal moral identity to a desired degree of perfection, b) the opportunity to do full justice to the particular case of the patient.

Bioethics, a field that examines the ethical implications of biological and medical practices⁵, is increasingly relevant to understand the above complexities surrounding trauma, exile and cultural displacement but also is a field where one's moral identity can be set under certain socratic *elenchus*. Under this prism, the aforementioned phenomena are not simply individual experiences but are deeply intertwined with subsequent and broader social and ethical considerations that affect identity training, health and communal relations. Jotkowitz draws our attention to the fact that it is quite disputable whose ethics we follow when we follow all these bioethical considerations during consultation⁶, perhaps violating the right of the person who is exiled or culturally displaced to be heard in his own recognition of himself and of his situation. Similarly, Toulmin maintains that moral enthusiasts may not do a good job when they literally blind themselves to real life situations and problems⁷. Elliott focuses on the parameter that the problem is not that bioethicists believe they have the skills and the knowledge to support their moral decisions but that they represent authority in the nexus of certain bureaucracy which gives an air of the infallible⁸. It comes as no surprise that Jotkowitz, again, describes that "for ethical consultation to fulfill its promise of medicine practiced

⁵ Downie R. S., Macnaughton J., *Bioethics and the Humanities. Attitudes and Perceptions*. New York 2007: Routledge, pp. 31-33.

⁶ Jotkowitz A., "Ethics Consultation: Whose Ethics?", *American Journal of Bioethics*, 7:2, 2007, pp. 41-42.

⁷ Toulmin S., 1981, "The Tyranny of Principles", *The Hastings Center Report*, 11: 6, 1981, p. 38.

⁸ Elliott C., "The tyranny of expertise", in Eckenwiler L. A., Cohn F. G. (Eds), *The Ethics of Bioethics. Mapping the Moral Landscape*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2007, p. 45.

according to the highest ethical standards, the members of the team must better reflect the religious and cultural values of the patients they are serving”⁹. For this reason, if the identity of the suffering person is to be re-shaped under the new conditions of his exile or displacement, then the related interactive social situations are to be re-shaped as well. Therefore, the intersection of bioethics with trauma, exile and cultural displacement requires thorough exploration of key terms and considerations to understand its implications completely.

The trauma, fundamentally understood, refers to the psychological and emotional response to distressing events. As such, it is related to the idea of one’s self, but also to the connections he has developed, i.e. with his sense of belonging. Trauma covers individual and collective experiences, particularly those that affect marginalized groups. Exile, in this perspective, is taken to mean the state of being prohibited from the native country, often as a result of political, social or economic pressures¹⁰; again, this has to do with a re-formulation of identity, and of the interactions one has with the others as object as well as with himself as object. De Grazia well understands this procedure when he refers to the narrative identity and the process of self-creation¹¹. This extends the psychosocial ramifications of the interruption of identity, while exiles fight their sense of belonging and cultural roots. Cultural displacement, meanwhile, implies the loss or alienation of a community of its cultural contexts, which leads to an existential crisis that could complicate identity reconstruction processes. Each of these terms plays a fundamental role in the configuration of experiences of individuals and communities, and examining their intersections reveals how bioethical considerations can provide a framework to understand human dignity, specifically alongside the issue of health. De Zulueta explains how this kind of consideration as active “compassion needs to be able to respond to all the dimensions

⁹ Jotkowitz A., “Ethics Consultation: Whose Ethics?”, *American Journal of Bioethics*, 7:2, 2007, pp. 41-42.

¹⁰ Cf. Kiritsis D., “Economic Globalization, Society and Education”, *Dia-noesis*, 10, 2021, pp. 87-100.

¹¹ De Gracia D., *Human Identity and Bioethics*. Cambridge 2005: Cambridge University Press, pp. 77-114.

of suffering and to respect the dignity of the person and not slide into pity and condescension”¹².

Studying the intersections of bioethics, trauma, exile and cultural displacement is particularly relevant in various communities, where variable cultural contexts affect perceptions and responses to these problems. For example, the ethical dimensions of providing medical care to traumatized refugees or displaced persons reflect on questions about informed consent, autonomy and the attribution of justice¹³. But also, as Agich demonstrates¹⁴, questions appear regarding what really constitutes the actions, cognition, and perceptions of practitioners. In many cases, traditional bioethical principles must be re-evaluated to accommodate the distinctive needs and cultural nuances of these populations¹⁵. Respect for cultural diversity becomes imperative, since the ethical standards that appear sufficient within a cultural paradigm may not be applicable to another. Dancy even doubts whether principles are anything else than just generalized mistakes which disfavor the variety of reasons that there are on numerous issues¹⁶. The question remains though: even if we say respect and awareness sound right (in the sense of being effective), how much are they really feasible?

In addition, the consequences of trauma, exile and cultural displacement on identity are quite profound and influence a lot of related parameters. Many people from displaced communities fight with the integration of their past identities with new, often imposed ones, leading to complex psychosocial challenges and, often, failures. Quite frequently they are feared by local governments or are turned into scapegoats; in this manner, their sense of identity is even more at risk¹⁷. Bioethical research on these identities reveals not only the individual’s struggle to manage himself under the

¹² De Zulueta P. C., “Suffering, Compassion and ‘Doing Good Medical Ethics’”, *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 41: 1, 2015, p. 89.

¹³ Engelhardt H. T., “The search for a global morality: Bioethics, the culture wars and moral diversity”, in Engelhardt H. T. (Ed), *Global Bioethics. The Collapse of Consensus*, M & M Scrivener Press, Salem 2006, pp. 18-49.

¹⁴ Agich G. J., “The Question of Method in Ethics Consultation”, *American Journal of Bioethics*, 1:4, 2001, pp. 31-41.

¹⁵ Toulmin S., 1981, “The Tyranny of Principles”, *The Hastings Center Report*, 11: 6, 1981, pp. 31-39.

¹⁶ Dancy J., *Ethics Without Principles*. Oxford 2004: Clarendon Press.

¹⁷ Vasanthakumar A., *The Ethics of Exile: A Political Theory of Diaspora*. Oxford 2021: Oxford University Press, pp. 1-2.

new terms, but also the collective memory of the communities affected by historical injustices. Once more, identity seems threatened, and the bioethical considerations do not always seem to serve effective solutions. The task lies in finding sensitive and culturally competent approaches that will gradually and in the long run recognize and cherish these identities while promoting health and well-being.

In addition, social perceptions greatly influence the traumatized, exiled or culturally displaced communities. Stigmatization and discrimination can exacerbate pre-existing mental health problems and obstruct access to adequate health resources. Hua et al clarify that “[we can now] identify the presence of institutional racism within international inpatient care; ...and there is evidence that patients experiences of racism within health systems was not isolated to inpatient settings but could in fact occur across the treatment pathway, with implications for how they then experienced their care as inpatients”¹⁸. These findings by Hua et al, along with the ethical dilemma that surrounds social responses to trauma and displacement, are crucial for bioethical analysis, since they raise questions about the moral responsibilities of health professionals, political leaders and society in general to guarantee equitable care and support.

Participating in an interdisciplinary exploration of these intersections allows a more comprehensive understanding of the ethical dimensions at stake. By recognizing the multifaceted nature of trauma, exile and cultural displacement, bioethics can ideally contribute significantly to improving mental health frameworks and promote social attitudes that cover diversity and resistance to adversity, as long as bioethics examines the factor of feasibility and the influence of its authority. Trauma is a multifaceted psychological response to distressing events, characterized by physical, emotional and cognitive repercussions¹⁹. It can manifest itself in many ways, covering acute and chronic experiences. Chronic trauma, in particular, stems from prolonged exposure to distressing situations

¹⁸ Hua P., Fenton S. J., Freestone M., Bhui K., Shakoor S., “Ethnic disparities as potential indicators of institutional racism in inpatient care within acute mental health wards: A rapid review, *SSM- Mental Health*, 8, 2025 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/ssm-mental-health/vol/8/suppl/C>

¹⁹ Regel E., “Mental health and humanitarian crisis: Moral stress in trauma therapy”, *Bioethics*, 38, 2024, pp. 811–815.

such as violence, war or continuous social marginalization. Among the displaced communities, the nuances of trauma are even more complicated by factors that intersect, such as cultural dislocation, loss of social support and the struggle for identity in the midst of an agitation. As if this violence was not ominous enough, Cuerda even claims that “Doctors can become a State’s instrument of violence. If a totalitarian shift is produced, it is easier for a state-medical class symbiosis to be generated in those countries which have a well-established and bureaucratized sanitary structure”²⁰.

The causes of trauma in displaced communities usually include not only the immediate consequences of exile - such as violence, persecution or flight - but also the side effects related to resettlement challenges. Frequently finding barriers that make it difficult for those outsiders who seek inclusion²¹ to adapt to new environments, including linguistic discrimination, socioeconomic instability, even sexual isolation²² and erosion of family cultural structures. Minoritized ethnic groups, especially in Western countries, receive unequal treatment resulting in lower quality healthcare and different health outcomes when compared to the wider population, according to Smedley et al²³. The specific stressors can exacerbate feelings of helplessness, leading to deep impacts on mental health, including anxiety, depression and posttraumatic stress disorder²⁴. Zeleke et al demonstrate, in the example of Ethiopia, how “internally displaced people are subjected to many stressors, including poverty, mass and community trauma, individual trauma and the collapse of social support networks, which can result in mental distress, impaired interpersonal relationships, diminished coping

²⁰ Cuerda E., “Medicine and State Violence”, *Conatus*, 4: 2, 2019, p. 259.

²¹ Vasanthakumar A., *The Ethics of Exile: A Political Theory of Diaspora*. Oxford 2021: Oxford University Press, p. 9.

²² Cf. Bauer J. E., “‘Mein Feld ist die Welt’: On Magnus Hirschfeld’s Conception of Exilic Nomadism and the Origins of Sexual Ethnology”, *Dia-noesis*, 8, 2020, pp. 7-48.

²³ Smedley B.D., Stith A.Y., Nelson A.R., “The culture of medicine and racial, ethnic and class disparities in health care”, *Unequal Treatment: Confronting Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care*. National Academies Press (US), 2003.

²⁴ Regel E., “Mental health and humanitarian crisis: Moral stress in trauma therapy”, *Bioethics*, 38, 2024, pp. 811–815.

abilities, and poor psychosocial well-being”²⁵. In addition, trauma can permeate family dynamics, infecting interpersonal relationships among family and community members and changing traditional roles, influencing drastically communal ties and social structures.

The interaction between trauma and identity becomes particularly evident in the context of exile and displacement. Individual identity can be fragmented as individuals deal with past experiences of violence and loss while they seek to adopt new social norms. For many of these people, a critical aspect of their personal identity is dependent on their cultural heritage and their homeland. Being torn apart from the family and homeland environment can instigate an identity crisis, where individuals can feel divided between their historical cultural identities and the pressures to assimilate in the host country, which quite often seems quite hostile to these “intruders”. This duality can manifest itself in a constant negotiation or misapprehension of identity, usually leading to feelings of alienation or marginalization.

Regarding collective identity in displaced communities, it can be said that although shared trauma can promote solidarity and a feeling of belonging, it can at the same time perpetuate simultaneous cycles of sadness and collective anxiety. For example, community rituals and narrative practices can serve as mechanisms for processing shared experiences, allowing a collective identity that honors past trauma and promotes resilience. Zeleke et al have found in their research that there are factors such as a collective definition of trauma, collective lived experiences, and collective connection to culture and legacies of healing and resilience²⁶. As a result, despite the profound sense of loss, the connection to the community and a culture necessary for healing are indispensable. However, these same narratives can also reinforce victimization by

²⁵ Zeleke W. A., Wondie Y., Mekonen M. M., Hailu T., Holmes C., Moges M. D., Nenoko G., “The collective narrative of trauma and healing among internally displaced individuals in Ethiopia: a community-based participatory action research inquiry”, *BMC Psychiatry*, 25:705, 2025 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-025-07043-4>

²⁶ Zeleke W. A., Wondie Y., Mekonen M. M., Hailu T., Holmes C., Moges M. D., Nenoko G., “The collective narrative of trauma and healing among internally displaced individuals in Ethiopia: a community-based participatory action research inquiry”, *BMC Psychiatry*, 25:705, 2025 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-025-07043-4>

complicating individuals with social perceptions of strength and agency.

In addition, the social perceptions of trauma play a critical role in the formation of the trajectories of displaced individuals and communities. External narratives usually frame populations displaced through victimization lenses, which may inadvertently limit their agency and recovery opportunities. Policy formulation and social support systems that ignore the nuances of trauma can further marginalize these communities, reducing their visibility in discussions on mental health and social justice. Downie and Macnaughton observe that the problems of health are not just those of public policy and legislation. The policies which are advocated by public health institutions raise a multitude of ethical issues involving principles of justice utility and individual rights²⁷. Approaching these complexities requires a differentiated bioethical structure that takes into account the intergenerational and cultural dimensions of trauma, while seeking to improve the results of health support and promote satisfactory and effective involvement with displaced populations. Exile precipitates profound psychological and social consequences for those who have practically been forced out of their homeland. The act of exile not only interrupts the continuity rooted in cultural heritage but also precipitates a reconfiguration of the self in a foreign context, where the exiled individual fights with constant feelings of loss and isolation. Within this multifaceted experience, bioethical considerations on access to health and mental health support for exiled individuals become fundamental especially since, as Morris upholds, due to the fact that the ethical implications of emotion for bioethics are crucial precisely because medicine engages in devaluation of feeling²⁸.

The psychological toll of exile is multiple, including stress and posttraumatic stress disorder²⁹. Individuals face the frightening challenge of dealing with traumatic memories associated with their

²⁷ Downie R. S., Macnaughton J., *Bioethics and the Humanities. Attitudes and Perceptions*. New York 2007: Routledge, p. 107. Cf. Toulmin S., 1981, "The Tyranny of Principles", *The Hastings Center Report*, 11: 6, 1981, pp. 31–39.

²⁸ Morris D., "Narrative, Ethics and Pain: Thinking with Stories", in Charon R., Montello M. (Eds), *The Role of Narrative in Medical Ethics*. Routledge, New York 2002, p. 209.

²⁹ Regel E., "Mental health and humanitarian crisis: Moral stress in trauma therapy", *Bioethics*, 38, 2024, pp. 811–815.

homeland, often exacerbated by trauma of their own displacement. In the bioethical context the differentiated experiences of exiled individuals are highly significant and should be dealt with. The ethical principles of bioethics emphasize justice and equity, advise against non-harm, raising questions about the standards of health resources for these populations³⁰. Exiled individuals often find barriers to access to appropriate health services, influenced by factors such as immigration status, cultural stigma around mental health and socioeconomic restrictions, emphasizing the need for an ethically responsive health system. Experiences of discrimination and xenophobia contribute to an exacerbated sense of crisis of alienation and identity within such populations. What needs to be highlighted is the ethical obligation to ensure that mental health structures are sensitive to cultural contexts and lived experiences of affected individuals, thus addressing not only doctors, but also the cultural dimensions of trauma.

Unfortunately, traditional models of mental health often fail to understand and analyze properly the collective traumas experienced by exile communities, leading to a disconnection between clinical practice and the realities faced by these populations. Bioethical considerations, therefore, have a role in informing the development of integrative care models that should adopt a holistic understanding of mental health, recognizing the interaction between individual trauma experiences and the broader social and cultural dynamics at stake. Moreover, it is essential to recognize the role of resilience in exiled communities. Ethical structures in bioethics should incorporate narratives of strength and agency³¹, recognizing that while exile represents significant challenges, communities often develop innovative coping strategies and forms of solidarity. These aspects of resilience should be reflected in bioethical discourse around mental health care, promoting an asset-based approach that validates and uses existing strengths in exiled populations³².

³⁰ Cf. Churchill L. R., “Are We Professionals? A Critical Look at the Social Role of Bioethicists”, *Daedalus*, 128: 4, 1999, p. 253.

³¹ Cf. Morris D., “Narrative, Ethics and Pain: Thinking with Stories”, in Charon R., Montello M. (Eds), *The Role of Narrative in Medical Ethics*. Routledge, New York 2002, p. 199.

³² Regel E., “Mental health and humanitarian crisis: Moral stress in trauma therapy”, *Bioethics*, 38, 2024, pp. 811–815.

Bioethical considerations around access to health and mental health support illuminate the pressing need for an equitable health system that responds to the complex needs of exiled individuals while they can be assimilated to local communities, contributing to the most effective and culturally sensitive mental health practices. Cultural displacement is a complex phenomenon which fundamentally modifies the fabric of individual and collective identity. Individuals undergoing cultural displacement are often faced with having a type of life that oscillates between their own heritage and the requirements of their new environment. This ongoing compromise imposes significant psychological charges, leading to mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression and identity disorders. The cognitive dissonance felt by displaced persons stems from the interaction between their historical account as members of a specific cultural group and the urgent need to adjust to a potentially disparate societal context. Hence, a crucial aspect of cultural displacement is inherent in the potentiality of identity training. For uprooted individuals from their native country, the nuances of their cultural identity can become obscured, forcing them to face questions of belonging and self-esteem³³. The loss of cultural symbols, languages and practices - a process called “cultural mourning” - presents a re-evaluation of its place in displaced and host communities. This reassessment is not simply an internal struggle; It has broader implications for community dynamics in what Regal describes as “morally imperfect conditions”³⁴. The displaced populations are often marginalized within their new societies, leading to new isolation and, due to that, exacerbation of mental and other health problems. Marginalization can come from the perception of society that biases against their cultural differences, thus promoting an environment of misunderstanding and distrust that complicates or renders impossible social integration.

Besides, further bioethical challenges encountered by displaced people cannot be overlooked. For example, access to mental health resources adapted to specific trauma associated with exile and loss is often inadequate or non-existent; Systemic barriers such as linguistic differences and the lack of culturally competent care more

³³ Downie R. S., Macnaughton J., *Bioethics and the Humanities. Attitudes and Perceptions*. New York 2007: Routledge, pp. 51-54.

³⁴ Regal E., “Mental health and humanitarian crisis: Moral stress in trauma therapy”, *Bioethics*, 38, 2024, p. 814.

emphasize appropriate therapeutic interventions. However, as Gabrielyan & Suleimenov claim, communication as an objective foundation of ethics between “transpersonal information objects of various types” is vital³⁵. Therefore, many displaced people may be reluctant to resort to mental health services due to fears concerning stigma, concerns about confidentiality or previous negative experiences with medical institutions in their country of origin or in the host country. These dilemmas oblige bioethicists to consider the ethical implications of health care provision systems in contexts where social justice and equity are even more urgent; especially because of the fact the complexities of individual experiences need to be recognized and accepted. The development of services that incorporate cultural accounts into therapeutic practices can promote resilience and a feeling of continuity that can alleviate the impact of cultural loss.

Under this prism, it is advisable that cultural displacement should not be a lonely experience based merely on physical relocation; It must be perceived as a multidimensional process that shapes identities and community dynamics. The bioethical implications inherent in this process and the plethora of difficulties in assimilation call for our attention while the displaced individuals combat against their previous identity in a background of trauma and adaptation. But also, as Sermetis shows in his analysis of Sartre, radical freedom, the freedom to choose who a person is going to be for the rest of his life, the freedom to think as he desires, are milestones that cannot be neglected in the existential adventure part of which, here, is the medical process³⁶- therefore it is not just the social nexus but also the individual response that counts, the opportunity to protect one’s identity by overcoming trauma under his own terms and with no significant external assistance. Tackling these complexities requires an inclusive approach which values the separate cultural identities of displaced people and integrates them while they also make personal efforts to integrate themselves³⁷.

³⁵ Gabrielyan O., Suleimenov I., “Objective Foundations of Ethics and Prospects for Its Development: Information and Communication Approach”, *Conatus*, 10:1 2025, pp. 111-125.

³⁶ Sermetis T., “Freedom of Consciousness in Sartre”, *Dia-noesis*, 11, 2021, pp. 117-128.

³⁷ Engelhardt H. T., “The search for a global morality: Bioethics, the culture wars and moral diversity”, in Engelhardt H. T. (Ed), *Global Bioethics. The*

Healthcare professionals are obliged to face the challenges of cultural competence, ensuring that informed assistance for trauma recognizes specific experiences and backgrounds of different populations³⁸. In the same context Engelhardt argues that so far “bioethics has not managed to produce a generally accepted account of appropriate deportment so as uncontroversially to justify a single account of health care policy and bio law”³⁹. In connection with this insurmountable, so far, problem, the traditional therapeutic methods, especially the western ones, can often not be able to resonate with individuals from different cultural contexts. Therefore, the ethical implications of the treatment extend beyond the supply of care; they invite a revaluation of the existing working framework that can inadvertently marginalize the same communities that need assistance.

In many cultures, mental health problems are still a taboo, leading to an inclination to suffer in silence. This cultural stigma is aggravated by external social perceptions, which can further isolate individuals who bring signs of trauma. The implications for the treatment are manifold, since the stigma not only hinders individual recovery efforts, but also perpetuates wider cycles of exclusion and discrimination. But not only that: the political landscapes surrounding the issues of exile and movement complicate access to mental health care. In many cases, displaced people may find themselves in environments without adequate resources for mental health, let alone with several inequalities and health disparities. Ethical obligations in these contexts impose a focus on the defense of fair access to health care, as well as an understanding of how policies can affect mental health support structures. The intersection of trauma, exile and cultural movement requires that healthcare professionals undertake practices that not only deal with symptoms but also consider methodologies for wider socio-political contexts and dominant attitudes towards mental health.

Collapse of Consensus, M & M Scrivener Press, Salem 2006, pp. 18-49. Cf. Andorno, R., and G. Boutlas. “Global Bioethics in the Post-Coronavirus Era: A Discussion with Roberto Andorno”, *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 7: 1, 2022, pp. 185-00, <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.27999>.

³⁸ Downie R. S., Macnaughton J., *Bioethics and the Humanities. Attitudes and Perceptions*. New York 2007: Routledge, pp. 101-106.

³⁹ Engelhardt H. T., “The search for a global morality: Bioethics, the culture wars and moral diversity”, in Engelhardt H. T. (Ed), *Global Bioethics. The Collapse of Consensus*, M & M Scrivener Press, Salem 2006, p. 35.

These perceptions shape not only the way in which individuals who undergo trauma and exile understand their experiences but also dictate their will to ask for help⁴⁰. According to Churchill, the increasing role that Bioethics can play due to its social acceptance is crucial⁴¹. For example, in various communities, in particular those that are marginalized or under-represented, the intersectionality of stigma surrounding mental health problems and displaced identities can create a number of obstacles to access to care, often intensified by pre-existing prejudices and discriminatory practices.

Cultural insights play a crucial role in training societal perceptions of trauma and exile for those people who are in need. In many cultures, there is a dichotomy between resilience and vulnerability, often celebrating endurance and loneliness while stigmatizing the expression of mental distress. This cultural framing can marginalize those who have undergone trauma or displacement, labeling their experiences as weaknesses rather than valid responses to their extraordinary circumstances. The burden of unresolved trauma can become a collective experience, leading to community hesitation to recognize their respective health needs. In such contexts, trauma is often made invisible thanks to collective adaptation strategies- something that is not so frequent unfortunately. Due to the above, community members may refrain from asking for help, fearing that recognition of their suffering can alienate them from their cultural group. Media representations considerably influence understanding and taking into account trauma and the need to find cure. For example, immigration laws, public opinion or political agendas may regard individuals as threats to society, which perpetuates negative stereotypes that complicate efforts for integration. These stories that happen everywhere nowadays can promote environments in which the search for aid is associated with marginalization or additional rejection, limiting the agency of individuals in the continuation of the necessary support⁴².

⁴⁰ Cf. Dancy J., *Ethics Without Principles*. Oxford 2004: Clarendon Press, pp. 34-38.

⁴¹ Churchill L. R., "Are We Professionals? A Critical Look at the Social Role of Bioethicists", *Daedalus*, 128: 4, 1999, p. 254.

⁴² Morris D., "Narrative, Ethics and Pain: Thinking with Stories", in Charon R., Montello M. (Eds), *The Role of Narrative in Medical Ethics*. Routledge, New York 2002, pp. 196-213.

As regards the role of mental health institutions and political institutions and their leaders, they are indispensable in the formation of societal perceptions. Professionals and governments must bear in mind that there is now an almost unavoidable and complex interaction of cultural standards in this huge global village, and that individual experiences remain valuable for the regional narratives. If societal stigma is widespread through the Press or politics, health discourse can inadvertently strengthen pre-existing stereotypes, perpetuate trauma and disconnection cycles⁴³. Consequently, the call for culturally competent care becomes urgent, emphasizing the need for service providers to consider carefully the multifaceted socio-cultural strata which informs about the identity and experiences of an individual with trauma and displacement.

These stories which are built around trauma and cultural displacement have significant power over the lived experiences of individuals and for this reason they cannot be neglected or frowned upon by locals. Nonetheless, these stories evolve with changes in other societal attitudes. For those affected by trauma and exile, it is essential to reshape their perceptions, without host societies being obsessive about certain views, and to allow to promote environments conducive to recovery. Consequently, the exploration of the way in which bioethics interface with these themes must take into account the broader implications of societal perceptions, the role of stigma and emergency for inclusive accounts which validate the experiences of all individuals confronted with trauma and displacement. In this understanding, bioethics attains a rather unexpected political role for contemporary societies. A fine example can be drawn from the Aboriginal peoples in North America which further highlights the intersection of bioethics, trauma and cultural displacement⁴⁴. The historical trauma endured by these communities, in particular forced assimilation, the dispossession of land and the discrimination that followed, have deep implications on their collective identity and their mental health status. Bioethical

⁴³ Cf. Mude W., Whitehorne-Smith P., Nyanhanda T., Mwanri L., "The Perceived Social Determinants of Mental Health among African Youth Refugees in South Australia", *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, 27, 2025, pp. 743–750.

⁴⁴ Saunt C., *Unworthy republic: the dispossession of Native Americans and the road to Indian territory*. New York 2020: W. W. Norton & Company, passim.

discourse here has an opportunity, a political one actually, to prioritize the indigenous perspectives on health and well-being, which often diverge from classical western medical exemplars. These communities are enthusiastic about their own traditional healing practices; so, one ethical obligation of public health systems could be to incorporate these perspectives into their medical agenda so as to promote healing and resilience while reaffirming the cultural identities that tend to be, otherwise, marginalized⁴⁵.

This requires a bioethical approach sensitive to the shades of the formation of identity, recognizing how cultural narratives influence the personal and collective experiences of trauma. Morris maintains that “institutions often cultivate to their advantage the moral twilight that ensues when they devalue individual narratives and emotional knowledge”⁴⁶. He further argues that the continuity of care is lost in our times and patients are not linked anymore so much with a single doctor who is responsible for treating them but with a vast and impersonal number of specialists. Since the face-to-face approach has been jeopardized, it follows that the personal narrative is put at risk. Churchill stresses here that a kind of hazard for patients and their families comes from bioethics consultants who are part of institutional power structures that serve the institutional needs rather than those of the patients⁴⁷. Morris additionally stresses the fact that when we make ethical decisions we do not really choose good over evil. We tend to make a preference on one story over another and thus highlight personal or cultural values of a suffering individual more than others while we try to perform our moral acts⁴⁸. Such understandings highlight the imperative for research and politics to engage with the complexities of culturally informed practices in mental health care. Traditional bioethical models often lack the prerequisites that are necessary to meet the specific needs of different populations affected by trauma.

⁴⁵ Downie R. S., Macnaughton J., *Bioethics and the Humanities. Attitudes and Perceptions*. New York 2007: Routledge, pp. 91-92.

⁴⁶ Morris D., “Narrative, Ethics and Pain: Thinking with Stories”, in Charon R., Montello M. (Eds), *The Role of Narrative in Medical Ethics*. Routledge, New York 2002, p. 212.

⁴⁷ Churchill L. R., “Are We Professionals? A Critical Look at the Social Role of Bioethicists”, *Daedalus*, 128: 4, 1999, pp. 256- 257.

⁴⁸ Morris D., “Narrative, Ethics and Pain: Thinking with Stories”, in Charon R., Montello M. (Eds), *The Role of Narrative in Medical Ethics*. Routledge, New York 2002, p. 213.

Therefore, there is an urgent need for a change to an inclusive bioethics that incorporates indigenous knowledge systems and culturally relevant therapeutic models to adequately respond to the challenges faced by displaced and traumatized individuals. These models would benefit from an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on cultural studies, social and bioethical psychology to create a holistic understanding of the intersection in question.

In our view, related directly to the above is the problem of definition. As the ancient Skeptic philosopher Sextus Empiricus claims, it is difficult, if not impossible, to have a fair definition of what is good, beneficial etc. In his *Against the Ethicists*, he upholds that a doctor's work is done with brevity, not causing pain and systematically, and this is what differentiates him from a common person⁴⁹. Nonetheless, he explains that every art is possible for people who are capable of practicing it. As in the case of a city of deaf people, no guitar playing is possible, in the same way when people wish to have an *ars vitae* imbued by *phronesis*, it is a problem if they are capable of having it⁵⁰. In this argument Sextus tries to demonstrate that our wishing one thing does not equal with the thesis that we are capable of achieving it. By doing so, he does not want to discourage our pursuing the truth of higher or more ethical things. On the contrary, he wishes to show how urgent it really is to remember that we are not really capable of providing yet all these complex answers that we need, and also that we may be incapable of acting rightly without them. In the same way, a practitioner does not have a solid definition of what is good or bad in all these cases. Therefore, a skeptic suspension of judgment allows more space for both the moral agents that are involved⁵¹, especially since, as Sextus remarks, it is a mistake to believe that the person who suspends judgement and practices *epoche* is not energetic⁵². The stronger point that Sextus presents in this hypothesis is that what the dogmatists consider as evil, i.e., pain, sickness etc, is more easily treated by a Skeptic who is not orientated towards certain goods- the Skeptic does not know what a good is and consequently it is easier for him to bear pain or misfortune⁵³, regardless whether

⁴⁹ Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Ethicists*, 203-206.

⁵⁰ Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Ethicists*, 196.

⁵¹ Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Ethicists*, 168.

⁵² Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Ethicists*, 162-163.

⁵³ Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Ethicists*, 147-154.

certain things are considered good or evil depending either on opinion or on need⁵⁴. For Sextus, it is impossible for someone to be eudaimonistic if he assumes that there is something good or evil by nature⁵⁵. The great disparity of opinion regarding good or evil seriously affects the issue of health. According to his theory, there are people who believe that health is the highest good, others who believe that this is not, others also believe that health is only a preferable than a real good⁵⁶. For bioethics this is a consideration that may be more fruitful than futile, at least in the sense that we may not have common definitions a) of what trauma is and b) the gravity of each trauma⁵⁷; even if we managed to have same definitions, they could not be the same for different cultural communities where religion and regional beliefs also play their significant role. In this perspective, it becomes very complex, if not vague, to understand not just what the good is for everyone involved but also if what is considered as good is conducive to a real state of well-being and eudaimonia⁵⁸.

Elliott assumes that bioethicists have now trusted themselves and their expertise more than they should⁵⁹. In dealing with bioethical issues, it should be remembered that there are at least two moral personalities included, therefore two moral perspectives to be illuminated and taken into account. The diversity of opinion, the possible lack of consensus on bioethical issues, renders it not only difficult to treat trauma, even in the cases of exile and cultural displacement but also tends to transfer one problem in the place of another, as Sextus comments⁶⁰. In order to cure the trauma of these moral protagonists that exile and displaced people are, the real need of the particular person who receives help may be disguised while it is often related to his sending community which has a certain, very unshakeable view on good and evil. Sextus is cautious when he discusses major aspects of the nature of good,

⁵⁴ Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Ethicists*, 141-144.

⁵⁵ Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Ethicists*, 144.

⁵⁶ Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Ethicists*, 48-49.

⁵⁷ Cf. Downie R. S., Macnaughton J., *Bioethics and the Humanities. Attitudes and Perceptions*. New York 2007: Routledge, pp. 71-75.

⁵⁸ Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Ethicists*, 35-37.

⁵⁹ Elliott C., "The tyranny of expertise", in Eckenwiler L. A., Cohn F. G. (Eds), *The Ethics of Bioethics. Mapping the Moral Landscape*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2007, pp. 43-46.

⁶⁰ Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Ethicists*, 133-135.

and subsequently how it is related with (what each of us understands as) eudaimonia. In the same line, Doris suggests that skepticism about persons and their identities is almost unavoidable and that one should carefully examine the things he believes over another person and his current situation⁶¹. Furthermore, Doris clarifies that “talk of persons involves both descriptive and normative elements” and this interferes gravely with the issues of agency and responsibility⁶². Hence, policies should be developed that actively involve the parties affected by the communities concerned in decision-making processes, ensuring that their items are an integral part of modeling institutional responses. The emphasis should be placed on the development of research methodologies on participatory action that allow communities to articulate their needs and preferences in the formulation of mental health services, allowing some more space for interpretation on previously static models.

As Dragona-Monachou highlights, all the relevant terms need to be philosophically more concise, and they practically, more than anything, need to be clarified⁶³. Understanding does not stand alone; it is often a matter of linguistic clarity and theoretical coherence before medical action⁶⁴. What we need here is not an uncritical follow of moral theories that will guide us to a wrong conception of the problem but an honest education that will train us to treat it. Just a linear implementation of rules and bioethical theories is not safe in treating trauma. Churchill even challenges our ability to be trusted when we treat other people through our bioethical prisms by asking: “would we want our own advice?”⁶⁵ and by posing part of the ineffective situation in our addressing the wrong problems. It is essential that ethical considerations evolve into tandem with our understanding of these complexities to encourage an inclusive approach that not only addresses the psychological needs of affected individuals but also promotes social justice

⁶¹ Doris J. M., “Skepticism about Persons”, *Philosophical Issues*, 19, 2009, pp. 57-58.

⁶² Doris J. M., “Skepticism about Persons”, *Philosophical Issues*, 19, 2009, pp. 58-59.

⁶³ Dragona-Monachou M., *Syghroni Ithiki Philosophia (Contemporary Moral Philosophy)*. Athens 1995: Ellinika Grammata, p. 386.

⁶⁴ Downie R. S., Macnaughton J., *Bioethics and the Humanities. Attitudes and Perceptions*. New York 2007: Routledge, p. 58.

⁶⁵ Churchill L. R., “Are We Professionals? A Critical Look at the Social Role of Bioethicists”, *Daedalus*, 128: 4, 1999, pp. 262- 265.

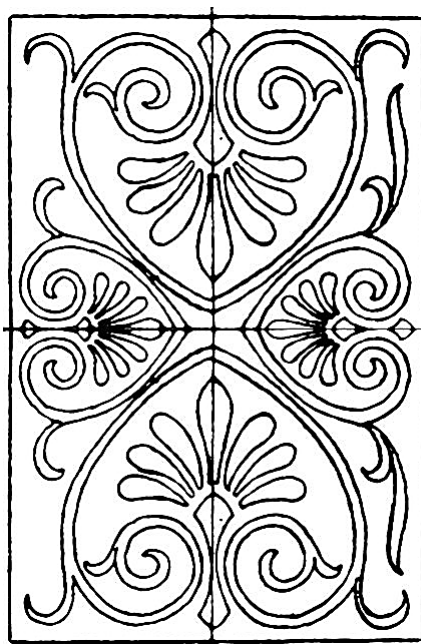
and fairness in healing processes, one that seeks truth in effective narratives in their existential setting. As De Zulueta rightly manifests: “Doing good medical ethics involves attending to both the biomedical and existential aspects of illness... Patients’ narratives describe existential neglect and how this intensifies suffering”⁶⁶. Through collaborative efforts and the commitment to cultural humility, through solid definitions in our quest of the truth and becoming aware of the limitations of our knowledge about the existential drama of human beings (especially those in exile or cultural displacement), research and future politics can contribute to the development of paintings that honor the dignity and resilience of those who navigate in the intricate realities of what their lives have brought in for them. But true faith should not be shown for the theory; true faith should regard the healing. This is where a certain amount of skepticism seems indispensable and may allow even those circumstances where trauma is not to be treated at all by external factors, despite their bioethical awareness and sensitivity.

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Mapping Trauma as Inheritance in *The Libation Bearers*

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Abstract

The Libation Bearers is a Greek tragic play by Aeschylus, which serves as the second part in the trilogy called *Oresteia*. This paper examines *The Libation Bearers* from hauntological and psychoanalytic theoretical frameworks as the Atreid household becomes a battleground of spectral (in)justice and (un)resolved mourning. In the play, Orestes exacts justice by reinscribing the very violence he seeks to expiate. Similarly, Electra's laments conjure the past as a living wound. The Furies are what the symbolic order couldn't symbolize. Borrowing Jacques Derrida's concept of the revenant and Jacques Lacan's concept of *objet petit a*, the paper seeks to understand how the domestic space in this play serves as a setting for psychological topology, where memory mingles with desire to attain justice. Buried underneath the trauma of the siblings lies a spectral call for justice where trauma isn't merely staged as an event but as a return of the repressed.

Keywords: *Trauma, Memory, Mourning, Hauntology, Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Greek Tragedy*

Introduction

Justice assumes a spectral force in Aeschylus' *The Libation Bearers* by remarkably marking its presence as absence, a sense of uncanniness that hovers over the House of Atreus. The past bleeds onto the present, wherein the rites only aggravate a sense of unfulfillment instead of appeasing the deceased. Justice does not remain a static code with boundaries between the avenger and avenged dissolving. The slain Agamemnon's cries echo through the inherited wrath of Orestes, who is compelled to fulfill a destiny that is equally a determination of his own free will. The vision of justice offered by this play is intertwined with trauma, in the sense that (in)justice spectrally returns to claim new sacrifices and unsettle the living.

Originally a part of the *Oresteia* trilogy, *The Libation Bearers* is a middle play that occupies a liminal space not only thematically but also structurally. While the first part of the trilogy, *Agamemnon*, lays bare the bleeding wound of Clytemnestra's murder of the King, which in turn is a response to their daughter Iphigenia's sacrifice by the King. The trilogy's last part, *The Eumenides*, provides a resolution to the conflict between justice and injustice, desire and memory. With the acquittal of Orestes (due to Athena's help), transformation takes place with the Furies becoming the Eumenides, standing guard benevolently, and they pursue justice in its truest sense instead of vengeance as the Greek society becomes more ordered.

Whereas in *The Libation Bearers*, there is a cyclical repetition of ethical as well as psychological forms of inherited violence. Trauma unfurls itself as a legacy of this family, as all its members are caught in a flux of an inescapable pull to the past. The middle play ends up occupying the liminal space wherein there's no origination or resolution but only a quest for retribution tainted with specters of unresolved and inherited trauma.

This paper analyzes the play from the theoretical frameworks of hauntology and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Both these frameworks play a crucial part in illuminating how trauma functions not only as a transmissible but also a persistent force. Hauntology as a concept was coined by the French-Algerian philosopher, Jacques Derrida, in his seminal work, *Specters of Marx*.

Hauntology essentially describes the present condition, which is ruptured with longings of the past, where the “time is out of joint.”¹ The “being-there” of specters of unresolved past (such as longing for justice and resolution) hover over the present. The world inhabited by Orestes is significantly hauntological in nature. Spectrality occurs in both ways, literally and figuratively. For the former, the ghost of Agamemnon appears in a literal sense. Whereas justice itself also assumes a form of spectrality, in a way, as it is deferred by unresolved wounds of previous generations.

In the Lacanian psychoanalytic framework, a rupture is marked in the very Symbolic order by trauma. There is a compulsive return of symptoms in the form of dreams and obsessions that cannot be completely symbolized or even assimilated. The paradoxical condition of vengeance, along with the invocations of ancestral guilt by the Chorus, and the maternal archetype of Clytemnestra, follow the Lacanian account of how unresolvable trauma is inherited. Where it haunts the subject and reproduces itself.

Theoretical Foundations

Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* emerged from a lecture series he delivered at the “Whither Marxism?” conference at the University of California on futures (or lack thereof) of Marxism in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The lecture series (and eventually the book) was also a reflection and critique of the neoliberal triumphant attitude shown by the likes of Francis Fukuyama. Derrida’s articulation of hauntology is based on trace and *différance*. According to him, there is just an “always-already absent present”² rather than a temporal point of pure birth.

The structure, subject matter, and fundamental ideas of a play are all included in dramaturgy, which is the art and practice of dramatic composition and theatrical representation. Hauntological dramaturgy is the study of how these components are influenced by the phantom energies of historical and cultural settings. It looks at how plays address unresolved histories, summon the spirits of the past, and develop plots and characters to deal with these

¹ Shakespeare, W., 2015: 35; Papaoikonomou, 2024.

² Macksey R., Donato E., (ed.), 2007: 254.

haunting presences. As "the forgotten and the forgetters, the buried and the ghosts, the present, the passing"³ Collide, theater becomes a shattered intersection where the living and the dead meet.

The text centers on the figure of the revenant. In old Celtic and Nordic mythology, a revenant was a creature that came back from the dead to visit the living.⁴ Derrida utilized the concept of "revenant" in a deconstructionist philosophical way, where the past apparitions of traumas and injustices kept haunting the present. The revenant here isn't simply what one might consider a metaphor for memory, but it is, by its own inherent nature, an agent of ontological disturbance.

Such hauntings are a rallying cry for an ethicality, a responsibility to those who are not present anymore in a physical sense. Since Derrida, many philosophers like Mark Fisher have adapted the concept of hauntology to media studies and theatre studies. As per hauntological reading of dramaturgy, the stage transforms itself into a site for the return of all that's been repressed, be it social, political, or familial.

By demonstrating how "time is out of joint" in the sense that "no entity can be fully self-sufficient,"⁵ hauntology serves to undermine the idea of presence. Furthermore, no creature may appear in a single, precise moment. Hauntology-influenced stories exhibit non-linear temporality, in which the past, present, and future converge to create an ethereal present. These dramatic decisions highlight the long-lasting effects of past traumas and unresolved social issues. Using techniques like shattered periods, recurrent motifs, and fragmented stories, hauntological dramaturgy regularly deals with memory and trauma.

The murder of Agamemnon produces mandates that are inherited. Ghosts and curses are not only plot devices but also function structurally on the site of stage. The oaths and debts are born from the dead, which in turn illustrates how trauma in tragedy isn't merely psychological but transgenerational. The invocations by the Chorus perform this inheritance, marking violence and justice as phenomena that are bereft of resolution and entirely spectral in nature.

³ Cixous H., "Enter the Theater (in between)", *Modern Drama*, 42: 3, 1999, pp. 301-314.

⁴ Tomaini T., 2018: 24.

⁵ D'Cruz G., 2024: 5.

The concept of *objet petit a* is central to Jacques Lacan's methodology of psychoanalysis. *Objet petit a* can broadly be described as the unattainable object and cause of desire. The end goal desired by the tragic protagonist remains elusive to them as they are manifested as a lost ideal (be it reparation for the wrongs of the past or restoration of the familial household in the context of *The Libation Bearers*). The elusive nature of this unattainable goal leads the protagonist astray and propels them to get trapped in an endless cycle of guilt and lack. Orestes' desire to restore order and settle the score of his father's murder becomes a senseless pursuit, revealing how desire is actually shaped by trauma as a ceaseless void.

Lacan's theorization of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary serves as a supplementary framework to read the visible and invisible forces operating in this tragedy. The Symbolic is encompassed by the language, law, and social mandates that help in structuring subjectivity. "Symbols in fact envelop the life of man in a network so total that they join together [...] the shape of his destiny."⁶

The Imaginary ends up involving fantasy and a sense of identification (idealizations of justice). "The imaginary is the realm of comprehension, in the Kantian sense, where one takes things in as wholes rather than piecemeal."⁷ However, the Real is the traumatic kernel that resists easy interpretation, and in the only compulsion for cyclical violence, it is found. Desire for immortality, perhaps, "is the real that governs our activities more than any other, and it is psychoanalysis that designates it for us."⁸ The cyclical violence is what pushes the plot of the play forward. Orestes' visions of persecutions and the Furies' irruption insert a form of inherited trauma into the Symbolic order through revenge, ritual, and law, with each act disclosing the limitations that the process has. Further insight into the psychic life of tragedy is provided by the Lacanian tradition's elaboration and reconfiguration of Freud's distinction between melancholia and mourning.

While melancholia is pathological and characterized by the assimilation of the lost object into the ego, which leads to constant

⁶ Lacan J., 1997: 68.

⁷ Lewis M., 2008: 148-201.

⁸ Hurst A., 2008: 213-236.

repetition, mourning involves a processual working-through of loss. Tragedy, especially in *The Libation Bearers*' inherited structures of debt and doom, oscillates between these two reactions: Orestes's actions and the chorus's rituals aim to bury the past and grieve the dead, but the very structure of vengeance necessitates constant repetition, with trauma as inheritance of melancholia.

Even while a lot of modern criticism has effectively used methodologies of psychoanalysis and hauntology to examine how trauma and violence persist in tragedies, there are still a lot of unanswered questions. Conventional interpretations of hauntology tend to emphasize ghosts, spectrality, and memory politics while ignoring the complex psychodynamic processes through which trauma is internalized and passed down through the generations. In addition to the ghost's carnal apparition, phenomenal body, and fallen and sinful body, the specter also represents the impatient and nostalgic need for redemption and, in this case, for a spirit. "The ghost would be the deferred spirit, the promise or calculation of an expiation."⁹

Psychoanalytic interpretations, on the other hand, may emphasize the individual ego above the community or even undermine the ritualistic and communal elements of tragic performance. In addition, there is a lack of comprehensive research that combines the spectral (hauntological) and structural (psychoanalytic) modalities to explain how trauma functions as both a hereditary compulsion and a shared social tension. By highlighting both the intimate, psychic recurrences mapped by Lacan and the collective, haunted temporality described by Derrida, this paper aims to close this gap by showing how these frameworks overlap and interact when mapping the logic of trauma-as-inheritance in *The Libation Bearers*.

The Haunted Domestic Space

In *The Libation Bearers*, the Atreid household functions not only as a setting, but also as trauma's living topography, where

⁹ Derrida J., 1994: 171; Kakoliris G., 2017.

memory and structure are combined into a psychologically claustrophobic landscape. The house, in Aeschylus' staging, too, is emphasized as a repository of the emotional and ethical impressions, due to cyclical violence. In addition to the actual presence of Agamemnon's ghost, the palace is haunted by the encompassing darkness that the Chorus observes: "O suffering home! O ruined house! Sunless shadows, hateful to men, now cover it entirely, for the master of the house is dead."¹⁰ Every stone and threshold in the house becomes a monument to violence, both predicted and witnessed, as it reflects, absorbs, and intensifies pain.

The points of containment and transition are returned to when a spatial analysis is performed. The threshold between inner and external, along with corridors and doorways, separates the realm of the dead from alive yet remains oddly permeable. The women's quarters, chiefly symbolic of protection in a domesticated sense, are compromised by screams of fear and nightmares. Memory simply does not only functions as an abstract concept but also doubles down as being affixed to physical spaces. This intersection can be observed at the tomb of Agamemnon, which assumes a liminal and central point in the play. The tomb's functionality as a site for death and life, present and past, is in constant negotiation. The offerings at the tomb by Orestes are an act of mnemonic (re)building.

The scene of libation, besides being a ritual, also acts as an attempt to reorganize the psychic landscape of the Atreid household. Though it becomes a container, it leaks with hauntings of horrifying deeds, as "blood once shed upon the earth"¹¹ cannot simply be washed away, and the family's offspring end up inheriting the trauma. At the center of the play is the specter of the father, Agamemnon. A specter whose cries cannot be ignored, and eventually, his demands end up drawing the lines of destiny for his family members. He verily becomes the manifestation as an *objet petit a*, a lost object subjected to compulsion and desire, whose recovery is longed for and simultaneously impossible. What emerges from the subject in anxiety is the *objet petit a*.¹²

¹⁰ Conacher D. J., 1987: 104.

¹¹ Conacher D. J., 1987: 104.

¹² Lacan J., Mehlman J., "Introduction to the Names-of-the-Father Seminar", *October: A Journal of Contemporary Art Criticism and Theory*, 40, 1987, pp. 81-95.

In Lacanian terms, the return to the tomb of his father by Orestes acts as a return to the site of loss. The subsequent desire for justice is structured by the traumatic absence. Paternal law is not only foundational but radically unstable too, as Agamemnon's murder starts a phantasmic regime and an unfurling of the traditional authority. It forces Orestes to become a murderer in turn so that he can restore the fallen order. He appeals, "my great grief for my father, my own lack of substance ... the commands of the god."¹³ The spectral presence in the physical absence of the father becomes stronger and saturates that absence with a demand for retribution and justice.

This spectral regime is enforced by visions and dreams. The Chorus's invocations of the apparitions and the nocturnal terrors of women ripple through the space of the palace by shattering the tranquility of the women's quarters. Such supernatural significations are signals of the violence that is to follow. In the tomb, Orestes's invocation—"Hermes-of-the-earth, you who watch over the father's realms below, be now my savior and my ally..."—represents a deliberate attempt to raise the buried father.¹⁴ He attempts to raise the buried father. Even after his demise, Agamemnon holds the reins of the Atreid household with his spectral governance. There is really no space for reclamation but only for perpetual return, where trauma intensifies and accretes across generations.

The Atreid household is also occupied by the nearly absent/present maternal shadow of Clytemnestra. She is a constant and compulsive force in the psychic landscape of *The Libation Bearers*. After Agamemnon's death, she is marginalized, yet the narrative structure pervades her presence even during the planning by Orestes. The maternal trauma inflicted on her children by Clytemnestra is hidden and manifest simultaneously. Her murder of her husband is initially positioned as vengeance for Iphigenia, but later it transforms by starting a cycle of inherited violence that even her death cannot exonerate. The narrative structure of the play is foregrounded in such a way.

Clytemnestra herself dispatches the libation bearers (Electra and the slave women) to make offerings for the deceased Agamemnon.

¹³ Conacher D. J., 1987: 108.

¹⁴ Conacher D. J., 1987: 103.

The act is by its inherent nature a palliative one, but it also becomes perverse given that Clytemnestra had him murdered. This act reveals the paradoxical nature of the maternal will, as she seeks to appease the very rules she has violated. The description by the Chorus of the godless woman emerges from a place of not only inexorable attraction but also a fear, a recognition of the fact that pollution of the Atreid household is as much maternal as paternal, it seemed. Clytemnestra's action of sending the women to the tomb for the ritual of libation is representative of the displacement of her own grief and guilt.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, a crucial position is also held by the concept of *jouissance*. This concept refers to when, within the symbolic order, the pleasure far exceeds the limits of satisfaction. Jouissance is an excessive and destructive enjoyment that isn't mere desire, but strictly arises at that point where prohibitions start to fail. The relation women possess in comparison to what the phallic function designates of jouissance, a supplementary jouissance...a jouissance of the body which is...beyond the phallus."¹⁵

It is intrinsic to the drive and the circuitous relation to lack. It gets manifested when the subject hits the realization that they cannot get away with something that isn't mediated or symbolized. Clytemnestra's act of murdering Agamemnon would be called feminine jouissance by Lacan. Following the ritualized sacrifice of her daughter, Iphigenia, Clytemnestra's actions spring from that excess of loss as a surfeit of response to trauma. The violation is a symbolic rupture as it is a clear assault on the sense that her role makes as a mother, wife, and subject within the patriarchal order. Her enjoyment does not lie in the ambit of satisfaction from vengeance, rather it lies in the transgressive pleasure that stems from the very act of annihilation of the law as embodied by the patriarchal order of Agamemnon. It is a borderline mystical communion wherein there is a process of "explosion, diffusion, effervescence, abundance, and one takes pleasure (jouit) in being limitless."¹⁶

Since the mythic narrative of the play and the overall trilogy positions Agamemnon as the sovereign representative of tradition and phallic authority, he upholds that symbolic order through sword and sacrificial altar. Agamemnon's murder in the intimacy

¹⁵ Rose J., (eds.), 1982: 145.

¹⁶ Cixous H., Clément C., 1986: 91.

of the bath, with a net and knife, is an act of inversion of the sacrificial logic. A mother's grief is transformed into a violent pleasure of transgression. Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon doesn't then become an act of retribution or justice. Instead, it ends up assuming what Lacan identifies as the tragic ethic. The refusal to give up one's desire if it means their own demise. Her act thus enacts a logic of the death drive, a compulsion that traverses the psychic economy, where there's no possibility for actual justice or reparation.

Like Antigone, Clytemnestra refuses the work of mourning and persists in her desire against the limitations set by the kin and *polis*. The murderous act by her transforms into a site where pain and pleasure are inextricable, and the annihilation of the other is unavoidable from the dissolution of the self, too. Lacan explains that the transit to desire has to do with a state of Being unto Death that is similar to the state beyond fear and pity in Antigone, the main character in Lacan's Ethics.¹⁷ The suffering of her children results from their melancholic inheritance of Clytemnestra's trauma. The murder of their father is not the only reason for their grieving, but also the inability to fully name the loss or mourn that ends up structuring their identities. As with Agamemnon, Clytemnestra's specter also meanders, not literally, but in the form of commands and the perversion of maternal nurturing. The subject's subjective formation will continue to be based on their association with the lack in the Other.¹⁸

Emblematic of this trauma is the motif of nursing, such as nurturing the lock of hair offered by Orestes to the river Inachos at the tomb, which links the mother's body and the memory of childhood to grief over the murdered and now physically absent father. There is a dark transfiguration here in the context of this primal scene of attachment. The act of nurturing itself transforms into a spectacle as violence and mourning are closely intertwined with maternal beneficence. Neither Orestes nor Electra can completely reject or, at worst, embrace it. The mother casts a shadow over the reclamation of the Atreid household since she is not always visible, yet her actions decide the rest of the course.

¹⁷ Kirshner L. A., "Toward an Ethics of Psychoanalysis: A Critical Reading of Lacan's Ethics", *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 60: 6, 2012, pp. 1223-1242.

¹⁸ Fink A., 1997: 130.

Instead of viewing it as a constitutive lack, the melancholic subject believes that they have once found the lacking object before losing it. To put it another way, the melancholic subject perceives this loss as a real one. According to Lacan, melancholia occurs when the entire Real of the object is present, but mourning is a state in which one experiences a portion of the Real and eventually conveys it to the symbolic.¹⁹

Orestes and the Compulsion for Repetition

The cyclical dynamic of inherited violence as trauma is not just a psychological engine but also a cultural feature. Repetition is central to the structure of this play, as even faintest glimmers of hope and reclamation end up giving way to darkness again, with Orestes enacting matricide. The entire text speaks a language of return. The dead exert influence over the living—"Ares will fight Ares and Justice Justice"—reinforcing the principle of retaliatory justice, in which murder is avenged by murder.²⁰ This act of compulsion refracts the agency even after Orestes apparently breaks the cycle by murdering Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. The Kindly Ones (a euphemistic term for the Furies) appears then, demanding more retribution. The pressure of inherited trauma is markedly more overwhelming than Orestes' own conscious volition. The ultimate sanction for Clytemnestra's murder is provided by the edict of Apollo. It also ends up providing a means for Orestes to exonerate himself from this crime by calling it an inspiration from the divine. Orestes remarks, "If I do not pursue ... life for life ..."²¹

This leaves the readers then with a crucial question: does Orestes have any agency of his own, or is he a mere instrument of the divinity who has been sent to restore order? This sense of ambiguity pervading here is essential in dramatizing the uncanny force via which trauma compels, circulates, and repeats itself with the psychic landscapes of all characters. What Freud called "repetition compulsion" then haunts the tragic law as this structure of repeti-

¹⁹ Grigg R., "Remembering and forgetting", *Lacanian Compass Express*, 3: 2, 2016, pp. 1-8.

²⁰ Conacher D. J., 1987: 123.

²¹ Conacher D. J., 1987: 107.

tion compulsion refashions the present in the reflection of a traumatized past. The repetition of violence is quite inseparable from this drive for justice, as each act of purification breeds only more pollution, also evident in the ceremonial choreography of violence and blood imagery.

This play can be mapped onto the terrains of the Lacanian psychoanalytic framework of the return of the repressed. The exile back to Argos is not only the journey undertaken by Orestes, but he also travels into the center of primal trauma that has never been symbolically worked out. In Lacanian terms, the Real (or the unspeakable) insists upon repetition as a means of discharge, even if that repetition entrenches the trauma more. This repetition does not purify and ends up polluting more, as the Chorus acknowledges that no purifying streams can cleanse. The confrontation of Clytemnestra with Orestes is also marked by a sense of maternal nurturance, “respect for the mother’s breast that nourished him.”²² This nurturing claim is countered by Agamemnon’s specter and Apollo’s divine creed.

The drive that dominates in this case is simply not desire as lack, rather it is the traumatic kernel, the Real, that resists interpretation and any symbolization. Orestes is “like a man driving his team of horses far off-course.”²³ He is overwhelmed by visions and beset by a creeping madness and guilt. The Furies, far from being mere mythic creatures, end up becoming the compulsive force of the repressed. As they arise in the consciousness of the subject’s field, their supposedly feminine attributes (Gorgon-like, black, serpentine) recall the monstrous and maternal aspect of what was denied once and now returns in a horrifying form. The futility of suppressing trauma through violent discharge can then be found in Orestes’ desperate pleas to fellow citizens, to the Sun, and to Apollo himself. The function of the real as encounter, “insofar as it is essentially the missed encounter—first presented itself in the history of psychoanalysis in a form that was in itself already enough to rouse our attention, that of trauma.”²⁴

The psychic tension mirrors the larger crisis of masculine identity that Orestes experiences, as well as the succession within both

²² Conacher D. J., 1987: 123.

²³ Conacher D. J., 1987: 125.

²⁴ Lacan J., 1998: 55.

the *oikos* and *polis*. At its core, the revenge plot mirrors an Oedipal drama where the son wants to reclaim the paternal order and simultaneously supplant the deceased father. Drawing on classical Athenian structures, the play captures how father-son relations were treated publicly, too. The Athenian *oikos*, with its monarchical model, places the father as lord of power, name, and wealth.²⁵ In psychoanalytic terms, the Oedipal dynamic disrupts and sustains this order. Where the son has to differentiate himself yet, at some stage identify with the father too, to become an autonomous subject. His coming back home is to inherit that trauma and, through vengeance, to share in the father's abominable fate. This error is exactly what gives the sad incident its horrific, unmemorable character. For this reason, Lacan would argue that the trauma is unrecognizable in itself and can only be remembered through repetition.

In *Logique du Fantasme*, Lacan makes the case that homeostatic processes and the desire to repeat do not follow the same discharge logic. A realm that is entirely distinct from the one pertaining to homeostatic pleasure seeking is established by repetition; it is a properly subjective realm where the mark "stands for," "takes the place of," and what we have ventured to refer to as "an event" is what only the movement of return, or what Lacan refers to as a "thinking of repetition," confirms and continually reconfirms this point of no return, which is also a qualitative cut and a structural loss.²⁶

The murders of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra are not simply a staged attempt at reclaiming masculine power but violence's anguished repetition, which tore any semblance of paternal order in the first place. Orestes referring to himself as "the brood of the eagle"²⁷ Combines his on-the-verge-of-collapse personal identity with familial legacy. In accordance with the Athenian social and

²⁵ For more about the structure of the patriarchal and monarchical life of the Athenian *oikos* (or the *private realm*), see: Arendt, H. 1998. *The Human Condition*. Chicago University Press, 27-9, 45; Theodosiadis, M. 2025. *Ancient Greek Democracy and American Republicanism: Prometheus in Political Thought*. Edinburgh University Press, 31

²⁶ Van de Vijver G., Bazan A., Detandt S., "The Mark, the Thing, and the Object: On What Commands Repetition in Freud and Lacan", *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2017.

²⁷ Conacher D. J., 1987: 107.

aristocratic norms, failure is deemed as effeminacy (Aegisthus's woman's heart), exclusion from society, and social devaluation. Orestes has to grapple with that anxiety of this identification as his ascension is inseparable from the violent displacement of his origins, along with that of his mother and her consort.

Lacan's metaphor of "symbolic castration" is an apt description of the situation faced by Orestes, where the murder of Clytemnestra is an action that enacts and actualizes that castration itself. Orestes, by obeying the Apollonian law, wounds his own subjectivity and tries to emerge as the faux pas head of the house. His authority is immediately challenged by the Furies, who act as phalanxes of the maternal. They erupt at that very point where the masculine order has to be restored. At every turn, thus the symbolic is marked by trauma and loss without any act of reparation, which can recover the masculine identity haunted by the threat of the return of the feminine/monstrous. The pursuit of the Furies of Orestes shows the inadequacy of the old order that is crumbling apart.

Electra's Lament and Politics of Mourning

The Libation Bearers begins with ritual grief but not overt violence. Agamemnon's tomb emerges as a site of not only ritualized mourning but also an evocation to avenge the loss of a father figure. Electra, unlike Orestes, reveals herself as a liminal figure who bears witness, taking on the task of a mourner and eventually becoming a co-conspirator. Electra's actions of grieving are highlighted even before Orestes arrives, and they are evocative of Antigone's insistence on burying her brother. Lacan does refer to them both together, referring to Electra as "Antigone's double."²⁸ Because of her unrelenting grief and sacrifice for the Name-of-the-Father, which are in line with Antigone's ethics of desire.

The lamentations of Electra follow the gendered conventional norms of ancient Greek society, where threnos (formal song) and goos (personal lament) are specifically women's duties. These laments destabilize the boundaries set by societal order on women's agency. Their lamentations become something more than mere channelization of grief. The lament of grief is already feminine in

²⁸ Lacan J., 1997: 217.

this culture, and “as Archilochus’s famous poem exhorts, it must be banished.”²⁹ The prohibition is intended to address the possible harm that women’s grieving poses to public order; while its manifestation is not pleonastic in and of itself, from the perspective of the citizen, it is.

Electra’s mourning for her father also acts as an alternative form of justice that closely aligns more with inherited trauma as memory than a civic procedure. The role of “professional mourner” is inherited by gender, but it ends up giving Electra both social precarity and expressive power as she performs the libation. “She is trapped in a liminal space where both her mind and body are adversely affected by her excessive mourning.”³⁰ Comprehending the mentality of mourning requires a knowledge of “the ancient Greek mentality of amnesty.”³¹ The connection between grief and rage is a clear place to start. Anger, as well as rage, is a byproduct of the feelings of sadness, which are the source of lament. Her lament is saturated with hues of ethical and political tension, too. The speech she delivers at her father’s tomb questions both piety and blasphemy simultaneously. She asks, “Am I to ask this, the customary prayer of mortals, that equal requital be given to those sending these offerings?”³²

The request put forth by her in the form of speech assumes a property of seeking help, even though it is centered in bodily memory. She begs of the Chorus, “O teach my inexperience,”³³ exposing the emotional displacement she herself faces in the wake of this traumatic inheritance. The moral purpose of tragedy is to draw attention to the political logos’ warped temporality. On the other hand, the tragic voice reveals that the only infinity that mortal creatures have is the infinity of grief and sorrow.³⁴ Electra breaks in joy upon recognizing her brother: “O blessed sight, who must for me be father, mother, sister, brother, all in one!”³⁵ This

²⁹ Loraux N., 1998: 11.

³⁰ Bakogianni A., “Performing Grief: Mourning Does Indeed Become Electra”, *Thersites*, 9, 2017, pp. 45-69.

³¹ Loraux N., (ed.), 1998: xi.

³² Conacher D. J., 1987: 105.

³³ Conacher D. J., 1987: 105.

³⁴ Nikolopoulou K., “Tragedy without Action? Reading Sophocles after Loraux”, *Epoché*, 2021, pp. 21-46.

³⁵ Conacher D. J., 1987: 106.

suggests, from a psychoanalytic framework, that there is a complete collapse of all relational categories, suggesting familial longing and a psychic regression. For Electra, there is no singular form of longing for justice; rather, there is a multitude that longs for the return of unity, which neither revenge nor the Symbolic Order's fantasy can fulfill.

The function of mourning by Electra is revealed by the collapse of this kinship as an ontological crisis and the inheritance of trauma as memory. Her joint lamentation with the Chorus, the kommos, serves more as a theatrical symptomatology than as a mere ritual closure. An oscillating structure is formed where trauma, instead of simply being mourned and processed, gets reiterated. In Lacanian terms, Electra flirts with the Symbolic and Imaginary registers to get close to the Real, the unmediated trauma that cannot quite be forgotten or called so. Her grief, articulated from an engendered ritual, stands at the edge of what can be uttered, yet remains unspeakable. Electra's femininity is not just a sociological posture, but it is rooted firmly in the lack, marked by mourning. Yet it becomes tragically voiceless when patricide and institutions of justice take over. If Electra lends a voice to trauma, then the Furies give it a solid shape by bursting at the end of *The Libation Bearers*.

In psychoanalysis, the forgotten origin of neurosis and the foundation for neurotic repetition are formed by the missed encounter with the Real, which remembers the impacts of trauma that is inassimilable to consciousness. "The real exceeds systems of signification, generating an excess or a remainder in relation to which desire inscribes its object."³⁶ The Furies are not to be interpreted as agents of justice ordained; rather, they are the irruptions of what Lacan calls the Real. The trauma that is elusive of any containment, which cannot be domesticated by ritualization, and also exceeds any form of interpretation. Their arrival tears down all structures of supposed normalcy, such as prophecy and kinship.

The Real resists any symbolization for Lacan and returns as violence, anxiety, and repetition by escaping the clutches of the Symbolic Order. The play is populated by otherworldly figures such as gods, oracles, and ghosts, yet the Furies are remarkably

³⁶ Botting F., "Relations of the Real in Lacan, Bataille and Blanchot", *Sub-Stance*, 23: 1, 1994, p. 24.

distinct. They are the primal force that emerges when justice is failed. Guilt alone does not push Orestes towards madness, but the direct spectral presences of the unbearable, outside the reach of institutional reason. A culmination of logic is marked by the Furies since the final defiance of Clytemnestra, “By guile we perish, as by guile we slew!”³⁷ She almost forewarns the cyclical form of vengeance as each act is recursively justified, yet each one generates more chaos and disorder. Orestes might claim that his act, divinely ordained, is supposed to bring an end to this cycle.

Yet the structure of order falls apart as the Furies appear since their justice is not the justice of Zeus or Apollo. Rather, it is much older and present as the primal urge of man. The stage ends up rendering what psychoanalytic framework recognizes as a symptom, where Orestes observes the Furies as “females like to Gorgons, sable-stoled, entwined with many dragons...”³⁸ The Furies are but an externalization of the unconscious dread of Orestes. The Real’s very pulsating kernel that erupts onto perception once there is complete disintegration of the Symbolic order. He cannot explain his vision, nor can he integrate it, let alone appeal to it for clemency. “In *The Eumenides*, Aeschylus chose to depict the underworld goddesses, the Furies, as preternaturally ugly.”³⁹

The Furies are elevated beyond their mythic function in the form of their representation. Unlike Apollo, who counsels, the Furies shriek and react. Their monstrous, feminine, and serpentine form is a signifier of a pre-Olympia regime where justice was not measured in the form of persuasion, but reciprocity and blood. “The Furies themselves represent the image in extreme. For their basic role (they call themselves “Curses”) is to objectify the vicious bite of conscience.”⁴⁰ The logic that emerges here is not one of Aristotelian catharsis, but one of psychological horror. The fulfillment of desire produces ruptures instead of balance. The prayers offered to Apollo and the Sun cannot hide the fact that justice has

³⁷ Conacher D. J., 1987: 123.

³⁸ Conacher D. J., 1987: 126.

³⁹ Schavrien J., “War and Nature in Classical Athens and Today: Demoting and Restoring the Underground Goddesses”, *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 29: 2, 2010, p. 154.

⁴⁰ Burke K., “Form and Persecution in the Oresteia”, *The Sewanee Review*, 1945, p. 383.

caught hold of a semblance of insanity and horror. The mother, even in death, returns to haunt him.

The difference due to gendered expression is crucial here as Electra internalizes the mother, whereas Orestes externalizes her. However, both fail spectacularly in transforming her legacy into something truly reparative. The Furies open the wound of inherited trauma even more. Orestes' role changes into an object of punishment from a self-prescribed agent of justice. The murder of Clytemnestra, which Orestes justifies in his speeches, is rendered null by the arrival of the Furies. The impasse of trauma is revealed here, as something that once has been done cannot be undone; some wounds return as presence, and the horror refuses to become reduced to a narrative form entirely.

The lament of Electra and the hunt by the Furies together comprise the trauma that is unsymbolizable in *The Libation Bearers*. The presence of the Furies also makes the plot progress for the third part of the trilogy, *The Eumenides*, where trauma has to enter the *polis* for an adjudication. The Real cannot be exorcised by a mere confession or some murder. Its trials and tribulations must be faced as Orestes has to face his own pursuit, not with speech, but by navigating the inner corridors of his own psyche, the trauma that demands to be observed.

Conclusion: Inheritance and the Spectral Future

Through the recursive violence of the Atreid household, *The Libation Bearers* sketches out a tragic tale of inherited trauma. The argument put forward by this paper is that the play's absent-present father and mother figures, domestic spaces, and its psychological economy end up enacting a drama of spectral inheritance. Fully spectral justice, compelled by forces that are neither rational nor completely visible. The Atreid household operates as a site in which trauma gets spatialized and transmitted, with the tomb doubling up as a threshold for memory and return. Orestes, compelled by divine, familial, and personal imperatives, finds himself at the end of a traumatic repetition compulsion which ensures that vengeance is always cyclical in nature.

Electra performs the affective labor of loss and grief as the voice of mourning. The unsymbolizable Real is given a solid shape by

the Furies, who crystallize the trauma, as some wounds can never be healed nor can they be properly articulated in any way. Application of hauntological and psychoanalytic frameworks opens up questions even for contemporary trauma scholarship: How does trauma become something inheritable besides can mourning ever reach Symbolic completion, and what happens when inherited trauma becomes uninterpretable?

Hauntology and Lacanian psychoanalysis reveal how the dead continue to haunt the living via intrapsychic conflicts that color and animate the ritualistic and familial drama. The Real shapes both the individual and collective destinies in tragedy. Tragedy here is about the unsettling persistence of that which should have been resolved.

This hauntological-psychoanalytic approach can also be extended to more Greek tragedies in future studies, examining how ritual and memory influence tragedy within the logic of the Imaginary. Multidisciplinary discussions involving trauma studies and memory studies would enhance both classical studies and modern cultural analyses, providing access to the spectral futures of Greek tragedy and unexplored forms of critical inheritance.

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Reconstructing Ukrainian Identity: The Impact of the Russian-Ukrainian War Trauma

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Abstract

The paper explores the reconstruction of the Ukrainian national identity in the context of the traumatic events of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The war traumatic experience is viewed as a source of suffering and existential challenges for Ukrainians and a catalyst for constructing their renewed collective “we”. This involves rethinking the history of the Ukrainian nation, its social, political, and cultural heritage. The paper also focuses on the development and the role of the Ukrainian language, the emergence and spread of various verbal and nonverbal initiatives and practices that contribute to overcoming the collective war trauma and revitalizing the image of Ukrainians as a nation in the world.

Keywords: *catalyst, national identity, image, redefining, the Russian-Ukrainian war, trauma, Ukrainian language*

Introduction

Wars fundamentally transforms the social, political, cultural, and psychological life of nations and personalities. The ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war has provoked the formation of a new Ukrainian national identity. Today, Ukrainian identity is increasingly defined by shared values: an unbreakable will to defend the country's sovereignty, mutual support, and large-scale volunteer activity. At the same time, the war has contributed to the revitalization of cultural life, the return of historical memory, and the strengthening of the significance of Ukrainian national symbols. Despite profound suffering, the trauma of war has become the basis for rethinking Ukrainian national identity and forming a new awareness of 'us' – as a community that defines its place in the world through resilience, unity, and dignity.

Trauma: Concept and Dimensions

Trauma derives from the Greek word τραῦμα, meaning “wound” or “injury”. Initially, it referred to a physical injury resulting from violence or an accident.¹ Since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, trauma has come to denote psychological and emotional wounds that leave no visible marks yet deeply affect the human psyche and consciousness.

The Austrian neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, studied the psychological dimensions of trauma and was among the first in scientific psychology to consider the role of traumatic experiences in human life. He described trauma as an event that exceeds the psyche's ability to integrate lived

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¹ American Psychological Association (n.d.), “Trauma”, in: *APA Dictionary of Psychology*. Retrieved October 10, 2025, from <https://dictionary.apa.org/trauma>

experience, resulting in its repression into the unconscious.² According to Freud, repressed memories do not disappear but continue to influence human behavior through neuroses, dreams, or repetitive behaviors – a phenomenon he called repetition compulsion.³ Freud's work led to the understanding of trauma not just as a psychological injury, but as a consequence of traumatic experiences shaping memory mechanisms and human behavior as well.

Leading twentieth-century psychoanalysts, including Melanie Klein⁴ and Donald Winnicott⁵, regarded trauma as the disruption of a person's fundamental sense of security and trust in the world. According to Donald Winnicott, an individual exposed to traumatic experiences loses the fundamental sense of stability essential for mental well-being, along with the ability to trust others and build healthy interpersonal relationships.⁶ Modern psychologists have expanded upon the ideas of European scientists, defining psychological trauma as an emotional response to an extremely stressful event that threatens a person's life or physical and mental integrity.⁷

The philosophical dimension reveals trauma as an ontological rupture in human existence – a moment when the established structure of subjectivity collapses. Jean-François Lyotard interpreted trauma as “an event beyond representation that cannot be fully expressed or comprehended”.⁸ In his *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2000), Paul Ricoeur approached memory and for-

² Freud S., *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, W. W. Norton, 1961, p. 13.

³ Freud S., *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, W. W. Norton, 1961, p. 18.

⁴ Klein M., *The Psycho-Analysis of Children*, Hogarth Press, 1932, pp. 198-205.

⁵ Winnicott D. W., *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development*, Hogarth Press, 1965, pp. 37-44.

⁶ Winnicott D. W., *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development*. Hogarth Press, 1965, pp. 103-110.

⁷ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *Trauma and violence – What is trauma and its effects?* Retrieved October 22, 2025, from <https://www.samhsa.gov/mental-health/trauma-violence>

⁸ Lyotard J.-F., *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p. 56.

givenness as ethical ways of overcoming traumatic experiences.⁹ Jacques Derrida characterized trauma through the concept of the *trace* that never disappears but shapes our identity.¹⁰ In “*The Origins of Totalitarianism*” (1951), German and American political philosopher Hannah Arendt emphasized the political dimension of trauma associated with exile, loss of home, and rupture from the world.¹¹

The social dimension of trauma refers to the impact of collective upheavals on society, its structure, norms, and values. In his theory of cultural trauma, American sociologist Jeffrey Alexander stressed that trauma becomes a social phenomenon once the community acknowledges an event as threatening to its collective identity.¹²

Another American sociologist, Kai Erikson, shared a similar perspective. He interpreted trauma as the breakdown of social bonds and interpersonal trust. To him, trauma was not only a personal suffering but primarily the loss of social integrity. According to Erikson, collective trauma can help to restore social cohesion, reshape mutual support, and redefine a system of social values.¹³

Wars, genocides, acts of repression, and exiles are major social crises connected with the political dimension of trauma. They ruin people’s lives, as well as social institutions, historical memory, and the sense of belonging. To Hannah Arendt, the trauma of exile and loss of homeland is both a personal and a political experience that alters the human way of being in the world and causes a crisis of human identity.¹⁴

⁹ Ricoeur P., *Memory, History, Forgetting*, University of Chicago Press, 2024, pp. 507-523.

¹⁰ Derrida J., *Writing and Difference*, University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 226. Cf. Kakoliris Gerasimos, “Jacques Derrida’s Deconstruction of Western Metaphysics: The Early Years”, *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 4, 2017, pp. 43-62.

¹¹ Arendt H., *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1951, pp. 267-302.

¹² Alexander J., “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma”, in: Alexander J. C., Eyerman R., Giesen B., Smelser N. J., Sztompka P., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2004, pp. 10-11.

¹³ Erikson K., *Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood*, Simon and Schuster, 1976, pp. 154-155.

¹⁴ Arendt H., *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1951, pp. 267-302.

Trauma arising from political catastrophes may serve as a source of mobilization and resistance, enabling new forms of solidarity and a rethinking of national identity. It transforms collective pain into a catalyst for strengthening national unity and constructing a shared “we”, reflecting the people’s striving for freedom and the preservation of their cultural and political distinctiveness.

National Identity and the Reasons for Its Reconstruction

National identity is a person’s awareness of belonging to a particular nation community, united by a common language, culture, historical memory, traditions, values, and symbols. It is both an emotional and a cognitive construct that forms the sense of collective belonging and an understanding of a shared past and future. National identity defines the way people perceive themselves within their nation and relate to members of other cultures or states.

The term “*national identity*” became common in twentieth-century academic works, although the concepts of national consciousness and people’s self-determination are historically older. The American political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson is a key contributor in the field. In “*Imagined Communities*” (1983), he described the nation as a social construct existing in the minds of its members through the imagination of a shared past, symbols, and rituals. According to Anderson, national identity is based not only on actual social bonds but also on collective beliefs. These beliefs enable the sense of belonging to a community even among those who have never met.¹⁵

In his “*Nations and Nationalism*” (1983), the British philosopher and anthropologist Ernest Gellner examined national identity through socioeconomic and cultural factors. He stated that it is not inherent but is socially constructed, arising from historical, economic, and cultural changes. To him, nations are socially constructed entities that align cultural and political domains. According to Gellner, national identity is a result of shared social experi-

¹⁵ Anderson B., *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, 1983, pp. 4-5.

ences and common value systems supported by state institutions and cultural practices.¹⁶

The British sociologist and nationalism theorist, Anthony D. Smith, is renowned for his work on national identity, ethnicity, and the origins of nations. Within the framework of ethno-symbolism, he adds the role of historical myths, symbols, religious traditions, and heroic narratives to the understanding of national identity. In “*Nationalism and Ethnic Identity*” (1991), Smith emphasizes that national identity is based on lasting cultural traditions and collective beliefs about shared ancestry, history, and culture. He shows that the nation is more than a political concept; it is a cultural and historical phenomenon that provides a sense of stability and continuity to the community over time. According to Smith, national identity merges the rational (civic) and the emotional (ethnic), creating a moral community united by a shared history and culture.¹⁷

The British culturologist and postcolonial theorist Stuart Hall considered national identity to be a process of ongoing construction dependent upon historical conditions, discourses of authority, and cultural representations.¹⁸ He stressed that national identity is a cultural construct constantly created through narratives, symbols, history, and notions of us and them. To him, a nation is not a fixed entity but *an imagined community* that always re-writes its history.¹⁹

Modern scholars point to the dynamic nature of national identity, which is constantly being reconstructed, especially under the influence of political crises, social transformations, and cultural changes.²⁰ ²¹ National identity provides a sense of belonging to a

¹⁶ Gellner E., *Nations and Nationalism*, Cornell University Press, 1983, p. 23.

¹⁷ Smith A. D., *National Identity*, University of Nevada Press, 1991, pp. 12-45.

¹⁸ Hall S., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Sage Publications, 1997, pp. 10-15.

¹⁹ Hall S., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Sage Publications, 1997, pp. 6-7.

²⁰ Mitchell J., “Transnational Identity and the Gulf Crisis: Changing Narratives of Belonging in Qatar”, *International Affairs*, 97: 4, 2021, pp. 929-947.

community. It also shapes the collective “we”, enabling individuals to navigate the social and political space, defend the rights and values of the community, and adapt to change. Periods of social instability, especially wars, intensify these processes because that’s when the sense of community, cultural continuity, and moral unity become crucial for a nation’s survival.

National Identity in The Context of War and Trauma

War stands as one of the most radical socio-political experiences a nation can face, forcing it to question its very existence, values, and right to self-determination. It creates circumstances that disrupt collective consciousness and turn traumatic experience into a force, making people rethink old narratives and shape new ones. During war, national identity gains real weight and becomes a matter of survival, dignity, and integrity of the community.

Collective war trauma prompts society to revise its own history, national memory, and symbols. Thus, the nation realizes the threat posed to its existence and identity. Such times foster a new collective narrative uniting people in shared pain, loss, and heroism. War brings destruction and, at the same time, sparks resurgence. It is a moment for a nation to rethink its past and plan based on responsibility and solidarity.

National identity serves as a psychological and cultural *shield*, allowing individuals to process and outline resentment and trauma, turning a turbulent experience into a meaningful narrative where pain and hope coexist.²¹ Language, memory, and cultural practices help a nation to reclaim its sense of agency and thus reshape the connection between past and present (Kryvda

²¹ Moon D., “Reconstructions of Serbian National Identity in the Post-Yugoslav Era: A Thematic Survey”, *Ethnologia Actualis*, 23:2, 2023, pp. 67-84.

²² Beukian S., and Graff-McRae R., “Trauma Stories as Resilience: Armenian and Irish National Identity in a Century of Remembering. *Studi Irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies*”, *Studi Irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies*, 8(8), 2018, pp.157-188; Theodosiadis M., “Republican perspectives on populism and hope (Beyond Christopher Lasch)”, *Doctoral Thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London*. 2021, p.284.

2019).²³ Narratives of shared values and historical memories (expressed through artifacts and collective customs), common experiences of struggle, and the public expressions that commemorate them, help to preserve and sustain national identity.²⁴ In wartime, such narratives grow in strength, helping to bring society together, mark out the enemy, and define what it truly means to be a nation.²⁵

War drives the transformation of national identity in different ways. Firstly, there is a reconsideration of historical memory – past events seen as neutral gain new symbolic meaning. Heroic deeds, the fight for independence, and cultural legacy are now inseparable from the ongoing national resistance. Secondly, linguistic and cultural self-identification becomes increasingly important. Language, literature, folklore, and art go beyond mere means of expression; they evolve into forms of resistance, strengthening the cultural autonomy of a nation. Thirdly, national identity acquires moral significance and forces every citizen to choose whether to contribute to the community actively or to stand aside.

The concept of collective memory is central in identity reconstruction.²⁶ It provides a space for people to rethink what national identity means. Traumatic events of war, such as destroyed cities, deaths, and exile, are woven into the collective memory through language and symbols. So, it does more than simply preserve shared experience – it builds an emotional pillar that fortifies national solidarity. Working through trauma leads to collective healing for those seeking to restore the meaning of their existence in a shattered world.

²³ Kryvda, N., Y., “КОЛЕКТИВНА ПАМ’ЯТЬ ЯК ЧИННИК ФОРМУВАННЯ ГРУПОВОЇ ІДЕНТИЧНОСТІ [Collective Memory as a Factor of Group Identity Formation]”. *Філософські обрії*, 41, 2019, pp.60-76.

²⁴ Theodosiadis M., “Republican perspectives on populism and hope (Beyond Christopher Lasch)”, *Doctoral Thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London*. 2021, p.288.

²⁵ Drozdzewski, D., Waterton, E., and Sumartojo, S., “Cultural memory and identity in the context of war: Experiential, place-based and political concerns”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, 101:910, 2019, pp.251-272.

²⁶ Theodosiadis M., “Republican perspectives on populism and hope (Beyond Christopher Lasch)”, *Doctoral Thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London*. 2021, pp.65-77.

Simultaneously, reconstructing national identity is a complicated process. It involves internal contradictions, interpretive conflicts, and struggles over which narratives prevail. Trauma has the power to divide and bring people together, forming new solidarity that transcends conventional boundaries of language, ethnicity, or territory. From this perspective, war is more than just a battlefield. It allows for cultural and symbolic transformation, shaping a new identity where the memory of loss is inseparable from the hope for a brighter future.

The Ukrainian National Identity and the Ongoing Russian-Ukrainian War

For Ukrainians, national identity means not just acknowledging their distinct cultural, historical, and linguistic heritage but also uniting around shared values in the pursuit of sovereignty. It stands as a vital force in the nation-building process. Its formation was hindered by many factors, including centuries without statehood, periods of imperial and colonial domination, forced Russification, social and political upheavals, and constant struggle for freedom and independence. Each historical event has catalyzed rethinking Ukrainian identity and building community spirit among Ukrainians.

The Ukrainian ethnic group emerged from East Slavic tribes inhabiting the territory of modern Ukraine in the sixth and seventh centuries AD. These tribes included the Polans, Drevlians, Severians, Ulichs, Tivertsi, and White Croats. They formed the core of Kyivan Rus' (9th–13th centuries) – a state that was the first political and cultural center of the common features of East Slavic civilization. Kyivan Rus' became the ethnic and state-building cradle of Ukrainian identity, as it gradually gave rise to a common language, the Orthodox religious tradition, models of governance and social order, and core Ukrainian values.

The mass adoption of Christianity in 988 established shared moral and religious norms that later became an integral part of Ukrainian identity. This period marked the formation of the state's structure and first Ukrainian values – faith in God, respect for land and labor, mutual respect within communities, and prin-

ciples of governance through princely and local councils. Writing and literary activity were central to forming a cultural fabric – through the development of church schools, the compilation of early chronicles, and the translation of sacred texts – that endured despite foreign invasions and political crises. The formation of Ukrainian identity was also influenced by territorial expansion and contact with other peoples, including the Slavs, Turkic tribes, and Byzantines. These contacts fostered the emergence of early statehood institutions, legal norms, and economic ties that later shaped the political and cultural autonomy of Ukrainian lands. Developed crafts and trade contributed to social mobility and the formation of self-aware communities actively involved in the political, religious, and economic life of Kyivan Rus’.

Although the thirteenth-century Mongol invasion shattered the socio-political system of Kyivan Rus’, its people preserved their ethnocultural identity. From the late thirteenth century, the territories of modern Ukraine gradually came under the rule of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (ca. 1320–1569). Following the Union of Lublin in 1569, they became part of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569–1795), where the Orthodox population experienced pressure from Catholic and Protestant traditions. During this period, the Orthodox Church became a central force in maintaining literacy, language, and traditions through education, printing houses, brotherhood schools, and monasteries.

The Cossacks, arising in Ukraine as a social and military structure at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, came to embody the Ukrainian spirit of freedom and struggle for autonomy. Following the 1648 national liberation war led by Bohdan Khmelnytsky, the Hetmanate (1648–1764) emerged in part of Ukrainian lands – an autonomous Cossack state with its own political, military, and administrative institutions. The Hetmanate united Cossack regiments and the local population under the leadership of the Hetman. He was the highest military and civil authority of the state as well as a symbol of national identity. This period was marked by patriotism, military valor, and Ukraine’s cultural development, with the Cossack administration

supporting education, literature, religious and cultural institutions, thereby reinforcing Ukrainian national identity.²⁷

Following the 1654 Pereyaslav Treaty, the Hetmanate became politically dependent on the Tsardom of Moscow, while retaining a degree of internal self-governance. The autonomous Cossack state came to an end in 1764, when the Russian Empire deposed the last Hetman, Kyrylo Rozumovsky, and abolished all of its self-governing institutions. The Hetmanate's heritage contributed greatly to Ukrainian political awareness and national identity.

In the nineteenth century, Ukrainians experienced a revival, with literature, art, and scientific studies playing a pivotal role in forming national self-consciousness. A leading Ukrainian poet and thinker, Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861), explores Ukrainian national identity from a philosophical perspective. His literary works depict the fight for freedom, dignity, and justice as a shared moral responsibility of Ukrainians, their sufferings as a source of inner strength, and the solidarity of the nation. The literary legacy of Ivan Franko (1856-1916) and Lesya Ukrainka (1871-1913) shapes Ukrainian patriotism and civic responsibility, stressing the value of moral strength, freedom, and dignity, and the role of language and culture in sustaining national identity through turbulent historical moments.

The nineteenth-century sociocultural aspect of Ukrainian identity was evident in the activities of scientific and cultural groups, theaters, musical bands, publishing houses, and educational institutions that actively promoted the Ukrainian language, history, and culture among various social groups. These institutions not only preserved cultural heritage but also cultivated a sense of community and moral solidarity among Ukrainians, laying the groundwork for nation-building. During this period, national identity ceased to be merely a symbol of ethnic origin and became a part of the values system, norms, and moral and aesthetic principles guiding the way Ukrainians think, live, and act in the world.²⁸

²⁷ Pasichnyk V., "Cossack Self-Government in Zaporozhya Sich as a Component of the State Tradition of Ukraine", *DG. Journal of History & Statehood*, 1:29, 2022, pp. 26-41.

²⁸ Yekelchuk S., *Ukraine: Birth of a Modern Nation*, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 45-78.

Ukrainians first had the chance to establish their own state during the revolutionary years of 1917-1921. For a short period, the Ukrainian People's Republic (1917-1921) and the West Ukrainian People's Republic (1918-1919) laid the basis for the development of constitutional norms, diplomacy, and national symbols. Nevertheless, political instability, foreign aggression, and internal conflicts prevented the full establishment of Ukrainian statehood.²⁹

Nation-building occurred under constant challenges during the early Soviet period, characterized by the policy of Ukrainization, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s, with systematic repression, collectivization, and the Holodomor of 1932-1933. These catastrophes had a profound sociocultural and psychological impact on the Ukrainian people. Losses, violence, and forced Russification resulted in a collective trauma that simultaneously reinforced the sense of national community and moral resilience among Ukrainians. Under these circumstances, Ukrainian identity came to be perceived less as an ethnic or linguistic category and more as a value-philosophical concept that brings the nation together around shared principles, cultural heritage, and moral norms.³⁰

When Ukraine declared its independence on August 24, 1991, it brought to an end century of nation-building efforts, yet cultural and linguistic differences within the country persisted. In 2004, the Orange Revolution demonstrated society's maturity and civic engagement. The 2013-2014 Revolution of Dignity, in turn, marked a decisive moment of sociocultural and ethical reflection on national identity. It confirmed Ukraine's commitment to democracy, freedom, and European values.³¹ All of these showed that the Ukrainian people can come together in difficult times, recognizing their national identity through shared experience, collective memory, and moral and civic solidarity.

²⁹ Stepyko H., *Formation of Ukrainian Statehood: Historical Perspectives and Challenges*, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, 2022, p. 67.

³⁰ Marukhovska-Kartunova O., Turenko V., Zarutskya O., Spivak L., & Vynnychuk R., "Analysis of Modern Socio-Cultural Processes in Ukraine and their Impact on the National Identity and Resilience Growth of Ukrainians in the Conditions of War", *Kurdish Studies*, 12:2, 2024, pp. 2780-2790.

³¹ Kulyk V., "National identity in Ukraine: Impact of Historical Legacies, Language, and Political Mobilization", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68:5, 2016, pp. 800-826.

Ukraine's society faced an extraordinary challenge when Russia invaded it in February 2022. It led to the consolidation and transformation of the meaning of national identity. Extensive hostilities, a high-intensity information war, mobilization of society, and significant losses among civilians and military personnel have spurred a thorough reevaluation of the importance of the nation, the state, and culture in the lives of citizens. War trauma deeply influences the collective psyche, shaping renewed understanding of morality, culture, and politics. It makes Ukrainians reconsider the value of freedom, human dignity, moral responsibility, and the historical mission of their nation.

According to UNHCR (2025), by the beginning of 2025, approximately 6.9 million Ukrainians had left the country, seeking refuge in Poland, Germany, Romania, the Czech Republic, and other countries across Europe and the world, while 3.7 million became internally displaced within Ukraine.³² These mass displacements have resulted not only in humanitarian challenges but also in the creation of a transnational Ukrainian community sustaining cultural, educational, and linguistic connections with its homeland. Ukrainian communities across the globe continue to promote their language and culture, strengthening national consciousness. By opening educational and cultural centers, language schools and clubs, launching media platforms, and other creative initiatives, they help to redefine what it means to be Ukrainian in today's world.

The collective memory of Ukrainians has been deeply influenced by both civilian and military casualties, thousands of wounded, and the vast destruction of housing and infrastructure. Beyond the shared experience of suffering, these tragedies have become a strong driver of the nation's moral, cultural, and historical unity. Every city left in ruins, every school or hospital destroyed, and every story of a family that lost loved ones is evolving into a powerful symbol – not only of pain but also of strength, resilience, and self-sacrifice.

The traumatic experience of war has become a factor that brought together diverse social, ethnic, and regional groups across the country in a common striving for survival and victory.

³² UNHCR. *Ukraine Emergency – Ukraine Emergency: Operational Data Portal*. 2025, February. Retrieved October 10, 2025, from <https://www.unhcr.org/emergencies/ukraine-emergency>

The experience of danger, the loss of home, family, and familiar surroundings has deeply reshaped national awareness: Ukrainians are coming to recognize that their freedom, culture, and language are not givens, but values that must be actively defended. Psychologists emphasize that collective trauma can be destructive as well as generative.³³ In Ukraine's case, it has become a basis for moral renewal and the revival of civic responsibility.

The memory of the fallen has become a significant component in shaping the historical self-awareness of the Ukrainian nation. It is expressed through a variety of forms, such as memorials, documentary films, songs, and artistic projects. These initiatives honor the war heroes, gaining deep symbolic meaning. Other rituals of remembrance include moments of silence (every day at 9 am), walls of mourning, folk poems, and artworks conveying both the nation's pain and dignity. These practices have shaped a new kind of cultural memory, turning trauma into moral strength that unites society.

Veterans play a particularly important role in this process. Thousands of people with combat experience have become moral voices of the nation. They participate in public life, volunteer movements, and political initiatives, creating a model of a citizen who embodies courage, dignity, and responsibility. The state gradually provides veterans with social and psychological support and professional reintegration as a way to memorialize their sacrifice and heroism. The veterans stand as a symbol of the nation's moral resilience, with their traumatic experience becoming part of the new collective identity.

The so-called *frontline initiatives*, where veterans and civilians come together to create moral and cultural *islands of resilience*, are an essential aspect of the new national identity. In December 2022, the volunteer center *Art of Resilience* was opened in Kyiv, offering humanitarian aid, lectures on Ukrainian history, and workshops in traditional folk art. Similar centers in Lviv and Kharkiv document events and consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian war and offer support to Ukrainians. Each story of

³³ Herman, J. L., & van der Kolk, B. A., *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, Basic Books, 1997, p. 32.

loss, volunteering, or rescue becomes part of a shared narrative that strengthens cultural solidarity.

The war has also intensified the philosophical reflection on the existence of Ukrainians in the world. Through their books, treatises, articles, and artworks, writers, philosophers, journalists, and artists explore the phenomenon of national trauma as an integral part of Ukraine's new modern identity. Authors of fiction and documentary works portray the frontline reality, volunteer heroes, people who lost their homes, and those seeking meaning in suffering, forming a spiritual space where pain becomes the path to self-discovery and collective reflection.

Through this process, trauma evolves into a narrative – a story Ukrainians can share with the whole world. The war uncovered a new moral depth in the Ukrainian people, anchored in dignity and sacrifice. All of these constitute the heart of modern Ukrainian identity, born of suffering and war but oriented towards a happy life and peace.

The war has changed the meaning of everyday acts. They gain a profound existential significance, whether it is helping a stranger, rescuing an animal, volunteering, or writing a nice comment on social media. From a philosophical perspective, it reflects the idea of the ethics of co-existence, where one's sense of self forms through being responsible for others. Through the shared war trauma, Ukrainians are becoming a community where empathy underpins moral and national cohesion.

The war also alters a country's symbols. Ukrainian national symbols – the flag, the coat of arms, the embroidered shirt (*vyshyvanka*), and the song – have gained new ideological meaning, becoming means of collective therapy. Today, the blue and yellow flag appears in the most surprising contexts – on soldiers' helmets, on the walls of destroyed homes, in social media profiles, and in contemporary artworks. The Ukrainian trident, a statehood symbol for centuries, now serves as a sign of resistance and hope for the nation.

The war's symbolic language extends beyond official emblems to a visual culture of resistance expressed through graffiti, murals, posters, music, and memes. In Bucha, Irpin, Mariupol, and Kharkiv, artistic projects of restoring walls and creating murals have transformed spaces of pain into spaces of memory and hope.

Digital culture is of great importance in the philosophical understanding of war. Ukrainian society is creating a new form of digital collective memory, where every post, photo, or frontline video becomes a fragment of history. Ukrainians are turning social media (such as TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram) into a living chronicle of war, documenting the moments of everyday dignity and struggle.

During war, memes help people cope with the harsh reality and stress they face. They transform trauma into text, into laughter, and into a collective “we” that overcomes fear. Humor and memes become a form of freedom that breaks the monopoly of fear. Iconic memes about “tractors pulling tanks,” songs about the “Bayraktar,” and humorous videos featuring Zelensky and the Armed Forces of Ukraine have become symbols of national resistance, reflecting the pain and heroism of the Ukrainian people. This phenomenon combines traditional folk humor culture (with its archaic protective functions) with modern digital creativity, forming a media-based expression of Ukrainian national optimism.

The Ukrainian Language and National Identity in the Ongoing Russian-Ukrainian War

The anthropocentric nature of any language manifests in its ability to name, conceptualize, and interpret the world from a human perspective. For this reason, language is defined as “*the house of Being*”.³⁴ Language is believed to embody the soul of a nation, its inner life, and its cognitive patterns. Thus, it functions not merely as a tool for naming but as a mechanism for collective reflection – a way of understanding national being. Language reflects a nation’s spiritual state, its core values, and moral com-

³⁴ Heidegger M., “On the Way to Language” (trans. by Albert Hofstadter), in: Heidegger M., *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Harper & Row, 1971, p. 113. Cf. Filippopoulos, Y. G., “Understanding the Concept of Being in General: From Being and Time Back to Young Heidegger”, *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 9:1, 2024, pp. 9-32, <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.32079>. Cf. Sakizli, A., “The Neutrality of Dasein and the Shame in the Female Experience: A Feminist Philosophical Analysis”, *Dia-noesis*, 17, June 2025, pp. 313-30, <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.41716>.

pass, functioning as a tool for understanding collective experience in hard times. Language preserves fragments of human existence connected with losses and victories, experiences and emotions. They help to comprehend all aspects of human experience, including the traumatic experience of war.

Similar experiences are not always conveyed solely through negatively valued or emotionally charged linguistic units, narratives of fear, pain, or despair. The Russian-Ukrainian war resulted in the emergence of neologisms in the Ukrainian language. New wartime realities required new designations. Since 2014, there has been a surge of neologisms and reinterpretation of existing lexical units. For example, «*green little men*», «*territorial defense forces*», «*de-occupation*», «*resocialization*», «*moral front*», and «*resistance*».

Since February 2022, due to the full-scale war in Ukraine and the need to name new realities, the number of neologisms in the Ukrainian language has significantly increased. Among them are the following units:

analogovnet (аналоговнет) – an ironic term for Russian technologies that have no analogs except in the imagination of Russians;

bayraktaryty (байрактарыты) – to destroy the enemy with Bayraktar drones;

bavovna (бавовна) – a euphemism for explosions in Russia or on temporarily occupied territories;

banderomobil (бандеромобіль) – a vehicle painted in national colors with patriotic symbols, used to collect aid, transport volunteers, or participate in protests;

blackout (блекаут) – complete power outage due to attacks on the energy grid;

debakhnulo (дебахнуло) – a person who can cause a lot of harm;

dyskoteka, discotheque (дискотека) – hostilities or shelling;

donate (донатути) – to give money to support the Armed Forces of Ukraine or volunteers;

ye-mogyla (є-могила) – an ironic name for the program of destroying occupiers;

culture front (культурний фронт) – activities aimed at preserving, promoting, and developing Ukrainian culture,

language, traditions, and values as a form of resistance against the aggressor;

orcs (орку) – a derogatory name for Russian soldiers;

moped (моне́д) – Iranian kamikaze Shahed drones;

palyanitsetest (паляницетест) – a test to identify whether someone is ‘one of us’ (a friend) or ‘one of them’ (an enemy) based on their pronunciation of the word palyanitsa;

Parton the dog (пес Патрон) – a sapper dog, symbol of heroism and humor;

pixel (ніксель) – military uniform of the Armed Forces of Ukraine;

pynkt nezlamnosti, point of invincibility (пункт незламності) – a place where people can get help during a power outage;

rashism (рашизм) – the criminal ideology of the ‘Russian world’;

rashists (рашисту) – Russian military, Putin supporters, etc.

Ukrainian wartime neologisms can be divided into several thematic groups:

military-patriotic (bayraktar, PPOshnyk (ППОшник) – air defense officer, deokupatsiya (de-occupation, kontrnastup (counteroffensive);

ironic-satirical (katsapsky svit, rashism, svynosobaka (bastard), vatnyk);

everyday/humanitarian (volonterty (volunteer, trymatu striy (keep rank), donatyty (donate);

meme-internet (dobrogo vetchora my z Ukrainy (good evening, we are from Ukraine), palanytsia effect).

Within the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, new linguistic units have become not only tools of communication or emotional response but also important means of reconstructing and reinterpreting Ukrainian national identity. Wartime linguistic creativity reflects the nation’s self-awareness, its values, collective memory, and perception of its own historical experience. By means of language, Ukrainians express their subjectivity, showing solidarity and moral superiority over the aggressor.

By shaping a new picture of the world, the Ukrainian language crystallizes core traits of Ukrainians:

Invincibility – the ability to endure, preserve dignity, and maintain inner freedom even under the most challenging circum-

stances (e.g., *points of invincibility, the steadfast, reinforced-concrete (people), the spirit of steel*);

courage and heroism manifested in the linguistic terms associated with the Armed Forces of Ukraine, volunteers, defense, and resistance (e.g. *ZSUshnyk, birdie – nickname for female combat medics, snipers, or drone operators; symbolizes lightness, courage, and vigilance, volunteer fighter – has gained new heroic connotations since 2014, becoming a national archetype of bravery and self-sacrifice, the Bird of Azov – nickname for Ukrainian medic Yuliia “Taira” Paievska and other Azovstal defenders*);

self-irony and humor serving as a form of psychological protection, reflected in numerous ironic and satirical neologisms (e.g., *bavovna, orcs, rashists*);

humanism and solidarity – embodied in lexemes related to volunteering (*donatyty (donate), volunteer, punkt nezlamnosti (point of invincibility)*);

a sense of community and national pride expressed through popular memes (*dobrogo vetchora my z Ukrainy (good evening, we are from Ukraine), trymatu striy (keep rank)*).

Wartime neologisms are linguistic markers of a new Ukrainian identity based on shared experience of struggle, mutual support, and spiritual unity.

Many neologisms have entered other languages, including English, not only due to its status as an international language but also because of the continuous reporting of the Russian-Ukrainian war in English-language media and social networks. Such linguistic units are the following:

Bayraktar – the Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drone, a symbol of Ukrainian resistance at the beginning of the Russian–Ukrainian war;

palianytsia – a Ukrainian word for “bread,” that is difficult to pronounce for Russian speakers (has become an identity marker and a way to detect strangers);

*Russian warship – a phrase originating from the legendary remark of a Ukrainian border guard on Snake Island: “Russian warship, go f**k yourself” (in the English-speaking world, it has become a meme and a slogan of resistance, used to signify defiance and heroism);*

Bakhmut spirit – a phrase denoting the resilience and heroism of Ukrainian defenders who defended the city of Bakhmut during one of the fiercest battles of the Russian–Ukrainian war;

Ukrainian resilience – a phrase used in English-language political speeches, analyses, and media to describe the Ukrainian people's ability to withstand aggression, adapt to the harsh conditions of war, and maintain national unity.

ZSU – Armed Forces of Ukraine;

missile terrorism – deliberate missile strikes on Ukraine's civilian infrastructure;

orcs – used by Ukrainian media and social networks as a diminutive derogatory term for Russian soldiers; this term has already appeared in English-language publications.

bavovna – Ukrainian slang for an explosion or strike on enemy territory, also discussed in English as a Ukrainianism;

rashism – a portmanteau of Russia + fascism, describing the ideology or actions of the aggressor country; sometimes also used in English.

It shows that the Ukrainian language is becoming a source of new elements in international political discourse, shaping the image of modern Ukraine as a country of courage and dignity. In the global linguistic discourse, Ukrainians are characterized through metaphorical expressions such as *phoenix nation*, *nation of indomitable people*, *the indomitable*, and *the nation of will*. The following lexical units have become new means of marking Ukrainian national identity in the global linguistic space:

nation of light – in contrast to the “darkness” of the aggressor; a symbol of good, truth, and civilizational choice;

Nation of heroes – highlights mass heroism both in combat and civilian life.

steel people, steel hearts – signifies resilience, perseverance, and unbreakable spirit;

people of light – represents Ukrainians' moral purity and humanitarian values;

people of gratitude – emphasizes the value of mutual support, mutual assistance, and the cult of gratitude;

country of volunteers – highlights the unique social phenomenon of self-organization;

people of courage – characterizes Ukrainians as a decisive and fearless nation;

warriors of light – an emotionally charged metaphor popular on social media, combining military valor and a spiritual mission; nation of gratitude and memory – points to the ability to remember losses while transforming pain into strength.

The Ukrainian language is a tool for psychological recovery, helping people deal with the consequences of the war. Different texts, songs, and slogans support people's emotional state. Such national phrases as "Everything will be Ukraine!", "Glory to Ukraine!" and "Glory to the heroes!" give psychological strength and unite the Ukrainian people. Similar slogans influence international discourse and global support of Ukraine.

Another form of therapy is the annual all-Ukrainian Radio Dictation of National Unity. Since 2022, their titles have been "*Your Home is Ukraine*," "*On the Station Platform*", "*Letter to the Future*", and "*We must live*". They convey Ukraine's war-time realities and the experiences of traumatic events. They are not primarily about literacy, but about unity, patriotism, and morale of the Ukrainian people.

President Volodymyr Zelensky plays an exceptional role in narrativizing the war and shaping a new image of Ukrainians amid existential challenges. He has become not only a political leader but also a moral-philosophical symbol of modern Ukraine. His public addresses – in world parliaments and before the international community – have turned into acts of national self-identification. In his speeches, President Zelensky uses simple, emotionally charged language that creates a sense of unity – he speaks from the people and for the people. His constant presence on social media, including video addresses from the streets of Kyiv, is therapeutic: it builds an emotional bridge between the government and society, reducing the traditional gap between them.

Video addresses of the President have become an "*emotional bridge*" that helped Ukrainians endure the crisis and maintain their morale. As a result, English-language media have begun using the phrase "*Zelenskyy's address*" for both his daily video messages to Ukrainians and his speeches in parliaments all around the world. His speeches are a means of moral leadership, enabling the nation to engage with state and international institutions.

Conclusions

Thus, the reconstruction of modern Ukrainian national identity is caused by the events of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war. The suffering and pain, losses and uncertainty have led Ukrainians to rethink themselves as a nation and revitalize their history, culture, language, traditions, and symbols. An unbreakable Ukrainian people capable of defending their country and its values, supporting their compatriots and national unity, adapting to changes and existential challenges, are the core of their present national identity. Language and communication practices play an important role in these processes, contributing to the renewal and representation of the Ukrainian “we” as a nation in the world.

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Lamentation, Exile, Trauma in Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Ajax*

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Abstract

Sophocles' *Antigone*, performed in 442 BCE, and *Ajax* in 442 BCE are twin responses to social ostracization and exile in a world where heroism was being redefined. While the plays were performed before the historic Peloponnesian War, they are responses to the topical war with Persia that Sophocles had witnessed firsthand. The "Seven against Thebes," the popular civil war which has Polynices and Eteocles, two brothers locked in a bitter fratricidal battle for the throne against Creon's rule, is central to *Antigone*. *Ajax* is about the Trojan war, which ends with the mental breakdown of the eponymous hero, Ajax, as he was denied the mantle of Achilles because of Odysseus, Menelaus, and Agamemnon. The central conflict in *Antigone* is between civic duty and personal morality, while in *Ajax*, it is more subjectivized and interiorized inner conflict. The plays trace the breakdown of language due to trauma, and move away from the symbolic to the semiotic and the maternal as expressed in lamentations and agony, using onomatopoeic Greek words before the suicides of the protagonists. The plays are closer to the Dionysian mode that is linked to orgiastic ecstasy, passion, and darkness (Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 1990). In *Antigone*, the central conflict is between the king's edict and the sacred duty to the dead. In *Ajax*, it is neurosis and hallucination, which leads to the mass slaughter of livestock mistaken for the Greek heroes who were his enemies. The plays are poignant

responses to the collective trauma created by war, and a sense of dislocation, alienation in a world that is suddenly bereft of meaning. The suicides of the protagonists are cathartic, a comment on the shifting political and social climate of Athens.

Keywords: *Greek Tragedy, Dionysian, Exile, Semiotic, Lamentation, War, Trauma, Tragic Alienation*

*Never a bride, never a mother, unfriended,
Condemned alive to solitary death.
-Sophocles, Antigone*

*Oh! Darkness is now my only light; the gloom of the under-
world shines from me. Take me! Take me to the halls of death.
-Sophocles, Ajax*

Aristotle's *Poetics* 330 BCE defines the genre of tragedy in a structured manner based on the unity of time and space. He says, "Tragedy, then, is a representation of an action that is worth serious attention, complete in itself, and of some amplitude, in language enriched by a variety of artistic devices appropriate to the several parts of the play; presented in the form of action, not narration; by means of pity and fear bringing about the purgation of such emotion" (Aristotle, 1965). This linear and evolutionary conception of tragedy was based on the overall cathartic effect that encouraged purgation of pity and fear to heal the community. The individual, as a tragic hero's unique dilemmas, delusions, and courage specific to him/her that are told through a story issuing forth from his/her hamartia or fatal flaw. In the post-Enlightenment and early Modern phase, these views of tragedy were revisited by the German thinker Frederick Nietzsche in his *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music* (1872).

Nietzsche's conception of the tragic emotion and tragic catharsis came to be linked to darker, subterranean emotions of alienation, exile, and inner breakdown of the protagonist in the middle of an

increasingly lonesome universe. According to Nietzsche, Greek Tragedy commingled two opposing forces borrowing names from Greek Gods—Apollo and Dionysius. Apollo represented beauty, grace, the sun, reason and order, and decorum. Dionysus, the God of wine, stood for passion and intoxication, irrationality, and the breaking of boundaries. These two forces or drives -Apollonian and the Dionysian gave birth to friction and the unique tragic experience in the 5th century Greece in the Attic plays. “The Apollonian”, Nietzsche says, “represents reason, artistic order, clarity, and form in contrast to the Dionysian that stands for all that is passionate, irrational, and primal experientially and which is expressed mainly through ritual and music”. In Nietzsche’s conception of art, all that was balanced, regular, and harmonic belonged to Apollonian aesthetics. The hidden, violent, and darker aspects of pain and unknowability belonged to the Dionysian aesthetics. According to Nietzsche, the drives that Apollo represented were those of the “image maker or sculptor,” while Dionysius suggested the “imageless art of music” (Leitch, 2004). Thus, together they created the profound experience of Greek tragedy, which held the audience speechless and emotionally moved.

The tragic experience in Nietzschean reading was not a simple grieving over something found sad; it was rather a delving deeper into the recesses of the audience’s soul. The plays of Sophocles, for instance, combined the two impulses in Greek tragedy—the Apollonian and Dionysian to focus on the boundaries and limits of an individual in collision with the state. The plays thus move away from the orderliness of the Apollonian form to the Dionysian drive towards what he called, “the dissolution of boundaries, the destruction of individuality and excess.” (Nietzsche, 1990). Thus, the chorus, spectacle, songs, and lamentation all together create a danse macabre through Dionysian “orgiastic music, choral singing and dancing” (Nietzsche, 1990). Thus, tragedy rises from a certain Dionysian intoxication and becomes a “ritual of self-destruction,” giving insight into the human condition (Nietzsche, 1990; Ojimba, 2024).

Sophocles’ plays *Antigone* and *Ajax* both performed in 442 BCE. Play with the idea of exile, trauma, and transgression, ending in Nietzsche’s sense of Dionysian ritual of self-destruction. *Antigone* opens in the dark of early morning, when the eponymous protagonist goes out to sprinkle dust on the dead body of her

brother, Polyneices. She broke a taboo and proclaimed civic law established by Creon, the king of Athens. She opposes Creon's edict by trying to dignify the corpse of her brother and desperately trying to bury him to honor familial ties. Sophocles' *Ajax* also begins in the early morning hours when he, in the dark, lashes out against cattle, rams, and other animals, mistaking them for the Greek warriors who have denied him his rightful honor—the armor/mantle of Achilles. Later in the day, he realizes his folly and is filled with remorse for his delusion and stupidity. Both plays are situational as they become responses to immediate situations—the death of Polyneices and the denial of state burial for him, and the aftermath of the Trojan war that leads to the slaying of Ajax. The plays become philosophical discourses on an individual's sense of alienation, exile, and trauma. The only fitting expression to the profundity of grief in the tragic space of the plays is the musical expression of lamentation. The tragic hero in both plays laments their fate and becomes amorphous, a subject-in-process; no longer the knowable, stolid traditional hero Aristotle defines in his *Poetics*.

As both plays were performed in 442 BCE, they represented historical changes and transformations in Sophocles' age. They become responses to social ostracization and victimization in a world where old standards of heroism were being redefined in society. Athenian tragedy in Sophocles' times became more of a political theatre, which negotiated the rise of Democracy and the rights of citizens during wars and the post-war world. War in Sophoclean tragedy constitutes the main body of the narrative and is a source of trauma and psychological aftermath of violence. The plays, while they dramatize individual tragedies they do so in the context of national and local battles, anticipating the Peloponnesian war that was to devastate Athens, leaving her broken in spirit when Sophocles was an old man. In *Antigone*, the central conflict unfolds against the backdrop of the popular civil war between Argives and Polyneices against Eteocles and Creon. The mythic Trojan war is the immediate context of *Ajax* and impacts the eponymous protagonist's consciousness and sanity.

Ajax ends with the mental breakdown of the hero, and the narrative is a storytelling to map the trauma of the war and its repercussions. Ajax kills innocent animals, mistaking them for his adversaries and enemies under the delusion caused by the goddess Athena. *Antigone* ends with the suicide of the hero, read as her

martyrdom as she dies protesting against the king's unlawful edict that denies all citizens the right to bury Polyneices, who has been declared a traitor after the civil war. Before her death, she laments the king's order of her entombment in a cave, the denial of the right to bury her brother, inability to marry her fiancée, Haemon. Antigone's maternal, semiotic cry towards the end of the play undermines the patriarchal authority of Creon and his injustice. She laments:

*You see me, countrymen, on my last journey;
Taking my last leave of the light of day;
Going to my rest, where death shall take me
Alive across the silent river.
No wedding-day; no marriage music;
Death will be all my bridal dower.
(Sophocles, p.148)*

The images of “death”, “silent river” and “no wedding day” underline her state of being cut off from the Polis and community. The tragic hero in this case suffers not only because of his/her *hamartia* or tragic flaw but also because of banishment from the State. The Polis in the play is the enemy and adversary who banishes all who challenge the limits drawn by the law. The body of Antigone becomes the site where the battle between civic law and familial or sacred laws is fought. She can only boldly attempt to flout the rule of the king, but when caught by the Sentry, she says, “I did not think your edicts strong enough to overrule the unwritten unalterable laws of God and heaven, you being only a man.” (Sophocles, p.138).

Ajax, much like Antigone herself, suffers when his freedom is circumscribed by the state, which, along with the Greek goddess, Athena, and the warriors of the Trojan war, judge him for his defeatist attitude. The slighting caused by Odysseus, Menelaus, and Agamemnon, along with the unjust treatment meted out by Athena, makes him lament: “AIAI! Who would have thought the name I was given would sound out my misery? AIAS! AJAX! AGONY! AJAX means agony, so much agony” (Sophocles, p. 22). His mental breakdown, caused by the denial of the armor/mantle of Achilles after the war, is more of a subjectivized and interiorized

conflict. The play focuses on the irrationality and anarchic impulses of the hero, which defy easy categorization.

Antigone and *Ajax* are plays in response to the collective trauma caused by the war and a profound sense of alienation and dislocation in a world suddenly bereft of meaning. In *Ajax*, the central theme is the hero's neurosis and his hallucinations following the trauma of the battlefield and the denial of his rightful share. His suffering and "foolishness" lead him to slaughter animals, mistaking them for Greek heroes, Odysseus, Menelaus, and Agamemnon. The story that Sophocles tells through this bitter narrative is about larger questions about man's sense of futility and helplessness in a world devoid of camaraderie and succor to the soul. When he screams and laments in front of Tecmessa, he is underlining larger metaphysical questions:

Oh!
Darkness is now my only light;
The gloom of the Underworld
Shines for me. Take me!
I have lost the right to look for
Any help from gods or men.
The daughter of Zeus,
The mighty goddess,
Torments me to my death.
Where could I run?
Where could I ever stay?
My reputation now lies here.
Among these butchered carcasses—
My reward for the obsession of a fool.
 (Sophocles, p.21)

Both Ajax and Antigone reach a dead end and commit suicide. Their prose utterances and retaliatory speeches in the beginning, addressing their adversaries, break down as the play progresses. Before their suicides, they start lamenting in poetic language, calling upon countrymen, addressing the chorus, and the Polis, expressing fervent desire to live and yet the inability to continue. Thus, their deaths are not isolated events but form a continuum

and reflect on the shifting political and social climate of Athens, wherein the voice of citizens was becoming more powerful than the state's tyranny.

While Sophocles' life began years after the last tyrant ruled in Athens and Athenian democracy came to full flower (Meineck, 2007; Tripoula, 2024), he was, however, conscious of the devastation wars wrought to the mind and body. The plays trace the breakdown of language caused by trauma, wherein prose gives way to the poetic, a movement away from the symbolic structure of language, according to Julia Kristeva, to the semiotic. The incantations, lamentations, and cries of the two protagonists in Sophocles' plays are protests against the dark underbelly of royalist arrogance. The use of onomatopoeic Greek words in their lament in Dionysian vein is linked to Nietzschean "orgiastic ecstasy, passion and darkness". The gendering of the protagonists makes them feminized in terms of vulnerability and the threat they pose to the law of patriarchy. Creon's indictment of Antigone's actions, for instance, underlines his condemnation of her as a woman/citizen/daughter of Oedipus,

*She has already shown her arrogance
and flouted established law
And now this second challenge—to do it again
And laughing, boast of her deed.
She will be the man, not I,
If she can go victorious and unpunished*
(Sophocles, p.155)

Sophocles was born in 496 BCE. At a time when Athens was becoming a free democracy and experimenting with the new machinery of "popular" government (Watling, 1947). *Antigone*, in fact, represents the paranoia and fears of the populace faced with this emerging face of "democracy". This is the tyranny Antigone laments, addresses, and critiques. Edith Hall, however, in "The Sociology of Athenian Tragedy" refers to the Athenian democracy as "a xenophobic, patriarchal, and imperialist community, economically dependent on slavery and imperial tribute". (Hall, p.93). Sophocles' tragedies continue to question the democratic structures

that stood on shaky grounds, as they were based on the sovereignty of the ruler and the system of kingship that still followed its own edicts, disregarding public opinion. Tragedy in Sophocles' hands became a celebration of Dionysian passions, expressing contradictions between the rights of the state and the rights of the individual. *Antigone* and *Ajax* expose the cracks in the outward façade of democracy to reiterate the loss of sovereignty of the individual. The plays underline the cracks in the structure of Athenian democracy and bourgeois complacency.

Sophocles had direct encounters with the Athenian state while in service in the military as General (Strategos) twice and was appointed as the imperial treasurer of Athens. Thus, he was not apolitical but deeply involved in political and military affairs, negotiations with Athenian allies. His tragedies mirrored the impersonal state and its increasing atrocities on people, measured by the punishments meted out to both the tragic heroes. Both heroes in the plays are dislocated from their everyday life and made a butt of ridicule and contempt. The Chorus and its songs lend a certain sense of reassurance to the audience in the two plays. The elders' and citizens' comments on the main action open the tragedies to further spiritual, political, social, and psychological dimensions. "The Song of Man" of the Chorus in *Antigone* lists the wonderful powers of man in the face of atrocities and natural calamities. The choric commentary also highlights the ultimate powerlessness of man when faced by the state, which punishes any act of disobedience by death. Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Ajax* suggest how the imperial state at that time was built on consensus and complicity, using both ideological control and coercive state power.

In fact, the plays focus on Antigone's and Ajax's trauma and sense of exile from the polis as citizens and representatives of the citizen collective. The tragedies expose the deep fissure between the claims of the state and the lone individual raising a voice against its barbarity and cruelty. Their rebellion is not a freak incident but becomes an informed opposition to Greek Gods and popular heroes. The state is not seen here as a benevolent institution but rather as flawed and illegitimate. Creon and Odysseus, in *Antigone* and *Ajax* respectively, represent the impersonal state that judges all those who rebel against it. While Creon stubbornly denies burial to Polyneices, Odysseus, after Ajax's tragic suicide, wants his body

to be buried, revealing a certain compassion that the state might be capable of when faced with a dead end.

Philip Holt in "Polis, Tragedy, Antigone" suggests how the Polis or city-state in the Sophoclean age was not a "sprawling modern nation-state" but a more cohesive community (Holt, 1991). In his view, the citizens in Athens lived in a democracy where they were far less likely than "citizens today to feel neglected by, or alienated from the ruling power" (Holt, p.661). Therefore, the idea of Romantic Individual revolting against the state was considered an "anomaly, not a norm" (Holt, p.662). However, the plays *Antigone* and *Ajax* are about romantic individuals rebelling against impersonal laws and a mindless state that affects the entire community and has tragic repercussions to engulf families. The plays underline the imperial state that used consensus and complicity, ideological control, and coercive state power to punish individuals whom they perceived as "deviant". The state is represented by King Creon and Odysseus in league with goddess Athena in *Antigone* and *Ajax*, respectively. The rebellion of both Antigone and Ajax is an informed opposition to Greek gods, popular heroes, and the king, even as the state is seen as flawed and illegitimate, not a benevolent institution, the chorus in both plays suggests.

Sophocles witnessed the aggression of the Persian empire during the Persian wars from 490-479 BCE, and he cheered the victory of the winning Greek army at Salamis after the battle of Salamis. The conflict between the Greek city-states and the Persian empire taught him the dangers of imperial rule and the aggression of empires. Though the Persian wars unified the Greek city-states against the common enemy, creating a pan-Hellenic identity which began the Golden Age in Athens but the trauma and wounds caused by protracted battles took a very long time to heal. The two plays consolidate Sophocles' responses to war as they anticipate the Peloponnesian Wars that occurred in 431 BCE and explore the ways the democratic city of Athens was punishing those who asked questions of the state (Castoriadis, 2007: 11, 123; Theodosiadis, 2025: 116-7, Vavouras, 2017). Sophocles' tragedies use war as the main plank to speak on issues of betrayal, anarchy, and limits of freedom, and in the case of *Ajax*, on madness as opposed to civilization.

In *Antigone*, the conflict is between civic duty, familial obligation and conscience gets voiced in Antigone's challenging the

king's unjust law that forbids a decent burial to her brother Polyneices. Creon's stubbornness becomes more evident when he doesn't allow the body of the "traitor" to be buried even beyond the limits of the city but rather be food for birds of prey. Ajax shows the ludicrous nature of heroism, the hero's foolhardy impulse to show strength against his "enemies" who turn out to be brute animals he slaughters in a fit of anger. Ajax is defeated by goddess Athena and Odysseus together in a modern play which depicts the tragic hero turning upon himself only to become a butt of ridicule for others. However, Barker Elton in "Dissent Hero" points to the play being radical and suggestive of an institutional place for dissent. In fact, Ajax's act of suicide "enshrines his dissent eternally in silence" (Elton, p.19). Elton points out how Odysseus meets Ajax after death in the underworld but the latter's silence is a "silent resistance". The tragic suicide of Ajax like Antigone leads to the break-up of families and petty demagogues (Elton, 2004).

Both the tragedies use interior monologues to follow the heroes' subjectivity. Though the tragic hero is higher than average run of humans, in *Antigone* the tragic hero is the former king Oedipus' daughter, while *Ajax* is a proclaimed warrior. In both plays, the fall of the tragic hero leads to debasement of the social order and perversion of laws. In *Ajax*, despite the hero's tall stature, he falls into delusion caused by Athena's hallucinatory web that makes his mind believe that the animals he was slaughtering are indeed his opponents,

He attacked the horned beasts, smashing their spines, then hacking out a circle of carcasses. He thought he had hold of the two sons of Atreus and was slaughtering them with his own hands. Then he hacked at his chief and that chief, hurling himself on and on, deeper into madness. And I was there to urge him into the trap. Once he tired of the slaughter, he tied up the surviving sheep and cows and dragged them back to his camp. As if he had captured men, not horned beasts. Now he is torturing them, tied up inside his tent.

(Sophocles, p.6)

Sophocles' plays *Antigone* and *Ajax* narrate the dislocation of the subject/tragic hero when faced by an impersonal and cold state

that refuses them the freedom of choice. The state is represented by Creon and Odysseus, both of whom mock the tragic heroes. They become two faces of imperial authority that could be repressive or benevolent according to their whims. Creon obstinately keeps denying Antigone's brother a burial, while issuing orders to bury her alive. Similarly, Odysseus taunts Ajax but shows "kindness" by permitting his dead body to be buried. They both represent the arbitrariness of power and those in authority. While Ajax also has a hostile world of Gods and Greek heroes who affect the life of a warrior and wreck his mind to mistakenly believe a flock of sheep and animals to be Achaean elders—Odysseus, Menelaus, and Agamemnon. When the hero, after killing the animals, realizes his foolishness, he wants to take his life rather than live in shame.

In both plays, the state becomes increasingly impersonal and coldly distant. In *Antigone*, the state embodied by Creon and his advisors, even the Sentry who catches Antigone covering her brother's dead body with a bit of dust. He represents the paraphernalia of governance and arbitrary rules, which have no place for personal relationships and familial ties. The King's decree forbidding the burial of Polyneices becomes a political act which asserts the authority of the state over the individual, thereby flouting the democratic basis of community living and freedom. He screams, "The city is the King's—that's the law!". Antigone challenges this impersonal state which does not accommodate personal royalties or religious customs. The tragic conflict is also a collision between moral obligation and repressive state apparatus. In the state of civic war personal freedom stands suspended, but Antigone's tragic lament becomes a protest against the king's diktat. The battle becomes one between human conscience, sacred duty and the civic decree which finally leads to the destruction of Antigone, Haemon and Eurydice, his mother.

In *Ajax*, the impersonal state is represented by the Greek military command, which includes Odysseus, Agamemnon, and Menelaus. While the King orders Antigone's burial even when she is alive, Ajax is judged by his seemingly "dishonorable" actions, which include his attempt to kill the Greek warriors who have been unfair to him after the Trojan war, and is denied a burial after he commits suicide, till ironically, Odysseus intervenes. Thus, military law and political necessity, not emotion or heroic merit, determine the choices of the leaders in both plays. Teucer pleads for the burial

of Ajax, and Odysseus' change of heart marks a change from the situation in *Antigone*. The impersonal state in *Ajax* seems to have some place for mercy and reflection, but it drives the hero to take his own life.

Sophocles' tragedies highlight trauma and exile caused by the devastating psychological and social effects of war, loss, and displacement. Trauma means a "wound" in Greek, thereby referring to both physical injury and deep emotional sorrow. In *Ajax*, trauma is expressed in the rage of the hero, his isolation from humanity, a sense of exile from the community and the Polis, hallucination, and finally a bitter suicide. The play dramatizes the hero's moral and spiritual injury, his shame, moral conflict, and sense of violation of his values. In *Antigone*, the tragic hero's suffering is caused by being alienated from her family, from the Polis, and her own body, which is controlled by the state. Exile in Greek tragedy meant severe punishment that resulted in loss of home, the city, religious life, and place in social order and hierarchy. Those in a state of exile were stripped of all markers of identity and belonging, shamed and isolated, carrying the stigma of pollution. King Oedipus in Sophocles' tragedy, after discovering the truth of his birth and his "sin" of pollution, blinds himself and chooses to beg for exile to protect the city. In both *Antigone* and *Ajax*, the protagonists are cut off from their homeland, from their family, and lose their right to remain members of civil society. Exile in a deeper sense also meant, therefore, to be cut off from oneself, to be an alien to everyone, when the only alternative left is to lament one's "cursed" state.

Both *Antigone's* and *Ajax's* lamentations in Sophocles' Attic tragedies are forms of storytelling that move through a crisp narrative from hubris to peripeteia, anagnorisis, denouement, and catharsis. The lamentation is both a tragedy and a poetic form which is as dark as Job's cries in the *Book of Job* in the Old Testament in the *Bible*. The lamentations with their subversive potential bring into question the neat, schematic structure of tragedy as formulated by Aristotle in the *Poetics*. In ancient Greece, lamentation was part of funerary rituals that were often suppressed or regulated by the state because of its emotional and potentially subversive power. Lamentation within the space of a tragedy becomes a cultural ritual, giving voice to the voiceless, thereby challenging the social order.

Lamentation in *Antigone* and *Ajax* mark pockets of poetry and breakdown of prose. The lamentation becomes a dangerous parallel to the Chorus's songs and commentary, which is regulated, wise, and contained. Antigone's and Ajax's lamentations become an elaborate protest against a sense of dislocation and exile in a state that is unjust to its citizens. Sophocles' plays have sustained lamentations which have their own tragic dignity and grandeur. According to Peter Meineck,

There is lament in a third of Oedipus,...Electra laments for her father and for her brother she thinks is dead. Deianeira grieves over her life as wife of an absent hero, later she grieves over what she has unwittingly done, and Heracles grieves over his own slow death. Philoctetes laments his wound, and Ajax bemoans his shamming by the Greeks. (Meineck, p.viii).

Lamentation in both tragedies becomes a means to negotiate war, trauma, and the aftershocks of war. These lamentations are a formal expression of mourning and are performed as songs or chants by the protagonists. These are choral and ritualistic in nature, embedded in the structure of tragedy, and are in the form of choral odes and kommos or exchange of lament between the Chorus and the protagonist. The language in these lamentations is stylized and poetic, becoming a form of resistance or defiance that challenges the authority of the king and the state. Lamentation, called "threnos" in Greek, becomes a powerful tool to express grief for the dead and explore ethical and social themes. Lamentation becomes a ritualistic expression performed by women and occasionally by men. According to Naomi Weiss, the paradoxical nature of lament in Greek tragedy makes it both musical and amousia or "a noisy disturbance that seems to be the antithesis of a lyrical performance." (Weiss, p. 244). In *Antigone* and *Ajax*, the lament moves from musical rhythms to jarring oscillation of poetry and prose to defy the state and express a sense of inner sorrow. The lamentation in the plays does not just mourn the dead and those about to die but reflects on the tragic events of their lives and enables them to unsettle the often "polite" and structured nature of the dialogues. The laments tell stories of their lives and comment on social conventions, forming part of the tragedy that goes beyond the limits of grief and hamartia as described by Aristotle in the

Poetics. The lament in these plays with their own rhythms, melodies, and gestures, ritualistic form becomes a way of negotiating their own social ostracization and alienation. In Ruth Fainlight's translation of *Antigone*, the lament becomes a cry for justice and a song of defiance against those in power,

*O city! city!--
 You, propertied men of the city!
 But the foundations of Dirce,
 And holy groves of Thebes with its many chariots,
 You at least can testify how one laments me,
 And by what aberration of justice
 I go to the heaped stones of my prison and unnatural tomb.
 What a wretched creature I am
 With nowhere to dwell, neither
 Among morals or corpses,
 Not the living nor the dead.
 (Sophocles, p. 170)*

Tragedy, in Aristotelian definition, has six characteristics: plot, character, thought, diction, song, and spectacle. The songs in tragedies provide narrative commentary, lend a sense of cadence and rhythm, and provide emotional support. The lamentations do something similar, but they can also be at cross purposes with the songs of the chorus; they might mock at their traditional wisdom and philosophical discourses. Choric commentary and songs are the main body of the play, lamentations are more like marginalia, they are like spurts from the abundance of grief that cannot be expressed in regular language. Lamentations are not just interior monologues and expressions of inward suffering but become a pungent critique of the hierarchized and powerful Polis. When Ajax laments that he is giving form to things that cannot be spoken, his sense of shame and indignity. He expressed himself as an outsider, a mortal competing with Gods and warriors,

*Now I am ridiculed by the men who escaped me.
 This was not my plan, but when a god strikes,
 Even the coward can outdo the better man.
 And what now? The gods revile me.
 That is certain. I am despised by the Greeks.*

(Sophocles, p. 23)

In *Antigone*, lamentation gives form to the unsaid in the play. She opposes Creon's authority and mocks his rule. She laments, "Mockery, mockery! By the gods of our fathers, must you make me a laughing-stock while I yet live? O Lordly songs of my city! O Thebes!" (Sophocles, p.149). Her words resonate at a visceral level as the voice of those on the margins in terms of gender and power in Greek society.

Julia Kristeva traces the interplay of the "Symbolic" and "Semiotic" in Greek tragedies, which transforms language and meaning. The Semiotic drive is from the maternal linked to the body, and its primal drives are located in the chaotic and pre-symbolic space. The Semiotic is also linked to fluidity and subject-in-process or a becoming state. The symbolic is linked to the law of the father, to patriarchal and masculine aspects as represented and structured through language. Greek tragedy, in Kristeva's terms, sees an oscillation between the semiotic and the symbolic within the individual and socio-cultural structures. The semiotics in Greek tragedy manifests as lamentation, which encodes the hero's visceral reactions, struggle with fate, and unsettling moments of abjection where boundaries of the self are disrupted. The symbolic in tragedy manifests as social hierarchies, law, institutions, Greek Gods, along with the structured and culturally defined aspects of language. The symbolic is also in the realm of consolidated forms, which are expressed in socially defined roles and characters.

Both *Antigone* and *Ajax* move away from the symbolic order represented by Creon/Odysseus the patriarchs who mete out punishment to the tragic hero. After their displacement from the Polis, they express themselves in the semiotic lamentation wherein they narrativize their trauma in lyrical, subjective, interior monologues. The tragic hero's lamentations become adjunct to the choric commentary which goes beyond the rigidity of linguistic structures and limits of the genre. Translation of these laments from Greek to English often captures the pre-verbal, monosyllabic, guttural sounds of their poetic prose, moving beyond the confines of language, breaking down and being liberated. *Antigone's* tearful bemoaning and lament cause the audience to awaken to suffering of the woman as the tragic hero. Her exile from the polis in fact is

caused by her vulnerability as a woman and sister of a traitor. Her lament reveals her ancestry with all other women who suffered likewise due to masculine cruelty,

*The daughter of Tantalus, a Phrygian maid,
Was doomed to a piteous death on the rock
Of Sipylus, which embraced and imprisoned her,
Merciless as the ivy; rain and snow
Beat down upon her, mingled with tears
(Sophocles, p.148)*

While Ajax in his self-reflexive speech agonizes over his predicament, in fact his foolishness,

*What a pitiable man I am
To have let those devils slip
From my grasp and instead
Attacks horned cattle, sheep and goats,
Shedding their dark blood.
(Sophocles, p. 20)*

Lament in these tragedies opens the plays beyond the confines and limits of traditional tragedy and Aristotelean definition of tragic hero. Lament here expresses grief and loss, deep emotional and psychological consequences of suffering becoming a bridge between the personal and political and the human and the divine realms. As formal expression of mourning, lamentation is performed in as songs and chants by both protagonists to reveal the philosophical dimensions of their suffering which is not personal grief alone but a reflection on the polis and voicing of their trauma. Accompanied by singing, stylized gestures and music combined with speech, lamentations in *Antigone* and *Ajax* becomes “performed” grief. Mourning in the lamentation becomes a form of transgression which challenges the limits of the genre. Antigone mourns the death of Polyneices even when he is branded a traitor and speaks out against Creon’s cruel edict which prohibits burial to traitors. Her lament is both personal and political as she comments on the moral decay of the state and impending doom,

*And must go the way that lies before me.
No funeral hymn; no marriage-music;
No sun from this day forth, no light,
No friend to weep at my departing.*
(Sophocles, p. 149)

Through the lamentation, both tragedies reveal the shaky grounds on which the “democratic” structures stood. The tragedies question the sovereignty of the symbolic —of Greek gods/King/demi-Gods/warriors by allowing the hero to flout edicts that circumscribe freedom. Democracy is seen as unjust to citizens and prejudiced based on gender, ethnicity, and class hierarchy. Antigone and Ajax despite their heroism and class superiority find themselves on the borderlines of social hierarchy, exiled because they dared to mock at social rules and obligations that are undemocratic. Through their painful cries, Sophocles writes about the dark underbelly of trauma and suffering behind the royalist and bourgeois complacency. When Antigone questions, “What law of have I transgressed? What god can save me now? What help or hope have I, in whom devotion is deemed sacrilege?” (Sophocles, p.150), she reveals the cracks in the world where laws are unfair to those who are powerless and even gods seem to abandon those who break away from the symbolic.

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Displacement and Climate Disrupted Subjects: A Phenomenological Reading of Agamben

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Abstract

The displacement of the bodily subject under conditions of forced migration, particularly in the context of climate-induced exile, invites a phenomenological inquiry into the lived experience of dislocation. Phenomenology foregrounds the body as the primary site of being-in-the-world; yet, when uprooted, the embodied subject undergoes a radical rupture in the continuity of place, memory, and identity. The loss of familiar spatial and social coordinates is not merely geographical but ontological, destabilizing the structures through which subjectivity is constituted. In this frame, displacement is not only a matter of movement across borders but a reconfiguration of the self's relation to the world. The phenomenological body, once anchored in a horizon of meaning, becomes estranged; its gestures, rhythms, and sensory engagements are disrupted by the absence of a sustaining lifeworld. The subject's sense of identity is fractured, caught between the memory of belonging and the uncertainty of alien space. Agamben's notion of *homo sacer* and the state of exception sharpens this analysis. Climate refugees often exist within juridical vacuums, stripped of political recognition yet governed through humanitarian management. Their bodily presence is both included in the global order through mechanisms of control and excluded from the full rights of political community, embodying Agamben's

paradox of “inclusive exclusion”. From an ontological perspective, displacement reveals the fragility of the body’s embeddedness in political and spatial orders. The dislocated subject becomes a threshold figure, existing in suspension between life as *zoē* (bare existence) and *bios* (politically qualified life). This convergence of phenomenology and Agamben underscores that climate-induced displacement is not only a humanitarian crisis but also a profound disruption of subjectivity and identity. Recognizing the displaced body as a site of contested ontology demands political frameworks that restore agency, visibility, and the conditions for human flourishing.

Keywords: *Agamben, Displacement, Identity, Ontology, Phenomenology, Subjectivity*

Introduction

The phenomenon of climate-induced displacement unsettles more than the geographical coordinates of human life; it ruptures the very ground of subjectivity and belonging. When individuals are torn from their familiar landscapes: homes, languages, and the sensory textures of daily existence, their loss is not merely material but existential. Phenomenology, with its focus on the body as the primary site of being-in-the-world, provides a critical lens through which this rupture can be understood. The displaced body is not simply in motion across borders; it is severed from the lifeworld that gave coherence to its gestures, memories, and relations. The climate refugee thus emerges as a paradigmatic figure of ontological dislocation, whose exile from place mirrors a deeper exile from meaning itself. Displacement, in this sense, is not a passage between two locations but a suspension between worlds – a condition where the body continues to live but struggles to *inhabit*.

It is within this interstice of lived experience and political exclusion that Giorgio Agamben’s thought becomes profoundly relevant. Agamben’s analysis of *homo sacer* and *bare life* exposes how modern sovereignty governs through the logic of inclusion by exclusion, producing lives that are biologically sustained yet politically nullified. The climate refugee embodies this paradox: rendered visible through humanitarian concern yet stripped of the rights that confer political identity. When read through a phenomenological lens, this biopolitical condition acquires a new depth; it is not only the juridical status of the refugee that is suspended, but also the phenomenological continuity of the self. To comprehend

the refugee's plight, we must therefore interrogate how sovereignty, embodiment, and worldhood intersect in the displaced subject's struggle to remain human in the absence of a stable world.

Phenomenology and the Embodied Subject: Being-in-the-World

Phenomenology, as articulated by Husserl and later expanded by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, situates the body at the center of existence. It rejects the Cartesian separation of mind and matter, positing instead that consciousness is always embodied, and that the body is not a mere vessel but the very condition through which the world becomes intelligible (Gallagher and Zahavi 45-46; Moran 78). For Merleau-Ponty, the body is *le corps propre* – the lived body – through which perception, movement, and meaning coalesce:

Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is one of them. It is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it sees and moves itself, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or prolongation of my body; they are incrustated in its flesh; they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the very stuff of the body. (Merleau-Ponty, 109)

Merleau-Ponty implies a reciprocal ontology where perception is co-constitutive – the world shapes the body as much as the body shapes the world. This vision of embodiment foregrounds a profound interdependence between self and environment, dissolving the illusion of separateness that underpins modern subjectivity. Our gestures, postures, and orientations are not incidental expressions of selfhood; they are the foundation of our being-in-the-world (Crowell 102; Gallagher 59). The phenomenological body is, therefore, both subjective and worldly: it experiences and is experienced, acts and is acted upon. Its identity arises not in isolation but through its relational embeddedness in space, temporality, and social interaction (Gallagher and Zahavi 112; Merleau-Ponty 137).

Within this framework, displacement is more than a geographical or political condition – it is an ontological event that fractures the embodied continuity of existence (Merleau-Ponty 94; Moran

122). To be displaced is to be estranged from the spatial and temporal rhythms that ground identity. The familiar lifeworld – constituted by routines, gestures, languages, and sensory landscapes – collapses, leaving the subject suspended in a void of meaning (Husserl 178; Gallagher and Zahavi 83). The refugee's body becomes disoriented, no longer attuned to its environment, its movements stripped of habitual significance. Heidegger's notion of being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*) captures this rupture: when the world ceases to be a horizon of familiarity, existence becomes unheimlich (*unheimlich*), marked by anxiety and loss (Heidegger 231; Crowell 67). The dislocated body, once a site of orientation and recognition, becomes the site of estrangement – a self that can no longer locate itself within a coherent world:

Readers and writers should not deceive themselves that literature changes the world. Literature changes the world of readers and writers, but literature does not change the world until people get out of their chairs, go out in the world, and do something to transform the conditions of which the literature speaks (Nguyen 10)

Nguyen's assertion redefines the social function of literature by drawing a sharp distinction between aesthetic awareness and material change. While literature can awaken consciousness and reshape the inner worlds of readers and writers, it remains impotent without corresponding action. His statement challenges the romantic ideal of literature as an inherently transformative force, grounding its potential instead in praxis. Ultimately, Nguyen situates literature as a catalyst rather than a vehicle of change; its ethical power lies in its capacity to move people from reflection to intervention. The phenomenological disruption of displacement also extends to the realm of intersubjectivity, the shared horizon through which individuals recognize themselves in relation to others (Merleau-Ponty, 412; Gallagher, 56; Mitrou and Kolyri, 2025). In exile, this relational matrix is destabilized; the displaced subject encounters others not as participants in a shared world, but as figures within a new and often indifferent social order:

...exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between

the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. (Said 173)

Said's reflection exposes exile as both an existential wound and a paradox of representation. He distinguishes between the lived anguish of displacement and its often-romanticized portrayal in art and history, revealing how narrative attempts to sublimate pain into meaning. The "unhealable rift" he describes underscores exile's permanence; its sorrow is not merely situational but ontological, marking a fracture between self and belonging. This estrangement fractures the self's narrative continuity, dislodging identity from the context that once sustained it (Gallagher and Zahavi 97; Moran 144). As the phenomenological body loses its rootedness, the subject's sense of temporality also unravels – past and future blur into an uncertain present. Thus, the displaced person's being is neither fully here nor there, but stretched between memory and anticipation, belonging and exclusion. To examine displacement phenomenologically, then, is to confront how the erosion of place entails the erosion of self – a crisis not only of home but of ontology itself.

Displacement as Ontological Rupture

Displacement fractures the ontological foundations of existence by severing the intimate bond between the body and the world (Merleau-Ponty 178; Moran 92). In phenomenological terms, the world is not a neutral space but a field of significance through which the subject's identity takes form (Husserl 108; Gallagher and Zahavi 63). When a climate catastrophe, war, or political crisis forces migration, what is lost is not merely a geographic location but the entire horizon of meaning that once anchored the self (Crowell 214). The familiar textures of sound, smell, and rhythm that sustained bodily orientation are replaced by the foreign and the unstable. Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* reminds us that the home is the primary site where the self "takes root in the

world” (Bachelard 5). Its loss, therefore, is not simply spatial but existential:

In the life of a man, the house thrusts aside contingencies; its councils of continuity are unceasing. Without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. It is body and soul. It is the human being’s first world... (Bachelard 6)

Bachelard presents the house as the foundational structure of human existence, a spatial metaphor for stability, identity, and emotional rootedness. It is not merely a shelter but a vessel of continuity that safeguards the self against the chaos of external and internal storms. Bachelard fuses the material and the metaphysical, showing how the home integrates physical dwelling with psychological being. His vision transforms architecture into ontology, suggesting that to lose one’s home is to suffer a fracture in the very coherence of existence. The displaced subject finds themselves unmoored, unable to dwell, condemned to perpetual motion both externally and internally – a life lived in the aftermath of world-loss.

This ontological rupture manifests as a profound disruption of temporality and embodiment. The refugee or climate exile inhabits a suspended present where the past becomes inaccessible and the future unimaginable (Merleau-Ponty 182; Moran 147). The phenomenological sense of continuity – the feeling that one’s life unfolds within an intelligible narrative – disintegrates. Heidegger’s *unheimlich* (unhomeliness) captures this existential homelessness: a state in which the world no longer offers a sense of belonging or care (Heidegger 233; Crowell 219; Filippopoulos, 2024; Papa-charalambous, 2021). Displacement exposes the fragility of our dependence on spatial and social coordinates for the constitution of selfhood. The body, once a medium of orientation and intentionality, becomes instead a marker of precarity – watched, documented, and regulated (Gallagher 77). It is a body that moves but cannot arrive, that perceives but is not perceived as belonging. The ontological wound of displacement thus opens at the intersection of visibility and erasure: to exist, yet not to be recognized as existing within a shared world (Gallagher and Zahavi 121; Merleau-Ponty 190):

The war was over, but the past was not. It was alive, and it had a grip on her. She had lived in three different countries, worked five different jobs, and changed her name twice. Yet, she felt like she was still standing on a beach in the middle of a war, waiting for a boat that would never arrive. She was a collection of scars and memories, not a whole person, not a person moving forward. (Nguyen, *The Refugees* 156)

Nguyen's passage captures the haunting persistence of trauma that renders temporal and geographic displacement meaningless. Despite physical relocation and the passage of time, the protagonist remains psychically tethered to the scene of loss, illustrating how war inscribes itself onto the self as an unending present. Her fragmented identity embodies the phenomenological paralysis of exile, where the past continually infiltrates the now. Through this portrayal, Nguyen exposes the illusion of recovery, showing that survival does not guarantee wholeness, only endurance.

At its deepest level, displacement reveals the instability of being itself. When the lifeworld collapses, what remains is a stripped form of existence – what Agamben would call *bare life* (Agamben 8). The phenomenological and political dimensions converge here: the body that has lost its world is also the body deprived of rights and recognition (Heidegger 233; Merleau-Ponty 182). To live in exile is to inhabit a liminal ontology, suspended between *zoē* – biological existence – and *bios* – the meaningful life of political community (Agamben 10; Arendt 179). This threshold existence renders visible the vulnerability that underlies all human beings-in-the-world (Butler 29). Yet it also gestures toward the possibility of reconstitution: a search for new forms of dwelling and relationality, however fragile (Bachelard 47). Displacement, then, is not only a catastrophe but a revelation – it exposes the dependency of identity on worldhood and the necessity of rethinking being itself under the conditions of global precarity (Mbembe 39; Moran 215): “The ultimate expression of sovereignty largely resides in the power and capacity to dictate who can live and who must die” (Mbembe 17).

Agamben and the Politics of Bare Life

Giorgio Agamben's philosophical intervention in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* redefines the relationship between life, law, and power by revealing how modern sovereignty depends on the capacity to separate bare life (*zoē*) from politically qualified life (*bios*) (Agamben 4-6). Drawing upon Roman law, Agamben's figure of *homo sacer*—one who may be killed but not sacrificed, embodies the paradox of inclusion through exclusion: the subject who is simultaneously inside and outside the political order (Agamben 11; Esposito 45):

The original political relation is the ban (the state of exception as zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion). The life caught in the sovereign ban is the originally sacred life... and, in this sense, the production of bare life is the originary activity of sovereignty. (Agamben 181, 83)

Agamben's formulation exposes how political power is grounded in the paradox of exclusion that constitutes inclusion. He reveals that sovereignty operates through the capacity to suspend law and thereby determine which lives count as politically meaningful. The "bare life" produced within this suspension occupies a liminal space (neither fully inside nor outside the legal order) where existence is preserved yet stripped of significance. In this way, Agamben unearths the hidden violence of modern governance: its authority rests not on the protection of life but on the perpetual creation of lives that can be abandoned.

The refugee, for Agamben, becomes the emblem of this paradox, representing a life reduced to its biological minimum, stripped of juridical and political significance (Agamben 132; Mbembe 16). This biopolitical logic is not an aberration of the modern state but its foundational mechanism. Sovereignty, in Agamben's reading, is constituted through the power to decide which lives are protected by law and which are exposed to abandonment (Agamben 83).

The condition of climate refugees vividly materializes this logic of bare life. Displaced by ecological collapse yet unrecognized

within international legal frameworks, they exist in what Agamben calls the *state of exception* – a zone where rights are suspended, and legality gives way to administrative control (Agamben, *State of Exception* 22–24). Camps, detention centers, and “temporary” settlements function as contemporary spaces of exception, where the rule of law is both enacted and withdrawn (Agamben, *State of Exception* 35; Fassin 51). Here, the refugee’s body is neither fully excluded from nor fully included in the political order; it is managed, categorized, and monitored under the guise of humanitarianism (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 133; Fassin 57). Agamben’s analysis reveals that this humanitarian governance does not restore political agency; rather, it perpetuates a depoliticized form of life that must be preserved but not empowered. The result is a regime of care without recognition, where existence is maintained but meaning is denied (Agamben 135; Mbembe 29):

Insofar as its inhabitants were stripped of every political status and wholly reduced to bare life (), the camp was... the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realized, in which power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation... The camp is the space that is opened up when the state of exception begins to become the rule. (Agamben 169, 171)

Agamben’s depiction of the camp as the ultimate biopolitical space reveals the terrifying culmination of sovereign power. In this space, life is reduced to its biological essence, devoid of political recognition or rights. The camp exemplifies how the suspension of law, initially an exception, can become a normalized mechanism of control. Through this analysis, Agamben exposes the dark continuity between modern governance and totalitarianism: both depend on transforming human beings into mere bodies to be managed, surveilled, and contained.

In this sense, the refugee’s plight is not a deviation from modern governance but its logical culmination. The global management of displaced populations exposes the underlying structure of modern power: the capacity to create spaces where human beings are reduced to their biological existence and rendered politically invisible. Climate refugees, like *homo sacer*, inhabit this liminal zone between law and life, embodying the tension between visibility and

rightlessness. Their existence demonstrates how sovereignty extends its reach not merely by governing territories but by governing the very threshold between life and death, inclusion and exclusion. To interpret their condition through Agamben's framework is to understand that climate displacement is not just a humanitarian crisis but a manifestation of the political ontology of modernity itself – an order that sustains itself through the continual production of *bare life*.

The Displaced Subject: Between Phenomenology and Biopolitics

The intersection of phenomenology and biopolitics exposes the dual register of displacement: it is simultaneously a lived rupture and a political production (Merleau-Ponty 112; Agamben 6). From a phenomenological perspective, the displaced body experiences exile as a disruption of worldhood, an existential fracture in the continuity of being (Husserl 78; Heidegger 245). From a biopolitical standpoint, however, this rupture is deliberately structured through mechanisms of governance that manage, contain, and classify populations (Agamben 122; Fassin 59). The refugee's subjectivity is thus doubly alienated: on the one hand, from the familiar textures of a meaningful world; on the other, from the political structures that recognize and protect identity. In this intersection lies the figure of the displaced subject, a being whose embodied existence is both lived and legislated, whose ontology is defined by exclusion. Displacement here is not accidental but systematic, revealing how modern forms of power operate by producing zones where the boundaries between life and law dissolve (Agamben, *State of Exception* 33; Mbembe 29).

Phenomenology allows us to understand how this political exclusion is lived from within, as a bodily and affective condition (Gallagher and Zahavi 104; Moran 87). The loss of worldhood translates into the erosion of agency, voice, and recognition. The refugee body becomes a site of inscription where global inequalities, environmental violence, and state sovereignty are etched into flesh (Mbembe 21; Fassin 63). Merleau-Ponty's idea of the body as a "general medium for having a world" becomes tragically inverted: in displacement, the body is reduced to a medium for survival, stripped of its capacity to project meaning or inhabit the

world creatively (Merleau-Ponty 203; Gallagher 55). Yet this embodied vulnerability is also what makes the displaced subject a critical site of resistance.

Relationality [is] not only a descriptive or historical fact of our formation, but also an ongoing normative dimension of our social and political lives, one in which we are compelled to take stock of our interdependence. (Butler 20)

Butler's conception of relationality underscores that human existence is inherently interdependent rather than autonomous. She reframes relationships not as optional or external to the self, but as the very conditions through which identity and ethics emerge. This recognition of interdependence introduces a moral imperative: to acknowledge that our lives are constituted through and sustained by others. In the context of displacement, Butler's idea demands an ethics of recognition that restores visibility and responsibility toward those rendered precarious or excluded. Judith Butler's notion of "precarious life" and Achille Mbembe's concept of "necropolitics" extend this insight by showing how the management of vulnerability becomes a means of political control – but also, potentially, a ground for rethinking ethical responsibility and collective care (Butler 33; Mbembe 39).

Agamben's *bare life* and phenomenology's *lived body* converge in their revelation of the subject as both material and metaphysical, biological and meaningful. When displacement reduces the subject to biological persistence, the phenomenological perspective restores visibility to the inner experience of loss, memory, and longing. The *displaced subject* is thus neither purely passive nor purely constructed – it inhabits an ontological threshold where the self is continually reconstituted through acts of endurance and remembrance. To dwell in exile is to negotiate between being managed and being human, between survival and selfhood. The phenomenological-biopolitical synthesis, therefore, compels us to see climate displacement not simply as a matter of governance or compassion but as a crisis that lays bare the fragility of subjectivity itself – the point at which the political and the existential collapse into one another.

Toward a Phenomenological Ethics of Recognition

If displacement reveals the fragility of subjectivity, a phenomenological ethics of recognition seeks to restore its ontological ground. Recognition, in this context, is not simply the moral acknowledgment of the other's suffering but a radical reorientation of perception – a return to the intersubjective basis of existence that phenomenology foregrounds. Drawing from Merleau-Ponty, recognition must begin with the embodied encounter, where the self apprehends the other not as an abstraction or political statistic, but as a living, sensing being who co-inhabits the world. In this sense, ethical response emerges not from juridical obligation but from the shared vulnerability of corporeal life – the very condition Agamben's bare life exposes yet fails to redeem. A phenomenological ethics, therefore, challenges the biopolitical logic that reduces life to survival (Merleau-Ponty 112; Gallagher and Zahavi 57). It calls instead for a recuperation of what Hannah Arendt names the *bios* – the life of political existence and shared action – rather than the mere *zoē* of biological persistence (Arendt 42):

The fundamental problem of the stateless person is not the loss of freedom, but the loss of a community willing to guarantee and execute any rights whatsoever... Their plight is not that they are not equal before the law, but that no law exists for them; not that they are oppressed, but that nobody cares even whether they are oppressed or not. (Arendt 293)

The individual ceases to exist not because they are denied specific rights, but because they are expelled from the very structure through which rights become meaningful — the political community. In Arendt's view, rights are not innate or universal in practice; they are performative, enacted only through a state's recognition. Thus, the stateless person becomes the paradigmatic other of modern sovereignty – existing outside law, history, and accountability.

To recognize the displaced subject is to resist the state's framing of them as administrable life, as population or data (Agamben 83; Butler 119). It is to affirm, through the phenomenological lens, that displacement is not only a crisis of territory but of appearing: the

dislocated body becomes invisible to political sight (Merleau-Ponty 98; Crowell 213). Recognition must thus restore visibility, reinstating the displaced subject as a being capable of meaning, expression, and world-making (Gallagher 67; Moran 154).

This ethics, finally, gestures toward a post-sovereign understanding of community –one grounded not in citizenship but in co-presence. It imagines an ontology of being-with, where recognition is sustained by empathy and openness rather than by borders or categories. Such a framework transforms displacement from a state of exclusion into a potential site of ethical renewal. In the phenomenological sense, to recognize the displaced subject is to recover the lost dialogue between self and world – a gesture that both precedes and exceeds the politics of belonging.

Conclusion

The displacement of the bodily subject, when read through the intertwined lenses of phenomenology and Agamben's biopolitical theory, reveals a profound crisis in the ontology of human existence. It is not merely a geographical or sociopolitical dislocation but an estrangement from one's own being-in-the-world – a rupture that severs the link between embodiment, identity, and place. Phenomenology exposes how displacement fractures the continuity of lived experience, transforming the body from a medium of intentional action into a site of exposure and surveillance. Agamben's *homo sacer* becomes a haunting figure here, the displaced as one who exists outside the political order yet remains entirely subjected to its power, existing in a state of suspended humanity.

Within this philosophical terrain, subjectivity is not annihilated but rendered precarious. The displaced body, caught between phenomenological invisibility and biopolitical control, embodies the paradox of modern existence: to be alive but politically dead, visible yet unseen. However, phenomenology provides a counter-movement – it reasserts the ontological primacy of perception, of being-in-relation. Even in situations of extreme marginality, it provides the chance to regain agency by establishing subjectivity in lived experience rather than in legal recognition. The displaced subject, when viewed phenomenologically, becomes a mirror for the world's ethical failures, but also a site of ontological renewal –

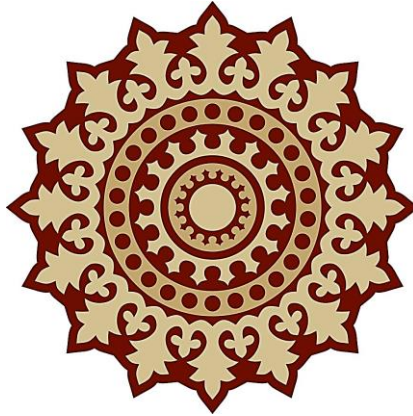
a reminder that meaning is always co-constituted through relation, not possession.

Ultimately, the dialogue between phenomenology and Agamben opens toward an ethics of recognition that transcends the limits of sovereignty and identity politics. To recognize the displaced is to acknowledge that subjectivity itself is relational, fragile, and always at risk of erasure. The phenomenological return to embodiment allows for a reimagining of politics – one that begins from vulnerability rather than dominance, from shared existence rather than exclusion. In this sense, displacement is not merely a symptom of crisis but a philosophical threshold – a space where ontology, ethics, and politics converge to question what it means to be human in a world that continually renders life disposable.

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**Exiled by Gods and Men:
Trauma, Violence and the Lexico-Semantic
Patterns of Displacement in Madeline
Miller's *Circe* and Classical Sources**

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Abstract

This study aims to determine and explicate displacement lexico-semantic patterns in Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018) and classical sources, such as *The Odyssey* by Homer, *Theogony* by Hesiod, *Argonautica* by Apollonius Rhodius, and *Metamorphoses* by Ovid. We utilized semantic field theory and digital corpus stylistics. By applying Voyant Tools, we identified 847 lexical cases related to displacement in *Circe* and 126 in the classical texts. The following semantic fields were identified: social alienation, spatial displacement, psychological interiority, vulnerability and violence, and agency and power. In classical texts, spatial displacement (43%) and power (31%) were presented only through male characters. The first-person narration in *Circe* significantly changed the above-indicated figures. Psychological interiority (39%), social alienation (24%), and vulnerability and violence (19%) were prominent for Madeline Miller. By combining feminist views and trauma theory, the study revealed original choices of lexical units made by Miller to name sexual types of violence in an explicit way, which contradicts classical masterpieces. Miller made a female the leading character in her novel and presented exile as a multi-layered trauma. This feminist influence demonstrated how classical texts were transformed and interpreted at the lexico-semantic level in modern works, including *Circe*.

Keywords: *trauma, exile, violence, displacement, lexico-semantic pattern, lexico-semantic analysis*

Introduction

In her novel, Madeline Miller depicts Circe's voice as "*strange*" and "*thin*" (Miller 2018). The following voice quality marks Circe as abnormal from her birth within the hierarchy relationship between power, voice, and marginalization within the well-established patriarchal order. Circe's voice leads to repeated rejections and, eventually, to permanent exile to the island of Aeaëa. Miller transforms and reimagines Homer's enchantress. Circe is no longer an aide or an obstacle to male characters. Instead, Circe becomes a unique heroine whose narrative focuses on trauma, displacement, isolation, and violence.

Classical Greek and Roman mythology gives Circe a uniquely liminal significance. According to *The Odyssey* (Homer 1919), Circe enchants the warriors led by Odysseus into wild pigs before she becomes his lover and guide. This heroine appears across different Greek and Roman sources in the roles that present her at social, ontological, and geographical boundaries. Being the daughter of Perse and Helios, Circe inherited divine parentage. On the

other hand, she lacks the power and beauty that could have secured her status among Olympians. Extensive expertise in *pharmaka* (meaning *a herb, a drug, or a poison*) provides Circe with an exceptional capability. This gift marks her as aggressive, vicious, and cruel. Her eternal residence on the island of Aeaea represents her permanent exile. Different classical texts depict Circe as simultaneously powerless and mighty, vulnerable and threatening, isolated yet frequently visited by the males whose arrivals influence her narration.

Miller dramatically breaks this classical stereotype by entrusting the first-person narration to Circe across her entire existence, depicted in the novel. This shift in narration, from a secondary character to a leading heroine, affects how readers understand and interpret Circe's experience. It is worth noting that Odysseus describes his time on the island of Aeaea as one of numerous adventures among many others on his way home. In Miller's novel, Circe treats it as an insignificant interruption in her endless centuries of solitude. In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid depicts Circe's transformation of Scylla as a very jealous beast. Miller presents this act as a consequence of limited agency, betrayal, and sexual trauma. Unlike other displaced mythological female characters, Circe refers to her exile as a permanent social and spatial isolation. Circe's displacement is neither correctable nor permanent, as there is no return home. Circe's exile is not a routine state that she could easily overcome, but rather an inevitable condition that she must obey. Thus, exile becomes one of the existential circumstances in Miller's novel.

We employed lexico-semantic analysis to examine word choices, language patterns, and semantic fields, and to explicate how classical texts and *Circe* by Miller depict displacement by means of lexical units. Classical authors utilized distinctive lexical units, including Greek *atimia* (*dishonor*), *phygē* (*flight*), and *nostos* (*homecoming*); Latin – *exilium* (*exile*), *relegation* (*banishment, exile*), and *fuga* (*flight*). These terms were of specific cultural, emotional, and legal significance in ancient Greek and Roman societies. Miller reconsiders all the classical patterns, applying the vocabulary of unbelonging and isolation that resonates with the exile discourse of ancient Greece and Rome. Miller filters it through modern concepts and understandings concerning identity, psychological interiority, and trauma.

Literature Review

Mythology as an Integral Component of Human Life

Mythology, as an integral component of human life, has attracted the attention of eminent thinkers since antiquity. As early as the works of the ancient philosopher Aristotle, trauma is viewed as a special kind of cognition. Many philosophers study trauma to define this concept accordingly. Linguists pay attention to the ways mythology is realized in different texts. The capability of texts to arouse a conscious response, to influence, to make readers empathize, to bring them aesthetic or communicative satisfaction is always regarded as their inherent quality. In view of this, the nature of mythological thinking is examined from the linguistic perspective (Naiden 2006), despite the long-standing debate among scientists (Rabinowitz 2014; Rabinowitz and Richlin 2014) regarding the place of mythology in language. For instance, Yarnall (1994) studies Circe's representations across ancient texts.

Displacement as a lexico-semantic category influences all human speech activity and becomes entrenched in the semantics of words as a means of designating various emotional states of the person. Therefore, in studying the language of a text, alongside the logical-referential semantics that reflect the concepts of human thinking, it is also important to consider an emotive component (Gaertner 2007, Castro, 2025).

Within the linguo-cognitive paradigm, it is possible to provide a more detailed account of such textual categories as mythological subjects (Leidich 2021; Mendelson 2018; Strong 2020; Zajko and Leonard 2006). In their study, Zajko and Leonard (2006) recognize the phenomenon of *laughing with Medusa*. Certain research frameworks are established, and a considerable body of empirical material is accumulated in the study of the concept. Circe by Miller belongs to this broader movement, which is also presented by works *The Penelopiad* (2005) by Margaret Atwood, *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) by Pat Barker, and *A Thousand Ships* (2019) by Natalie Haynes. Strong (2020) examines this classical feminist turn in contemporary literature. However, despite many definitions and

interpretations of the concept, there is still no single shared understanding of it, and a general theory of the mythological concept has not yet been sufficiently elaborated.

The Notion of Trauma in Philosophy, Psychology, and Literature Studies

Trauma and its mechanisms are the object of scholarly inquiry, as they play an important role in every person's life. Many disciplines study this psychological phenomenon: psychology, physiology, medicine, biochemistry, sociology, philosophy, ethics, linguistics, literary studies, and others. Many psychologists focus on the study of trauma. For example, Caruth (1996) states that traumatic memory characteristics dominate the patterns presented in ancient exile narratives. Herman (1992; 1997) develops the concept of *complex trauma*. Holmes (2010), who studies the meaning of the Greek words *algos* (*pain*), *penthos* (*grief*), and *atē* (*destructive folly or delusion*). Bakewell (2013) analyzes *Suppliant Women* by Aeschylus, combining trauma with displacement and other related concepts (Tripoula, 2024).

Trauma is studied most thoroughly in feminist criticism analysis of violence (Koutsopetrou-Møller 2021; Harrison 2015; Omitowoju 2002; Rabinowitz 2011). However, the psychology of trauma does not possess a unified theory of emotional states, and different researchers interpret the term *trauma* differently. Thus, Omitowoju (2002) shows rape representations in Athenian drama and argues that trauma is one of the physiological states of the organism that encompasses all human experiences and feelings. Rabinowitz (2011) analyzes sexual violence in Greek tragedy. The researcher indicates that trauma is an experience that represents a long-term state that only occasionally manifests itself in outward behavior. Trauma is situational in nature; that is, people express an evaluative personal attitude to possible situations and their own activity (Suter 2008). The scientist emphasizes that trauma is a complex state that has neurophysiological, neuromuscular, and phenomenological aspects. The neurophysiological aspect is determined by the electrical activity of the nervous system (the cortex, the hypothalamus, etc.). The neuromuscular aspect is, above all, facial activity, as well as pantomimic, visceral-endocrine, and sometimes

vocal reactions. At the phenomenological level, trauma is manifested as an experience that has immediate significance for the subject.

Distinguishing the Notions of Displacement and Exile

The problem of differentiating the notions of displacement and exile is quite topical and attracts the attention of many scholars (Agamben 1998; Ahmed 2006; Hardwick and Stray 2008; Said 2003, Mitrou and Kolyri, 2025). Contemporary researchers dealing with the differentiation of “*trauma*” and “*exile*” can be divided into three groups. The first group of researchers analyzes how texts represent extended temporal experience and traumatic memory (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995; Bal 1999; Ricoeur 1984). The fact that temporal experience and traumatic memory are interrelated is beyond doubt. Quite often, the notions “*temporal experience*” and “*traumatic memory*” are used as synonyms. Bal (1999) tries to distinguish between *trauma subjectivity* and *experience*, but encounters certain difficulties. People express a certain attitude to everything happening around them and evoking a particular type of trauma and experience. The same events may cause different traumas and experiences in people. Assmann and Czaplicka (1995) show the difference between cultural memory (institutionalized, long-term memory sustained through cultural practices and texts) and communicative memory (everyday, generational memory). People know what trauma is, yet they are not always able to describe and explain their trauma and experience clearly. This is hardly surprising, since to this day, the problem of trauma in science remains mysterious and, in many respects, not fully understood. However, its role in regulating human behavior is substantial.

The second group of researchers focuses on how texts represent marginalized voices (Lanser 1992; Spivak 1988; Stratton 2007). Feelings are referred to as a special subclass of trauma. Researchers distinguish feelings from trauma by their object-related character, which arises as a result of a specific fusion of trauma associated with a specific object.

The third group studies specific word choices, semantic fields, and patterns of language usage to construct meaning (Halliday and

Matthiessen 2014). Compared to classical studies, linguistic approaches are more stable phenomena with a clearly expressed object-related character. They are always directed to someone or something and express people's attitude towards that (Bakker 1997). For instance, Hart (2007) analyzes the language of asylum and refuge in Greek tragedy. The researcher reveals how specific vocabulary clusters, including terms for sanctuary, supplication, belonging, and protection, construct exile as simultaneously legal, religious, social, and psychological. Feelings arise as a result of the generalization of traumatic experience. They appear later than situational trauma and depend on upbringing influences more than trauma does. It is feelings, and not the events themselves, that impart a specific traumatic coloring to human experience (Semino and Culpeper 2002). Therefore, it is evident that analysis of trauma in ancient texts is represented by interdisciplinary approaches – linguistic, historical, and literary dimensions simultaneously. *Circe* by Miller participates in ongoing cultural discussions regarding how classical texts can be reimagined and reinterpreted to center previously marginalized perspectives, hence making visible forms of suffering and violence that the latter have obscured or overlooked.

Methodology

Research Design and Theoretical Framework

The following study utilizes a qualitative, comparative textual analysis methodology. It aims to combine trauma-based practices, feminist approaches, and lexico-semantic analysis. The research design focuses on the methodologies applied in classical philology, literary studies, linguistics, and cultural studies to investigate and then explicate how displacement is designed through language, specifically lexical units, in both ancient and modern texts. This approach indicates the unique and complicated nature of the object under study: the texts separated by centuries yet involved in addressing such topics as power, exile, gender, trauma, and violence.

The analytical framework originates from lexico-semantic field theory and corpus linguistics. It aims to examine how texts con-

struct specific meanings through lexical units' choice patterns, lexical clustering, and semantic relationships (Stubbs, 2001). The selected approach allows for explicating how lexical units cluster into semantic fields united under specific conceptual domains. Thus, for this research, displacement and exile, violence and trauma, mortal and divine power relations, belonging and alienation, and transformation and agency are the most significant semantic fields. By determining and analyzing the above lexical patterns across the selected texts, we reveal that both ancient and modern texts conceptualize exile as a multiplex phenomenon. The concept of exile simultaneously operates across numerous dimensions, including social, spatial, psychological, and legal ones.

Corpus Selection and Its Justification

Circe (2018) by Madeline Miller is one of the modern masterpieces analyzed in its entirety as a sustained displacement narrative. The choice of the first-person narration covering centuries provides inclusive and clear access to how a single being's consciousness treats and describes exile across time. The corpus of classical texts comprises: *The Odyssey* by Homer (specifically Book 10), *Theogony* by Hesiod, *Argonautica* by Apollonius Rhodius, and *Metamorphoses* by Ovid (specifically Book 14). It is worth noting that Homer provided the most detailed description of Circe, her island, and her relations with Odysseus. In his turn, Hesiod made emphasis on Circe's genealogy by indicating her divine bloodline. In his work, Apollonius Rhodius depicted how Circe met Jason and Medea. Ovid described Circe's transformation of Scylla in his masterpiece. It is evident that all these ancient sources collectively present Circe's life and allow for intertextual networking that Miller refers to.

The following research utilizes standard scholarly editions of Greek and Latin texts, as well as their English translations in the Loeb Classical Library. This measure allows analyzing both source-language (Greek and Latin) and target-language (English) lexical patterns. Since original Greek and Latin lexico-semantic patterns undergo inevitable variations, changes, or substitutions in English texts, it is of great significance to establish new terms and explicate their semantic complexity. Therefore, for Greek vocabulary, we

consult the Liddell-Scott-Jones *Greek-English Lexicon*; for Latin, we refer to the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* to establish comprehensive semantic ranges (Liddell 1811-1898; Scott 1811-1887).

Analytical Procedures

The analytical process consists of four stages: the identification of lexical units, semantic fields mapping, the analysis of comparative patterns, and the interpretation of the key findings.

Stage One: The Identification of the Lexical Units

Using Voyant Tools (Voyant-tools.org n.d.), we uploaded Miller's *Circe* and other selected classical texts to create the research corpus. We applied a custom stop-word list and built a curated query set for displacement lexemes (single- and multi-word) in the Terms panel. Voyant returned 847 hits in *Circe* and 126 across the selected classical texts. The senses were validated via Contexts (KWIC) and refined by excluding false positives. Collocational structure from Links and distributional profiles from Trends allowed grouping the results into five analytical buckets – spatial displacement, social alienation, psychological interiority, vulnerability and violence, and agency and power, which emerged as stable clusters (See Figure 1). The classical corpus showed pronounced peaks in social and special exile vocabulary, indicating a foregrounding of movement, civic status banishment, and polis / oikos relations. By contrast, *Circe* concentrated frequency and collocated around inner states, trauma response, embodied affect, and memory, which is consistent with sustained first-person intensification and modern subjectivity frameworks under displacement. In brief, Voyant's frequency, collocation, concordance, and trend views corroborate a diachronic shift: classical source privilege externalized, civic-spatial exile, whereas *Circe* intensifies vulnerability, negotiated agency, and interiority.

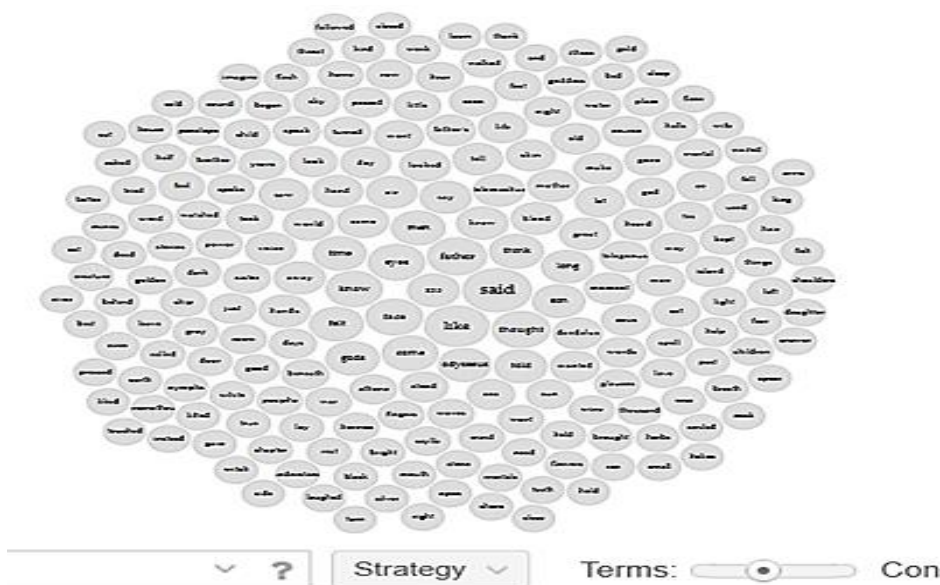


Figure 1. Termsberry (Words Relative Frequencies in *Circe* by Miller)

The first stage was aimed at identifying all cases within the selected corpus where displacement, exile, isolation, or related concepts appear. This included direct lexical markers (words explicitly denoting *exile*, *isolation*, and *banishment*) and indirect semantic indicators (descriptions of social exclusion, emotional alienation, and spatial separation). For *Circe* by Miller, this involved close reading with utmost attention to: first-person descriptions of isolation (*exile*, *alone*, *banished*, *strange*), descriptions of the island of Aea accenuating separation, remoteness, and solitude, interactions depicting Circe's exclusion from both divine and mortal worlds, and temporal markers focusing on the aspect of her long-lasting displacement (*age*, *century*, *eternity*, or *infinity*).

For ancient Greek and Latin texts, the identification of lexical units lays emphasis on both Greek and Latin vocabulary. Key Greek terms comprise: *phygē* (*exile* or *flight*); *erēmia* (*desolation*, *solitude*, *loneliness*); *nostos* (*return* or *homecoming*); *moira* (*portion*, *share*, or *fate*); *xenos* or *xenia* (*guest/stranger* / *alien* or *friendship*); *atimia* (*loss of rights*, *dishonor*). Latin terminology includes: *exilium* (*exile*), *solitudo* (*solitude*), *relegatio* (*banishment*), and *fuga* (*flight*). It is worth noting that we tracked not only isolated

cases but also co-occurrence patterns. Furthermore, we analyzed term clusters within texts and tried to explicate what semantic relationships they suggested.

Stage Two: The Mapping of the Semantic Fields

We organized all the identified lexical units into five semantic fields. Consequently, we managed to reveal conceptual structures that underlined different representations of displacement in the texts under study. During the following process, we referred to the semantic field theory suggested by Lyons (1977). The researcher stated that lexical units could gain their meanings partially through their relationships with semantically related terms (1977). Therefore, we identified five key semantic fields.

The field of spatial displacement incorporated lexical units denoting geographical isolation, physical distance, isolated islands, abandoned territories, thresholds, and movements away from centers toward boundaries.

The field of social alienation comprised lexical units denoting strangeness, community exclusion, lack of belonging, strict social relationships, and otherness.

The field of psychological interiority included lexical units depicting various emotional states, such as grief, sorrow, longing, loneliness, etc., which appeared as a result of isolation.

The field of vulnerability and violence included lexical units related to either sexual or physical violence, defensive measures, threats, bodily integrity, as well as transformations that were supposed to protect.

The field of agency and power comprised lexical units denoting capacity for action, magical skills or knowledge, divine ability, constraints on power, as well as negotiation/communication with authority representatives.

Mapping the above-mentioned fields involved creating detailed lists of lexical units within every category, considering their text distribution and frequency, as well as co-occurrence patterns. Moreover, we focused on the extensions of metaphors, where lexical units from one semantic field were used to depict concepts

from another one. For example, spatial distance was metaphorically utilized to represent the emotional alienation of the leading character in *Circe* (2018).

Stage Three: The Analysis of Comparative Lexico-semantic Patterns

We compared lexico-semantic patterns established in classical texts and *Circe* (2018). We examined which semantic fields appeared in both ancient texts and the modern novel under study. Secondly, we determined where some lexico-semantic patterns diverged or converged. Thirdly, we analyzed how the sustained first-person focalization in *Circe* (2018) affected which semantic field would specifically be emphasized by Miller. Fourthly, we determined which concepts or lexical units appeared in Miller's novel for the first time. Moreover, we tried to explicate why Miller has decided to introduce novel lexical units and concepts. Last but not least, we focused on how classical terms lacking direct equivalents in the English language were reflected in *Circe* (2018).

The comparative analysis emphasized the questions regarding narrative perspective. Therefore, it is obvious that classical texts depicted Circe's presence through visiting male characters, specifically Odysseus. The perspective of Odysseus took a dominant role in Book 10 of *The Odyssey* (Homer 1919). In her novel, Miller shifted the focus to Circe, thus making her the leading heroine. Thus, we examined how this shift, applied by Miller, impacted the identified lexico-semantic patterns.

Stage Four: The Interpretation of the Key Findings

We integrated research findings obtained from lexico-semantic analysis with numerous theoretical frameworks from classical reception theory, trauma studies, as well as feminist concepts. We examined what the identified lexical patterns revealed regarding how ancient and modern texts conceptualize displacement, violence, and trauma. According to Herman's research on trauma (1992; 2015), psychological injury appears as a result of prolonged

exposure to unbearable conditions of severe control, as well as prolonged captivity. Thus, we examined whether Circe's considerations and experiences corresponded to the patterns suggested by Herman (1992; 2015). These patterns included a sense of permanent damage, hypervigilance, restricted capacity for intimacy and trust, and distorted perceptions of offenders.

By referring to feminist narratological frameworks, we examined how narrative voice and focalization affected the representation of violence by both males and females. Unlike ancient authors, Miller granted her Circe sustained first-person narration. Thus, we observed feminist interventions into different classical texts that deprived female characters of first-person narration.

Furthermore, we applied the concepts of hyper-textuality by Genette (1997) to analyze how Miller managed to transform and reinterpret classical texts. We examined the transformations that occurred at the lexico-semantic level.

Results and Discussion: Lexico-Semantic Patterns of Displacement

Semantic Field One: Spatial Displacement

On the one hand, Miller preserves classical emphasis on spatial isolation and, on the other hand, expands its phenomenological dimensions. The opening chapter establishes Circe's perception of space as fundamentally alienating: "My father's halls were dark and silent. I was a daughter, a disappointment, no more" (Miller 2018). The combination of "*dark and silent*" with "*daughter*" and "*disappointment*" describes social rejection – Helios' halls become physically oppressive through their emotional atmosphere. When exile becomes evident, Circe utters spatial displacement through layered sensory description:

The boat set off through the white crests, the oarsmen pulling past the last edge of land. I stood at the prow, watching the ocean's shadows darken. I had thought I knew what exile meant. Now I understood: it was being shown the world, only to be told I could not touch it (Miller 2018).

The above-mentioned paragraph presents a specific lexico-semantic pattern used by Miller: spatial vocabulary ("*edge of land*" (Miller 2018) and "*ocean's shadows*" (Miller 2018) is combined

with and sensory restriction ("*could not touch*") (Miller 2018) and epistemological language ("*I had thought*") (Miller 2018) and "*Now I understood*" (Miller 2018). The exile experiences space not merely as distance but as painful proximity to an inaccessible world.

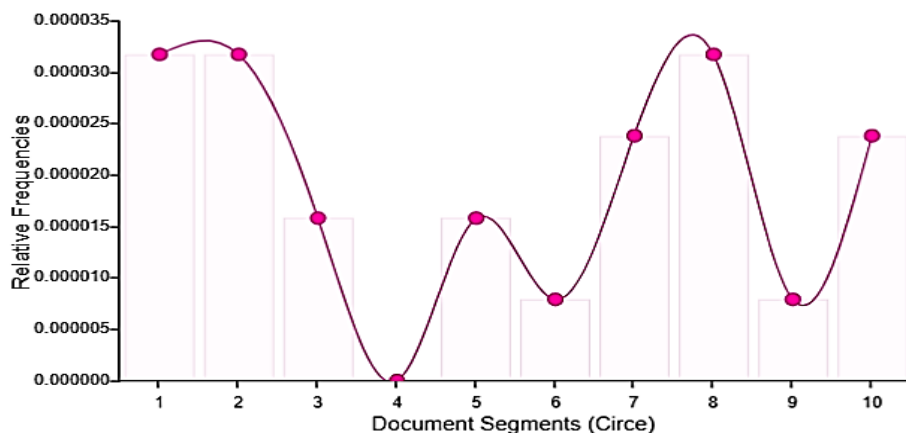


Figure 2. Edge (Relative frequencies of the word *edge* in *Circe* by Miller)

Miller utilizes specific lexical repetition to construct an isolating geography of the island of Aeaea. The word "*alone*" appears 47 times across the novel – roughly once every seven pages – with specific presentation in chapters depicting the initial centuries of solitude that Circe experienced. Similarly, the noun "*island*" appears 112 times, but Miller intensifies this noun with certain adjectives and pronouns, such as "*my wild island*", "*this abandoned place*", and "*my exile island*" (Miller 2018). The possessive pronoun "*my*" claims ownership and emphasizes that Aeaea precisely belongs to Circe, as any other being wants it. In this case, possession is established through rejection.

The most striking spatial innovation in the novel appears in Circe's temporal experience of unchanging geography. After centuries alone, Circe reflects: "Every day was the same. I walked the shore, I worked my garden, I spoke to my lions. The sky stayed where it was, the trees did not walk" (Miller 2018). The negative construction "*did not walk*" (Miller 2018) inverts the animistic expectations of mythological landscape, focusing on the static quality of the landscape. For an immortal being, spatial steadiness becomes temporal imprisonment. Thus, the semantic field of spatial

displacement merges with temporal stasis, hence creating what may be referred to as "*spatio-temporal confinement*" – neither time nor space changes, consequently trapping Circe's exile in a permanent present.

Semantic Field Two: Social Alienation

Miller transforms classical silence regarding Circe's social isolation into a sustained first-person expression of loneliness. The author devotes extensive passages to the phenomenological depiction of solitude's effects: "The days passed, and I did not count them. There was nothing to count for. I had thought - I had hoped - that someone would come. My father, perhaps, said it had been enough, that I was sorry enough, that I had learned. But no one did" (Miller 2018). The repetition of negations ("*no one*," "*nothing to count for*," and "*did not count*" (Miller 2018)) accumulates across the paragraph, each negative construction increasing the absence at solitude's core.

The adjective "*alone*" functions distinctively in the novel, appearing in syntactic positions accentuating its semantic significance: "I was alone, truly and wholly"; "I lived alone and walked alone"; "I had been alone so long, I was ready to believe"; "After he left, the solitude was very great" (Miller 2018). The adverbs "*truly and wholly*" in the first example suggest the degrees of aloneness. The main heroine had been alone before, but not with this totality and disparity. The parallel structure "*lived alone and walked alone*" (Miller 2018) illustrates how isolation penetrates both movement and dwelling. The causal relationship in "*I had been alone so long, I was ready to believe*" (Miller 2018) suggests that extended isolation impacts judgments, thus prefiguring trauma theory's insights regarding social deprivation's cognitive effects.

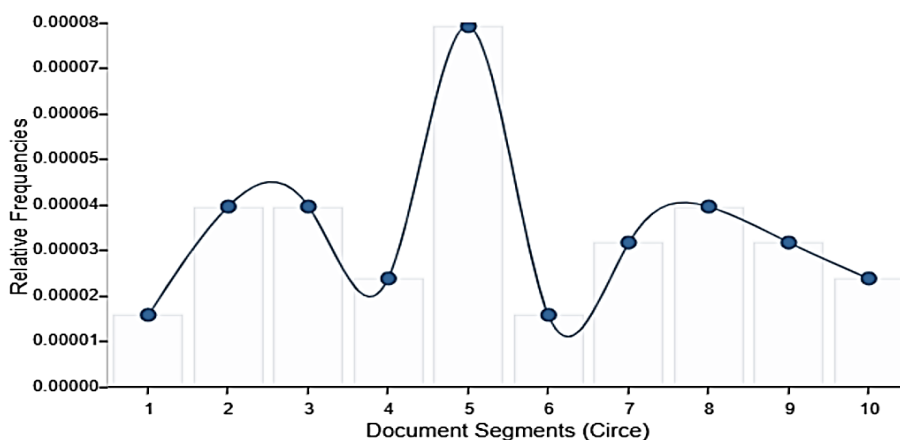


Figure 3. Alone (Relative frequencies of the word *alone* in *Circe* by Miller)

Miller introduces the vocabulary of social alienation, which was not used in classical texts, borrowed from contemporary psychological discourse. For instance, *Circe* describes her feeling as "*invisible*", "*unnoticed*", "*nothing*" (Miller 2018) – terms that utter not merely physical separation but ontological deletion. When Hermes visits, *Circe* states, "I had not heard my own voice in so long it sounded strange to me" (Miller 2018). The adjective "*strange*" echoes her self-description from childhood, but now applies not to her unique nature but to her own voice rendered unfamiliar through disuse – social isolation totally alienates her from herself.

The most theoretically sophisticated treatment of social alienation can be found in *Circe*'s analysis of her hospitality practices. After centuries of transforming male visitors into swine, she encounters Odysseus and indicates: "I had grown used to my own thoughts...I had forgotten what it was to speak and be answered" (Miller 2018). The phrase "*had grown used to*" (the Past Perfect tense, underlining the completed past action with ongoing present effects) describes *Circe*'s adaptation to solitude as a habitual action. The contrast between "*speak and be answered*" versus merely speaking indicates that communication requires reciprocity – without response, speaking becomes a monologue. Therefore, it is evident that the long-lasting isolation may impact not only individual comfort in particular but also existence and subjectivity in general.

Semantic Field Three: Psychological Interiority

The first-person narration utilized by Miller allows unprecedented access to various psychological processes by Circe. Numerous paragraphs are devoted to memories, introspection, self-analysis, and emotional responses. The above-mentioned interiority concepts are not paid attention to in classical masterpieces. The semantic field of psychological interiority dominates the novel under study. It is obvious that lexical units describing various mental states extensively appear in Miller's masterpiece:

I lay on my narrow cot and thought of all those hours I had spent working my loom, fingers pushing the shuttle through the threads, back and forth, the same motions repeated, the wool growing slowly into cloth. It had not seemed monotonous then. I had told myself that such a task was meditative, an offering to the gods. But the truth was, I had been grateful simply to be left alone (Miller 2018).

The above paragraph shows several original features of psychological vocabulary used by Miller. Firstly, the verb "*thought*" (Miller 2018) introduces an extended internal reflection on Circe's experience that happened to her in the past. Secondly, sensory details, including threads, *shuttle*, or *fingers*, present a psychological process in the embodied memory. Thirdly, the contrast between present recognition ("*But the truth was*" (Miller 2018)) and past self-deception ("*I had told myself*" (Miller 2018)) emphasizes metacognitive awareness that Circe not only remembers but also tries to analyze her mental states experienced in the past. Last but not least, the understanding that Circe was "*grateful simply to be left alone*" (Miller 2018) before her final exile helps her to recontextualize her isolation. Circe's desire to be alone becomes a severe punishment on the isolated island.

Miller applies specific lexical patterns to describe traumatic memory. The author considers various aspects of trauma theory and traumatic experiences and skillfully integrates them into her novel. When Circe recalls attempted rape, the narration becomes fragmented: "Their hands on me. Their breath. I felt myself splitting. There were two of me now – one who remained, and one who fled, up through the ceiling, away" (Miller 2018). The fragments ("*Their hands on me. Their breath*" (Miller 2018)) lack

verbs, presenting sensory impressions without narrative integration. The metaphor of splitting (*"I felt myself splitting"*(Miller 2018)) makes emphasis on dissociation, and the Present tense verb *"remains"* and *"flee"* (rather than the past tense *"remained"* and *"fled"*) suggests traumatic memory's intrusive presentness – despite narrating specific past events, Circe experiences them as the ongoing present.

The most sustained psychological vocabulary reflects emotional and cognitive effects of solitude. After centuries alone, Circe describes her unique mental state:

I found I could not remember what it had been like to walk through the halls of Oceanos, to have nymphs all around me. I tried to summon their faces, but they would not come. I could remember only myself, standing among them like a stone (Miller 2018).

The phrases *"I could not remember"*(Miller 2018) and *"I tried to summon"* (Miller 2018) construct memory as an active attempt rather than a passive reception. The failure of memory (*"they would not come"*(Miller 2018)) suggests that long-lasting isolation usually erases social memory, hence leaving only the isolated self. The simile *"like a stone"* (Miller 2018) implies both severity (emotional numbing) and immobility (inability to connect). Thus, based on trauma theory's postulates, emotional constriction is a result of prolonged stress or other factors.

Semantic Field Four: Vulnerability and Violence

In her novel, Miller manages to break the classical authors' silence regarding sexual violence against Circe, naming attempted rape and rape explicitly and repeatedly. The most extended sequence presents the sailors who landed on the island of Aea during early exile by Circe:

They had been three days on the island when one of them seized me...He dragged me towards the woods. The others followed. I knew what they intended. Their eyes had been crawling over me since they stepped from their boat (Miller 2018).

The verb "*seized*" (*violent physical force*) initiates a unique sequence, followed by "*dragged*" (*forcible movement*) and the explicit statement "*I knew what they intended*" – Miller refuses euphemism, thus making sexual violence's intent unmistakable.

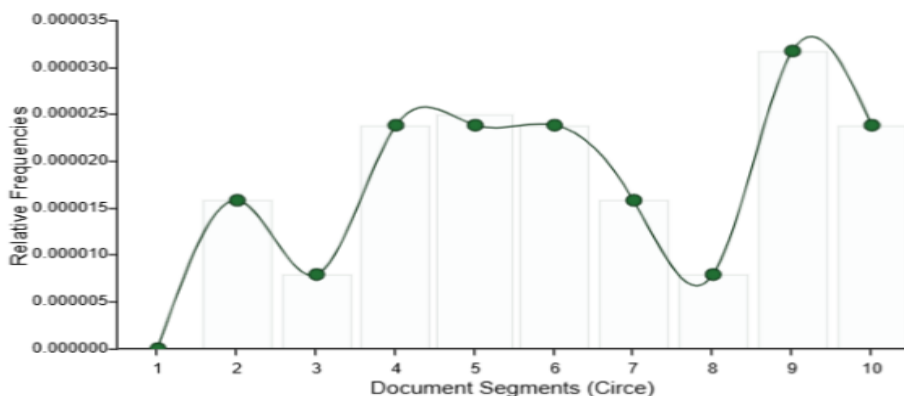


Figure 4. Seize (Frequencies of the word *seize* in *Circe* by Miller)

The paragraph continues with typical trauma vocabulary: "I twisted, trying to get free, but he only laughed. His hand reached for my dress...I felt terror then, raw and overwhelming"(Miller 2018). The adjective "*raw*" applied to terror suggests unmediated emotional intensity, whereas the other adjective "*overwhelming*" emphasizes an effect exceeding cognitive capacity. It is worth noting that both adjectives refer to trauma theory lexicon. The resolution of the scene is when Circe discovers her magic power to transform other beings. In this case, Circe's defensive magic is triggered by her fear. Therefore, transformation is one of the trauma responses rather than vicious and well-planned cruelty.

The author applies a unique lexical pattern to combine vulnerability to violence by means of temporal and conditional constructions. Circe indicates: "If I had been a mortal, they would have killed me. If I had been one of my soft, harmless sisters, I would have washed up on the beach, food for gulls" (Miller 2018). The repeated conditional "*If I had been*" (Miller 2018) constructs possible scenarios in which vulnerability produces or leads to death. The statement "*But I was not*" (Miller 2018) indicates that survival requires seeking defensive violence, as gentleness would have led to destruction. This lexical pattern recurs throughout the novel:

vulnerability necessitates defensive violence, kindness enables exploitation, and transformation becomes a protective measure.

Furthermore, Miller introduces domestic violence vocabulary, which classical authors failed to use in their masterpieces. Circe's relationship with Odysseus comprises passages presenting emotional manipulations: "He would use my words against me, twist them. 'You said you were not angry,' he would tell me, though I had said no such thing" (Miller 2018). The verb "*twist*" applied to words, and the explicit statement "*though I had said no such thing*," (Miller 2018) names gaslighting – psychological abuse through the victim's reality denial. Thus, it is evident that Miller refers to modern domestic violence discourse to choose special lexical units to describe different types of abuse and violence in her novel.

Semantic Field Five: Power and Agency

Miller transforms Circe's power from a static attribute to a developmental process. The novel represents Circe's revelation of transformation abilities, pharmaceutical knowledge advancement, negotiation with divine authority, and ultimate self-determination. Power vocabulary constantly changes across the novel, from passive suffering to active resistance and to personalized choice.

In the first chapters, lexical patterns accentuate the lack of power. Child-Circe describes herself through different types of negation: "I was not strong. I was not clever. I was not beautiful" (Miller 2018). The anaphoric repetition of "*I was not*" constructs identity through absence, through what she lacks rather than possesses. When transformation powers develop, Miller utilizes discovery lexicon: "I felt something within me, like a thread pulling taut" (Miller 2018). The simile "*like a thread*" (Miller 2018) connects to Circe's weaving – her power emerges through metaphors of textile production, which was a traditional women's craft in ancient Greece for centuries.

As the novel further develops, the power vocabulary becomes more confident and obvious. Mid-narrative Circe indicates: "I chose who I would help and who I would not" (Miller 2018). The verb "*chose*" (the Past Indefinite, active voice) depicts Circe as the grammatical subject making conscious decisions. The parallel

structure *"who I would help and who I would not"* (Miller 2018) emphasizes that both refusal and assistance represent Circe's active choices – withheld power is still exercised power.

The most significant power vocabulary used by Miller appears in Circe's confrontation with Athena. Protecting her son Telegonus, Circe claims: "You have yourself to blame for that...If you make him an enemy, then know that I am his. My power is not so great as yours, but I will fight you anyway" (Miller 2018). This paragraph demonstrates several essential characteristics of Miller's power lexicon. Firstly, the imperative *"know"* commands divine acknowledgment of the position occupied by Circe. Secondly, the statement *"My power is not so great as yours"* (Miller 2018) acknowledges hierarchy, while the adversative conjunction *"but"* introduces resistance despite disadvantage. Thirdly, the future tense *"I will fight"* (Miller 2018) represents a commitment to action regardless of probable outcomes. The vocabulary of power changes from a capacity description to an intention declaration – from *"what I can do"* (Miller 2018) to *"what I will do"* (Miller 2018).

The conclusion of the novel presents the most radical and evident exercise of agency. Circe chooses mortality: "I thought once that gods are the opposite of death, but I see now they are more dead than anything, for they are unchanging, and can hold nothing in their hands" (Miller 2018). The comparison *"more dead than anything"* (Miller 2018) reshapes conventional ontological dogmas. Thus, it is obvious that immortality leads to death, whereas mortality results in life. The metaphor of having nothing in their hands dates back to the earlier imagery of craft and transformation, implying that power requires both the capability to change, considering numerous factors, and the willingness to give up control. Therefore, the final power vocabulary cases provide a novel definition of the term power in the novel. Power becomes mortality, change, and choice, but not domination or superiority.

Conclusion

The study analyzed how classical authors and Madeline Miller linguistically constructed displacement in their texts. The semantic field theory and Voyant Tools were applied to conduct comparative

lexico-semantic analysis. The comparative approach revealed various patterns of distribution. 847 lexical cases related to displacement were found in *Circe* by Miller, whereas 126 were identified in classical texts. Different shifts or changes were identified in lexico-semantic fields, gender preferences, narrative presentation, and focusing, and lexical units chosen to depict trauma and exile. The most important findings concerned narrative focusing and, thus, its direct effect on the distribution of the lexical units. In classical texts, authors focused on male characters' presentation and special displacement (43%), as well as agency and power (31%). On the contrary, sustained first-person narration in Miller's *Circe* significantly inverted the above proportions. Psychological interiority (39%), social alienation (24%), and vulnerability and violence (19%) took the leading positions. It is worth noting that Miller failed to emphasize special displacement (11%) in her novel. The Voyant Tools collocation and frequency analyses corroborated a unique diachronic shift. The field of vulnerability and violence underwent the most ideologically vivid and important transformation. Classical authors simply ignored or euphemized sexual violence and assault against Circe. They preferred to depict Circe as a death threat to all the male visitors. In her novel, Miller depicted Circe's attempted rape by means of specific lexical units' choice, such as "*seized*," "*dragged*," or "*terror*". Miller avoided utilizing classical taboo words or euphemisms. Circe was provided with a modern vocabulary to utter her victim's experience. The application of Voyant Tools assisted in tracking the relative frequency of the lexical unit "*seized*" and its variants that Miller used to depict the assault and further consequences. Therefore, the choice of specific lexical units helped in vividly constructing and representing trauma in *Circe*. Following feminist interventions, Miller used lexical units that classical authors had preferred to deny. The analysis of the psychological interiority field by means of Key Word in Context (KWIC) concordances showed how sustained first-person narration provided unprecedented access to experiential presentation of exile and trauma. Such terms as "*alone*," "*remembered*," "*felt*," and "*thought*" clustered in patterns that are consistent with the description of trauma and various consequences, including PTSD. Miller used the present tense to denote past events, as well as lexical units to describe assault, rape, and emotional devastation. All the lexical patterns used by Miller aligned with clinical trials

and descriptions by Herman (1992; 2015). Thus, long-lasting isolation, violence, and vulnerability may result in unique linguistic patterns that could be utilized in different types of discourse. Furthermore, digital corpus analysis significantly contributed to analyzing and explicating the key findings. The utilization of Voyant Tools allowed lexical patterns' identification and quantification in both classical texts and modern novel samples. Moreover, classical language analysis, trauma-informed interpretation, and digital frequency analysis proved that Miller's novel functioned as "hyper-text" and remarkably transformed classical texts at the lexico-semantic level. Last but not least, Miller depicted exile through specific linguistic patterns, which simultaneously operate across numerous semantic fields. Miller provided her heroine with original language to express those aspects, including exile, trauma, self-determination, violence, etc., which classical authors had avoided depicting. The choice of lexical units, their distribution, relative frequency, grammatical aspects, and the structure of collocations allowed depicting the concept of displacement, its effects, and interpretations.

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**Towards an Egalitarian
Synchronicity of Displacement:
Re-imagining Shared Temporality
as Unifying Grounds for Social Solidarity**

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Abstract

The present article initially examines, in a comparative way, the theoretical contributions of Ayşe Çağlar, Janine Dahinden, and Georgina Ramsay, who equally problematize the dominant Western epistemology of the refugee crisis and, in particular, its heterochronic categorization of refugee and non-refugee subjects. As we demonstrate, the inscription of refugees within temporalities distinct from those of Western citizens reinforces entrenched logics of othering and exceptionalization, thereby obstructing possibilities of interactive coexistence and socio-cultural interchange. Within this framework, we attempt to reconceptualize displacement as a unifying analytical topology that highlights the shared rhythms of dispossession, precaritization, and alienation that shape both refugee and non-refugee lives. Building on these insights, the second part of the article explores the conceptual and epistemological affinities between displacement and precarity. We argue that, when critically reworked through feminist theory and brought into dialogue with one another, these concepts provide fertile anti-essentialist frameworks for re-situating heterogeneous subjects within a shared spatio-temporal and socio-political condition. Such a perspective enables the theorization of emergent non-identitarian forms of relationality, sociality, struggle, and solidarity observed among refugee, migrant,

and precaritized citizen populations in recent years, while also destabilizing the entrenched ethnocentric binary that opposes the autonomous Western citizen to the vulnerable, Orientalized refugee subject.

Keywords: *Temporal Displacement, Temporalities of Migration, Precarity, Citizen-Refugee Binary, Solidarity, De-exceptionalization of displacement*

Introduction

As a transnational cross-cultural diachronic phenomenon, displacement has been systematically theorized, thematized, explored and reconstructed in terms of a profoundly interdisciplinary notion within multiple scientific fields in areas such as history, philosophy, politics and public policy, geography, human rights, international and public law, sociology, ethnology and social anthropology, psychology and psychoanalysis, as well as mobility, refugee and migration studies. At the same time, displacement has been constantly depicted, illuminated, and reimagined in poetry, literature, and art from classic ancient Greek literature to contemporary literary, poetic, cinematic, visual, and digital narratives on migration, diaspora, mobility, emplacement, memory, trauma, identity, alienation, and exile. The complex dialectic between trauma, exile, and displacement has been the object of numerous philosophical inquiries deriving from distinguishably different theoretical traditions from Levinasian¹ ethics and Arendtian political theory to post-colonial and critical race, mobility, and feminist studies. More specifically, the notion of displacement has been theoretically reconceptualized within modern philosophical thought in terms of both a macroscopic socio-structural product of complex political, economic and historical transnational processes of war, violence, neo-colonialism, systemic oppression, human rights violations, persecution, land occupation, climate change and geopolitical transformations *and* as an existential condition of self-alienation, rupture with the world,

¹ Cf. Papacharalambous Charis, "Other's Caress and God's Passing By: Levinas Encountering Heidegger", *Dia-noesis*, 11, 2021, pp. 77-94, https://dianoesis-journal.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/dianoesis-olo-t11_opt.pdf

dispossession, exploitation, isolation and disorientation within the post-modern late-capitalist reality.

The notion of displacement is canonically associated or even conflated with refugeehood, forced migration, and involuntary movement, being often framed and represented in hegemonic Western public discourses in terms of a pathogenic dehistoricized and depoliticized exception from the anachronistic fantasy of a robust global Nation-State order. However, critical theoretical approaches emerging over the last decade, mainly in the field of social anthropology, reconstruct displacement under novel conceptual, epistemological, and methodological premises by detaching movement-through-space from the defining conceptual characteristics of displacement. At the same time, contemporary reconceptualizations undertake the complex epistemological endeavor to “de-exceptionalize” displacement and problematize its dominant articulation as an exceptional condition of radical dispossession, liminality, deprivation, and trauma experienced solely by refugee and migrant subjects in contrast to stable, secure, and well-ordered lives enjoyed by the citizens of the Nation-State.

While critical scholarship on human mobility initially concentrated on the spatialities of displacement—engaging in depth with the topologies of the refugee camp, the maritime and terrestrial routes of migration and refuginess, the liminal zones of waiting, control, and surveillance, as well as the biopolitics of the border regime—over the past decade a systematic body of academic work has explored the complex relation between displacement and time. This emerging field of research examines the dialectic between migratory and refugee experiences and temporality, tracing the differentiated temporalities, “temporal regimes” and “chronotopes” within which migrant and refugee subjects navigate their every-day lives, envision their future and perform daily acts of planning, claiming, resisting and interacting at the camps, hot spots, detention centers, borders and checkpoints, while becoming regulated by decelerated, obscure and complex immigration bureaucratic processes, rules and mechanisms². As Tsagarou-

² See, for example, Griffiths, M. “Out of Time: The Temporal Uncertainties of Refused Asylum Seekers and Immigration Detainees”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 40:12, 2014, pp. 1991–2009, Hage, G., “Waiting out the crisis: On stuckedness and governmentality”. In: Hage, G. (ed.) *Waiting*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2009) pp. 97–106, McNevin, A.

sianou interestingly argues, “such renewed interest in exploring migration through the perspective of time has indeed enriched migration literature and has provided a different understanding of processes of being, becoming, and belonging for migrants³. Similarly, Jacobsen and Carlsen observe that “foregrounding temporality as an analytical lens can provide critical new knowledge about the socio-cultural dynamics of contemporary migration.⁴

In our view, the exploration of the distinct and multi-layered temporalities of displacement is not merely descriptive; On the contrary it unravels, under a critical theoretical lens, the racialized and ethnicized power structures, governing techniques, subjectivation processes and categorization and normalization mechanisms that are equally involved in the normative production of displaced populations in terms of ‘illegal subjects’, as well as in their subsequent exposure to grave violations of fundamental human rights, socio-political marginalization, material deprivation and cultural othering under the securitization regimes of the West. An illustrative example of the close correlation between the exploration of the temporalities of displacement and the socio-political investigation of the systemic injustices entailed within the contemporary Western regulation of migratory and refugee flows can be traced in Tazzioli’s recent research, which conceptualizes the “temporality of control” as a central analytical category for the critical problematization of the functions of the EU border regime and the limitations of the right to seek for asylum⁵. In her analysis, this conception illustrates both the specific

& Missbach, A., “Luxury limbo: Temporal techniques of border control and the humanitarianisation of waiting”, *International Journal of Migration and Border Studies*. 4:1–2, 2018, pp. 12–34, Jacobsen, C. M., Karlsen M.A., Khosravi S. (eds.) *Waiting and the Temporalities of Irregular Migration*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2021).

³ Tsagarousianou R., “Time and mobility/immobility: the chronopolitics of mobility and the temporalities of suffering and hope in situations of encampment”, *Mobilities* 18:2, 2022, p. 268.

⁴ Jacobsen, C. M., and M. A. Karlsen. 2021. “Introduction: Unpacking the Temporalities of Irregular Migration.” In *Waiting and the Temporalities of Irregular Migration*, edited by C. M. Jacobsen, M. A. Karlsen, and S. Khosravi, (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), p.1.

⁵ Tazzioli M., “The Temporal Borders of Asylum. Temporality of Control in the EU Border Regime.”, *Political Geography* 64, 2018, pp. 13–22.

temporalities embedded in techniques of migration government and the complex power tropes through which time itself operates as a medium and technology of control over displaced populations. As she argues by foregrounding the notion of temporal borders, -namely the normative imposition of deadlines, waiting periods and time limits that profoundly shape migrants' and refugees' lives and mobilities-, "the lens of the temporality of control enables seeing that time is not only object of mechanisms of control over time- but also a mean and a technology for managing migrant- control through time"⁶. In this regard, she observes the multiplication and stratification of temporal borders that constitute asymmetrical hierarchies of mobility across displaced populations through accelerated temporalities of control, which coexist with, rather than contradict, the prolonged waiting and legal limbo experienced in reception centers in South Europe, while forcefully disrupting migrants' autonomous temporalities and geographies of movement.

The temporal regimes to which refugee and migrant subjects are subjected are frequently theorized in terms of exceptionality, or as a distorted mirroring of the normative linear temporality of an accelerating Western trajectory of unrestrained historical and cultural progress and unceasing capitalist productivity. Prolonged confinement within refugee camps, compounded by socio-political marginalization, juridical ambiguity, and the manifest impossibility of securing or envisioning a predictable future, often results in the depiction of migratory and refugee conditions through the lens of liminality, opacity, and a protracted status of existential and legal-political "limbo. Such a condition is designated as governed by a depoliticizing and debilitating normative regime of permanent waiting, emptiness, inactivity, non-productivity, indefinite suspension, and delay—a temporal state in which neither individual agency nor collective emancipatory action can be articulated. However, according to Rozakou's ethnographic studies⁷ on the multiple and shifting temporalities of contemporary collective refugee experience—as these were shaped and transformed during the prolonged stay of refugees in

⁶ Ibid, p. 14.

⁷ Rozakou, K., "The Violence of Accelerated Time: Waiting and Hasting 'during the Long Summer of Migration' in Greece." In *Waiting and the Temporalities of Irregular Migration*, ibid, pp. 23–39.

reception centers on the Aegean border islands in the summer of 2015—the temporality of displacement cannot be reduced to the catatonic rhythm of existential suspension and indefinite stagnation. Rather, it continually alternates with temporal patterns marked by accelerated rhythms and processes of speed. By problematizing the normative association of accelerated mobility with intentionality and progress, and that of enforced immobility with passivity and decline, Rozakou argues that the temporal dialectic between acceleration and deceleration permeates the “shifting temporal rhythms on the border”, which are dictated by power mechanisms of border control and demand the constant vigilance and responsiveness of the refugee and migrant subjects who are inscribed within them.

This methodological, epistemological, and theoretical designation of the distinct temporalities that structure the collective experience of displacement—at once internally homogenizing yet simultaneously marked by radical divergence, liminality, and unmediated exception in relation to the normalized temporalities of continuous progress, linear continuity, and unbroken stability attributed to Western citizens—results, beyond its partial scientific inaccuracy, in the inscription of displaced subjects and Western citizens into discrete, hierarchical, non-relational, and non-communicating temporal frameworks. Such a conceptualization obscures, on the one hand, the vivid, complex, and antagonizing intentionalities, resistances, and emancipatory practices of refugee and migrant subjects, and, on the other hand, the radical precaritization of life for Western citizens under conditions of intensifying neoliberalization. As Cabot and Ramsay interestingly argue, “the exceptionalism entailed in dominant approaches to displacement involves a partitioning of time (‘normal’ time and moments of ‘crisis’); of space (borders and their transgression, the Global South and the Global North); of categories (the refugee or migrant as opposed to the citizen); and experience. As such, deexceptionalizing entails disrupting epistemological and political boundaries, and examining erosions in the capacity for flourishing lives and livelihoods unfolding across diverse categories of membership⁸.

⁸ Cabot, H., & Ramsay, G., ‘Deexceptionalizing Displacement: An Introduction’, *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 12:3, 2021, p. 292.

Initiating from the above-described theoretical standpoint, in the first part of the present article, we will comparatively examine the significant theoretical contributions of social anthropologists and political theorists such as Ayşe Çağlar, Janine Dahinden, and Georgina Ramsay, which equally problematize the heterochronic categorization of citizens and refugee subjects within the realms of the dominant Western epistemology of the refugee crisis. As we will further analyze through the illumination of the above theoretical insights, the dominant epistemological inscription of refugee subjects within a temporality distinct from that of Western citizens in Western host states reinforces prevailing logics of othering and exceptionalization, which in turn obstruct the possibility of interactive coexistence and socio-cultural interaction between Western citizens and migrant subjects. Against this backdrop, the notion of displacement is re-explored in terms of a unifying analytical topology that illuminates the coeval subjection of both refugee and non-refugee populations to shared rhythms of dispossession, precaritization, and alienation. Building on this perspective, the article re-visits displacement as an innovative epistemological device aiming at the successful co-articulation of heterogeneous social subjects under a common epistemological prism and claim that the relocation of both refugee and non-refugee subjects under a conjunctive time-spatial and sociopolitical analytical trope could elucidate manifold, previously invisibilized, relational structures of cultural interchange, political communication and social solidarity between Western citizens and refugee populations. In the second part of the article, we will attempt to highlight the conceptual and epistemological affinities between displacement and precarity, suggesting that both displacement and precarity, when critically reworked through the lens of critical feminist theory and placed in dialogical relation with each other, can operate as critical anti-essentialist conceptual frameworks for re-situating both refugee and non-refugee subjects within a shared spatio-temporal and socio-political trajectory. In this regard, we will further explore how these co-examined conceptions can forge a nuanced and fruitful analytical platform for the theorization of emergent non-identitarian forms of sociality, relationality, struggle, opposition and solidarity between contemporary refugee and migrant populations and precaritized citizens of Western host societies in the last decade, as well as for

the deconstruction of the entrenched ethnocentric binary that normatively juxtaposes the autonomous Western citizen with the vulnerable, Orientalized refugee subject.

Exclusionary Temporalities of Displacement: Re-situating Refugee, Migrant, and Citizen Subjects in Shared Political Realities

In her scientific study “Still ‘migrants’ after all those years: foundational mobilities, temporal frames and emplacement of migrants”⁹, Ayse Çağlar systematically problematizes the methodological nationalism that characterizes the dominant *culturalising, essentializing, homogenizing, racializing* and *ethnicizing* epistemological discourses on the study of contemporary migrant and refugee subjects. In this regard, she argues that the ruling state- and Western-centric epistemological emphasis on the national identity and ethno-religious origins of migrant populations not only invisibilizes the complex dynamics, relationalities, narratives, experiences, agencies and socio-political bonds of migrant subjects, but also obscures the manifold constitutive gender, class, religious, sexual and social differences of distinct migrant subjectivities, leading to the normative erasure of their radical heterogeneity, multiplicity and non-irreducibility. Interestingly, Çağlar claims that this hegemonic ethnocentric and essentialistic perception of the migrant condition in epistemic and representational frameworks, reflecting a normative separation between migrant and non-migrant subjects, invokes systemic mechanisms that locate migrant and refugee subjects into distinct, unbridgeable, and non-interlocking temporal realities and analytical paradigms than non-migrant Western populations. In her words, “such a prioritization of ethnic and/or national categories in analysis inscribes those who are designated as migrants and the ‘natives’ into different temporal frameworks”¹⁰. According to Çağlar, under the dominant paradigm of the integrationist perspective on migration, refugee and migrant subjects are positioned within linear temporal processes that require the gradual shedding of their ini-

⁹ Çağlar, A., “Still ‘migrants’ after all those years: Foundational mobilities, temporal frames and emplacement of migrants”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 42: 6), 2016, pp. 952–969.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 2

tial cultural, national, religious, and ideological characteristics, alongside their progressive absorption of the hegemonic culture of the Western host state. Such processes are framed within a teleological conception of the future, imagined as the point of completion of an idealized, perpetually deferred, and ultimately unattainable project of total self-transformation. In this context, the presence of the refugee subject is reconstructed in terms of an autonomous temporal regime of ongoing, protracted, and fluid transition toward the uncertain ideal of absolute socio-cultural integration. From this perspective, the refugee present remains unable to synchronize—under the condition of this impossible completion—with the historical reality and the socio-economic and political transformations of the host society or the broader global order. Shifting her focus from the integration model to a more progressive critical perspective on migration, Çağlar explores a post migrant perspective mainly in the field of cultural production and further conceptualizes this perception's discourse on the relation between displacement and time. Çağlar initially aligns herself with the cultural radicalization introduced by the post-migration perspective. Within this framework, she argues that the de-stereotyping of migrant subjects, the recognition of the multiplicity and fragmentation of migrant and refugee identities, and their egalitarian, de-essentialized, and de-nationalized representation in art, culture, social life, community bonds, and the public sphere constitute subversive and transformative agonistic practices. These practices are capable of reconstructing plural alternative historiographies and narrativizations, as well as multi-identitarian socialities, political collectivities, and communicative practices that move beyond the dominant essentializing strategies of 'integration' and 'multiculturalism.' As she notes, "the aim behind the introduction of this concept is to counter the dominant and normative categories of migration industries, knowledge practices and the foreigner 'dispositive', by drawing attention to the subversive and the playful strategies this group of people deal with their ascribed positions in the society. These playful strategies are presented as forms of resistance to the ethnicized and essentialized logics of the majority of migration scholarship and public discourses on migration¹¹.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 3

However, the post-migration perspective likewise introduces an a priori temporal overdetermination within the very framework of the constitution of (post-)migrant and refugee identity. It does so by associating the multiple developments of social bonds, cultural practices, and political collectivities of contemporary migrant subjects with the past moment of their movement into a distinct nation-state. According to Çağlar, the inseparable entanglement of refugee and migrant presentness—whether linked to a future-oriented teleology of successful integration or to a decisive past point of departure—serves to de-historicize and homogenize complex refugee and migrant subjectivities. This, in turn, distances them from the non-refugee Western population through the hegemonic construction of two dichotomous and mutually exclusive temporal frameworks for understanding the lived reality. Borrowing the notion of the *chronotope* from Mikhail Bakhtin¹² and further drawing upon Johannes Fabian's seminal study *Time and the Other*¹³, Çağlar in particular explains that the normative dichotomous construction of different spatio-temporal and conceptual territories for native populations and migrant subjects employs epistemological devices of exclusion, while invisibilizing the vivid, heterogeneous and multiple social, cultural, financial, sentimental and political interconnections between migrant and non-migrant subjects and further hindering the epistemological endeavor of developing encompassing and mediating temporal modalities elucidating the interactions, socializations and relationalities between migrant and non-migrant subjectivities.

On the basis of the above theoretical reconsiderations, the constitutive temporal separation of refugee and non-refugee social subjects results in a politically paralyzing denial of the synchronicity and interactivity between migrant and non-migrant subjects—what Fabian has termed the “denial of coevalness.” From this perspective, we can see how the normative inscription of refugee and migrant subjects into a detached and mono-focal temporality—one governed by its own internal rules and disconnected from global systemic phenomena such as capitalist accumula-

¹² Bakhtin, M., “Form of Time and Chronotope in the Novel.” In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by M. Holquist, 1981. Austin: University of Texas Press, pp. 84–258.

¹³ Fabian, J., *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, New York: Columbia University Press. 1983.

tion, labor deregulation, environmental risks, and the pandemic crisis—undermines the essential conditions for unimpeded and symmetric communicative exchange and mutually transformative dialogical encounters between migrant and non-migrant subjects. At the same time, it blocks the emergence of solidaristic mobilizations and political alliances between them. The radical suppression of this necessary dialogical contemporaneity —what Fabian names *Gleichzeitigkeit*, contrasting it with mere empirical co-existence—leads, according to Çağlar, to the following corrosive socio-political consequences: “Such a denial of coevalness disregards the experiences, norms and values migrants and the natives share resulting from their contemporary embeddedness in social, economic and political processes, networks, movements and institutions that exist both within and across state borders at a particular space and time. Locating ‘migrants’ and ‘non-migrants’ into different spatio-temporal frames in which the former is assumed to be subject to categorical and inscribed time, while the latter to historical time, creates an asymmetry between these frames of reference and action”¹⁴.

As we argue, the foregoing analysis elucidates the necessity of developing novel epistemological, methodological, and conceptual tools for the re-synchronization of the historical realities of migrant and refugee subjects and native populations. At the same time, such a theoretical perspective underlines the epistemological significance of situating refugee and non-refugee populations within shared analytical frameworks, by highlighting their mutual subjection to broad systemic processes of neoliberal governance, socio-economic precaritization, the collapse of the public care system and welfare infrastructures, capitalist accumulation, environmental and health crises, as well as far-reaching sociocultural transformations and political struggles. Within this epistemological horizon, the systematic illumination of common challenges, interests, and aspirations across distinct population groupings is in a position, in our view, to dismantle the constitutive hierarchical binary between refugee and non-refugee subjects and open up new communicative channels, political alliances, and social interactions among heterogeneous forms of social subjects. Çağlar, in particular, reconceptualizes the notion of *displacement*

¹⁴ Çağlar, *ibid.*, p. 9.

in conjunction with the concepts of *emplacement* and *dispossession*, seeking to employ it as an analytical lens for the reconstruction of a co-temporal, namely a synchronic, epistemological framework aiming at the re-theorization of the social relationalities that unfold within the urban context between migrant and native Western populations under the term of *coevalness*. The notion of displacement captures the multiple forms of responsiveness, reaction, and resistance enacted by urban inhabitants—migrants and non-migrants alike—against systemic processes of capital accumulation and the restructuring of cities; As she eloquently claims, “highlighting these processes of dispossession, displacement and emplacement that encompass all the city residents allow us to set aside the binary difference between migrants and non-migrants as our starting points”¹⁵.

While not explicitly associating displacement with temporality, Dahinden¹⁶ similarly problematizes dominant epistemological mechanisms that discursively constitute the category of the displaced subject in terms of an absolute exception from the national order and a mirroring incorporation of divergence from its binary opposite, namely the citizen/part of the general population subject of Western normality. This institutional reproduction of unbridgeable migration-based differences between displaced subjects and native citizens is incubated within a purely ethnocentric normativity and gets constantly re-enacted through normalizing and naturalizing mechanisms, subjectivation processes, scientific discourses, communicative practices, institutional policies and juridico-political categorizations that are part of the modern Nation-State’s migration apparatus, which Dahinden describes as “a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble of discourses, institutions, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements”¹⁷, that is inextricably interconnected with the very function of the Nation-State. Claiming that migration and integration research, theory, discourse and epistemology are deeply rooted within the nation-state migration apparatus, Dahinden investigates how such epistemic fields uncritically and unreflectively adopt, reproduce and normalize the naturalized, essentialized,

¹⁵ Ibid, p.10.

¹⁶ Dahinden J., “A plea for the ‘de-migrantization’ of research on migration and integration”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 39:13, 2016, pp. 2207-2225.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 2209

racialized categories of migration- and culture/ethnicity-related differences as core analytical units in applied methodologies, as well as in both empirical and theoretical research of broader socio-structural phenomena. On this basis, she advocates an alternative epistemological approach that entails the denaturalization and denationalization of the subject of migration and integration studies, advancing the development of novel methodologies for the “de-migranticization of migration.” One such methodological strategy of de-essentializing migration, as she terms it, involves dismantling the epistemological framing of migrant and refugee populations as an internally homogeneous yet analytically isolated and exceptional category, set apart from the general population, a hegemonic tactic, which, as we have previously observed, is strongly linked to the inscription of displaced subjects and Western citizens into different and non-interlocking spatio-temporal realities.

In this regard, Dahinden explores three specific methodological strategies that could lead to the production of de-essentialized and de-ethnicized scientific discourses on displacement and migration, namely the distinction between analytical and common-sense categories, the fruitful inauguration of systematic dialogue between migration research and social theory and the investigation of macroscopic social processes and the specific role that migration plays within them through a shifting of the object of scientific study from the migrant to the general population. As far as the first strategy is concerned, Dahinden more specifically calls for a rigorous differentiation between *common-sense categories*—such as “migrant,” “foreigner,” or “refugee,” which originate in policy, law, and everyday discourse and serve to normalize migration—and *analytical categories*, which are conceptual devices developed within the social sciences. Conflating the two, particularly by uncritically employing policy-driven or politicized categories in research, reproduces the logic of the state-centric migration apparatus and entrenches ethnicized or “migranticized” difference as predominantly given. According to her argumentation, these categories should be studied as social realities with concrete material and discursive effects, rather than taken as explanatory tools in themselves. Under these premises, Dahinden highlights a clear separation between common-sense and analytical categories that enables researchers to translate socially or politically framed

“problems” (e.g., integration, trafficking, refugee crises) into sociological research questions, by adopting a critical lens that perceives migration and ethnicity not as a priori essentialist categories of difference, but as contingent dimensions of broader social processes.

The second methodological attempt at de-essentializing migration research focuses on forging a closer connection between migration studies and broader analytical categories of social sciences, as well as on progressing epistemological developments in social theory. Reconstituted as an epistemological project of critical reflexivity and methodological expansion, this endeavor entails drawing upon conceptual devices and theoretical conceptualizations from fields such as mobility studies, social anthropology, social theory, ethnic theory, and social network analysis. According to Dahinden, these epistemic paradigms offer productive, nuanced, and critical innovative frameworks that re-imagine the concepts of race, ethnicity, displacement, and citizenship, along with historically and socially contextualized reconsiderations of human mobility and systematic studies of the relationalities, networks, and interactions of contemporary refugee and migrant subjects. As a result, their creative application within the field of migration studies can contribute to the critical reconstruction and systematic problematization of the normalizing, ethnocentric “apparatuses of migration.” At the same time, such a methodological approach can facilitate the de-essentialization of the subject of contemporary mobility and the emergence of mediating topologies of convergence between the formerly non-communicating social categories of displaced subjects and Western citizens. It is noteworthy that Dahinden seeks new conceptual frameworks for the de-stereotyped re-signification of political actions, subjective identities, and social interactions of migrant subjects beyond the dominant narrative axis of constitutive difference. In this pursuit, she privileges the concept of *mobility*, understood as a fundamental aspect of social life, as a unifying and de-essentialized analytical category through which migrant populations can be re-situated within a shared socio-structural continuum alongside native populations—analogue to the way in which Çağlar conceptualizes displacement as a central analytical tool.

A third proposed strategy for “de-migranticizing” migration research entails shifting the unit of analysis away from “the mi-

grant population” as a discrete object of study and instead focusing on segments of the overall population, within which migrants and displaced subjects are included. This reorientation aids in the gradual subversion of the constitutive dichotomy between migrant and non-migrant populations, while still allowing an analytical examination of the significance of migration and ethnicity for the respective phenomenon under study. In practice, this approach has been applied in diverse contexts: exploring everyday ethnicity in neighborhoods; investigating boundary-making processes in schools; or analyzing how categories of diversity are produced through bureaucratic practices in institutions such as civil registry offices.

In her article “Time and the other in crisis: How anthropology makes its displaced object”¹⁸, Ramsay conceptualizes displacement as follows: “I define displacement here as an existential experience of contested temporal being, in which a person cannot reconcile the contemporary circumstances of their life with their aspirations for, and sense of, the future. That is, displacement is a fundamental disruption to the teleology of life: an experience, whether acute or chronic, that pulls a person out of the illusory comfort of a life with stability and into a reality of a future that is not only uncertain, but which is determined by forces that are outside of their direct control.”¹⁹

More specifically, Ramsay critically problematizes the observed tendency within migration and refugee studies to characterize the temporalities of forced migration and refugeness as inherently distinct from those experienced by citizens of Western states. While acknowledging the hegemonic tropes and power structures through which refugee and migrant subjects are often normatively inscribed into alternative temporal trajectories, she cautions that describing displacement solely as a form of forced migration and involuntary mobility governed by an exceptional liminal temporality of uncertainty and indeterminacy could lead to the reproduction the very dominant logics of exceptionality those theoretical and methodological approaches seek to critique and subvert.

¹⁸ Ramsay G., “Time and the other in crisis: How anthropology makes its displaced object”, *Anthropological Theory*, 20:4, 2020, pp. 385–413.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 388.

Such descriptions, she argues, implicitly assume that the lived experiences of Western citizens are structured by temporal stability, certainty, and predictability, thereby reinforcing a mirroring binary that positions refugee experience as abnormal or deviant, while invisibilizing the socio-structural challenges in which precaritized Western subjects are exposed to under regimes of neoliberal governmentality. The illumination of the distinct temporalities of refuginess and migration reproduces politico-legal framings of displacement as exclusionary and exceptional and additionally forecloses the possibility of recognizing the broader social, political, and economic conditions through which uncertainty and precarity are produced across populations by obscuring the complex socio-economic processes through which global infrastructures of capitalist dispossession, austerity, and deregulation have increasingly rendered life precarious for migrants and non-migrants alike. Rather than conceptualizing refugeehood as the temporal expression of exceptionality, she calls for the development and re-articulation of novel theoretical and epistemological frameworks that highlight the shared rhythms of dispossession and precarity by contextualizing displacement within encompassing critical insights on global capitalism. By de-exceptionalizing displacement and decentering the spectacle of refugeehood, anthropologists and migration scholars can reframe time not simply as a matter of “refugee temporalities” set against “citizen temporalities,” but as a contested field of temporal trajectories, dispossessed futures, and anticipatory horizons that shape both migrant and non-migrant lives.

In particular, Ramsay advocates for the disentanglement of refugee subjects from the interminable regime of spatio-temporal and politico-juridical exception within which they are normatively inscribed. Against such paradigms of ontological captivity, she advances an alternative analytic that repositions both refugee and non-refugee subjects within a shared temporal rhythm of displacement. Within this framework, she underscores the ways in which neoliberal governmentalities and the infrastructures of global capitalism impose homologous modalities of precaritization upon diverse populations, situating them within overlapping conditions of existential dispossession and political-economic alienation. Crucially, these conditions cannot be reduced to the singular fact of migratory or refugee status, since they are inextrica-

bly interwoven with the systemic erosion of citizenship as a guarantor, or, in fact a matrix of rights-based security and socio-political welfare. For Ramsay, the temporal impasse of protracted uncertainty, the foreclosure of futurity, and the interminable suspension within a state of crisis are not phenomena that uniquely configure refugee or migrant life. Rather, they index the wider dispersal of precarious temporalities across late-capitalist social formations. By unsettling prevailing representations of refugeehood as defined by timeless deferral and dehumanizing vulnerability, she reframes precarity and austerity as the generalized condition of existence under neoliberal capitalism—one that binds refugees and migrants to the so-called “stable” citizens of the Global North within a shared temporal regime of dispossession. In her words, “although migrants experience distinct states of liminality, it would be false to assume that citizenship is automatically conducive to full inclusion and existential security. The lives of citizens themselves, who ostensibly have access to all of the resources, rights and services that some refugees might imagine make life stable and certain, are increasingly rendered into contemporary states of precarity, in which the future is unpredictable (Allison, 2012, 2013; Butler, 2004; Khosravi, 2017; Tsing, 2015). Subsequently, in a period in which global infrastructures of capitalist dispossession have come to precaritize life everywhere (Tsing, 2015), for both migrants and non-migrants, it is necessary to develop theoretical frameworks that reflect these shared rhythms of displacement through dispossession (Glick Schiller, 2018), rather than approach the temporalities of immigrant exclusion as exceptional.”²⁰

Problematizing the constitutive allochrony that has long structured sociological and ethnographic renderings of refugee experience, Ramsay, therefore, expands the category of displacement beyond forced migration to encompass a broader ontological condition: that of liminality, suspended presentism, and the violent expropriation of futurity. Such a reconceptualization de-exceptionalizes displacement, divesting it of its conventional tethering to refugeehood and re-articulating it as a relational category through which shared logics of vulnerability and exclusion can be apprehended. In doing so, the suggested approach destabilizes

²⁰ Ibid., p. 396.

the essentialist dichotomy between refugee and non-refugee subjects, while simultaneously illuminating the multiple and heterogeneous modalities of juridico-political exclusion and economic dispossession that persist even after the acquisition of legal status or ostensible integration of migrant subjects. In this sense, Ramsay's analytic demonstrates how displacement functions less as a singular crisis of mobility than as a structuring principle of contemporary political existence, stratifying temporal horizons and governing access to futurity itself.

Between Displacement and Precarity: Reconceptualizing Citizenship, Refugeehood, and Non-Identitarian Solidarity

As we have observed above, Çağlar, Dahinden, and Ramsay argue that the dominant epistemological inscription of refugee subjects within a temporality distinct from that of Western citizens in host states reinforces prevailing logics of othering and exceptionalization. This, in turn, obstructs the possibility of interactive coexistence and socio-cultural osmosis between refugee, migrants and non-refugee/ non-migrant subjects. Within this framework, the reframing of displacement as a unifying topology illuminates the coeval subjection of both refugee and non-refugee populations to shared rhythms of dispossession, precaritization, and alienation. Such reconceptualizations of displacement bear, in our view, considerable affinities with the notion of precarity, which over the past decade has been systematically re-signified and elevated to a central analytical category in critical theory, political philosophy, sociology, and anthropology. Precarity has been theorized as a multidimensional and encompassing prism crystallizing plural and intersecting forms of exploitation, alienation, financial destabilization, social erosion, austerity, deprivation of fundamental rights and social guarantees, and exposure to accelerated modalities of state violence under neoliberal governmentality.

According to Ramsay, the experience of this fragmented, fluid, and uncertain present under late-capitalist neoliberal conditions interweaves precarity and displacement in an inseparable and mutually constitutive relationship. In her analysis, precarity denotes a generalized condition of protracted socio-political instabil-

ity, while displacement signifies the traumatic existential experience of enforced immobilization within an unstable present and the radically alienating incapacity to anticipate, control, or shape a dispossessed future. As she puts it: “Although precarity and displacement are not precisely the same experience, given such conceptual echoes, they are, I consider, linked and co-constitutive: precarity being a general state of protracted instability and displacement being an existential awareness of a fundamental contradiction in the unfolding of contemporary action towards a future that is unpredictable and controlled by external forces. Precarity captures the politico-economic forces that create uncertainty; displacement captures the existential experience of being immobilised by those forces and having a sense of the future arrested and dispossessed.”²¹

In their joint essay “De-exceptionalizing Displacement: An Introduction”²² Heath Cabot and Georgina Ramsay further differentiate between the conceptions of precarity and displacement. In their view, while precarity is mainly associated with exposure to socio-economic conditions endemic in late capitalist Western societies characterized by post-Fordism, neoliberal retreat of the social State, and the flexibilization of labor, displacement is multi-layered, historically sedimented, and culturally situated. In this regard, they point out that the theoretical conceptualization of precarity as a novel or unprecedented condition within critical problematizations of radical austerity and holistic neoliberalization of all aspects of Western societies risks obscuring the longstanding structural vulnerabilities and social injustices faced by systematically marginalized populations in historical realities preceding neoliberalism.

In order to further support this line of argumentation, Cabot and Ramsay deploy the interesting problematization of the notion of precarity, mainly as framed within Guy Standing’s theory, by Sean Hill II. More specifically, as Sean Hill II illustrates, the supposed novel and radical emergence of “the precariat” masks the complex historical realities of oppression, discrimination, financial insecurity, exploitation and marginalization that Black Americans

²¹ Ibid., p. 401.

²² Cabot, H., & Ramsay, G., ‘Deexceptionalizing Displacement: An Introduction’, *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 12:3, 2021, pp. 286-299.

have always been subjected to. In this sense, presenting precarity as a newly emergent phenomenon that horizontally vulnerabilizes Western societies re-establishes the experiences, struggles and worldviews of the white, middle-class populations of the Global North as the normative archetype of the socio-economic analysis. It is therefore supported that the conceptual framework of precarity alone cannot adequately capture the layered and intersecting dynamics of dislocation and dispossession, which are simultaneously rooted in longstanding histories of racial oppression and settler colonialism, as well as moulded by the complex outcomes of Western extractivism and capitalist accumulation. Contemporary displacements, therefore, emerge not simply as a symptom of labor market flexibilization, but from the entangled projectories of land, resource, and bodily appropriation that mark both past and present trajectories of global capitalism. As Sean Hill II frames it, “Yet when we examine the United States through the lens of precarity, we encounter a glaring contradiction—namely, that Black Americans have had the markers of precarity since the country’s inception through to the present day. Their existence as a precarious class in fact preceded neoliberalism. The last several decades are only unique in that the pool of precarious persons has now expanded to include white Americans and others of European descent, the lives that have “mattered” both historically and contemporaneously. It is this small subset of the precarious class that Standing is seemingly describing in his scholarship: newly exposed to the job insecurities of capitalism and especially susceptible to the appeals of fascist leaders.”²³

At this juncture, we recognize that adopting a conceptual approach to precarity perceived exclusively as a product of neoliberalism, structural adjustment policies, and austerity measures offers, indeed, a fragmented account of the phenomenon. Such a reductionist framing may in fact efface or marginalize the gendered and racialized dimensions of the multiple and intersecting configurations of contemporary social deprivation, dispossession of rights, exploitation, oppression, and alienation. In our view, however, more inclusive conceptualizations of precarity—such as

²³ Hill II, S., “Precarity in the Era of #BlackLivesMatter”, *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 45: 3/4, 2017, p. 95.

that one developed in the political philosophy of Judith Butler—effectively mitigate the aforementioned risk and can be brought into productive dialogue with the critical reconceptualizations of displacement elaborated by the aforementioned scholars.

Briefly put, Butler articulates a dual understanding of vulnerability. On one level, Butlerian vulnerability denotes the inescapable relationality, sociality, and dependency of the subject—conceived as decentered and dissolved—upon uncontrollable and non-chosen Others, as well as upon the infrastructural, societal, institutional, and political conditions that sustain its very existence. On another level, the concept highlights the uneven exposure of particular racialized, feminized, and nationalized subjects to systemic violence, structural inequality, cultural misrecognition, and social exclusion. These groups are rendered less “grievable” within hegemonic frameworks, and thus considered less deserving of protection in comparison to other subjectivities. This dual conceptualization is further clarified through Butler’s critical distinction between *precariousness* and *precarity*. First introduced in *Frames of War* (2009), and developed in her subsequent work, this distinction builds upon her theoretical reflections on vulnerability. *Precaiousness* refers to the universal existential condition of embodied openness, relational sociality, and exposure to the unpredictability of Otherness. By contrast, *precarity* designates the historically and culturally contingent, socio-politically mediated, and unequally distributed manifestation of this general condition. Viewed through Butler’s theoretical prism, complex assemblages of bio- and thanatopolitical mechanisms differentially produce precarity by subjecting particular social groups and entire populations to plural, intersecting, and stratified forms of violence, dispossession, deprivation, abandonment, detention, exploitation, persecution, stigmatization, and even death. As Butler eloquently puts it, “Precariousness and precarity are intersecting concepts. Lives are by definition precarious: they can be expunged at will or by accident; their persistence is in no sense guaranteed. In some sense, this is a feature of all life, and there is no thinking of life that is not precarious—except, of course, in fantasy, and in military fantasies in particular. Political orders, including economic and social institutions, are designed to address those very needs without which the risk of mortality is heightened. Precarity designates that politically induced condition

in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death. Such populations are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection”²⁴.

Butler and Athanasiou, in their collaborative work *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (2013)²⁵, provide a meticulous elaboration of the dual conceptual morphology of the term *dispossession*. For them, dispossession embodies an aporetic paradox, at once referring to the constitutive conditions of subject formation and to the socio-political processes of deprivation that structure contemporary life. On the first register, dispossession designates the very condition of the emergence of the subject, which is inevitably mediated by the subject-to-be’s subjection to hegemonic norms of intelligibility. Driven by a quasi-Spinozian primordial striving for existence—the nascent subject becomes recognizable, namely intelligible, within the symbolic order only by submitting to these disciplinary regimes and by relinquishing non-compliant attachments. In this sense, the subject is dispossessed from the outset, dissolved not only by normative frameworks of intelligibility but also by her constitutive encounter with alterity. As Butler and Athanasiou argue, our inevitable exposure and unavoidable commitment to the radical Otherness that we have not chosen is best understood as a *heteronomic condition for autonomy*²⁶: a paradox in which the very possibility of selfhood is predicated upon an Other that one has neither chosen nor mastered. On the second register, dispossession depicts the subject’s fundamental exposure to the normatively regulated socio-economic mechanisms that impose violence, displacement, deportation, intensified financial precaritization, biopolitical regulation, accelerated social exclusion and cultural marginalization unsymmetrically among different social subjects and population categories. Within this register, dispossession describes the condi-

²⁴ Butler, J., *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, 2009, New York: Verso, 2009, pp. 25-26. Cf. Kakoliris, G. “Judith Butler on Gender Performativity”, *Dianoesis*, 17, 2025, pp. 57-74, <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.41735>.

²⁵ Butler, J. and A. Athanasiou. *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.2.

tions under which individuals and populations are deprived of rights, protections, and material supports, thereby exposing the unequal allocation of precarity across lines of race, gender, class, and citizenship. Seeking to conceptualize the complex relationality between these two dimensions, Butler and Athanasiou argue that our primordial embodied vulnerability—our constitutive exposure to norms and Others—forms the very ground upon which subsequent forms of deprivation can be enacted. In other words, the ontological dispossession that inaugurates subjectivity renders possible the political, social, and economic forms of dispossession experienced throughout one's life: the loss of social bonds, the erosion of legal entitlements, the dismantling of material infrastructures, and the deprivation of political liberties and economic resources²⁷.

In our view, both displacement and precarity, restructured through the above-examined theoretical perspectives, can mutually operate as critical anti-essentialist conceptual frameworks for the theorization of the emergence of non-identitarian forms of sociality, relationality, struggle, opposition and solidarity between contemporary refugee and migrant populations and precaritized citizens of Western host societies in the last decade. Both provide fertile epistemological devices for theorizing the connective basis of the multiple and heterogeneous relationalities that have been sociologically observed to be developed in crisis-stricken South European societies among refugee and migrant groups, on the one hand, and precaritized citizens, on the other; and both are in a position to furnish novel epistemological grounds of critical reflection on the foundations of the newly emerging constellations of social solidarity and political struggle that have arisen over the past decade of successive crises among such heterogeneous population categories. Moreover, the inscription of refugees, migrants and Western citizens within the shared analytical categories of displacement and precarity constitutes in both perspectives an alternative modality for theorizing the relationship between refugees, migrants and Western citizens beyond the Eurocentric, hierarchical economy of asymmetrical charity and professionalized humanitarian aid. Through such analytic prisms, what comes to the fore are the symmetry, plurality, heterogeneity, agonism, and

²⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

horizontality of relations that may be forged in the pursuit of common political objectives and within the fabric of everyday social interactions and confrontation of similar struggles between these social subjects. More specifically, within dominant discourse, contemporary refugee and migrant identity is constructed as a discursive formation entirely mediated by intensified processes of othering and invisibilization either as a threat or as a victim²⁸. Under the prevailing nexus of neoliberal bio-/thanato-political production of alterity, representations of the so-called “refugee crisis” incorporate technologies that reconstitute two relationally co-constituted subject positions, locked in a permanent dialectical negotiation: that of the refugee-subject (and/or migrant-subject) and that of the citizen-subject. Through the hegemonic production of refugee and migrant subjectivity as non-Western, non-civilized, non-agentic, non-rational, and above all non-citizen, the national imaginary simultaneously crystallizes—through a process of mirror reflection—the positive definition of the subject that is not identified as a refugee. This process intensifies narcissistic ideological hallucinations of national superiority and self-determined sovereignty of the Western Self, while at the same time producing a positive revalorization of the radically weakened status of citizenship²⁹. Furthermore, the bipolar projection of two ostensibly opposed identities undermines any prospect for a symmetric and egalitarian ethical encounter between refugee subjects and citizens of Western host societies. By enacting the hegemonic ontologies of Self and Other, the perpetual symbolic juxtaposition of these two subject positions obscures potentially fertile avenues for solidarity and joint mobilization between refugees and citizens in confronting the shared threats posed by economic precarity and neoliberal governance.

In our belief, the conceptual frameworks of displacement and precarity can equally problematize this constitutive binary, by exposing its profound anachronicity. In reality, the vulnerable citi-

²⁸ See Polychroniou, A., “Towards a Critical Reconstruction of Modern Refugee Subjectivity: Overcoming the Threat–Victim Bipolarity with Judith Butler and Giorgio Agamben”, *Open Philosophy*, 4:1, 2021, pp. 252–68.

²⁹ For the relational production of the antinomic subjects citizen-refugee see Kirtsoglou E. and G. Tsimouris, “Il était un petit navire”: The refugee crisis, neoorientalism, and the production of radical alterity, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 2016, p. 7.

zen-subject of the prolonged financial market crisis has long ceased to represent the hierarchically superior pole within the classical ethnocentric dichotomy of the self-sufficient Western citizen versus the vulnerable, Orientalized refugee subject. As the constitutive attributes of Western citizenship gradually recede, giving way to a new form of neoliberal subjectivity structured around precarity, uncertainty, and dispossession, the social relationalities between citizens of Western host societies and newly arrived refugee populations inevitably depart from the outdated modernist frameworks of charity, philanthropy, or unilateral humanitarian aid. Instead, they are being radically reconfigured through unprecedented, multi-identitarian, hybrid, and horizontal forms of socio-political interconnection.

Illustrative of the obsolete character of this constitutive Western-centric binary, as well as of the necessity to re-situate the aforementioned social categories within a shared analytical framework, is the ethnographic study “The European Refugee Crisis and Humanitarian Citizenship in Greece”³⁰ by the American political anthropologist Heath Cabot. Situated within the contemporary Greek historico-political reality of intersecting financial and mobility crises, the study explores the foundational convergence of the previously rigidly dichotomized categories of “citizen” and “foreigner” under the imposed neoliberal governmentality of precarity. In this regard, Cabot advances a common analytical framework for examining the radical precaritization of rights among both native citizens and refugee/migrant subjects. In doing so, she documents the neoliberal reconfiguration of a novel, fragile, and vulnerabilized form of citizenship, which she terms as *humanitarian citizenship*.

Indeed, in Greece’s decade-long fiscal crisis we witness the emergence of new mechanisms of neoliberal subjectivation and a re-coding of citizenship in terms of radical dependency, socio-political alienation, and juridico-political dispossession. These processes contribute to the profound blurring of boundaries between providers and recipients of humanitarian aid, as well as to

³⁰ Cabot H., “The European Refugee Crisis and Humanitarian Citizenship in Greece”, *Ethnos*, 84 (5), 2019, pp. 747-771. Cf. Rupčić Kelam, D., “Militarization of Everyday Life: Girls in Armed Conflicts”, *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 8: 2, 2023, pp. 487-519, <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.35119>.

the destabilization in practice of the hallucinatory racialized and nationalized hierarchies that traditionally separated citizens from non-citizens. As numerous ethnological, anthropological, and sociological studies have compellingly demonstrated, the unfolding of plural, decentered, and diffuse formations of solidarity economies and mutual aid in late-crisis Greece illustrates that the constitutive evacuation of Western conceptualizations of citizenship from its democratic premises, its juridico-political legitimacy, and its socio-economic guarantees generates novel forms of social horizontalities and non-identitarian relationalities across differentiated segments of the general population.

Although subjected to distinct modalities of precaritization, the unemployed, the underpaid, the socially uninsured, the indebted, the economically vulnerable, the labor-alienated, and the exploited Western citizens increasingly encounter and interact with heterogeneous migrant and refugee subjects. They occupy fluid, deconstructible, and mutually substitutable positions within social clinics, community tutoring schools, pharmacies and cafés, cooperative kitchens, solidarity networks, housing shelters, exchange economies, and other—more or less institutionalized—forms of mutual assistance, financial support, and social care. The disembedding of citizenship from a dense nexus of fundamental constitutional liberties and inalienable juridico-political entitlements, when read together with the intensified phenomena of social exclusion, internal displacement, debtocratic governance, economic flattening, labor insecurity, and pervasive fiscal deregulation, demonstrates the insertion of Western citizens into a *shared continuum of precarity* with migrant and refugee subjects who inhabit the same socio-historical conjuncture and the same geopolitical and spatial localities of crisis. As Cabot aptly observes, “however, increasingly visible forms of neoliberalisation, and attendant humanitarian projects that come to stand in for both human and social rights, have destabilized this assumed antinomy between citizenship and alienage. Key aspects of global trends toward neoliberalisation include policies and practices actively dismantling the social state, a rise in temporary and precarious work, and a concurrent decline in labour mobilisations. Anthropologists have studied how, under such conditions, citizens themselves increasingly become brokers for rights and services once taken to be the provenance of state/society relations (Allison

2013; Molé 2012; Muehlebach 2012). These shifts have led to forms of subjectivity shaped by moralized notions of individual responsibility and experiences of fragmentation and atomization (Greenhouse 2012; Gershon et al. 2011). As such, precarity has emerged as a concept that captures – for many scholars and political mobilizers alike – struggles for basic rights and livelihoods in contexts where politico-legal belonging is not, in and of itself, under question. In diverse national contexts, then, citizens themselves are increasingly facing the radical precaritization of rights, belonging, and life – a struggle that has often been ascribed to the domain of alienage.”³¹

Concluding Remarks

The theoretical and methodological incorporation of refugee, migrant, and Western subjects within a shared analytical framework is by no means an easy epistemological undertaking. The search for mediating modalities and common narrative threads across distinctly precarized lives encounters entrenched ethnocentric and Eurocentric conceptions of citizenship and foreignness, while simultaneously clashing with obsolete egological imaginaries of an autonomous and invulnerable Western Self, normatively construed in constitutive opposition to the amorphous mass of passive and fundamentally vulnerable refugee and migrant subjects. At the same time, such a philosophical–political project inevitably confronts the systematically ingrained epistemological methods and binary categorizations that continue to shape dominant disciplinary approaches to contemporary human mobility. As demonstrated in the critical analyses of Çağlar, Dahinden, and Ramsay, much of the existing anthropological, sociological, and political science literature tends to essentialize “refugeeness” situating refugee and migrant subjects within temporalities distinct from those of Western citizens, and thereby failing to embed these categories together within the shared socio-political condition of globalized capitalism and neoliberal governmentality.

Within this context, we have argued that the concepts of displacement and precarity—when critically reworked and placed in

³¹ Ibid, p. 753.

dialogical relation—offer productive epistemological devices for re-situating both refugee and non-refugee subjects within a common spatio-temporal and socio-political reality. Both conceptual frameworks are adept at encoding both forms of territorial dispossession, geopolitical displacement, juridico-political abandonment, and prolonged confinement that more closely characterize the condition of refugeeness, and also complex phenomena of social exclusion, labor exploitation, debt-induced exhaustion, economic devastation, and the withdrawal of the welfare state, which increasingly define the precarious situation of Western citizens exposed to neoliberal governmentalities.

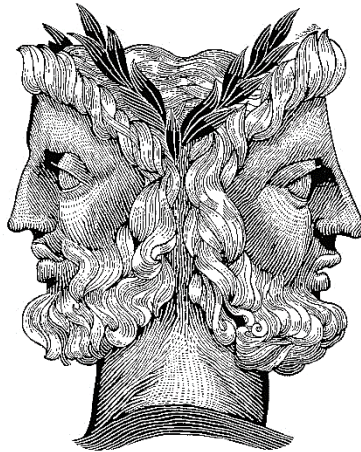
It is crucial to emphasize, though, that situating refugee and non-refugee subjects within the common analytical trajectories of displacement and precarity does not entail a homogenization of their distinct experiences, traumas, memories, narratives and challenges. On the contrary, the reframing of these categories as a shared mediating topology across heterogeneous, plural, and socio-politically differentiated populations is not intended to obscure the asymmetrical conditions of exposure to intensified—and often lethal—forms of precarization, nor to efface the gendered, racialized, heterosexist, and ethnocentric structures that actively shape these differentiated vulnerabilities. Rather, embedding diverse social collectivities within the shared horizon of postmodern neoliberal reality facilitates the development of a radical potential for forging non-identitarian, horizontal, and multi-participatory forms of political mobilization, cultural interaction, social alliance, and epistemological reconfiguration that transcend the outdated hierarchical opposition between “citizen” and “refugee.” Perceived in this light, the critical conceptualization of precarity and displacement as unifying topologies functions deconstructively with respect to the foundational binary of Western citizen/migrant-refugee subject, while simultaneously demanding a critical, encompassing, unifying and non-essentialist reconceptualization of these terms to avoid reproducing or reinforcing dominant forms of homogenization, erasure, exclusion, otherization and essentialization. Ultimately, these conceptual frameworks allow us to illuminate complex relational structures of solidarity, cultural osmosis, and political communication between Western citizens, migrants, and refugees, while at the same time reopening a critical philosophical inquiry into the very

foundations of social solidarity beyond the hegemonic logic of identity.

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The ‘C’ Word: Testimony and Trauma in Gaiutra Bahadur’s *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*

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Abstract

Gaiutra Bahadur in *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* has chronicled the stories of indentured ‘coolie women’ who suffered severe domestic abuse, bodily mutilations, and even murder. Bahadur’s quest for unearthing her great-grandmother Sujaria’s story becomes an exercise in bringing the history of a quarter million other ‘coolie’ women into the light. By employing an interdisciplinary lens, the paper aims to unravel the experiences of such oppressed women in the Caribbean context during the period of colonization. The paper additionally aspires to scrutinize the text as a testimonial writing that accentuates the voices of the voiceless through the author. This will be achieved by analyzing the primary sources and employing a theoretical framework associated with gender, diaspora, and postcolonialism. Not only does the research disclose various marginalized aspects of history, but it also offers valuable perspectives to enable contemporary discussions associated with gender and social injustice.

Keywords: *displacement, gender, identity, postcolonialism, testimonial writing, trauma*

Introduction

The text *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, defines the ‘Caribbean’ as: “the island nations of the Caribbean Sea and territories on/the surrounding South and Central American mainland (such as Guyana and Belize). It also refers to all island nations in the area (and mainland Guyana and Belize)”. The rise of the European powers in the late 15th century led to various colonies serving as lucrative lands for the cultivation of cash crops. This utilized a huge labor force system, which included African slavery and indentured labor from Asia. Colonization of the Caribbean led to assertions of themes of race, history, identity, and resistance through literature as attempted by Caribbean postcolonial writers.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Postcolonial studies started looking at issues of ethnicity, displacement, and gender (Cf. Kakolyris, 2025). Along with understanding oppression and resistance during colonial rule, postcolonial studies sought to analyze the nuances of multiple postcolonial spaces existing in a single nation. In the postcolonial Caribbean nations, the people formed a multicultural rubric. Although authors from diverse cultural contexts shared the legacy of colonialism, reconstructing a single national history in the Caribbean context remains problematic. Gaiutra Bahadur, a third-generation Indian-Caribbean, settled in the United States, writes from one such space, bringing in the issues of diaspora, history, gender, and nationality.

Colonial discourse often reflects racial stereotypes, and it is no secret that Indo-Caribbeans and African-Caribbeans had their own ways of being ‘Othered’ by the mainstream. The ‘hardworking Indian’ stereotype was furthered by Immigration Agent General James Crosby, who reported them to be ‘contented, happy and cheerful’ as Bahadur observed in her book. Bahadur’s study of colonial records also revealed several aspects of trauma and abuse suffered by the indentured women aboard on ships. The trauma records included suicides of women aboard the ship, along with observations of ‘melancholy’. A little girl around eight had also been sexually abused by a sailor and was unable to state because

of extreme fear. There were incidents of new mothers leaving their newborns, fearing the fact that they would end up as the system's 'collateral damage.'

The paper focuses on highlighting the intersection of gender, displacement, and inequality. Gautra Bahadur combines the genres of biography and testimonial writing in her book *Coolie Woman: The Story of Indenture*, published in 2013. The author has attempted to chronicle the traumatic history of a quarter million coolie women like her great-grandmother Sujaria, who were sent from India to the Caribbean as indentured laborers. Bahadur's quest started for unearthing her grandmother Sujaria's story. As the author delved deeper into colonial archival records, she was able to discover several stories of coolie women who were testimonies to the trauma of colonialism, the caste system, and gender violence. In addition, the author addresses the inherited trauma of her generation as an attempt to locate herself in her homeland's history and hate. She attempts to find answers in the personal, along with the political. LaCapra in *Writing History Writing Trauma* brings up the concept of "working through", which aligns with Bahadur's narrative. (LaCapra, 65). Bahadur discovers that:

One woman was hacked to death by her husband in 1890. The magistrate described it as a 'fit of jealousy', as though the act could be excused as a temporary lapse of reason rather than the culmination of years of domestic terror. Many other women suffered mutilation, abandonment, or death, and the official documents treated these tragedies as trivial footnotes in the labor record, erasing both the cruelty and the humanity of their experiences. (Bahadur, 122).

Bahadur's narrative seeks to restore dignity to these women who tried to survive against all odds in a strange land that did not release them from the shackles of patriarchy.

The 'C' Word: Exploring the burden of history

Bahadur's Preface to *Coolie Woman* begins thus-

*Oh, cooly girl with eyes of wonder!
With thoughtful brow and lips compressed!
I know not where your thoughts do wander;*

*I know not where your heart doth rest...
...why so foreign? Why so strange
In looks and manner, style and dress –
Religion, too, and social ways? (Bahadur, xix)*

Bahadur states that the source of this ‘anonymous’ poem is a British Guiana newspaper of the year 1893. She also clarified in this section the reason for choosing ‘coolie’ in her title despite the offensive overtones the word might carry in today’s context.

‘Coolie’ comes from the Tamil word kuli, meaning wages or hire. It was first used, beginning in the late sixteenth century, by Portuguese captains and merchants along the Coromandel Coast in India, who passed it on to the other Europeans who vied with them to control the lucrative trade with the subcontinent. They all described the men who worked for them, carrying loads at the docks, as coolies. Gradually, the word took on the broader meaning of someone paid to do menial work. When, after the enslaved were emancipated in the 1830s, the British began to rustle up replacement workers for plantations worldwide, this was the epithet they used for the indentured laborers they enlisted. Ultimately, over the course of eight decades, they ferried more than a million “coolies” to more than a dozen colonies across the globe, including British Guiana, Trinidad, Jamaica, Suriname, Mauritius, and Fiji. (Bahadur, xx)

Bahadur’s deliberate choice of the term ‘coolie’ in the title becomes a kind of forthright rebellion in itself; an attempt to de-romanticize the idea of the diaspora of indentured laborers whose lives were decided by the colonizers. In Pramod K. Nayar’s *Post-colonial Literature: An Introduction*, women’s life writing from postcolonial nations is said to have strategic importance as they have “a sense of immediacy and authenticity that fiction, even realist fiction, does not possess” (Nayar 150; Cf. Rupčić, 2023). He further states that women in postcolonial societies are doubly marginalized and placed much down the hierarchy of structural oppression. Bahadur’s account of her great-grandmother may not be first-hand. However, it attempts to reveal the traumatic experiences of indentured Indian women of the Caribbean who could not reconstruct their ‘self’. Bahadur states how the ‘C word’ was used

to sting Indians in general because no matter what profession they practiced later on, they were always referred to as ‘coolies’.

In an interview with Fountain Ink, Bahadur opined that one cannot sanitize history by scrubbing ‘words clean’. Hence, acknowledging the stigma of the ‘C’ word in the title was essential for her to portray the burden the indentured women carried. The ‘C’ word is more problematic when it comes to women, as they were triply marginalized and dishonored because of their gender. As hard as it is to unearth painful histories, it also becomes imperative to acknowledge the deep-rooted issues that lie embedded even to this day.

Bahadur’s narrative discusses the identities of these Indo-Caribbean female migrant workers as disregarded because most of them were considered ‘fallen’ women. They were either runaways, widows, or outcasts. To add to their economic inequality, many of them were victims of domestic abuse, suffering bodily mutilations and even murder by their husbands. Brenda J. Mehta states in her paper titled “The Colonial Curriculum and the Construction of ‘Coolie-ness’ in Lakshmi Persaud’s *Sastra* and *Butterfly in the Wind* and Jan Shinebourne’s *The Last English Plantation*.

The term ‘coolie,’ as an original signifier of caste and class disparity in India and China, refers to the porter class of unskilled, cheaply-employed laborers, a readily exploitable mass labor force whose only value was located in its utilitarian capacities...The colonial appropriation of the term to characterize Indian indentured history in the Caribbean, South Africa, and the islands of the Pacific and Indian Oceans added a level of racialized marginalization to an already disempowered social categorization (Mehta, 115).

This added layer of meaning to the word ‘coolie’ brings to light the strategic oppression of the colonized people, and in the context of Bahadur’s work, the ‘coolie women’. Thus, the British Guiana newspaper of 1893 featuring the poem on the ‘cooly girl’, which attempted to ‘understand’ the ‘mysterious’ foreign girls with “eyes of wonder,” would just be conforming to the stereotypes created by colonial discourses. Her foreignness is vexing, her homeland in literary shambles, her present home just another ‘land of mud’. This is much reminiscent of Edward Said’s observation of the ‘exotic Orient’ in his seminal work *Orientalism*. Here, the ‘coolie girl

'is stereotyped by the Occident but is still 'foreign' in the Caribbean. The reality is undoubtedly a far cry from this romanticized version of the coolie girl. The colonial gaze possesses the ability to transform her into an object of desire, in spite of being disrespected. Her visibility is confined to racial stratification and eroticized gaze. The ocean that carried them to the strange land is therefore transformed into a site of silenced diasporic rupture.

To cross the kala pani was to cross not just the sea but the boundaries of caste, community, and belonging. For most women, it meant a rupture from everything familiar – an exile without the promise of return. The ocean became both a witness and a tomb, carrying their unspoken fears, their violated bodies, and their unclaimed stories to a land where no one would call them daughters again (Bahadur, 23).

Bahadur conveys the dubious phenomenon of freedom- the idea and hope associated with return. The first indentured contracts guaranteed a free return passage to India after five years of work. Several women have been reported to choose to leave Indian because they assumed it would 'liberate' them and give them independence of a different kind. The capricious colonial promises did not disclose the alarming facts that there would be cheating, rape, exploitation, and other forms of violence, both physical and psychological.

The author also discovered that madness was often used as an excuse by indentured Indian men to either subject the women to extreme violence or even kill them. Bahadur narrates the plight of Laungee, a coolie woman- "Though still alive, Laungee looked beyond saving, too. More than thirty-five wounds covered her body...On that one arm alone, Laungee had been cut in eighteen places...Bruises covered Laungee's entire body. While being hacked to death, she had been beaten" (Bahadur, 133).

Laungee and her husband, Badal, had been indentured to Vriesland, a Demerara River plantation. He frequently abused her physically and verbally, finally murdering her brutally. During the trial, Badal professed his innocence by quoting an 'Eastern law' that unfaithful women deserve severe punishment. However, his strategy did not work, and he was given capital punishment for mur-

dering his wife. Despite Badal being proven guilty of murder, several other women were hacked to death, and some crimes went unpunished.

Bahadur's study of the archives further brought to light the reasons for the emergence of such gender patterns. When women sometimes exercised their autonomy in relationships, their partners considered their independence a threat. This left women to be victims of extreme violence as the men felt emasculated and betrayed. Colonization and patriarchy went hand in hand when it came to the suppression of coolie women. Bahadur does not call them passive victims; instead, they were like the survivors of a system that sought the erasure of their experiences.

Trauma and Testimony: The Author as Ethnographer

The author has admitted that 're-writing' about the history of women who have been barely acknowledged, or rather just seen as 'a heap of broken images', has been challenging. In the narrative, her own diasporic identity came to light as she made her way through unfamiliar - yet very familiar - faces in Bihar, India, where her ancestors belonged.

I was almost seven, old enough to have memories of Guyana and young enough to be severed in two by the act of leaving it. Emigrating was like stepping into a magician's box. The sawing in half was just a trick. In time, limbs and coherence would be restored, and a whole, intact self sent back into the audience (Bahadur, 4).

Though the author spent significantly less time in Guyana, she draws a vivid picture of her lived experience. Bahadur's experience is suggestive of Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands*, wherein the confusion of the diasporic imagination comes to the fore, along with problems of belongingness and incomplete memory. The angst of diasporic belonging is not an unknown concept in contemporary times. The first section of Bahadur's book is titled 'The Magician's Box'. The title has a fairy-tale feel to it, when wide-eyed children wait in anticipation for things hitherto unexplained. However, the magician's box referred to here is the

concept of emigration. The section ends with Bahadur's self-reflection on whether leaving Guyana for America had been liberating or was it a double-edged sword. Bahadur's coming to terms with her identity can be compared to that of her ancestors, who were sent to the Caribbean as indentured laborers. The magician's box of emigration may have liberated her, like it may have liberated women who left India decades ago.

Various glimpses into the author's process of growing up reveal memories of Guyana, which slowly seeped into her transition as a diaspora in the United States. According to the author, the America she arrived in was 'too cold' to continue their old way of living, and they had to leave behind. The various challenges she faced in America, being an Indo-Caribbean, especially the harsh racism, also showed the difficult side of migrating to the 'New World'. Her trip to India, where she felt, she was expected to 'act Indian' because of her brown skin and despite an American passport, also poses problems associated with identity. She confesses that she wanted to be seen as an American when it suited her, but at other times wanted to blend into the background as an Indian. At this juncture, it is critical to analyze the precarious position the author holds as an ethnographer.

Bahadur's text, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*, attempts to bring together the genres of memoir, ethnography, and history. Bahadur's narrative has a very personal touch to it as she is a member of the post-indenture generation. Her narrative technique articulates agency against the structural limitations of an autobiography since it serves as a collective testimony. She brings to the limelight the silenced histories of endangered women conceptualized through the interrelation of trauma and testimonial narrative. Bahadur herself is a product as well as an interpreter of the collective memory of the diaspora. She attempts to recover forgotten stories about women who want to travel from India and fall prey to the objectified indenture system in the Caribbean. This is how one can say that Bahadur takes on the role of an ethnographer, having suffered due to her ancestral trauma.

Her role as an ethnographer is marked by a double-consciousness. Bahadur is simultaneously an insider and an outsider, further positioning her as a subject of intergenerational transmission and a phenomenon under investigation. Bahadur's ethnographic

impulse is evident when she attempts to “peel back layers of forgetting to find what was never recorded” (Bahadur 14). This act supports the framework of Cathy Caruth’s perception of trauma as an “unclaimed experience” in the text *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Trauma functions as a wound that eludes direct representation yet requires mediated expression. (Caruth 4). Bahadur’s narrative is transformed into a site of unraveling unspoken and underrepresented histories of indentured women. The trauma and suffering of these women are channeled through Bahadur. Her decision to unravel forgotten history transforms archival erasure into ethical witness. Bahadur’s narrative begins on a very personal note. However, she states:

I went looking for my great-grandmother Sujariya and found a quarter of a million other coolie women. Each of them had crossed the kala pani under circumstances that erased their names, their desires, and their identities. The ship logs, the indenture contracts, the magistrate reports- all recorded only numbers, not lives. In trying to reconstruct her story, I realized I was piecing together a history that was meant to be forgotten (Bahadur, 3).

This discovery synthesizes the intersection of Bahadur’s primary narrative technique, bringing together the individual and collective memories. Her ethnographic inquiry begins with an attempt to unearth and trace Sujaria’s story. It is gradually transformed into an act of acknowledging the heterogeneous experiences of women under indentured labor. Their histories brim with instances of structural violence, epistemic erasure, and territorial displacement. It validates Dominick LaCapra’s notion of trauma in *Writing History Writing Trauma*, which involves the “transference of effect and implication across generations” (LaCapra 41).

Gaiutra Bahadur’s position as a diasporic subject highlights how trauma has its effects across generations, forcing descendants to bear witness to the unarticulated trauma of their predecessors. Bahadur’s ethnographic approach questions colonial archives and misinterpretations. She opines:

The women who crossed the kala pani were written about as a moral problem, not as people. They were reduced to descriptions that emphasized sexual impurity, laziness, or disobedience. The records rarely acknowledged the harsh

conditions of the plantations, the abuse at the hands of husbands, or the exploitation by colonial overseers. The archive created a portrait of women that obscured suffering and erased agency” (Bahadur, 57).

This powerful statement underscores the systemic dehumanization embedded in colonial bureaucratic structures that tag indentured women as ‘fallen women’, sex workers, and other stereotypes. This perception also aligns with Spivak’s concept of “strategic essentialism” in her text titled *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Spivak 13). It unites the nuanced experiences of all the women tagged as ‘Coolie Women’, in order to re-narrate the colonial archive.

Socioliterature and Marginalization: Exploring Paths to Social Justice

The term ‘Socioliterature’ can be understood as an interdisciplinary approach that combines the fields of both Sociology and Literature. In that light, literature also becomes a social document to chronicle the various issues in society, including the position of women, which places them within the politics of gender. Bahadur’s work deeply interrogates power hierarchies (Janssen, 2024) and injustices when it comes to indentured women in Guyana. She has focused on intergenerational justice so that the struggles of women like Sujaria are known to the world and become a part of history.

In the introduction to *Displaced: Literature of Indigeneity, Migration and Trauma*, Kate Rose introduces the term “socioliterature” in the context of trauma narratives.

Socioliterature is an analytical current I have named to highlight literature’s impact on society. It represents and defines a growing current of engaged scholarship crossing national, ethnic, and genre boundaries. Too often ignored, social justice through research is of urgent importance in an increasingly unequal world. (Rose, 5)

Rose’s introduction is aptly titled “Socioliterature: Stories as Medicine”. She suggests the possibility of healing and recognizing the effects of both individual and historical trauma. In this context,

Socioliterature becomes a key element in recognizing the traumatic elements embedded in narratives that explore issues like gender, displacement, and migration. Bahadur's attempt at Socioliterature can be seen as giving a voice to the subaltern, as the idea itself grapples with hazy pages of traumatic history. The exploration of trauma in *Coolie Woman* highlights both the significance of testimonial writing and the challenges it entails. Crafting a narrative like *Coolie Woman* can be understood as an act of "socioliterary resistance," contesting dominant assumptions perpetuated by mainstream representations.

In the epigraph to her book, Bahadur has included Adrienne Rich's poem "Cartographies of Silence" as thus,

*Silence can be a plan
Rigorously executed
The blueprint of a life
It is a presence
It has a history of forming
Do not confuse it
With any kind of absence* (Bahadur, ix).

The 'silenced' coolie women also had untold stories of trauma, which Bahadur sought to bring to light. Bahadur's narrative is divided into three parts- 'Embarking', 'Exploring', and 'Returning'. Therefore, as a fourth-generation descendant of coolie women, she sought not just to explore but also to offer a space for old injustices to be rectified through narratives of the marginalized. Bahadur's declaration —"I am the descendant of a woman who was both exploited and brave, broken and bold; her story is my inheritance" (Bahadur)—serves as a key to understanding her legacy of indenture, diaspora, and the trauma they engendered.

In addition, she mentions how various Indian tongues have been lost in Guyana because the missionary-run schools during British rule did not consider any languages other than English. She points out that by taking away the language, an attempt to block access to untold stories of trauma also takes place. Bahadur's observation of how people like her grandmother were absent from records except as a number points out how colonial records silence the marginalized voices.

'Socioliterary resistance' can be seen where Bahadur challenges the statistics given by colonial records. According to the archives,

the coolie women were at fault for being ‘morally degenerate’. It does not criticize the system for forcing the women into indenture. The partners of the women often suspected them of infidelity and hence subjected them to violence. Between 1859 and the end of 1917, more than 167 women were killed by intimate or would-be intimate partners in Guiana. Infidelity or the fear of it motivated the crime in most cases, colonial authorities claimed. The first formal sign of a problem was a proclamation in ‘The Official Gazette’ in 1863 (Bahadur 108).

It is also interesting to note how Bahadur does not vilify all men but merely observes the different power dynamics. The archives show that a few suicides among men in Guyana occurred because they had been “deserted by romantic partners”. The men are mostly oppressors, but sometimes victims as well. However, the statistics of domestic abuse by men outnumbered such incidents. Some Indian men were “middlemen” who helped recruit women from India, thereby exploiting the women of their own country for the British. Some women were forced into indenture because their husbands abandoned them. During a time when men could leave marriages without social punishment, such a situation meant the blame was put on women. Men’s abandonment is not only a personal betrayal but part of a larger social pipeline that feeds women into exploitative labor systems. The colonial economy benefited from this by recruiting socially “unwanted” women for plantation labor. Bahadur suggests that colonial and patriarchal systems worked hand in hand to ensure that men had mobility and choice, while women bore the burden of shame and survival.

The women who left India broke more than social codes; they shattered caste hierarchies by stepping onto ships forbidden to their kind. The act itself was defiant, but society read it as defilement. They became ‘fallen women,’ stripped of their virtue before even setting foot on the foreign soil. Indenture began with shame, not work, and that shame followed them like a second shadow across the seas (Bahadur, 41).

A few women in the colony, like “Baby,” were headstrong and rebellious. Exposed to injustices at a young age, she tried to take matters into her own hands by choosing a lover. Her actions led to severe backlash, and the authorities kept watch over her. Her

abusive husband's actions led her to fight aggressively for her rights, even filing a petition citing police harassment. But such 'emancipated' women were an anomaly. In the end, being a female indentured laborer translated as involuntary slavery-

Indenture was not slavery, but it was not freedom either. The women labored, bore children, and endured beatings under the same sun that had once seen their ancestors toil in chains. They worked for survival, not wages; for food, not future. The contract promised return, but for most, it was a contract with loss- a bond that made them invisible even to themselves (Bahadur, 147).

Hence, one can understand how the trauma faced by these women is multifaceted. Along with social and economic constraints placed on them, there is also the reality of violence, silencing, and cultural dislocation. Their suffering extends beyond the physical, reaching into the psychological realm and producing profound fragmentation. The notion of identity and memory is therefore in constant flux. Injuries from the history of indenture echo across generations, which further shape the diasporic consciousness. In this process, the personal and the collective history of indenture and trauma are united. Bahadur's narrative technique provides visibility to the generational trauma that is not just remembered but also relived.

The adverse effects of colonization create a sense of psychological and internalized inferiority, forcing the upcoming generations to battle instances associated with fragmented identity in a biased society. There is also an ongoing struggle against the stigma of having descended from coolies. Furthermore, the fact that Guyana has one of the highest suicide rates globally also could be traced back to the violent, broken heritage of colonialism. In their paper "Reconciling a Broken Heritage: Developing Mental Health Social Work in Guyana", Halley and Cowden argue that the nature of Guyana's mental health issues is "sociogenic". They present the findings that the issues that persist till today are a direct result of the historic trauma related to the colonial legacy. They opine-

As a modern state, Guyana was formed through the dispossession of the indigenous people and the introduction of slavery and indentured labor, and the lived realities of this were experiences of sexual abuse, rape, murder, poverty,

and deplorable living conditions...The internalization of the patterns of violence and control that developed during the colonial period on the basis of gender continues to manifest itself in contemporary Guyana. In Guyana today, there are estimates that as many as 50% of Guyanese women have experienced intimate partner violence (Halley and Cowden, 20).

This is a clear indication that although the days of indentured labor might be over, the remnants of such a problematic past are manifesting through such contemporary lingering issues. The trauma inherited from previous generations continues to resurface in subtle forms. It includes cultural estrangement, fragmented identities, and structural inequality. The colonial past continues to tamper with the contemporary functioning of societies. Bahadur's discovery of frequent suicides during those times underscores the present findings-

Plantation life was policed by numbers: how many women, how many births, how many deaths. The records show everything except feeling. Violence was disguised as statistics; a suicide became a line in a ledger. Yet in these bureaucratic remains, one can hear the echoes of despair, the cry of a woman who refused another day of humiliation (Bahadur, 88).

Such incidents of suicide and self-harm amongst indentured women indicate the psychological trauma faced by them. Within a violent colonial order, such trauma is a profound testimony to the silenced experiences of indentured women. As established by Halley and Cowden, the approach to healing should be 'sociogenic'. Such an approach is very similar to understanding the different layers of 'Socioliterature'. In their findings, they observe that sexual possession and subjugation that continue till today are mostly inherited dynamics, and these continue to "characterize and haunt contemporary relationships". Thus, one can see a strong presence of the idea of Socioliterature in the sociogenic approach suggested by Halley and Cowden. Further, their paper brings forth the role of social workers in mitigating mental health issues by encouraging open dialogues about social policies. The contemporary situation

in Guyana, especially regarding violence and suicide, must be understood sociogenically in order to facilitate healing from the grass-roots level.

Conclusion: Ethnography as Witnessing

Bahadur's *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* reconceptualizes ethnography as she positions herself as an insider enduring the wounds of ancestral history. Her narrative seems fictional and historical, objective and affective at the same time, which transforms archival engagement into testimonial writing. She provides a voice to the coolie women who were silenced by history. Instead of claiming authority over their story, Bahadur takes on the role of an active listener and serves as a testament to the trauma endured by them. She indulges in a counter-hegemonic act of post-colonial feminist witnessing that underscores the need for literary representations. Hence, writing serves as a form of remembrance, testimony as a form of resistance, and ethnography as an attempt to unravel the alternate history. In the current context, ethnography provides the author an opportunity to assert autonomy. As an individual suffering from indentured trauma, it gives the authority to transform silenced histories into narrative frameworks. Bahadur's attempt to narrate shadowed history is in itself a form of political resistance.

Bahadur's narrative emerges as an ethnographic counter-discourse, as well as a feminist re-inscription of agency. Unlike other traditional narrative patterns, Bahadur's personal association with traditional anthropology is evident in her unique narrative ability. It shares conceptual ground with Clifford Geertz's notion of "thick description" in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. According to Geertz, ethnography involves the interpretation of meanings grounded in cultural epistemologies rather than reproducing a distanced, hegemonic gaze (Geertz, 10). Bahadur goes through various forms of data, ranging from reading ship registers to visiting sites; in order trace the origin of indenture that continue to affect their lives in diverse ways. It further connects with James Clifford's claim on ethnography in *The Predicament of Culture*. He asserts that ethnography is "a hybrid textual activity, entailing translation and mediation across cultures" (Clifford, 25). Bahadur's *Coolie Woman*

materializes this hybrid consciousness as she manoeuvres between the extremes of the enduring interplay of colonial legacies and postcolonial realities, silenced voices and discursive representation, trauma and the journey towards self-awareness.

Bahadur's ethical witnessing and her extended role as an auto ethnographer serves as a crucial narrative technique to provide a voice to the voiceless coolie women. Her bold and strong declaration serves as a testimony to the same.

I am implicated in the story I tell. I am not neutral. I am her kin, her descendant, and in that relationship, I inherit the responsibility to reconstruct her experiences as faithfully as possible. To write is to intervene, to shape the narrative while remaining aware of the gaps, the silences, and the impossibilities. In claiming her story, I am also claiming a collective history that had been rendered invisible, and through that claim, I am transformed as both writer and witness (Bahadur, 9).

Caruth's theorization of trauma is in complete alignment with Bahadur's *Coolie Woman*. The harsh history and treatment meted out to indentured women being erased from historical records highlights the biased side of history. The legacy of marginalization occurring due to colonial narratives continues. Bahadur's ethnographic account serves as a witness, providing a voice to the silenced and fragmented voices across generations. The following statement articulate Bahadur's role as an author as well as mediator, and her attempt to transform trauma into testimony.

I stand between the archive and the silence, between what was written and what was lived. My task is not to invent, but to interpret, to give coherence to fragments that history abandoned. Every testimony I reconstruct is both truth and imagination, an attempt to restore dignity where the record shows only disgrace (Bahadur, 139).

By revisiting and re-narrating her great-grandmother Sujaria's story, Bahadur attempts to unravel the collective history of indentured women. Such narratives serve as source of continued trauma as well as a source of healing. Writers like Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub in their seminal work *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing*

in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History lay emphasis on the ethical listening and the methodological role of silence in ethnography. It resonates with Bahadur's narrative and findings:

I could not find her voice, but I could trace her silences. In letters never written, in names unrecorded, in the gaps between arrivals and departures, there were stories that refused to die. I read between lines, interpreted omissions, and imagined moments of suffering and endurance. The silences themselves became a language through which the women spoke, demanding that someone hear, interpret, and bear witness to what had been deliberately obscured (Bahadur 104).

The paper facilitates further research on areas associated with biography, re-writing history from the point of view of the marginalised. A comparative study of texts can also be attempted to enable contemporary discussions on various aspects associated with displaced identities. A thorough examination of intergenerational trauma can also be taken into consideration. Being a third generation descendent of indentured women, Bahadur might be at a slight disadvantage of not witnessing traumatic events first hand. However, her intense research which covered Guyana as well as India paved the way to the understanding the different layers of trauma embedded within indentured labour in the Caribbean. The dreaded 'C word' has been employed by the author as a mark of 'shared beginnings' which she claims is true to her subject.

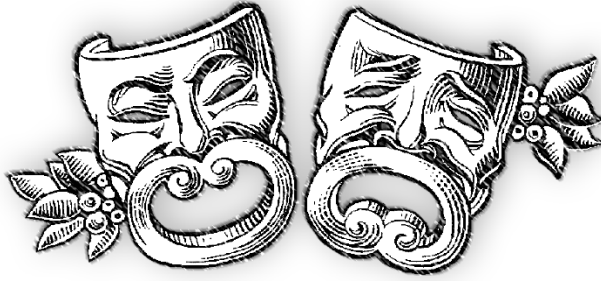
Bahadur's work *Coolie Woman* therefore holds much relevance in the context of the current findings regarding mental health issues especially related to women in Guyana as observed in the earlier sections of the paper. This can further enable researchers can take up an intensive qualitative or quantitative study on the overlapping of historical trauma and mental health in the contemporary context.

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Indigenous Exile from Cosmopolitan Narrative: Fight/Resistance of Indigenous Self against Historic Trauma in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This article aims to discover a new strategy for the indigenous subjects of Bangladesh to encounter the memories of the indigenous exile and trauma in the 21st century. As the indigenous people of Bangladesh are struggling to overcome the bitter experiences of the historical exile and the multifaceted trauma received during the British Raj, East Pakistan, and Bangladesh, they are becoming the double-victims of history and reality. This complex situation constrains the indigenous psyche to restrain the indigenous self and society from composing the indigenous story. The limit surfaces as the inability to represent the indigenous self before the national narrative. This inability restricts the indigenous meaning-making process, making constructing an indigenous identity difficult. Consequently, the indigenous self and society cannot formulate the indigenous perspective and voice beyond its sphere. This situation excludes the indigenous self from the national narrative.

Keywords: *Exile, Trauma, Displacement, Indigenous Self, Bangladesh*

Introduction

In Bangladesh, the voices of indigenous communities are largely absent from the national cosmopolitan narrative. Since independence, groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (such as the Manipuri, Garo, Kuki, Tripura, Chakma, Rakhain, Marma, Khasi, Mro, and Munda) have struggled to secure a place within the broader national discourse. Historical traumas have further impeded the development of indigenous narratives, preventing their meaningful integration into the nation's collective story. The process of state-marginalization by the Bangladesh government has made the situation more complex and compelled the Indigenous people to remain invisible in the national sphere. The indigenous communities have inherited the historical detachment from British India. Before the British Indian period, those communities lived in their land as separate, distinguishable kingdoms or states. Unfortunately, the British Raj destroyed those indigenous kingdoms and converted them into tiny groups. Although the indigenous communities existed under various peace treaties with the British Raj and the local landlords, they maintained a separate existence. That created a situation of exile for the indigenous people. This separation remained even after the partition/independent Pakistan. Because of power play, social hierarchy, religious difference, cultural domination, foreign educational aggressiveness, and territorial distance, the indigenous communities could not get the benefits of the country's independence. In addition, they were forced to undergo massive displacement as a dam for the hydro-powerplant was built and a large area was submerged under the water. This resulted in the irreparable loss of their houses, agricultural lands, and natural resources. They did not receive adequate compensation. These displacements and sufferings created an intensive trauma to the indigenous communities, indigenous people, and indigenous subject/self. A large number of indigenous populations had to leave and find shelter in other places, and even in different countries. The indigenous self can never forget that devastating memory. The experience created an unhealed trauma to the indigenous self who carried out that trauma in independent Bangladesh. Although independ-

ent Bangladesh was the hope for changing the existing fate of the indigenous life and reality, the indigenous people discovered new challenges as citizens of the new country. From the early years of post-independent Bangladesh, the indigenous people attempted to establish their identity and existence nationally. As the Bengalis, along with Bengali nationalism, were dominant and their Bengali narrative became the mainstream narrative in the national sphere, the indigenous communities were under suppression. The political marginalization and the constitutional unrecognition transformed the indigenous self into a socially and nationally outcaste. Facing the force to be part of the Bengali nationalism, the indigenous self became traumatized. In fear of an identity crisis, the indigenous people started to revolt. They desired to earn the citizens' freedom and administrative autonomy. When the leaders and government officials refused to meet the indigenous demand, the indigenous communities formed a political party and military wings. This military conflict between the army and the indigenous revolutionists caused a grievous crisis. It created further displacement of many indigenous people from their homes and compelled them to escape. In 1997, a peace treaty eased the situation, and a peaceful environment was established. Unfortunately, the trauma that the indigenous people experienced could never be erased. Since then, indigenous communities have been fighting for control over language (Cf. Castro, 2025), education, literature, discourse, ideology, culture, land, economy, and freedom against the mainstream-led national invisible dominations. Apart from the indigenous scenario, the government of Bangladesh and the mainstream Bengali society have been assisting the indigenous communities by providing special quotas for the indigenous community-based qualified people in almost every sector, such as education, administration, government, parliament, etc. Even after this exceptional support, the indigenous communities are not surfacing in the national sphere. The indigenous people's contributions are not noticeably found in the national realm. In this tense environment, the indigenous self and its voice have not emerged in the national narrative. They remain invisible in the national existence. This anxious situation compels the indigenous self to be in exile. This article will examine the primary reasons for indigenous exile from the cosmopolitan narrative in Bangladesh. In addition, it will aim to discover a new

strategy by investigating the existing forms of indigenous self and narrative to fight against or resist the legacy of historical trauma in Bangladesh.

Theoretical Background / Review

Exile and trauma are two closely related concepts that often coexist. Exile occurs in a subject's life when s/he is forced to leave his/her native-land after encountering extreme difficulties in living. It is produced from volatile situations about the security of the native land, irreparable discrimination between the major and minor races, land conflict, lack of educational facilities, linguistic incomprehensibility, social disparity, religious domination, ethnocentric oppression against the xenocentric resistance, unequal employment, partial administrative treatment, biased government policy, politicized judicial system, corruption, etc. Theoretically, it has become a significant factor, produced mainly from displacement and hostility. It uproots a person from their native land and places them in a foreign land. It causes a tremendous psychological conflict that arouses a sense of detachment with self-denial. It places the individual self into the in-betweenness. It emerges from the unhappiness with bitter recycling memories, which conjures up a sense of lostness. In *Reflections on Exile: Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, Edward Said defines – '[e]xile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted' (180). Consequently, it makes the subject suffer a sense of loss of homeland and identity. It compels the subject to suffer from the search for belonging. In addition, it leads the subject to experience a double vision – a critical view of both the native land and the host land. However, it assists the subject in reconstructing its fragmented self. It helps the subject to become independent from the domination of the mainstream dogma. It also permits the human being to develop a particular new tale from the national history. Said refers:

... exile ... is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their

land, their past ... Exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people. The crucial thing is that a state of exile free from this triumphant ideology—designed to reassemble an exile's broken history into a new whole—is virtually unbearable, and virtually impossible in today's world. (Said, 183)

Said's remark- 'exile's broken history into a new whole' (Said 183) reflects the example of the diasporic literature originating from the exiled writers. The diasporic writers and their literatures are now well-recognized and well-valued worldwide. The exiled subjects can develop their new literature compared to the homeland's literature. Still, the debate, which Said has highlighted, is to keep the exiled subject from the 'triumphant ideology' (Said 183). The exiled subject escapes from the domination of the homeland's 'triumphant ideology' (Said, 183), but s/he is motivated to adopt the dominant world's 'triumphant ideology' (Said 183). Moreover, s/he tries to build up the exiled literature/narrative mirroring the dominant world/homeland's narrative. In most cases, this process turns the exiled subject's voice, perspective, discourse, ideology, culture, and narrative into another wing of the triumphant ideology. The exiled subject is in a continuous endeavor to be an opposite entity compared to the triumphant ideology/mainstream narrative, so that s/he can construct his/her own identity and vision. Notably, the attempt to build the exiled subject's identity and narrative struggles as the exiled subject fights to manage his/her trauma about his/her previous horrific memories. Trauma is a paranoid experience that cultivates severe complex psychological sufferings along with physical disorientation. It recalls the history, terrifies the contemporary, and unsettles the upcoming. It spreads one's trauma to the societal agony and becomes national mourning. 'Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity. Collective actors "decide" to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they come from, and where they want to go (Alexander 10). '[T]he collectivity's sense of ... identity' (Alexander, 10) and

'[c]ollective actors' (Alexander, 10) start 'a process of "we" formation, a process both historically rooted and rooted in history' (Eyerman, 74). Although this history is considered a 'common history' (Eyerman, 74), it refers to memory in the form of narrative/literature. The history, the memory, and the narrative develop a common ground through which 'trauma refers to an event or an experience, a primal scene, that defines one's identity because it has left scars and thus must be dealt with by later generations who have had no experience of the original event' (Eyerman 75). In this process, trauma contributes to the formation of identity in both individual and collective senses, which results in a cultural trauma [which] is ... a threat to a culture ... arouses negative affects' (Smelser, 40). Significantly, the cultural trauma and the process of constructing our identity through trauma unsettle 'the structures of meaning' (Alexander 10), producing 'the sense of shock and fear' (Alexander 10). These circulate through 'an exercise of human agency' (Alexander 10) and the 'power structures' which bring the consequence in 'sociocultural process' (Alexander, 10) and cultivate the 'reflexive social agents' (Alexander, 10). As a result, trauma lies in '[t]he gap between event and representation' (Alexander 12), and it demands 'claims' (Alexander 12). Through claim, trauma refers to some fundamental injury, an exclamation of the terrifying profanation of some sacred value, a narrative about a horrible, destructive social process, and a demand for emotional, institutional, and symbolic reparation and reconstitution' (Alexander 12). In this process, trauma gives a new story. Yet this storytelling is... a complex and multi-valent symbolic process that is contingent, highly contested, and sometimes highly polarizing' (Alexander, 12). It remakes the meaning-making process. The new story and storytelling process develop 'a new master narrative' (Alexander, 15). Through this new master narrative, trauma renews the representation of memory, history, and identity, thereby recreating the national identity.

During the construction of the national identity of Bangladesh, exile as well as trauma played significant roles. Because of the successful interpretation of exile and trauma, Bengali people have been able to recreate Bengali memory, history, and identity, and remake the Bengali story, which has gradually become the new master narrative. In the journey to earn an independent Bangla-

desh, the Bengali people have relied on the traumatic experiences derived from disastrous events/incidents. Among the devastating events, the sacrifice of the Bengalis to have the native tongue, the death of Bengalis against the oppressive autocratic rule of Pakistan government, the mass murder done by the soldiers of Pakistan on innocent Bengali people, the sacrifice of the Bengali freedom fighters, the enormous sufferings, bloodsheds, rapes and deaths of Bengali people done by the Pakistani army, and the Pakistan army's destruction to the Bengali houses, offices, factories, roads, bridges, power-stations etc. have made the claims towards trauma. Moreover, the massive displacement of more than one crore Bengali people in the form of exile during the liberation war has made the trauma intensive. These events have been transformed into historical signposts when the Bengali people, along with the Bengali society, have converted the individual Bengali subject's exile and trauma into the stories of the Bengali society's collective we. Through these Bengali societal stories, the Bengali writers have renewed the exile and trauma into new stories with new meaning, producing structure. They have searched for the Bengali identity and attempted to represent the trauma in Bengali cultural trauma. By significant largeness in population, noticeable territorial existence having administrative authority, and the new stories with new meaning from exile and trauma, Bengali writers have been able to construct a powerful Bengali narrative to represent Bengali memories, experiences, and stories in a unified voice. Because of this Bengali narrative, the Bengali population has been thriving in integrating the Bengali narrative as a mainstream narrative in the national narrative. This integration has empowered the Bengali narrative to take the driving position compared to the other narratives in Bangladesh. In this cycle of becoming the mainstream narrative in Bangladesh over the past fifty years, the Bengali narrative is now synonymous with the Bangladeshi national narrative. Thus, the Bangladeshi national narrative has recognized the Bengali stories / representations through the lens of exile and trauma stemming from historical events. In the way the national narrative of Bangladesh has recognized the Bengali exile and trauma in the form of a new story, new meaning, new identity, new cultural representation, and new narrative, it is not endorsing the indigenous exile and trauma and not accepting the indigenous saga, discourse, posi-

tion, portrayal, and narrative. The indigenous people are still struggling to transform their exile and trauma into a powerful story. They have encountered exile and trauma, similar to the Bengali people in East Pakistan, the liberation war of Bangladesh, and the post-independent Bangladesh. However, they have kept their experiences of exile and trauma in the preliminary stage. They cannot materialize the incidents of the exile and trauma into a collective force. The process of constructing the collective and formulating the indigenous identity has been obstructed. The government evacuated the Chakma population to build the Kaptai Dam during the 1960s. This evacuation triggered an armed conflict in 1978. These displacements caused the indigenous people to be exiled from their homeland. These exiles conjured up the traumas in the indigenous self. Instead of being expressive about the trauma, the indigenous self restricts his/her self in sharing the stories in the national sphere. The introvert nature in raising the indigenous voice discourages the indigenous writers from representing the indigenous experience of indigenous exile and trauma through the different writing formats, especially novels. In consequence, the indigenous self, story, and society are not recognized in the national narrative and do not get the opportunity to construct an indigenous narrative for 'conversion disorder' (Mandal and Singh, 10258). The lack of the indigenous narrative imprisons the indigenous self and story within the indigene. The indigenous narrative is not able to break the indigenous self's traumatic situation and remain in traumatic captivity. The article aims to investigate the causes of the indigenous exile from the cosmopolitan narrative in Bangladesh. In addition, the article will endeavor to discover a strategy for the indigenous self, society, and narrative to deal with the historical traumas.

British Raj and Pakistan: Exile and Trauma in a Lost Indigenous Nation

From the British Raj to Pakistan, the Chittagong Hill Tracts' aboriginal population experienced the breakup of their indigenous/tribal kingdoms. The indigenous kingdoms/states had to negotiate with the British colonial government through economic

exchange to avoid territorial oppression. Although they were under British rule, they could continue their autonomy. In the case of the Chakma kingdom, Chakma King Jan Bux Kha had to fight twice against the British company in 1777 and 1780. After that, the British company went to have a peace treaty with the Chakma King on the condition of not infringing on the Chakma Kingdom's authority and administration. This autonomy continued. 'During the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857' (Debsarkar, 21), the Chakma Queen Kalindi Rani stood side by side with the British when the whole Indian Subcontinent was in armed rebellion. She had allocated the Chakma guards alongside the border to help and support the British and to ensure the mutiny did not reach the barracks of Chittagong' (Debsarkar, 21). Under the rule of the Chakma Queen Kalindi Rani, the Chakma Kingdom was able to present itself as a friendly buffer state' (Debsarkar, 21) before the British and to ensure its authority on a vast territory 'between the Feni River in the North and Naf River in the south' (Debsarkar, 21). The harmonious relation was sustained for the next generations. To protect the indigenous people and territory, the British colonial government enforced laws such as 'Raids of Frontier Tribe Act 22 of 1860, Regulation 5 of 1873, Regulation 3 of 1881, and Act 4 of 1863' (Chakma, 1997, 9). In 1900, it canceled all the previous laws and implemented the 'Chittagong Hill Tracts Manual' (Chakma, 1997, 9) to make an excluded territory from the mainland. That manual was amended into 'Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation, 1900' (Chakma, 1997, 9). Along with this, 'Chittagong Hill Tracts Police Regulation 1881' (Chakma, 1997, 9) was enforced to provide security. The significant factors include the wars against the British colonial government, the enactment of inconsequential laws for regulation, and the continuous indigenous support for the British rulers, which went against the mainstream political and social forces of the Indian Subcontinent, ultimately transforming the indigenous Kingdoms into dependent entities. Even after being allied with kingdoms/states like the Chakma Kingdom and receiving support from the British government, the indigenous people could not establish themselves as prominent entities because they centered their contribution in the indigenous territory. This self-centeredness made the indigenous people, society, and culture self-restricted. It turned them to be detached from the rest of the mainland/the plainland. This led

them to be in isolation, which created an alienated identity for the indigenous people. These self-centeredness, self-restriction, detachment, isolation, and alienation limited the indigenous participation in the Indian Subcontinent's power and politics. In consequence, the indigenous people, societies, and states were not considered during the partition of the Indian Subcontinent. To give independence to the Indian Subcontinent, the British colonial government used the two religions- Hinduism and Islam to create two separate countries, India and Pakistan. However, it did not recognize the necessity to ensure the existence of the indigenous states, kingdoms, communities, and people of different identities, cultures, and religions. It ignored the indigenous desire, choice, and necessity. Focusing on the Chittagong Hill Tracts' historical fate, Priyajit Debsarkar said:

On 12th August 1947, Sir Cyril Radcliffe, responsible for the partition of Bengal, awarded the Chittagong Hill Tracts to the newly formed state of Pakistan. The decision to award the Chittagong Hill Tracts to East Pakistan took the Chakma King by surprise, but was accepted gratefully. 97% of the Chakma population was Buddhist. The award of the Chakma-excluded territories to East Pakistan Might have been negotiated in exchange for Sikh areas of Sira and Ferozpur in favor of India ... in spite of not being a Muslim majority province, Chittagong Hill Tracts became a part of East Pakistan, and the fate of the Chakma people was about to change. (28-29)

King Nalinaksha Roy of the Chakma was concerned with securing his kingship and kingdom. His strategic relationship with Jinnah's Muslim League resisted any strong opposition to the inclusion in Pakistan. Sneha Kumar Chakma, the general secretary of Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samity (PCJS), along with PCJS, opposed the integration of the Chittagong Hill Tracts to Pakistan and wished to join India, but 'no direct assistance was available from Delhi' (Sarkar 30) till 19th August 1947 whereas 'Radio Pakistan Dhaka announced that the Chairman Sir Cyril Radcliffe had awarded Chittagong Hill Tracts to Pakistan' (Sarkar, 30) in

‘the evening of 17th August 1947’ (Sarkar 30). To comment on the fate of Chakmas, D. K. Chakma said, ‘Chakmas were the worst victims of the Partition’ (ix). This breach of desire and dream created a deep dissatisfaction that led to trauma. It made the Chakmas and other indigenous communities feel threatened in their sense of ownership, belongingness, and securing identity. The most important thing that the indigenous people lost was their nation/country. The transformation of the indigenous identity from the independent state/nation/country to the unimportant minor community made the indigenous people vulnerable and traumatized. The indigenous people discovered a sudden change in their lives where they were positioned in otherness/others’ other in newly independent Pakistan’s national hierarchy. This partition compelled a large number of indigenous people to flee from the Chittagong Hill Tracts. This exile from the homeland created an intense sense of physical and psychological displacement. The loss of homeland echoed the crisis of self, memory, existence, identity, culture, etc. The crisis about the past (homeland), along with the acceptance of the present (new country), traumatized the indigenous subject and forced them to be in a situation of in-betweenness/doubleness. Similarly, those indigenous people who chose to stay back in their homeland, accepting the partition they discovered the same trauma for being in-betweenness/doubleness. Although the indigenous population was willing to continue the British Raj’s facilities, such as the autonomy in identity, economy, and administration, along with the Regulations, they revealed the conflict between appearance and reality. In Pakistan, they observed the gradual erosion of laws that had protected them from external intervention during the British Raj. The voids of the Regulations endangered the linguistic, social, economic, cultural, and territorial stability. Moreover, the state-sponsored injection of hundreds of non-indigenous Muslim families to reside in the indigenous territory further mounted the trauma. The worst trauma that the indigenous people, especially the Chakma people, experienced was building a dam for a hydroelectric water power plant in Kaptai, Rangamati. ‘[M]ore than 87,000 people were directly affected’ (Debsarkar, 42) and displaced by the Kaptai dam, which flooded ‘premium quality land (approximately 54,000 acres of land)’ (Debsarkar, 42). The irony is – ‘[t]he historic royal palace (Rajbari) of the

Chakma Kings was finally submerged ... the palace was lost forever, and maybe it was the mark of the beginning of the end of the glorious history of the Chakma Kings ...' (Debsarkar, 43). The displacement of the common Chakma people and the destruction of the palace annihilated the last hope of being a Chakma nation/country. In this regard, the Chakma King Raja Tridip Roy played a mysterious role as he supported constructing the dam and accepted the displacement and destruction. According to Debsarkar, 'The Raja practically did nothing to secure his people, rather he played a passive role in dealing with the so-called sugar-coated promise of development. He did not stand up for the affected locals ...' (43). Raja Tridip Roy was silent regarding the Kaptai Dam and the suffering of the Chakma people, purposefully because he wanted to be close to the Pakistan government and to discard Bengali nationalism. Construction of the Kaptai Dam, silence of Raja Tridip Roy, and displacement of common Chakma people triggered the process of being traumatized and unsettled the indigenous psyche, indigenous self, and indigenous mind. 'For the Chakma people, the building of the dam marked the beginning of the end of a Chakma autonomous kingdom based on their demography and their unique linguistic/cultural identity in the region' (Debsarkar, 44). Consequently, '[t]he mass migration of the Chakma people led to a drastic drop in the population ...' (Debsarkar, 44). The Chakma King's approach and the Pakistan government's treatment of the Chakma people and society reflected the lost indigenous nation in Pakistan. The displacement, exile, and trauma provoked the indigenous/Chakma people to be victims of history, which made them self-restricted in representing the indigenous self and story in the indigenous narrative. They could not produce any significant piece of literary work that would represent the indigenous/Chakma community, culture, and self, not only in the Chakma narrative but also in the national narrative of Pakistan.

Bangladesh: Exile and Trauma in Indigenous Dilemma

The indigenous population of Bengal was hopeful to change the scenario of exile and trauma that they experienced in Pakistan. The indigenous expectation of restoring the citizen rights

with equality and equity encountered inaugural trauma from the Constitution of Bangladesh, 1972 in which Section 6 declared 'Citizenship of Bangladesh shall be determined and regulated by law; citizens of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangalees' and Section 9 confirmed 'The unity of solidarity of the Bangalee nation, which, deriving its identity from its language and culture, attained sovereign and independent Bangladesh through a united and determined struggle in the war of independence, shall be the basis of Bangalee nationalism'. Citizenship of Section 6 and Bangalee nationalism of Section 9 validated Bangladesh as a single racial nation, denying over thirty-five indigenous communities in Bangladesh. Through constitutional denial, the indigenous communities experienced a state-sponsored structural trauma. This constitutional denial through executive, legislative, and judicial institutions disseminated the trauma into indigenous communities, individuals, and stories. The state apparatus's establishment of the concepts of Bengali citizen and nationalism broadcast the Bengali meaning-making process and the Bengali representation. The state-apparatus, in other words, 'collective agents' (Alexander 11), performed 'institutional, representing one particular social sector or organization against others in a fragmented and polarized social order' (Alexander 11). The indigenous people protested against this state-patronized eradication. Just after the independence of Bangladesh, Charu Bikash Chakma (indigenous leader) and Manabendra Narayan Larma (Member of Parliament) appealed for ensuring the indigenous citizen rights, autonomy, equality based on equity, and no administrative change to the head of the government. Later, Manabendra Narayan Larma constituted a regional political party to defend the interests of the indigenous population in Chittagong Hill Tracts. While the indigenous leaders were in demand for indigenous people, the prime minister declared, 'From today, there will be no tribe in Bangladesh, all are Bengalee' (Translated by me) (Chakma, 1997, 15). This call increased the indigenous people's frustration. Even after the government's denial to accept the indigenous identity in Bangladesh, the indigenous leaders wanted to believe in the prime minister. In the meantime, the indigenous communities got another trauma when they observed the resettlement of Bengalis in their land. This resettlement number mounted rapidly after 1975. Opposing the state decision of Bengali resettlement in Chit-

tagong Hill Tracts, Shanti Bahini launched attacks against the Bangladesh government and army from 1977. The Bangladesh army was deployed to defuse the conflict. Severe arm conflict broke out on a massive scale. For this conflict, the indigenous people had to go into exile from their homeland once again and became the victim of trauma. In 1980, President Ziaur Rahman attempted to negotiate an end to the armed conflict, as revealed in an interview with *The Guardian*. He said, 'We are doing some wrong there. We are being unfair to the tribes. It is a political problem being addressed through police and Army action. Yet it can be settled politically very easily ... We should at least call a meeting of these tribal leaders and ask them their demands' (Chakma, 1997, 19). The intensity of the armed conflict was drastically increased, and lots of people were killed and injured. Many of the indigenous people were displaced and exiled in Tripura, India. In 1997, the fight ended through a peace accord. Although the peace accord halted the insurgency, several key issues persisted, including land conflict, administrative control, cultural management, rehabilitation of exiled indigenous people, protection of indigenous rights, the Bengali resettlement, and constitutional recognition of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Significantly, the historical exile and trauma that the indigenous population experienced could not be forgotten; instead, the indigenous people carried those memories and emotions within themselves. The indigenous memories and emotions of historical exile and trauma had a tremendous impact on the interpretation-producing method, along with the developing indigenous self. As constitutional, judicial, administrative, social, political, and cultural denials to the indigenous subject and society were integrated in the national and mainstream consciousness, a spontaneous rejection with misunderstanding, mistrust, and misconception was infiltrated in the subconscious/unconscious psyche of the institutionalized approaches and treatments towards the indigenous people and communities. Thus, the indigenous self and society got involved in '[t]he social process of cultural trauma' (Alexander, 10). The indigenous historical exile and trauma encountered disruption in 'the trauma process' (Alexander, 11) because the indigenous self and society were deprived of getting the state-agents' support. The state-agents were supposed to 'compose collectivities broadcast symbolic representations—characterizations—

of ongoing social events, past, present, future ... as “claims” about the shape of the social reality, its causes, and the responsibilities for action’ (Alexander, 11). Due to the state-agents’ non-cooperation, the indigenous self and society were unable to emerge as a collective force to share their claims through stories of exile and trauma in the public/national spheres. The gap between claims of trauma and representation of experience restrained the indigenous self and society from constructing a new indigenous master/grand narrative. Even after the massive displacement and exile, the killing of numerous people, the full-scale escalation of armed conflict, the widespread destruction of houses, institutions, wealth, and resources, and the all-out oppression, the indigenous self and society could not determine the nature of traumatized pain to develop the collective memory and experience. This difficulty in tracing the nature of traumatized pain made it problematic for the indigenous self and society to figure out the prominent victims who might lead the representation of the iconic indigenous victim. For this, the indigenous self and society had to set up a ‘relation to the trauma victim to the wider audience’ (Alexander 14). Because of this failure to build up the relation, the indigenous self and society could not connect the indigenous trauma either to the indigenous realm or to the national/mainstream sphere. Moreover, they could not convince the institutions of religion, aesthetics, law, mass media, state bureaucracy, etc., to represent the indigenous trauma. This catastrophe prevented utilizing trauma in order to construct ‘a new master narrative’ (Alexander, 12). As the indigenous people could not use trauma through ‘a sociological process that defines a painful injury to the collectivity, establishes the victim, attributes responsibility, and distributes the ideal and material consequences’ (Alexander, 22), the indigenous identity could not be revised to develop ‘the contemporary sense of the self’ (Alexander, 22). This fiasco, which connects ‘identity revision, memory and routinization’ (Alexander, 22), became part of national identity.

‘[F]ailures to recognize collective traumas’ (Alexander, 26) and ‘inability to carry ... the trauma process’ (Alexander, 26-27) forced the indigenous people of Bangladesh to fall into a cycle of traumas. The historical trauma, the political trauma, the cultural trauma, and the representational trauma gave a repressive experience to the indigenous self and society and positioned them in

a dilemma. Because of the failure to capitalize on the trauma, the indigenous self and society could not produce the indigenous narrative and become a part of the national narrative of Bangladesh successfully. After the Peace Accord of 1997, both Bengali writers and indigenous writers initiated a re-evaluation of the position of the indigenous narrative. They began to re-present their traumatic memories and experiences through various forms of art, including poems, dramas, essays, and stories. However, the inherited indigenous challenges, such as conflicts over land/forest rights, language/education rights, economic rights, and human rights, made it difficult to convert traumas into tales. Apart from the challenges, the prominent Bengali writers like Akteruzzaman Elias and Salina Hossain invited the indigenous writers to write literary works, especially novels, on the indigenous self, struggle, memory, life, and reality. Many indigenous writers, such as K. V. Debashis Chakma, Bipom Chakma, Mrittika Chakma, etc., came forward with their writings on the indigenous trauma. They attempted to transform the indigenous/Chakma memories of traumas into an indigenous narrative, but they struggled to connect the indigenous stories of traumas to the mass audience. The present unresolved issues on the indigenous identity, land, forest, education, language, economy, human rights, etc., hinder traumas, writers, stories, and readers, producing a psychic violence. Because of not recognizing and resolving the indigenous problems, the indigenous self is in trauma once again. In addition, the invisible state-sponsored process of erasing the indigenous stories of exile and trauma, and the state-patronized injection process of celebrating the Bengali stories of exile and trauma, compels the indigenous self to be in a double-dilemma with double-trauma.

Escaping the Exile and Healing the Trauma: Indigenous Scenario in 21st Century Bangladesh

In early 21st-century Bangladesh, the indigenous people are fighting to escape exile and heal trauma. They are endeavoring to construct a new Bangladeshi indigenous identity depending on indigenous memory of exile and indigenous experience of trauma. Unfortunately, the Bangladeshi indigenous self and society are struggling to construct the Bangladeshi indigenous identity

because of the Bengali ethnocentric superiority complex and the Bengali unwillingness to recognize the indigenous. Moreover, the attitude of denial in the Bengali self, society, and narrative creates obstacles to the indigenous identity construction process. In addition, the Bengali self and society are also in a trauma that originated from the demand for indigenous autonomy or self-governance and the revolution for political, economic, and cultural freedom. The memory of the armed conflict conjures up a sense of fear of the disintegration of the country in the mind of Bengali nationalism. This fear of disintegration produces the trauma that Bengali nurtures through the collective we and incorporate in the national sphere. Mirroring that, the Bengali self and society interpret the relationship between the Bengali and the indigenous through the stories in the Bengali narrative/literature. As the stories are reflected in the national narrative/literature, they influence the administration, bureaucracy, judiciary, media, education, politics, policies, economies, ideologies, cultures, agencies, etc. In conclusion, as the country's sole representative, the government gets provoked and converts the stories into Bengali and national faith. The traumas of Bengalis and the indigenous population in Bangladesh are confronting each other, which evokes hostility. The conflict of opposite traumas, the reverse process of meaning-making/interpretations, and the contradictory representation of the stories situates the Bengali and the indigenous into an envious relation. Because of this, the Bengali consciousness cannot explore the indigenous realm, and the indigenous voice of Bangladesh cannot cross its territory to reach the national sphere. Bengali and indigenous writers, intellectuals, policy makers, and conscious people are trying to reduce the distance and cultivate harmony. As Bengali society is comparably large to the indigenous communities, the prime responsibility lies on the Bengali self, society, and narrative to take the initiatives and mitigate the problems of the indigenous self and societies. The Bengali writers can assist the indigenous self, society, and narrative/literature to escape the disgruntled indigenous experience of exile and heal the indigenous traumatic excruciation. Besides, the indigenous writers can also contribute to escaping exile and healing the trauma by connecting the indigenous self, society, and narrative/literature to the nation. In this regard, indigenous writers like Pranshanta Tripura and Sanjeeb Drong have

started to address indigenous necessities and desires in their writings. Both Tripura and Drong echo the indigenous anguish in their writings. In *Bohujatir Bangladesh: Essays of Prashanta Tripura*, Prashanta Tripura surfaces several crucial issues on indigenous sufferings with critical insights. Firstly, he demands to reconstruct the indigenous identity as there is a debate about whether Chakma, Marma, Khiyang, Tripura, etc. will be called indigenous or ethnic. The government, as well as the country, needs to solve that matter. Secondly, Tripura emphasizes protecting the indigenous lands. He opposes the state-sponsored outsider/Bengali settlement on the indigenous territories. Along with these, he wants to take action against those people/agents who are opposing the Jhum/shifting cultivation. Thirdly, he seeks to develop the indigenous lifestyle in light of modernity. Fourthly, he requests the government/state to address the struggles of the indigenous women and solve those (Cf. Tripoula, 2025). Fifthly, he urges the government/state to secure the status of the indigenous languages, so that the indigenous languages do not get lost over time. Sixthly, he appeals to the country to facilitate the indigenous children/students to be educated in the indigenous education system, where they will earn the indigenous knowledge, life, culture, and narrative in the indigenous signs, words, and sentences with the indigenous meaning producing process. Seventhly, he desires that the state should withdraw itself from the constant endeavor to erase the indigenous existence, omitting the indigenous representation in the national narrative/literature. He raises the question regarding the selection of the national poet in Bangladesh and shows the process of ignoring the rich indigenous poetry and the remarkable indigenous poets. Finally, he suggests that the indigenous self, society, and culture should search for the indigenous consciousness. As the state is aloof and unwilling to establish the indigenous rights, the indigenous self and society have to activate the indigenous consciousness. Like Tripura, Sanjeeb Drong, in his two books – *Desheen Manusher Katha* (*Words of Stateless Human Being*) and *Eeshwar Sanwtalder Bhule Gecche* (*God Has Forgotten Santals*), also identifies the indigenous struggles which the government/state should address and resolve. Among those, he demands the constitutional acknowledgment of the indigenous population. As indigenous communities are not recognized constitutionally, the indigenous

languages are not recognized nationally and internationally. Besides this, he expresses his fear about whether the hills will become the death valleys or not. He tells the indigenous people to search for ways to get out of the darkness of the hills, as well as the darkness of the indigenous people. With that, he is concerned about the security of the indigenous women who are in constant fear of being physically abused or killed. The humiliation of the indigenous women destroys the indigenous psyche of self and society. Drong calls for building the psychological strength to fight back and ensure the indigenous sustenance. In addition, he is worried about the violation of the indigenous human rights. He tells the government and the indigenous communities to work on the indigenous human rights because the continuous violence on land, residence, Jhum cultivation, religion, gender, education, language, citizen rights, cultural rituals, representation, etc., is deteriorating. Along with these, he expresses his dissatisfaction about the unchanged situation of the indigenous people and societies in 21st-century Bangladesh, as the government of Bangladesh and the indigenous political parties are yet to fulfill the conditions of the peace accord. Drong raises the question – ‘Why does the state make the indigenous suffer?’ (Drong, 2019, 64). He advises the government to listen to the cry of the indigenous people and understand the sufferings of the indigenous people. He recommends being aware of indigenous suffering and taking action to improve the situation. From *Bohujatir Bangladesh: Essays of Prashanta Tripura*, *Desheen Manusher Katha* (*Words of Stateless Human Being*), and *Eeshwar Sanwtalder Bhule Gecche* (*God Has Forgotten Santals*), it is found that the indigenous self, society, culture, and representation/narrative are still struggling to overcome the indigenous difficulties even after more than 50 years of the independence of Bangladesh. Bangladesh as a nation does not distinguish the voice of the indigenous population. The indigenous population has failed to develop the power to narrate the stories of their struggles and sufferings. As the indigenous struggles and sufferings are compiled over the years, the indigenous people are traumatized and impose self-restriction. When the indigenous trauma turns into an unbearable condition, the indigenous subjects endeavor to escape from their indigenous society, territory, and culture. This exile occurs in the life of indigenous subjects in several ways – linguistic and educational exile,

social and cultural exile, physical and territorial exile, psychological and psychic exile, etc. In linguistic and educational exile, the indigenous people of Bangladesh are forced to be interested to learn Bengali and English instead of their indigenous mother tongues and take Bengali and English education instead of their indigenous education. This language and education diversion develops hybrid indigenous subjects. Being victims of the hegemony of hybridity, isolation, and alienation, the indigenous subjects lose interest in becoming indigenous subjects; rather, they are keener to be mainstream subjects. In social and cultural exile, the indigenous people are no longer willing to be in the indigenous society and culture. In terms of economic and population power, the indigenous people are encountering a drastic decline over time. Out of the fear of being an invisible entity, they are curious to join the mainstream society and culture to enjoy the superior power and position. This situation compels the indigenous people to leave the indigenous social bondage and cultural integrity. The indigenous subjects' social and cultural transitions compel the indigenous psyche unknowingly to themselves and welcome the mainstream social and cultural domination. In physical and territorial exile, the indigenous people are desperate to be displaced from their homeland as the indigenous territory misses the blessings of modernity. The absence of modern knowledge, technology, and facilities attracts the indigenous people to migrate to the modern cities within the country or abroad. As the indigenous people, society, culture, and knowledge are not honored or celebrated in the country and abroad, many indigenous subjects are leaving their homeland willingly. Moreover, insecurity, violence, instability, domination, fear, torment, and bloodshed are forcing the indigenous people to go into exile in the country and abroad. Significantly, these exiles scatter the indigenous subjects and their perspectives. For this, both (physical/territorial) exiled indigenous subjects in the city/abroad and left exiled (psychologically) exiled indigenous subjects in the homeland are double-traumatized, which prevents the indigenous subjects from representing their memories in the stories. In this relation, the indigenous self fails to construct an indigenous meaning-making process and an indigenous authority. S/he is unable to form the collective indigenous we. Because of the failure, the indigenous narrative cannot be constructed correctly in Bangladesh. Bangla-

deshi indigenous narrative cannot flourish with its deep understanding and magnanimous beauty. It struggles to compete against the historical trauma, the cultural displacement, and the mainstream cosmopolitan Bengali narrative. Consequently, it fights to gain an esteemed position in Bangladesh's national narrative.

Conclusion

In Bangladesh, the mainstream Bengali narrative is converting into a cosmopolitan narrative, whereas the peripheral indigenous narrative is becoming parochial. Although the Bengali narrative, being a cosmopolitan narrative, adopts cultural hybridity, worldwide humanistic principles, multinational struggles, and diasporic lexes, it endeavors to align the notion, discourse, ideology, and perspective into a specific structure to limit the sense-making process and celebrate the boundary of thoughts. It compels people to think in the same manner. This manner is also reflected in the cosmopolitan Bengali narrative's treatment of the indigenous narrative. Being the parochial narrative, the indigenous narrative restricts itself within its range as part of resistance. In response to the cosmopolitan Bengali narrative's limited openness and manner in increasing the number of followers, the indigenous narrative is exiled from the Bengali narrative, as the indigenous narrative does not want to be part of the Bengali narrative. It desires to keep its identity, position, and nature unique. Unfortunately, the desire of the indigenous narrative is challenged as the indigenous self in the face of the writers is encountering a crisis about the successful connection of the indigenous exile and trauma to the forms of representations such as poems, stories, essays, dramas, and novels. Like the Bengali transformation of trauma into story/narrative, the Bangladeshi indigenous narrative should focus on the indigenous traumas and start to produce the indigenous trauma literature. The indigenous writers should utilize 'explain(s) the effects of traumatization on the individual and collective psyche' (Mandal and Singh, 10256). They must delineate the 'psychic wound' caused by undesired events through some's unpleasant thoughts, words, and actions' (Mandal and Singh 10256). They have to manipulate the 'fragmentation of the

psyche “hypnoid hysteria” (Mandal and Singh, 10257) to transform the ‘state of panic ... the form of horrible interruptions and traumatic nightmares’ (Mandal and Singh, 10257) into ‘a symbolic level’ (Mandal and Singh 10257) to ‘provide(s) meaning to the traumatizing experience’ (Mandal and Singh, 10257). They need to entail ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’ (Mandal and Singh 10257) into ‘a new context’ (Mandal and Singh, 10257). They necessitate creating ‘a complex network of associations, dissociations, and representations’ (Mandal and Singh, 10258) to surface the suppressed trauma to earn the acknowledgment and authority of the national narrative. This process of converting the indigenous trauma into the indigenous story/literature/narrative can empower the indigenous writers in constructing the indigenous voice and identity. Moreover, the indigenous writers can morph the exile into ‘an alternative to the mass institutions that dominate modern life’ (Said 189). If they become accustomed to the exile’s ‘nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal’ (Said, 192), they can come out from ‘unsettling force’ (Said, 192) and construct a new indigenous story/literature/narrative. They should take a strategy to re-identify the Bangladeshi indigenous self/hero/symbol who will be the equilibrium between fight and resistance, refining the memories of indigenous exiles and traumas. They can transmute the historic indigenous events of exiles and the horrific indigenous experiences of traumas into an exponential indigenous image. Through the newly created Bangladeshi indigenous image, the indigenous writers can rewrite the indigenous story/literature/narrative to bring out the indigenous self from the sense of self-restriction and create a momentous position in the national and global literary sphere. The indigenous writers must build up the indigenous agencies and power structures to broadcast the indigenous collective we, focusing on the fundamental indigenous injury. That broadcast should cultivate the new indigenous story and meaning-making process from traumas. Based on these, the indigenous writers have to develop a new master narrative for the indigenous population. This new master narrative will renew the representation of indigenous memory, history, and identity based on the events that originated the exile and trauma. It will create the historical signposts that will strengthen the indigenous discourse, sense, ideology, and culture to fight or resist against the state-sponsored structural process of

traumatization. Through the new master narrative and the historical signposts, the indigenous writers can challenge the domination of the Bengali narrative/national narrative and construct the indigenous narrative agencies to transform the historic, political, economic, social, and cultural traumas into a powerful indigenous identity. Although the strategy is complex to comply with in Bangladesh due to many unfavorable conditions, it will help the indigenous people and society escape from the indigenous exile. It will favor the indigenous self to fight/resist against the historical (Cf. Demetriou, 2024), contemporary, and forthcoming traumas, as well as the cosmopolitan Bengali/national narrative. If the indigenous writers can utilize the strategy to produce a relationality among the indigenous image, story, master narrative, representational signposts, meaning-making process, and identity converting the memories of indigenous exile and traumas into a forceful literary representation, they will be able to bring out the indigenous self and society from the self-restricted isolation and integrate the indigenous self, society and story into the national narrative of Bangladesh.

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From Colchis to Corinth: Mapping The Trauma of Exile in Euripides' *Medea*

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Abstract: Exilic trauma entails repercussions that trespass boundaries considering ontological positioning of different characters in literary landscape. Since bygone eras, individuals in writings have undergone numerous traumatized situations because of displacement from their native land. Tragedies, more so concerning Greek tragedies, often lead one to an introspective state as they weave a mire in lives of different characters making them subject to multiple interpretations. This paper critically attempts to problematize anguish and trauma resulting from exile as seen in one of the ever-lasting Athenian classics, Euripides' "Medea." It explicates Medea's character in the play, making a critical explication of her status as an outsider living in exile. Following Cathy Caruth, the paper hinges on the idea of "traumatic un-representability" to postulate that Medea's trauma could not exactly be depicted at point of occurrence. The paper employs a qualitative methodology, in that, it makes a critical analysis of Medea's character to comprehend her precarious position, first as a female in then Greece, and secondly, as an exile in the narrative.

Keywords: *ethnic otherness, exile, outsider, qualitative, trauma*

Human History has been a witness to manifold instances of displacement of beings from their native places, often leading to precarious situations. Various descriptions, be it oral or otherwise, coupled with individual experiences find a close alignment as they substantiate each other. Trauma of any kind, always appears to be an unclear idea with its abstract nature, making it doubly difficult to exactly portray in literary writings. What makes a traumatic narrative poignant is how trauma gets represented with various emotional traits of characters coming out to fore. If any traumatized situation forms a specific entity, it appears to be in stark opposition to its fundamental core of affecting cognitive faculty of an individual. That stated, what appears more cohesive is its comprehension as an elusive phenomenon that regulates characteristics of various individuals in a narrative. Right from ancient historical periods, trauma has been a pivotal element in literature- one that ties various narratives together to understand its causes. Starting from traumatic descriptions of characters in ancient epics like Ramayana to showcasing how trauma makes an individual devoid of serene living in classical tragedies, trauma has been an indispensable factor to literature at large. Although trauma has been a constant since ancient periods when soldiers used to hurt themselves in wars, this research specifically focusses on identifying its psychic impact which finds a notable diversion from its ancient depiction to current scenario. It appears primary to note that classical literature dealt with traumatized situations of lives by adhering to fragmented forms of language along with a form of narrative strategy which was not linear. These were used to portray inherent thoughts in minds of characters that resort to past memories to restructure their present lives. However, contemporary writings mark a distinct distinction from this way of depicting trauma to indicating how trauma gets within a larger social purview which gets formulated by power and politics (Tripoula, 2024). This research, in its attempt to subtly showcase how depiction of trauma in literature has moved away from only dealing with broken statements, monologues of characters to focussing on inner recesses of human mind today, elevates itself in its significance.

A gradual probe into its effects of on different individuals can lead one comprehend “events in excess of our frames of reference”

(Felman, 16).¹ “Medea” remains a long-standing tragedy that not only mesmerized audience with its depictions but also posed serious questions on attributes pertaining to individuality and identity of the central character, Medea. From its initial depictions, Medea has been shown to be adorned with troubles as she led to her own brother, Apsyrtus’ death besides marrying an individual called Jason in opposition to her father’s desires. It was seen that once she was married to Jason, Medea’s physical landscape suffered a massive jolt as she had to reside in Corinth, a Grecian city from her native Colchis. From being the daughter of Aeetes, ruler of Colchis, she got changed to a stranger who was a mis-fit in Grecian landscape. This change, as readers learn, marked the beginning of innumerable troubles related to acclimatization, slowing reducing her status to an outsider. Euripides showcases several instances in the narrative when Medea seems to lament her loss- one that was connected to her home that granted her peace. To compound her troubles, readers also learn that Medea was abandoned by Jason who expressed feelings for daughter of Creon, the ruler of that land. What followed Medea’s loneliness was beyond a mundane reader’s imagination as Medea decided to murder her own children, an indication of her vengeance against Jason. It finds alignment with different contemporary writings, creating massive jolts in minds of readers as they tinker inner recesses of psychic descriptions. What can be inferred from Medea’s act is her emergence as fierce lady, refusing to get caged and oppressed, only to find herself in a mirage of trauma and agony that drastically altered her life in the play.

Medea’s emotional state finds a key position in the play with characters like that of nurse and chorus plying their part to let audience know how she had to grapple with conflicting situations right throughout. It is a strong emotional portrayal of Medea that she stands out with her subjective authority, leading to her establishment as a dynamic force. Moreover, her character also alludes to how myths get comprehended in contemporary cultural milieu. Today’s society tend to re-inscribe and restructure mythical figures within locus of societal dynamics which help comprehension of

¹ Felman, Shoshana., “Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching” *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Trauma*, 48: 1, 1991, pp. 13-73.

their imbedded traits. Myths have always remained notable symbols denoting culture of a particular time frame. They get re-inscribed in various forms so that various purposes get fulfilled in different manifestations. If Medea is studied as a mythical character in the play, it becomes interesting to note that she tends to subvert various ideological foundations which otherwise act as signs of individual ontological demarcation in a society. There can be an underlying idea that everyone follows concerning

stories, recorded in the culture's epics and scriptures or transmitted orally in their more local versions reflect the answers . . . to the dilemmas of existence For most orthodox Hindus, tales are a perfectly adequate guide to the causal structure of reality. The myth, in its basic sense as an explanation for natural and cultural phenomena, as an organizer of experience, is verily at the heart of the matter. (Kakar, 2)²

Euripides orchestrates a very artistic characterization of Medea as an other, navigating her life amidst struggles without support from family at a strange land. Thus, Medea's character becomes a representative depiction of a bipolar dichotomy placed against what contemporary post-colonial critics call as debate between self and other. Her character also becomes very significant in bringing in essentiality of drama considering positioning of a so called oppressed other in terms of race, ethnic depictions, class.³ That Medea's life was nothing short of arduous found a notable manifestation in following lines by the chorus which equated her precarious position with death

*O my fatherland, my home!
I would that I might never lose my city
and so know that yawning life of helplessness that cannot be
endured –
of all the sorrows in the world, most pitiable.*

² Kakar, Katharina Poggendorf. "Middle-class Formation and the Cultural Construction of Gender in Urban India" in: Imtiaz Ahmad and Helmut Reifeld., (ed.) *Middle-class Values in India and Western Europe*. Social Science Press, New Delhi 2001.

³ Disempowered other also comes with an inherent image of someone not enjoying privileged positions, enviable entailments, luxurious adornments and are subject to various forms of discriminations in the society. Notable works by Cartledge (2002), Loraux (1993) and Zeitlin (1996) have focussed a lot on attributes of gender. Also, Hall (1989) has carried out extensive works on ethnicity.

*No! I would sooner die
and put an end to all the long days of my life,
for there is no grief greater
than to lose your native land.* (Euripides, 645–53)

Readers can also sense an inferiority in terms of Medea's social standing as her desertion by Jason significantly lowered her status as a woman as women tended to get identified with her husband during then societies of Greece which reeked of patriarchy. During initial stage of the play, Medea's precarious position as a female could well be identified as a result of her status as an exile. Cathy Caruth, the stalwart from field of trauma studies, tried to put a cursory comprehension of trauma by connecting the same to "describing an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomenon" (*Explorations in Memory*, 11).⁴ Thus, Medea's character can be identified to be drowned in trauma since her initial portrayal in an alien Greece with her dress resembling Oriental feature, indicating her non-belongingness belong to that land, thereby, making herself emerge as an outsider. Also, a barbaric status was associated with her personality which echoes that she was bereft of values pertaining to Grecian societies- those echoing class and grace much to the ignorance of Medea. This, in return, led to one very derogatory image of being mad and irrational with no sense of making rational judgements. Donald Mastronarde makes a very significant observation in relation to women's position in then Grecian societies stating, "the respectable women of citizen families were ideally imagined as confined indoors, silent, and subservient" (26).⁵ This image of an ideal woman was very much in opposition to Medea's character who echoed being barbaric. What characterizes contemporary portrayal of trauma is a greater focus on psychological ramifications of characters that differentiate them from ancient classical tragedies. Medea's character becomes an example of one-dimensional traumatic

⁴ Caruth, Cathy., "Introduction: Trauma and experience" in: Cathy Caruth., (ed.) *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, John Hopkins University Press, London 1995.

⁵ Mastronarde, Donald J. *Euripides: Medea*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

portrayal of Grecian tragedy which makes a bifurcation from current-day depictions. Euripides dramatizes Medea's trauma so much so in the narrative that he portrays her to be an isolated being in Grecian society- first, as a vulnerable woman and second, of a lady at an alien land devoid of a conjugal married life. Oaths and vows, which appear so central to Grecian heroes, appear meaningless in case of Jason which further belittled Medea's image as a wife as Jason betrayed her by not staying by her side forever. After Jason's treachery, readers find that Medea makes a strong prophecy of his downfall and death, indicating her god-like prowess. This can be related to presence of God-like influence in barbarians, dealing with exertion of justice for generally downtrodden ones. Medea prophesizes

but you, a coward, you will die a coward's death as you deserve, struck on your head by a remnant of the wreck of the Argo seeing a bitter end to your marriage to me. (Euripides 1385-87)

The chorus also plays a notable role in the play to indicate Medea's plight as it elucidates Medea's position after Jason's betrayal

You, Medea, in the mad passion of your heart sailed away from your father's home, threading your way through the twin rocks of the Euxine, to settle in a foreign land. Now, your bed empty, your lover lost, unhappy woman, you are being driven forth in dishonor into exile. (Hadas, 199)⁶

Caruth's notion of "traumatic un-representability" finds significant portrayal in Medea's life as her traumatic state of not being able to cope with a completely alien state of living could not be correctly represented. It was through her struggles, her fights in isolation that Euripides attempts to let readers come to terms with her trauma and sense of pain. It becomes very important to understand that Medea's decision to kill her own children was also inclined towards hurting Jason for his treacherous behaviour as it "will hurt [him] most that way" (Hadas, 208). Thus, more than becoming murderer of her own children this act was plotted to bring grief to Jason's life as it would bring an end to his own

⁶ Hadas, M., *The Legacy of Greece*. Bantam Classic (ed.) New York, Bantam 1982.

blood- a signifying depiction as to how traumatized Medea's life was. Readers learn that Medea plotted to kill Jason's newly wedded wife along with her father initially, showcasing her determined subjective position. Culmination of betrayal and her inherent thoughts to avenge Jason's treacherous behaviour cannot correctly be observed in the play considering trauma although her painful state of living could be sensed because "the traumatic experience is an experience that is not fully assimilated as it occurs" (*Explorations in Memory*, 5). Trauma, identifying from Medea's life and following various arguments by Caruth, becomes an unexplainable and un-understandable entity that perturbs individual subjectivity.

Ideas concerning individual positions of women during ancient Grecian period find sharp depiction through Medea's character in the play. More than vengeance, which remains at the heart of this narrative, Euripides, albeit subtly, draws concerns of his readers to comprehend how aspects like that of barbaric illustration of a female appeared central to that society. Association of words like barbaric with Medea's character in the play leads readers to come to a pivotal conclusion- this barbarism leads to violence which nonchalantly pervades pages of the play. Medea's trauma also finds a connection with her portrayal to be an unrefined woman- someone who could not match with luxury and poise of Grecian lifestyle. In the same vein, Euripides makes it vividly evident that Medea's trauma also finds an inextricable connection with her wild behaviour of not even bothering to become a killer of her own kin. This is indicative of her act based on instinct more than rationality which was of prime importance for Grecian society. Also, by portraying Medea as a barbaric character, the author also links her character to attributes of witchcraft; validating her act to be based on wild passionate behaviour. Caruth makes a notable point of any traumatic situation leading to a shake in an individual's mind whenever it is being taken to account and is being thought of as this "is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on" (*Explorations in Memory*, 4). This becomes very much related to Medea's action of her desire to avenge her husband's deceitful behaviour along with her desire to kill her own children as her traumatized self always left her perplexed in an alien land. It was trauma and inherent sense of

confusion in Medea's mind that resulted in what Caruth calls as "psychic anguishes for traumatised victims" (*Listening to Trauma*, 11).

Euripides showcases that Medea's marriage attained a null status in Grecian societies as outsiders did not enjoy status and privilege of natives there. It was also understood as no foreigner could be in any legalized married relationship with native residents of Greece during that period which further compounded Medea's problems as in spite of her married situation, she was an outsider. Her traumatized expressions and isolated self-found vivid reiteration when she expressed her plight stating

Women of Corinth, do not criticize me... you and I are not in the same case. You have your city here, your paternal homes; you know the delights of life and association with your loved ones. But I, homeless and forsaken, carried off from a foreign land, am being wronged by a husband, with neither mother nor brother nor kinsman with whom I might find refuge from the storms of misfortune. (Hadas, 195)

If something, it was ambivalence which structured Medea's life in Corinth as she could not become an obedient wife to her husband (which was generally expected during that period) and also could not become a part of her external surroundings. As it was sensed, her problems to come to terms with societal features of Corinth significantly led to alterations of her ideologies and viewpoints which she nurtured while her stay in Colchis. Medea's precarious position in the narrative in terms of her lack of homeland can also be attributed to her lack of mental comfort which she had at home. Her act of leaving behind home and family members also denotes emblematic representation of rejecting own customs that she had grown with as a little girl. It also has to be stated that rules regarding marriage even at her homeland appeared to be very strict, indicating vulnerable positions of women as they were made to completely execute different activities with male support. In this regard, different barbaric and passionate activities undertaken by Medea in the play become glaringly identifiable with her pressures and dictates of society that appeared nothing short of suffocating. Euripides depicts nurse's character who explicates this predicament for Medea

A refugee who's won respect, admired—stable, domestic—supporting her husband as she should. But now she hates all things. What love remains is sick. Jason has left his sons and my mistress for a royal bed and bride—the daughter of Creon, the king who rules this land. Medea, enraged, recites the list of Jason's vows, mocks the way he raised his hand as a pledge, and demands the gods stand witness to what her faithful love's produced. Now she starves herself, except for grief and endless hours of crying since she learned about her husband's wrongs. (Euripides, 15-30)

Her desire to kill her native children appeared to be a significant means as a retort from her side to both hurt Jason and establish her being. Euripides has expertly crafted Medea's character to be swaying between her divided self and her attempt to structure her identity through a mechanism which was violent to its core. "Honor is coming to the female race!" (Euripides, 417-418) were the striking words uttered by Corinthian group singing chorus in the play.⁷ This statement is indicative of deceitful behaviour of males as it was Jason who failed to keep his oaths to Medea and her revengeful actions could well led to alteration of an otherwise unthinkable situation in Ancient Greece- subversion of patriarchal dominance. Thus, readers find Medea's portrayal almost in line with someone like that of Medusa- one who was feared by the society and was placed outside general determining factors of feminine being. Her traumatic life can be regarded as a pathway to understanding her maternal forces that led to heinous crimes of killing multiple characters in the narrative, often at the cost of her own sanity. Readers can clearly sense a very potent and violent misogynistic force within Medea which culminates in murders at different stages of the play. It also has to be acknowledged that there is a philosophical reiteration in what Medea executes in the

⁷ The chorus plays a pivotal role in the narrative as it acts as a pathway to letting readers know various actions, upcoming events, primarily different acts carried out by Medea right throughout the narrative. It is the chorus which describes that Medea was planning to avenge deceitful behaviour of her husband. Medea's acts in the narrative can also be regarded as efforts to subvert patriarchal domination which was indeed unthinkable during ancient Athenian societies which were completely based on dictates of males with no female voice or emancipation. Moreover, lines by the chorus also acted as significant outlines for various events that were to be followed in the play and were to be witnessed by audience on stage. Thus, the chorus acted as an omnipresent figure in the play which was a very important entity in ancient Grecian plays.

play- from living in tatters as an isolated newly married women in Corinth to planning to kill her own children for avenging her husband's deceitful behaviour. Eminent philosopher Immanuel Kant argues that human moral forces and duties should not always be associated with what is understood as external and societal rules. Whatever an individual carries out in the course of his or her life, Kant opines, should always be based on a common ground of logic which can be related to every being on earth. This is because, at a fit of rage or any powerful external emotional attribute, an individual might carry out violent actions which can prove detrimental in the long run which was evident in Medea's character in the play. Not only did Medea destroy her own husband but also became a murderer of children she herself gave birth to. Following lines by Jason become explicit of his misogynistic nature and are also evidence of Medea's powerful influence on him as a dominating force

If only in some other way

human beings [could] beget children, but that the female race did not exist.

And that thus there would have been no evil for men. (Euripides, 573-74)

Unlike Kant, who strongly believed in presence of any philosophical foundation and traces of empiricism behind execution of any task, Medea's violent actions were based on her own traumatic life and baseless passions. As Kant argues, different duties pertaining to ethics of mankind are based on a rational judgement which do not fall prey to momentary rage or pleasure. However, as a sharp contrast, character of Medea has been shown in light of her own tendencies and desires- those based on her barbarism and barbaric growth guided by fits of extreme anger. Medea's trauma can also be related to be her own conflicting situation of finding herself between her desires and instinctive thoughts and rational behaviour which never allowed her to lead a life of stability. Thus, philosophical echoing looms large in Medea's barbarism which never found alignment with the generally considered right in human societies, further justifying her traumatized self that knew only revenge at any cost. Caruth argues in her theoretical propositions that trauma exerted from getting displaced from one's home

results in psychological impact that can further damage an individual's actions. Multiple situations adorned with trauma related to Medea's life in the narrative appear as, in the words of Caruth "inherent belatedness" (*Unclaimed Experience*, 92) as they do not find resurfacing right at point of occurrence, leading to fragmented selves. As she further explicates, an individual gets affected by any traumatic event when there is "acknowledgement of the way in which traumatic experiences overwhelm the individual and defy language" (*Unclaimed Experience* 14).

One can also find a significant illustration of traumatic un-representability concerning Medea's life in her desires to kill her own children as there was influence of emotion and passion more than rationality. Also, readers learn that her decision was not instantaneous but was based on various negotiations, plans, and thoughts in mind which find translations to readers by chorus in the narrative. This echoes what Caruth calls as "filtering" (*Explorations in Memory*, 4) where traumatic events tend to get subverted at specific moments of occurrence and find resurfacing only at later stages where they do not find accurate portrayal thereby justifying their un-representability. That Medea plans to avenge her husband's treacherous behaviour by hatching his destruction along with aims to establish herself as a dominant agency more than a passive and voiceless entity reinforces that "trauma is repetitive, against the very will of the survivor and it is transgenerational in nature" (*Unclaimed Experience*, 2). Kant⁸ makes a very thoughtful observation when he utters the following lines concerning philosophical behaviour associated with morality, rightful behaviour of mankind

is it not thought to be of the utmost necessity to work out for once a pure moral philosophy, completely cleansed of everything that may be only empirical and that belongs to anthropology? For, that there must be such a philosophy is clear of itself from the common idea of duty and of moral laws. Everyone must grant that a law, if it is to hold morally, that is, as a ground of an obligation, must carry with it absolute necessity; that, for example, the command "thou shalt not lie" does not hold only for human beings, as if other rational beings did not have to heed it, and so with all

⁸ Kant I., *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, 2-3. Cf. Deligiorgi, 2017; Grigoriou, 2022.

other moral laws properly so called; that, therefore, the ground of obligation here must not be sought in the nature of the human being or in the circumstances of the world in which he is placed, but a priori simply in concepts of pure reason... (Kant, 2–3)

Readers also find a striking philosophical depiction when chorus says, “Since you’ve shared your plans with me, I urge you not to do this; I want to help you, holding to the standards of human law” (Euripides, 811-813) after learning after Medea’s intentions of murder. It vividly echoes that murder of own children would become an act which goes against laws and dictates of human societies, bringing in an inherent philosophical reiteration which Medea goes against. Euripides rams the death knell to Medea’s traumatic life by showcasing her heinous murders, first of Jason’s wife along with her father, Creon and then, of her own children. It was shown that her two children were with her inside their house with sounds of them screaming. Suddenly, Euripides also showcases that their screams dimmed- an indication that they were no longer alive. As dramatic as it was, Jason was brought to this scene with his request to let him in. However, what took place was beyond a mundane reader’s imagination as her children’s murder has been devised in a very captivating manner with their cries echoing background of the narrative accompanied by a song performed by chorus addressing Sun. This entire act was much to the dismay of audience as they could comprehend how brutal a crime Medea had committed.

Also, it was a vivid reiteration that Grecian tragedies never approved of God-like figures to be making a way to sky from their homes using doors. Even readers were also made aware that such an act was about to be executed, none of which was seen in Medea’s case. What followed was a remarkable portrayal of Medea on a winged chariot of Sun high above the house carrying corpses after her heinous act. This portrayal can be regarded as Euripides’ justification of Medea’s murder which was indicative of even God’s approval. Readers can also learn a transfer of passive agency to a very active one concerning Medea’s personality as she appears very powerful, shattering patriarchal dominance. The final portrayal of Medea was of a disobedient lady who blamed Jason for death of their children, further indicating his initial deceitful behaviour that led Medea resort to such a deed- one that has cemented her place

in Greek history as a powerful voice. Euripides also showcases that even the chorus, which was a prominent mouth-piece for Medea's different acts, became perplexed at such a horrifying act, a further reiteration of her powerful emotional in-comprehensibility.

Euripides's "Medea," thus, has withstood multiple tests of time and has surpassed numerous literary periods only to get it critically read and researched by scholars across the globe. This has been a tale of utter audacity- one that defies various boundaries which could be seen during then Athenian society where women always had to remain under dictates of patriarchal forces. "Medea" becomes a very notable tragedy that deals with tremendous confrontation at various levels- between poised Greece and Barbaric Medea, between general nuances of man and woman and between conflated social rules and overpowering human passions. Character of Medea can also be elucidated to be an archetypal figure which stood for almost all women during that time that had to face curse of male force. However, what elevates her status from an initial submissive female to a very authoritative female at the end was her inner trauma and traumatized state of living at an alien land. Thus, it was trauma which led to manifestations in her mind culminating in her overall actions; those never aligning with Grecian dictates that curbed female emancipation. By portraying heinous crimes like that of murders, Euripides has also showcased traits of time, leading readers to multiple introspections and elucidations that lead to emergence of various perspectives on Medea's character. If Medea echoed protest in its severity, she equally denoted voice of resistance that never knew bogging down in the face of defeat.



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Oikic Exile and Maternal Hauntology: Clytemnestra's Chthonic Sovereignty in the Matricidal Cosmogenesis of Greek Tragedy

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Abstract

In Greek tragedy, Clytemnestra emerges as a controversial figure whose voice articulates a suppressed cosmology struggling against erasure. As she has been read traditionally in terms of gender inversion, revenge, and political transgression, this paper re-placed Clytemnestra, under matricidal cosmogenesis, the cultural procedure in which patriarchal order assures itself by overriding maternal and chthonic action. She represents oikic exile, the estrangement of oikos itself, and maternal hauntology, spectral recovery of the lost maternally ordered. Her nets, baths, and blood language are ritualized and claim chthonic sovereignty, a sub-power based on the underworld and sacrifice as opposed to civic law. By drawing upon linguistic analyses of *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus and Caruth, Ricoeur, Said, Derrida, Irigaray, and Cavarero, this article identifies Clytemnestra as a paradigmatic victim of trauma, alienation, and cultural estrangement.

Keywords: *Clytemnestra, Matricidal Cosmogenesis, Oikic Exile, Maternal Hauntology, Chthonic Sovereignty*

Introduction

Of characters in the Greek mythology, there can be very few as Clytemnestra who runs such an amalgamation of ambivalence, terror, and fascination. Her outstanding status has been mentioned by both classical and modern critics: she is a woman with an exceptional status that disobeys the gender positioning of the polis, the perpetrator of the gender hierarchy; she is, as H. D. F. Kitto remarked (1961), “a man-minded woman” (p. 84), disruptive of the gender hierarchies; and her role is seen as a cursed avenger, the phenomenon who continues the cycle of blood revenge¹; her sorrow over Iphigenia turns, to Froma Zeitlin, into a destructive sort of sovereignty². But these readings, despite being lightning-bolts, keep us bound to items of gender reversal, vengeance, and political legitimacy, and they fail to reflect on or acknowledge the more serious philosophical and cosmological interests her character ciphers.

In this paper, Clytemnestra is reconsidered in the following light of matricidal cosmogenesis: the movement whereby the hinge of a patriarchal order entails symbolic repression of the maternal powers along with the underworld. As Ünsal Çimen has argued (2019), the overthrow of maternal principles in Greek myth—whether in Zeus’s victory over Cronus or Orestes’ matricide of Clytemnestra—constitutes not merely political reconfiguration but a foundational act in the “cosmogenic transition from cyclical, maternal time to patriarchal linearity” (p. 42). Within this genealogy, Clytemnestra’s murder of Agamemnon and her own subsequent death at her son’s hands function as episodes in a broader cultural logic of matricidal cosmogenesis, a process underwriting the very ontology of the classical world.

Clytemnestra can be seen as an example of what could be called oikic exile: displacement not that of a physical movement but of a

¹ Winnington-Ingram R. P., *Studies in Aeschylus*, Cambridge UP, 1983, p. 145.

² Zeitlin Froma, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature*, University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 63. Cf. Tripoula, I., “The Ethics of War Leadership as Seen through Ancient Greek Poetry”, *Dia-noesis*, 15, 2024, pp. 123-138, <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.38177>.

feeling of alienation both within the oikos and within the polis. Edward Said describes (2000) describes exile as “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home” (p. 173). This division is internalized by Clytemnestra. She is still inside her palace, but she is alienated by her position as a wife, a mother, a queen, which is a part of her belonging. The anguish of this alienation is manifested in her discontinuous voice, wavering between grief, anger, and resistance, a testimonial, as described by Cathy Caruth (1996), “an event not fully owned at the time but only belatedly experienced through repetition and haunting” (p. 4)

It is this haunting where it is termed as maternal hauntology: spectralization of the maternal order in a patriarchal universe that aimed to eradicate it. In his idea of hauntology (1994), Jacques Derrida refers to the importance of repressed beings to “return as ghosts” (p. 63) and disrupt the seeming unity of the present. The images of blood, nets, baths, and movement into the underworld associated with Clytemnestra may therefore be interpreted as hauntological outbursts, the voices of a subjugated cosmology trapped in the civil space of tragedy. In this regard, she transforms into the maternal specter that rejects the possibility of erasure as she haunts both her own immediate house and the cultural imagination through the centuries.

This repetitiveness of such ritual image highlights her assertion of what it would be described as chthonic sovereignty: a source of power that does not reside in civic power or Olympian command; rather, it resides and is based in underground, ritual, and maternal aspects of the very life. In her interpretation of Lycophron’s *Alexandra*, Celsiana Warwick identifies (2018) Clytemnestra and her analogs as encoded “chthonic disruptors” (p. 91), bearers, as Celsiana Warwick puts it, of a pre-Olympian cosmology of sacrifice, ritual, and the underworld rather than of the city-state.

Literature Review

Critical evaluation of Clytemnestra has found it hard to paint her in a single light, as scholarly opinions have ranged from different positions of gender inversion to ritual symbolism. Early critics focused on her unusual strength, depicting her as a woman

who broke gender norms by taking on male roles of authority and violence.³ Feminist critics later broadened this interpretation, portraying her as both rebellious and paradoxical—simultaneously conforming to the structures of the oikos while subverting them through her usurpation of power.⁴ Such interpretations often highlight her as a warning figure, emblematic of the dangers of female agency within a patriarchal polis.

Scholars frequently put Clytemnestra in the frame of vengeance and tragic pathos. Winnington-Ingram highlights her complicity in this logic of revenge by pointing out that her act perpetuates rather than ends the blood feud.⁵ Some critics approach her from a thematic point of view of maternal grief, and they emphasize her tragic rather than threatening side, whereas symbolist critics focus upon images of blood, nets, and sacrifice in order to portray Agamemnon's murder as a breach with chthonic foundations, and with the home as well as the gods. Comparative approaches further gender the dialectics of retribution, in which she is caught.

Learned works have recently taken her voice politically into account, as well as in contemporary reception. Helene Foley interprets her as possessing legitimate, if male-coded, political authority,⁶ While others position her as a figure of cultural transition, caught between older fertility rites and emergent linear patriarchal orders. Feminist re-interpretations reclaim her as more human and much less demonic, a figure whose crime is rethought with the frameworks of resistance and with cultural displacement in mind.⁷

Collectively, these readings reveal the inexhaustible richness of Clytemnestra as a site of interrogation - simultaneously murderess and mother, warrior and queen, transgressor and victim, conformist and rebel. Yet the critical emphases have continued disproportionately to focus on socio-political paradigms without sufficient

³ Kitto H. D. F., *Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study*. Routledge, 1961, p. 84.

⁴ Zeitlin Froma, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature*, University of Chicago Press, 1996, pp. 63, 77.

⁵ Winnington-Ingram R. P., *Studies in Aeschylus*, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 145.

⁶ Foley Helene P., *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*, Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 121. Cf. Janssen, J. "Ethics as a Means to Power", *Dia-noesis*, 15, 2024, pp. 59-80, <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.38166>.

⁷ Vernant Jean-Pierre, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, Translated by Janet Lloyd, Zone Books, 1990, p. 102.

attention to her ravaged subjectivity that serves as a site of intersection between trauma, exile, and cosmological transition. This paper takes on the task of intervening in that gap by setting forth a new conceptual choreography consisting of the following into articulation: *oikic exile*, *maternal hauntology*, *chthonic sovereignty*, and *matricidal cosmogenesis*, through which the historical figure of Clytemnestra becomes paradigmatic of cultural displacement, spectral survival, and cosmological resistance.

Toward a Conceptual Grammar of Displacement

The hermeneutic orientation of this study arises from the confluence of trauma studies, narrative philosophy, exile theory, hauntology, and feminist philosophy of the maternal. In concert, these frameworks generate a reconceptualization of Clytemnestra, moving beyond her conventional positioning within tragedy and paternal retribution to recognize her as a paradigmatic figure who gives voice to trauma, estrangement, spectral presence, and the cosmogenic violence of patriarchy.

At the core of this study lies Cathy Caruth's theorization of trauma, which functions as its guiding framework. According to Caruth, traumatic experience is never fully absorbed at the time it happens; it is belatedly discharged in the form of intrusive repetition, a repetition that Caruth defines as "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (1996, p. 4). Clytemnestra's torn nets and blood, her alternating cycles of mourning and celebration, convey this delayed discharging of trauma. These phenomena do not constitute mere rhetorical flourish, but are symptomatic intrusions of an unassimilated rupture. Consequently, her oration functions as a traumatic testimony, which conserves and transmits the trace of an irrecoverable loss.

Paul Ricoeur radicalizes this insight by locating testimony within the philosophical architecture of memory and narrative. He intensifies this insight by inscribing testimony within a hermeneutic philosophy of memory and narrative. In his view (2004), remembrance is never an act of unmediated immediacy but always a process of narrative mediation, which "configures the temporal discordance of lived experience into intelligible form" (p. 21). Within

this framework, Clytemnestra's speeches can be read as hermeneutic reconstructions that translate alienation and lament into discursive articulations of justice and legitimacy. The instability of her narratives - the oscillation between prophetic vision, ritualized enunciation, and violent confession - signals both the indispensability and the precariousness of narrative testimony. What Ricoeur terms (2004) the "duty of memory" (p. 88) reverberates through her fractured voice, as she testifies to a rupture that at once resists narration and yet compels it.

A further twist would be enlarging this reading model with Edward Said's *Reflections on Exile*, which are essential in this case. Exile, Said writes (2000), is "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (p. 173). The fracture Clytemnestra's life is not territorial but domestic and cultural; she is still within the walls of the palace, but is cut off from participation in one generation's collective identity as mother, wife, and citizen. This paradox can be theorized with the term 'oikic exile', a form of the exporting of self, of exdomos (exodos), but within the domestic context itself, the oikos. This condition exposes her broken subjectivity as an index to an even deeper cultural displacement, that of the marginalization of the maternal order in the structures of patriarchy.

When the oikic exile formulates her condition, 'maternal hauntology' specifies the mode of her return. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida develops a theory of hauntology as the persistence of repressed or excluded haunts that reappear to disrupt the present's supposed self-containment.⁸ Hauntology, in turn, becomes a kind of ontology of the spectral, of a being somewhere in between absolute absence and presence. This study argues that the voice of Clytemnestra serves as a spectral presence, in which the repressed maternal order reappears through reiterative patterns, manifestations of a cosmology that patriarchal power has endeavored to erase. By evoking libation in the form of blood, ritualization of imagery of nets and entrapment, and the evocation of chthonic forces, she brings to the fore hauntological dislocations of a maternal cosmology that will never be completely effed up.

⁸ Derrida Jacques, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, Routledge, 1994, p. 63.

The repressed order that emerges with hauntology is a maternal ontology as theorized by Luce Irigaray and Adriana Cavarero. Irigaray has repeatedly argued that the maternal origin is effaced by Western metaphysics, giving prominence to the paternal and the phallic in its place.⁹ and Cavarero in *In the Name of the Mother* (1985) has argued that the maternal voice is systematically silenced in the story of the foundations of philosophy¹⁰, for it is this maternal voice that she sees as a site of what might be called the “unspeakable other” (p. 102) of metaphysics, a voice that becomes the test of what Irigaray calls the maternal ontology, which is an ontology that is essentially the superego of patriarchal hegemony seen in light.

The endurance of the maternal is expressed as ‘chthonic sovereignty’ in this paper. In contrast to the civic and Olympian bases for the sovereignty of classical tragic power, the sovereignty of Clytemnestra is derived from subterranean forces and ritualized enactment. Her power is not accomplished through law, but through violence, blood, and the logic underground of death. Jean-Pierre Vernant has shown the interest of Greek tragedy in tensions between the chthonic and Olympian¹¹, and Celsiana Warwick shows how Lycophron presents Clytemnestra as a chthonic intruder against Olympian incorporation.¹² Reading her sovereignty in chthonic terms thus aligns her with a cosmology based on fertility, death, and cyclical temporality in opposition to linear historicity.

Finally, by placing Clytemnestra in the context of matricidal cosmogenesis, these strands are related to the broader philosophic genealogy of the patriarchal order. As Ünsal Çimen notes, the symbolic murder of the mother that is the paradigm of matricide (Zeus’s overthrow of Cronus and the slaying of Clytemnestra by her son) represents the very beginning of patriarchal ontology.¹³ Clytemnestra’s tale is at once part of and beyond this transition:

⁹ Irigaray Luce, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill, Cornell UP, 1985, p. 75.

¹⁰ Cavarero Adriana, *In the Name of the Mother*, trans. Serena Anderlini-D’Onofrio and Áine O’Healy, SUNY Press, 1995, p. 88.

¹¹ Vernant Jean-Pierre, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd, Zone Books, 1990, p. 132.

¹² Warwick Celsiana, “Chthonic Disruption in Lycophron’s *Alexandra*”, *Classical Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 1, 2018, p. 91.

¹³ Çimen Ünsal, “Zeus’ Overthrow of Cronus within the Context of Symbolic Matricide”, *Journal of International Social Research*, vol. 12, no. 65, 2019, p. 42.

her death seals patriarchal succession, while her voice preserves the haunting memory of what is violently silenced. The maternal is repressed in the name of laying the foundation for a new order, but its very repression guarantees its return in spectral form. Thus, ‘matricidal cosmogenesis’ marks the cultural process by which patriarchal cosmos is born out of the destruction of maternal sovereignty, as proven dramatically in the figure of Clytemnestra and preserved. This framework weaves together Caruth’s trauma, Ricoeur’s narrative testimony, Said’s exile, Derrida’s hauntology, and feminist philosophies of the maternal to articulate a new interpretive model. Through the coinages of ‘oikic exile’, ‘maternal hauntology’, ‘chthonic sovereignty’, and ‘matricidal cosmogenesis’, Clytemnestra is reimagined as a paradigmatic figure whose fractured voice speaks both the originary violence in which cultural order is founded and the hauntological insistence of what that order tried to erase.

The Net and the Blade: Ritualized Matricide

The climactic moment of Agamemnon’s murder, as narrated by Clytemnestra in the so-called “net speech” (*Agamemnon*, 1372–1398), furnishes a privileged site for scrutinizing how her voice articulates ritual violence, cultural estrangement, and cosmological rupture. In this passage, she delineates how she ensnared Agamemnon “in a vast, voluminous net, as if for fish” (*Agamemnon*, 1382) before striking him down with the sacrificial labrys. The image of the net cuts across the domestic and ritual planes and thus has an implication of the consistency of domestic weaving, the frame of entrapment of the sacrificial, and also the reason for predatory entrapment. Her speech swings between success and fear, power and disintegration, thus reflecting the swings that characterize her trauma and displacement state. This rhetorical play underscores the doubled character of her agency, in which she plays the roles of the perpetrator and the victim and thus makes her traditional readings of her character more difficult.

From the perspective of matricidal cosmogenesis, this scene presents the paradox of the cultural basis obtained due to violence in relations to matrons. Karina Talts insists (2019) that the death of Agamemnon is not displayed as a simple violent act, but it is a

ritualized show, “with its ritual patterns: bath, the robe, the net, and blood-as-libation” (p. 212). In this respect, Clytemnestra turns the murder into a kind of quasi-sacrificial ritual appealing to the semiotics of cult and not the semiotics of crime. But the ritual also holds her in the genealogy of matricidal cosmogenesis: when she kills Agamemnon, she brings back to life the repressed maturation mythology, though its eradication by her ultimate murderer, Orestes, is inevitable. Her speech, therefore, becomes emblematic of what Ünsal Cimen (2019) refers to as the “cosmogenic rupture” (p. 42), the very process through which the patriarchy is reconstructed by the effacement of the maternal.

Discussing it within the context of vocality and affect, it can be argued that the utterance incorporates what can be called maternal hauntological. Here, the net takes on the status of a spectral artifact, full of such layers of suppressed memory: the net activates Iphigenia’s sacrifice, the entwining of fateful textiles, and the web of kinship relationships. In hauntology by Derrida (1994), the specter lies in between, “neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive” (p. 63). Likewise, there is a level of saturation in this scene of Clytemnestra with her voice projecting victory, and at the same time, she brings out a breakage, rules, and brings out trauma. That lost maternal in Aulis, which is re-created in her speech as a ghostly figure, is the blood that she is losing, not merely Agamemnon, but some disturbing re-emergence of a maternal cosmology violently repressed.

Her narration also performs what this paper defines as ‘oikic exile’. Edward Said (2000) defines exile as “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place” (p. 173). The framework of her palace bears witness to Clytemnestra’s profound alienation from the conventional roles of wife, mother, and queen. She underscores this dislocation within the *oikos* by transforming domestic symbols (such as clothing and the net) into instruments of death, repurposing them to render the home itself a symbolic site of displacement, turning it into an arena of dislocation. Therefore, she is a queen in exile, locked in her walled house, and her broken testimony reflects the natural incalculability of the way to reconcile the subjectivity of the maternal with the patriarchal.

At the same time, the discourse about the net speech contains a ‘chthonic sovereignty’. Unlike Agamemnon, whose kingship is supported by civic organizations and Olympian ranks, the power

of Clytemnestra is based on underground power. Noted by Jean-Pierre Vernant, tragedy often enters the opposition between the Olympian order by the fratricidal power of the chthonic; the latter functions as a disrupting element of the so-called coherence of civic legislation.¹⁴ Clytemnestra appeals to the chthonic world again, by appealing to blood as libation and the net as a means to the sacrifice: she dictates no longer according to the law, but according to the ritual, no longer according to the polis. Warwick shows that the subsequent receptions, especially the adaptation by the *Alexandra* of Lycophron, relate her explicitly as a contributor to disruptive underworld traditions, which do not fit within the Olympian system.¹⁵ A net speech is therefore a prefiguration of this postmodern world, reflecting her sovereignty as a root in the underground.

When discussing the interaction between these registers, it is possible to see how Clytemnestra destabilizes simple distinctions between crime and transgression by virtue of her voice. This act is beyond the expediency of individual revenge but rather a stylized act of an ancient cosmology, which the patriarchal system is both referencing and refuting. This speech prefigures the paradox that is concealed in the matricidal cosmogenesis; the new patriarchal order of succession relies upon the repression of the maternal image, but the process of repression leaves behind a spectral trace. Hermeneutic clues by Paul Ricoeur are once summoned and pursued further as the role of testimony forces the two-way charge of both preservation and disjointedness and fashions the memory into a narrative, at the same time exposing its vulnerable nature.¹⁶ The performative rhetoric of Clytemnestra is a representation of this duality, as her story tries to confer legitimacy upon her act as being righteous, but the mechanical unreliability of her imagery, both vagrant between home and sacrifice, both victorious and horrific, is evidence of a damaged and disjointed subject.

In brief, the murder scene explains that Clytemnestra is a paradigmatic example of domestic exile, she is misidentified with her

¹⁴ Vernant Jean-Pierre, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd, Zone Books, 1990, p. 132.

¹⁵ Warwick Celsiana, "Chthonic Disruption in Lycophron's *Alexandra*," *Classical Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 1, 2018, p. 91.

¹⁶ Ricoeur Paul, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, U of Chicago P, 2004, p. 21.

own family; she is the earliness of woman hauntological talk, the spectral re-emergence of the repressed order of social relations; she is, at the same time, a character that takes part in the culture-slaughtering oscillation of the maternal; and she is the servant of the exile of her own cosmos, she is an agent of matricidal creation. Therefore, her oratorical intervention is not a duty of a simple vengeful narration but rather a philosophical paradigm of an act of cultural alienation when ritual, traumatizing, and cosmogenic intersections occur.

Light as Haunting: The Beacon of Displacement

Clytemnestra's initial entrance in *Agamemnon*—where she proclaims Troy's fall through the beacon chain (264–316) - positions her as an authority marked by both assertiveness and fragmentation, a paradox of anticipation and spectrality. Such a description of the transmissions of signal between Mount Ida and Argos is expressed with extraordinary confidence, she says, "From Ida's fire to Hermes' crag it leapt, / then passed the torch on to Messapion's peak" (*Agamemnon*, 1977) Although the net speech already plays off ritualized slaughter, the beacon discourse exists in a different idiom - one that attempts to exert a discipline of coherence on the incoherent and to instantiate a viewpoint of exile and discontinuity.

Viewed from the perspective of the oikic exile, the speech delivered to the beacon is possibly paradoxical. On the one hand, Clytemnestra plays the role of the herald, thus usurping the traditionally and exclusively male role of messengers or city officials. Conversely, the fact that she needs to assume such a position as the marker of her alienation from ordinary roles of wife and queen. Applying Edward Said's conception of exile (2000) as "the unhealable rift between self and home" (p. 173) helps to illuminate this paradox. Now she speaks to her people in the tent of her palace, but her power lies not in her roles of passive wife; nor can she yet claim her status of ruler. Therefore, the address is rather a performance of being part of the oikos, and at the same time is deceptive in her being exile-in-place.

When considered critically, her fractured subjectivity becomes more convincingly clear in terms of the paradigm of trauma. Cathy

Caruth explains that the process of repetition reinstates trauma, which evidently cannot be enacted entirely at the moment of the event but subsequently comes after many years.¹⁷ This structural logic may be observed in the repeated number of images of fire jumping on top of mountains: the chain of light is simultaneously a signifier of triumph and a compulsion that refers to an act of crossing the trauma. Every second part repeats the initial dispensation at Aulis, the sacrifice of Iphigenia, which supplies the overall sweep of the warfare itself.¹⁸ The genocidal remains ultimately emerge as the traumatic remains of sacrificial loss, appearing to manifest what would otherwise be viewed as a heraldic statement into haunting of unassimilated grieving.

Even this haunting, though, serves to give rise to what is called maternal hauntology: the continuance of the non-existent, of the ghostly coming back to life of the banned, exactly what Derrida is interested in speaking about in the discussion about hauntology, offers the theoretical frame on which it is been visualized the beacon speech has been visualized.¹⁹ The voice of Clytemnestra in the beacon speech could also be interpreted as a ghostly intrusion; she claims triumph, but her rhyme is the silence of Iphigenia, who had been sacrificed to ensure the demise of Troy. The victorious beat of her Feminine wound is troubled by the sexual hurt that is the core of the whole conflict. Accordingly, the beacon chain becomes not merely an act of transmission of fire, but of a conduit of haunting as well; the spectral lack of the daughter is flung onwards in every flash of it. In that way, the chain represents both transference of technology and transference of affection. The story of Clytemnestra thus represents a feminine statement, one that throws a wafer of triumph, so far so civic, into anarchy.

As the kingship of Agamemnon is confirmed by Olympian recognition, the kingship of Clytemnestra is proven by the intertextuality and ritualistic means. By breaking the cosmic codes of

¹⁷ Caruth Cathy, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, p. 4

¹⁸ Zeitlin Froma, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature*, University of Chicago Press, 1996, pp. 63–65.

¹⁹ Derrida Jacques, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Routledge, 1994, p. 63. Cf. Kakoliris Gerasimos, “Jacques Derrida’s Deconstruction of Western Metaphysics: The Early Years”, *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 4, 2017, pp. 43-62.

fire, she aligns herself with a rationality grounded more in omens and ritual dances than in the laws of the state. As Jean–Pierre Vernant observes, tragedy depicts a theatre where Olympian and underworld rationales clash, thereby exposing the vulnerability of civic stability.²⁰ In the expectation of such a dichotomy, the rhetoric of the beacon speech has Clytemnestra talking not only of herself as herald of change, but more significantly, of herself as priestess of signs, a princess whose authority is anchored not on an art that declares but on an underground economy of omen, sacrifice, and blood. Hence, her rhetorical voice replaces the male proponent, therefore restoring chthonic wisdom to civic discourse.

Beacon discourse is therefore placed within the greater genealogical framework of matricidal cosmogenesis. Ünsal Cimen, in particular, believes that matricide (literal or symbolical) is the cultural ordeal of transferring cyclic and maternal structures into a linear patriarchal structures.²¹ Such linearity, on its part, is a characteristic of the beacon chain: a fire that traverses without interruption between apogee and apex and by any such operation requires a representation of history as a forward transmission. However, the disruption of the so-called linearity is brought about by a white-haired vocalization of the ghost-like Clytemnestra who still makes to recognize that the source of this fire is sacrificial, motherly, and cyclical. This seeming sharpness of the signal, above which the maternal body is paradoxically sealing the terrain, is compensated, transforming it in its turn, into a spectral presence that comes around her damaged speech, like a specter in her shattered words. As a result, despite what could be viewed as a triumphant statement of purpose, the beacon discourse still produces the paradox of matricidal cosmogenesis; the patriarchal order pronounces itself via linear marks, but the maternal, even though subdued, remains an apparition.

Where, in the traditional speech, Clytemnestra strives to claim sovereignty by enacting killing, the so-called beacon speech reveals her projective fractured voice, a voice trapped between utterance and wailing, and interpretative power and ghostly witnessing. These two discourses together form her subjectivity as oscillating

²⁰ Vernant Jean-Pierre, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd, Zone Books, 1990, p. 132.

²¹ Çimen Ünsal, “Zeus’ Overthrow of Cronus within the Context of Symbolic Matricide”, *Journal of International Social Research*, vol. 12, no. 65, 2019, p. 42.

between the largely oikic exile (estrangement within her own palace), maternal hauntology (cyborg return of the suppressed maternal), chthonic sovereignty (counter-power based on ritual and omen), and matricidal cosmogenesis (the violent cultural shift that erases as much as it preserves the maternal). Through interrogation of the beacon speech in terms of these conceptual apparatuses, Clytemnestra is not only a prophecy of conquest, but also a figure characterized by a disunity of voice that already reports the cultural displacement cravings that are both staged and held in the tragedy.

Matricidal Cosmogenesis: The Cultural Birth of Patriarchy

Through the closer inspections of both the beacon and net speeches, it becomes evident that the talk of Clytemnestra simply will not fall into a simplified classification of either vengeance, political rhetoric, or even tragic Pathos. Instead, her broken voice operates at the outer edges of trauma, exile, ritual, and cosmology. It is not what is seen outside, just as an image of a hideous queen, but a philosophical paradigm that this paper referred to as matricidal cosmogenesis.

The beacon speech is a parody of literary convention in which an effort to make the jarring of discontinuity into a linear sequence is carried through; its radiant and joyous imagery of brightness asserts a patriarchal logic of identity that finds an echo in the historiographical edifice of canonical authority. However, as Caruth insists, trauma films out in an ultimate late return and disrupts the supposedly definitive turnaround of events, providing a palimpsest of memory.²² The mute loss of Iphigenia suffuses the conversation with a deep lack-victory mingled with grieving, power made of displacement, and the concept of absence as potential that suggests a psychoanalytic interpretation of the absence as positive possibility, is experienced. Since the net speech stands in stark contrast to the sovereignty of the ritual, Clytemnestra enacts violence through nets, baths, and libations, thereby transforming vengeance into a form of cultic performativity. Talts's reading of sacrificial

²² Caruth Cathy, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, p. 4.

vocabulary underscores how private murder is reframed as cosmological rupture.²³ This sovereignty is, however, precarious both in itself and in alternating between victory and threats, action and discontinuity, and so forcing the question of any unitary image of power.

Taken together, the speeches dramatize a maternal hauntology, in which the repressed order re-emerges as a spectral presence within the structures of patriarchy. Derrida has contended that ghosts upset the idea of presence as such, showing structures that are based on erasure as fundamentally weak.²⁴ In his case, Oedipus viewed through the skewed testimony of his daughter, Clytemnestra, is another illustration of such a phenomenon: the maternal muted at Aulis comes back in the beacon speech, the suppressed chthonic order comes out in the net speech. This ghosting is not an accidental, but definite feature; patriarchy demands the destruction of the female, but it cannot entirely repress its revenge.

This dynamism names Clytemnestra in the very heart of a matricidal cosmogenic order. As Çimen argues, both the dethronement of Cronus by Zeus and the killing of Clytemnestra by Orestes are symbolic matricides that initiate the ontology of the patriarchs.²⁵ Her account swings back and forth between these extremes: on one hand, as an agent, she plays out the perpetuation of the maternal, and on the other, as a victim plays out the extinction of it. This duality indicates that there is a cultural rationality over the necessity of destroying the maternal to unleash the patriarchal order of things, but rather its obliteration ensures that it is haunted.

This paradox on the philosophical level demonstrates the nature of the fragility of the patriarchal ontology. Irigaray argues that the screened-out maternal origin on which Western metaphysics is founded renders it unspeakable as a matter of fundamental concern.²⁶ Cavarero, as well, asserts that the maternal voice is effec-

²³ Talts Karina, "Violent Death in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*", *Philotheos*, vol. 19, 2019, p. 212.

²⁴ Derrida Jacques, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, Routledge, 1994, p. 63.

²⁵ Çimen Ünsal, "Zeus' Overthrow of Cronus within the Context of Symbolic Matricide", *Journal of International Social Research*, vol. 12, no. 65, 2019, p. 42.

²⁶ Irigaray Luce, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill, Cornell UP, 1985, p. 75.

tively cut out of the eventual narrative of any beginnings: the dis-united voice of Clytemnestra is both the witness of the otherwise unspeakable other of metaphysics, and the melancholy ghost of that other.²⁷

Conclusion

The fractured voice of Clytemnestra when analyzed through the prism of beacon and net speeches works as a strong example of how tragedy can be neither domestic conflict nor gendered inversion, but even more compellingly, how tragedy runs through the processes of violence that form the basis of patriarchal order. It is her oikic exile that causes a sense of estrangement on a household scale; it is on a house-hold level, whose voice functions within the context of what is known as a maternal hauntology that reflects the spectral and ghostly retaliation; her authority, which is also the sovereignty of the chthonic, is rooted on sacrificial and underground logics; and her active role in matricidal cosmogenesis that causes her also both as a figure of defiance and a figure of destruction.

The indications of such a reading are more than the narrow confines of philological inquiry. As Ricoeur has underscored, testimony functions dually as a vehicle for preservation and as a mechanism of fracture, reshaping trauma into narrative even as it exposes underlying instability.²⁸ The testimony of Clytemnestra tells us that tragedy transfigures no one but to understand how tragedy brings about a generation of cultural memory. Her speeches also help to see what an irony in the patriarchal order is: it is built on the repression of the maternal image, although the one it should overcome haunts with the presence of its continuity that it still should extinguish.

This question is part of the general discourse of Trauma, Exile, and Cultural Displacement that rematerializes the question of Clytemnestra as the vehicle of representation, with the help of which the philosophical aspects of cultural displacement will be explored. No, she does not serve entirely as a tragic monarch who killed in

²⁷ Cavarero Adriana, *In the Name of the Mother*, trans. Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio and Áine O'Healy, SUNY Press, 1995, p. 88.

²⁸ Ricoeur Paul, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, 2004, p. 21.

revenge, but is a multifaceted character in which the discourses of trauma and exile outline the violent preconditions of the cultural identities. The voice of her afterlife expressed not only in classical works but also in later distributions is an indication of how the image of the mother has continued to resonate: not erased or lessened, but it has been re-formed as an apparition, as a witness to the testament, and as a sort of counter-sovereignty. In her turn, Clytemnestra helps us to remember that the process of cultural displacement takes place at loftier levels than at the expense of purely spatial displacement; it is written in the fabric of the world right into its depths.

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Trauma, Ontological Exile, and the Trans Self: Reading Transgender Autobiographical Narratives from the Global South

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Abstract

Scholarly understanding of exile usually foregrounds the forced displacement of human beings from one geographical location to another due to war, violence, or fear of persecution. However, exile is also a psychological state of being caused by external factors that need not necessarily be limited to the physicality of dislodgement from a sense of home. This paper explores exile as an ontological condition informed by experiences of trauma, selfhood, and marginalisation from the vantage point of transgender lived experiences from India. The philosophical engagement of these ideas is exemplified by the autobiographical work of a transgender woman, A. Revathi, titled *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*. The paper facilitates dialogues between narrativising trauma, psychological exile, and the trans self-using interdisciplinary frameworks of Paul Ilie, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Edward W. Said, Judith Butler, Cathy Caruth, Sara Ahmed, and Shoshana Felman to examine the interconnection between thoughts

on trauma, testimony, inner exile, lived experiences, queer phenomenology, and gender performativity. The study observes that the reclamation of transgender selfhood emerges through the act of self-narration. It also reimagines exile and trauma as philosophical processes of self-awareness and becoming.

Keywords: *ontological exile, transgender trauma, autobiographical narratives, transgender existential displacement, politics of unbelonging*

Introduction

The experience of exile is generally associated with geographical displacement that is fueled by various reasons, from war and violence to political and personal causes. The notion of being cast out from the space that one calls home forms the basis of exile, which attributes to the word a spatial significance. However, exile can also mean one's expulsion from one's own existence and one's state of being. In this regard, exile becomes an ontological condition that transcends geographical displacement and includes the displacement from one's idea of the self. The exiled self belongs outside the purview of society, transitioning into a self that is aware of its fragility and unbelonging in the social makeup. In this context, trauma that informs exile cannot be limited to physical inflictions of violence and instead, also takes the form of social, cultural, and political stigmatisation of the non-normative self that questions one's existence in the world as a dislodged member of the social fabric. This metaphysical homelessness that serves as the traumatic enforcer of the lived experiences of the exiled will be studied in this paper through transgender lived experiences from India, with reference to A. Revathi's autobiography, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*. The paper positions itself within a non-Western philosophical standpoint to facilitate dialogues of existence, exile, and trauma from the vantage point of transgender identities. The study leans on seminal and contemporary works of philosophy to contextualise identity politics of being the unrecognised subject to expose the philosophical depth of trauma and exile in trans narratives. Some of the ideas that inform this paper include the notion of exile as posited by Edward W. Said, Paul Ilie's concept of inner exile, Merleau-Ponty's lived body and embodied subject, Cathy Caruth's theorisations of trauma, Shoshana Felman's notions of testimony and witnessing trauma, Sara Ahmed's

queer phenomenology, and Judith Butler's ideas of gender performativity and recognition. The unbecoming of the trans self-dictates that the transgender person must fight to be seen, known, and named to release themselves from the condition of ontological exile and make sense of their existence. This paper draws associations between trauma experienced by transgender people and ontological exile, and their negotiations with the experiences of social ostracisation and marginalisation. It also addresses questions about locating the trans self at the nexus of rebuilding selfhood through narrative practices and embracing the othered self. This paper is also motivated by progressivism, which is 'both a belief that social conditions can improve for those now oppressed and a commitment to that improvement'¹. Aimed at provoking philosophical discussions on transgender subjectivities, ontological exile, and trauma, this paper seeks to contribute to the paradigm of phenomenological philosophical thought, intersectional studies, and transgender scholarship. It also reorients the global academic attention towards Asian queer contexts that have been underrepresented within the school of philosophy.

Conceptualising Exile, Trauma, Queer Phenomenology and Transgender Identity

What does it mean to be driven away from the place that one considers their home? What happens to the sense of belonging when one is untethered from their roots? How does one negotiate between their geographical rootedness and their integrity towards their intersectional identities? These questions fuel the dialogues of exile, trauma, and selfhood with which this study seeks to engage. As opposed to the academic majority that discusses exile as a geographical estrangement due to political reasons, this paper argues for the need to study internal or psychological exile as an essential branch of philosophical thought to encourage alternative visualisations of exile as an ontological state of existence. Within the conventional system of understanding exile as physical displacement, the philosophical reading undertaken in this paper is an attempt to establish that it is also an ontological condition that

¹ Zack N., 2024: 1

displaces transgender people's notions of selfhood in a socio-cultural climate that forces them to distance themselves from what they believe constitutes their identity. For this purpose, this section begins by contextualising exile as primarily a physical displacement as understood by dominant thoughts. It then derives dialogues on exile as an internal conflict of one's state of being against the backdrop of transgender identities, also building on ideas of trauma, intersectionality, and marginalisation.

Edward W. Said defines exile as 'the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home'² and conceives of the affective evocations of exile as an 'essential sadness' that cannot be removed³. Often, those who are exiled are forced to flee from their homeland due to fear of persecution, acts of violence, war, human rights issues, and other such reasons informed by 'mass violence and horror'⁴. The dominant philosophical enquiries into exile make connections between political displacement and nationalism⁵, foregrounding the lived experiences of the exiled with nationalist thought and discourses on the nation, belongingness, and homeland. These debates on exile exist in conjunction with layered intersectional politics concerning race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, caste, religion, nationality, and other identity markers⁶. Intersectional approaches have been adopted by various disciplines, from literary studies, law, social sciences, and cultural studies. However, philosophical investigations into intersectionality primarily cover Western contexts and non-Western identities within Western spaces. In the context of exile, this includes intersectional experiences of the people displaced from countries like India, China, North Korea, Egypt, Lebanon, Israel, Pakistan, Nepal, South Africa, and who have settled in Western geographies like the United States of America, Canada, and England. Here, the intersectionalities of race, gender, class, and ethnicity inform the trauma faced by the exiled in their home countries and the newly inhabited locales. Therefore, in the broadest sense, thoughts on exile revolve around those who have experienced estrangement from the geographical spaces that they call

² Said E.W., 2002: 173.

³ Said E.W., 2002: 173.

⁴ Rojas M.S., Nuñez J. A. & Erices G. N., 2015.

⁵ Said, E. W., 2002: 176.

⁶ Crenshaw K., 1989; Crenshaw K., 1991.

home. However, the focus of this study is on psychological exile that is enforced upon members of society who do not adhere to the rules of normativity established by oppressive dominant ideologies and institutions.

Drawing on Paul Ilie's work, *Literature and Inner Exile: Authoritarian Spain, 1939-1975*, exile can be seen as a mental state of being. It is 'a state of mind whose emotions and values respond to separation and severance as conditions in themselves'⁷. The estrangement caused by exile emerges from the adherence to values that stand in contrast with accepted values of society, according to Ilie. This can be extended to include the purview of trans identities being in a state of exile due to their innate refusal to adhere to what society conceives of as male and female. For A. Revathi, a transgender woman in India, her identity as a woman is an internal reality that the conservative society finds difficult to accept. In addition to the loss of place and the loss of the homeland, exile also means the loss of the self. In the state of exile, the trans subjects occupy a liminal or an in-between space⁸ in which they are neither completely recognised nor completely excluded, trapping them in a state of constant negotiation of their identities with the conditions of the society. For Revathi, the subject position of the exiled is inscribed within liminality, the depth of existence wavering between being and non-being, not knowing where she belongs when shrouded by an unsettling state of dislodgement. This creates a sense of alienation, which Ilie observes as an element of inner exile that indicates the severance of a trans person from their sense of self. Building on the phenomenological understanding of selfhood that perceives subjectivity as a relational and disjointed lens, alienation can be understood as a phenomenon that is causative of and emergent from psychological exile. Considering insights from Merleau-Ponty's notion of the embodied subject, the self understands itself and the world through the lived body, which acts in association with the mind⁹ and the stimuli from the surroundings. Critiquing the philosophers who 'had become so caught up in the abstractions and theorisations about the world that they'd moved far away from the texture of what real life, as

⁷ Ilie P., 1980: 2.

⁸ Gennep A.V., 1960; Turner V., 1966; Bhabha H.K., 2004

⁹ Merleau-Ponty M., 2002.

an experience and phenomenon, was actually like'¹⁰, Merleau-Ponty employed phenomenology to implement his argument that 'true philosophy consists in relearning to look at the world'¹¹. By adopting the cathartic expression of her feminine selfhood and her identity as a woman in the form of writing an autobiographical narrative of her lived experiences, understood through her body and mind, Revathi's narrative incites dialogues that further scholarly discussions framed within the larger ontological context of transgender phenomenology. Therefore, transgender literary narratives serve as a space that fuels discussions on the exiled body as a site of experiencing, negotiating, and challenging alienation. By positioning these thinkers in dialogue with each other, the phenomenological lens offered by this study reveals that the exile of the transgender body is a lived condition that is intimate, public, and political simultaneously.

Additionally, the experience of exile is inevitably linked to trauma. While the traumatic influences on spatial exile in the geographical and nationalist sense include macro events of war, violence, religious and ethnic persecution, human rights violations, and economic exploitation, the overlap of trauma with the non-normative exiled body includes both macro and micro levels at which trauma is generated. Cathy Caruth theorises trauma to be evasive from complete integration within consciousness. In her work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Caruth explains that during the events that engender trauma, one is unable to grasp it in its entirety and encounters it in later stages when it resurfaces in various ways.¹² Signifying the belated understanding of the repercussions of specific experiences and events on one's psyche, trauma strikes its presence in knowable and unknowable ways that often transcend comprehension. The trauma associated with the experiences of internal exile by transgender people in Indian society has socio-cultural, historical, and political dimensions that add to the lived experiences of trans exile. The philosophical implications of Caruth's claim that trauma is a 'repeated suffering of the event, but it is also a continual leaving of its site'¹³ are many. The very idea that trauma cannot be

¹⁰ Nixon D., 2020.

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty M., 2002: xxiii.

¹² Caruth C., 1996.

¹³ Caruth C., 1995: 10

limited to a particular event alone, and that its manifestations come in temporal waves, argues for channels through which such trauma can be processed, negotiated, experienced, and tackled. The traumatic experiences of being a transwoman in India are built on the foundation of the historical marginalisation of gender non-conforming people and the political invisibilisation of such members of society who are consequently forced into the peripheries. Contemporary philosophical thoughts on transgender experiences in a conservative, developing nation call for an understanding of the political perception of transgender people in India. While the social stigma towards trans people extends to all strata of the Indian society, the legal recognition of transgender people, especially the ruling of the Supreme Court of India regarding transgender people's constitutional rights and the 'right to self-determined identity',¹⁴ *theoretically* legitimised their existence in India. The legitimacy is theoretical instead of actual integration with society because the lived experiences of transgender people continue to be entrenched within subjugation, alienation, and oppression despite their legal rights. It is in this context that this study locates trauma within the transgender exiled body.

The exiled and traumatised self of the gendered and sexualised body is also informed by the manner in which it is oriented. Sara Ahmed expounds on the theory of queer phenomenology in her work *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), arguing that the orientation of a body in society inhabits spaces that are bound by norms of gender and sexuality¹⁵. Drawing from Merleau-Ponty's relationality of spatial forms, Ahmed locates what she calls migrant orientation, describing it as 'the lived experience of facing at least two directions: toward a home that has been lost, and to a place that is not yet home'¹⁶. The migrant orientation in the context of those facing internal displacement can be understood in terms of the duality of existence proposed by Ahmed. When ostracised by their own family and communities, the trans person loses the home that they were born into, signifying the first level of orientation. This emerges from being out of place in a setting that rationalises non-queer existence and marginalises queer ones. The second level of orientation of the exiled trans body is towards

¹⁴ Kumar G. & Chadha A., 2025: 84

¹⁵ Ahmed S., 2006. Cf., Mitrou Y., & Kolyri C., 2025.

¹⁶ Ahmed S., 2006.

a community of fellow trans people who form the new home. Drawing from Revathi's lived experiences, this second home is formed by the *hijra* community, which provides her with a space closest to home despite its shortcomings. The members of the community trained Revathi in the performative ways of being a hijra, teaching her to embody her femininity in a manner that was, in fact, socially prescribed yet fulfilling to her. The phenomenological orientation of the trans self also needs to be discussed against the backdrop of the historical reorientation of the perception of transgender women in India. For instance, the mythological association of the hijra community in India spoke of reverence and respect.

The ontological applications of exile, trauma, and transgender identities, as conceptualised in this section, lead to the following question: What is the relevance of Revathi's autobiography, *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*, in the philosophical ideation of psychological exile and trauma? The rationale behind the adoption of a literary foundation to address this larger philosophical question is rooted in Shoshana Felman's conceptualisation of testimony in her thoughts on trauma studies. People who witness events that cause trauma have the power to use the articulation of their experiences in the form of a testimony to process traumatic occurrences, sharing these experiences with the world, and finding comfort through the cathartic release of repressed stories. In this context, literature serves as an outlet for expressing traumatic experiences. Therefore, autobiographical narratives are important critical tools that can be used to understand how trauma impacts a person's consciousness and self-perception. In Revathi's autobiography, she offers vignettes of her lived experiences as a transgender woman in the Indian context, recounting instances that are embedded within structural inequality and transmisia. These accounts serve as a fertile ground for philosophical discussions on the ontology of inner exile and trauma, exploring displacements of the inner self from rightful existence and well-being that also manifest as physical displacement and the trauma of gendered violence. Through Revathi's narrative, notions of spatiality, temporality, and ethical consciousness are debated from the context of transgender experiences from the Global South.

The Trans Self, Gendered Trauma and Ontological Exile

Edward W. Said's position that 'exile is a solitude experienced outside the group'¹⁷ reflects Revathi's exiled transgender subjectivity that renders her in a perpetual state of disconnect from society. The trans self in exile is therefore 'fundamentally a discontinuous state of being'¹⁸ which experiences ostracisation owing to its non-normative ontologies that occupy the peripheries of a heteropatriarchal transmissive society. While Said's approach to exile draws from nationalist and geographical notions of exile, the philosophical reading of exile through the lenses of trans narratives and traumatic experiences undertaken in this study aligns with Caruth's understanding of trauma as a persistent and stubborn wound¹⁹. In a world that believes in the binaristic view of gender and sexuality, the transgender person is perceived as an anomaly owing to the contradiction between their gender assigned at birth and the gender they embody. Reflecting on Moore's Paradox within the context of trans selfhood²⁰, the tense relationship between unbiased reality and subjective belief emerges as opposing forces in which the physiological gendered label stands in contrast with the epistemic understanding of the gendered self. Here, exile is experienced by the transgender person when they are forced to move away from the knowledge about themselves. Grounding this thought on *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*, Revathi's understanding of herself as a woman is refuted by her socio-cultural contexts and communities, who perceived her as a man, forcing a rift between who she is and who they want her to be.

Consequently, the body becomes the primary site of exile as it is psychologically forced to leave what it considers to be its home. To elaborate, the psyche of the transgender woman is exiled as she is forced to disassociate herself with her female identity and occupy the liminal space of social outcasts. The temporal displacement experienced by Revathi occurs only when her feminine identity is revealed to others, indicating how one's sense of self is constituted not only by one's awareness of oneself but also by the validation

¹⁷ Said E.W., 2002: 177.

¹⁸ Said E.W., 2002: 177

¹⁹ Caruth C., 1996.

²⁰ Brakel L.A.W.

of other people. Drawing from Merleau-Ponty's notions of embodiment, the transgender body becomes a lived body²¹ that experiences trauma and exile from the impact of social negligence that strips the non-normative person of recognition and discards them at the fringes of society. Using the lived experiences of Revathi as an example, the lived body as the bearer of transformation, trauma, and exile can be seen in her following statement:

'I experienced changes in my body and in my being. I experienced a growing sense of irrepressible femaleness, which haunted me, day in and day out. A woman trapped in a man's body was how I thought of myself. But how could that be? Would the world accept me thus? I longed to be known as a woman and felt pain at being considered a man.'²²

This internal conflict of not being able to actualise her innate womanhood becomes the premise for her ontological exile, where her state of being itself is questioned and negated. The psychological impact of cultural ostracisation and becoming the victim of social ridicule leads to her internal dislocation from being able to express herself, constituting the first stage of exile. An instance from the autobiographical narrative can be taken in order to spatialise this psychological exile. During the *Mariamman*²³ festival in Revathi's village, she dressed up as a *kurathi*²⁴ at the behest of other boys who also dressed up for the festival as 'bears and tigers, policemen, gods, and *kurathis*'²⁵. While the others perceived her as a boy disguised as a girl, she was self-aware, existing as a woman who knew she looked beautiful.²⁶ In the same festival in the subsequent year, too, she dressed up to dance. Herein lies the significance of drawing phenomenological understandings from autobiographical narratives. Revathi's ontological awareness that she 'had not worn a disguise' rather, she had 'given form to [her] real feelings'²⁷ advances the idea of selfhood trapped within social

²¹ Merleau-Ponty M., 2002.

²² Revathi A., 2010: 14-15.

²³ A Hindu Goddess

²⁴ A female gypsy

²⁵ Revathi A., 2010: 11-12

²⁶ Revathi A., 2010: 12

²⁷ Revathi A., 2010: 16

perceptions of normative existence. Though the teenage transgender girl asserted the reality about her identity to herself, the manifestation of this awareness also attracted anger, judgment, and ridicule from those who perceived her reality as a fallacy.

Additionally, the displaced transgender person asserts their gendered existence in known performatives of masculinity and femininity. Butler's contention that gender is a state of doing refers to the performative nature of the construct. She argues that 'gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being'²⁸. Posing Butler's thoughts on gender performativity in conversation with phenomenological ideas on the psychological exile of trans subjects reveals that Revathi's manifestation of her female identity as a child deemed a male included performative actions of femininity. This is exemplified by the following extract from her autobiography:

'I played only girls' games. I loved to sweep the front yard clean and draw the kolam every morning. I even helped my mother in the kitchen, sweeping and swabbing, washing vessels. My work was certainly not tidy, not like that of grown-up women. But all the same, I would do it with confidence. On days when the kolam outside the yard opposite ours was more beautiful, I would smudge the marks with my feet and flee before I was discovered. As soon as I got home from school, I would wear my sister's long skirt and blouse, twist a long towel around my head, and let it trail down my back like a braid. I would then walk as if I were a shy bride, my eyes to the ground, and everyone would laugh.'²⁹

Here, Revathi expressed herself 'with confidence'³⁰ as a child, before social stigma stifled her and banished her into a state of exile. Being ridiculed by her family, friends, and other villagers marks the onset of her awareness that her expression of her self-hood stands against the 'prevailing values', in the words of Ilie³¹,

²⁸ Butler J., 1990: 33; Kakoliris, 2025.

²⁹ Revathi A., 2010: 3-4.

³⁰ Revathi A., 2010: 3.

³¹ Ilie P., 1980: 2.

of the culture of her geographical home. This brings into question her rootedness within the realm of her village, located in Salem, in India's southern state of Tamil Nadu. The spatial association of exile is relevant in tracing the transformation of a young human being who was at home in the metaphysical sense to being displaced not only from her hometown but also from her awareness of her identity. The autobiographical narrative of Revathi traces her dislocation from her village to various parts of India in an attempt to find a home and a sense of community. The ontological underpinnings of Revathi's narrative shed light on the experiences of transgender people in India, marked by persecution and punishment for performing their gender that is much removed from their assigned gender at birth. In her work *An Account of Oneself*, Butler posits that the self is never self-constituted as its making is influenced by the norms of society, the pressure to perform the self in accordance with accepted behaviour, and the historical and cultural conditions that dictate molds of selfhood. In the case of transgender people, their gendered existence is often distorted by systemic structures that enforce the pressure of legitimising the social membership of transgender people by politicising their selfhood and gendered identity.

Consequently, philosophical renderings of the notion of recognition³², as opined by Butler, are essential in this context to understand the trauma of invisibility and ostracisation of trans subjectivities. When the trans identity is denied recognition, the ontological and epistemic rootedness located within the conscious awareness of transgender people's gendered identity is negated, conferring upon them an unlivable existence³³. This notion of living an 'unlivable life' is borrowed from Butler, who argues that 'certain humans are recognized as less than human, and that form of qualified recognition does not lead to a viable life'³⁴. Here, non-recognition paves the way to the erasure of one's identity and selfhood. Transposing this notion to the context of transgender people's lived experiences in India, the absence of recognition of Revathi as a transgender woman stems from an ideological refusal to accept intersectional identities that defy what constitutes normativity, and this gap between accepted womanhood and transgender

³² Butler, J., 2004.

³³ Butler J., 2004: 8

³⁴ Butler J., 2004 2

womenhood gives unlivable and traumatic characteristics to Revathi's life. Moreover, it is integral to note that an understanding of the influence of societal recognition of the transgender person calls for an awareness of the role of external forces in validating one's identity. Anybody with intersectional non-normative identities is exiled from the normative categories of existence that have been historically formulated and reconstituted with time, bringing in such awareness about the extent to which the stigmatised self is dependent on others for recognition. Locating these thoughts in Revathi's narratives shows how the state of being unrecognised³⁵ as a woman leads her to an existential crisis, as indicated by her thoughts following the *Mariamman* festival: 'Reluctantly, I changed into my regular clothes. As I re-emerged in my man's garb, I felt that I was in disguise, and that I had left my real self behind'³⁶. This brings into question Moore's Paradox, drawing from the association of this paradox with the trans self by Linda Brakel in her work, *Investigations into the Trans Self and Moore's Paradox*. Brakel proposes 'a new ontological phenotype' that argues for the categories of 'trans-man' and 'trans-woman' to be inscribed within the mainstream gender binary, bringing in biological and empirical studies to strengthen her philosophical arguments.³⁷³⁸ While weaving such categorisations into the social framework may ease the experience of internal exile by transgender people, it also contributes to the larger problem of essentialising the gender binary, whether in cisgender or transgender contexts. Consequently, there arises a need to not only broaden the existing vocabulary of identities related to gender and sexuality but also formulate a practical way of disseminating inclusive practices within different strata of society in everyday language, vocabulary, and culture.

While the lived body becomes a site of ontological exile when placed at the juncture of self-awareness and social stigma, physical

³⁵ Butler, J., 2004.

³⁶ Revathi A., 2010: 16

³⁷ Brakel L.A.W.

³⁸ The sensitive way of using the word transgender is as an adjective and not a noun. For example, do not use 'transwoman'. Instead use 'trans woman'. Further insights into the correct usage of terms associated with the word 'transgender' can be found in the "Glossary of Terms: Transgender" published by GLAAD Media Reference Guide.

displacement adds to the internalisation of the experience of exile of a trans person. Exile, in its literal sense, occurs when the body and self are dislodged from physical spaces that the lived body had perceived as its home. This second stage of exile has physical implications, including violence, spatial displacement, and unbelonging. Finding a community within the mental state of displacement becomes pivotal in the life of Revathi as a teenager. A sense of community is built when she befriends four people like her, who were perceived by society as men. The spatial implications of the perpetual state of exile can be traced to the top of a hill that these women frequented, disguised in their male bodies and preserving their self-awareness as women. Locations such as the hilltop serve as the host land that offers a space for the exiled to rest and be themselves. This geographical movement, in its initial stages, can be understood as the process of rehomeing, in which finding pockets of safety within a hostile environment contributes to inner peace and stability. However, these seemingly safe spaces are inscribed within the heteronormative cis-patriarchal setting, making them susceptible to encroachment by enforcers of dominant cultures. To contextualise this thought within the lived experiences documented in transgender narratives, consider the following scenario recounted by Revathi:

‘Those who come to visit the hill-fort do so in the mornings and are all gone by sunset. We, on the other hand, went up the hill only after 6 o’clock, and since there was no one around then, we felt we could be women and do as we pleased. The odd rowdy did come up the hill, and whenever we saw them come in a group, we fled. One evening, though, two rowdies caught hold of one of my *thozhis*³⁹ and marched her off, further up the hill. We could not fight with them, but neither did we want to leave until she was back with us. After about half an hour, and much to our relief, she returned. She looked exhausted. Sweat ran down her face, and she could barely walk.’⁴⁰

Revathi continues to elaborate on the harrowing tale of the sexual assault of her friend, which becomes one of the first instances

³⁹ ‘Female comrades’ as noted in Revathi A., 2010: 18

⁴⁰ Revathi A., 2010: 18-19

of horrific violence faced by trans women recounted in the autobiography. The fear of persecution by cisgender men who objectify transgender women and inflict physical and sexual violence on them becomes the source of an inexplicable, deep-seated trauma that manifests in different scenarios throughout the lives of these women.⁴¹ The narrative politicises the trauma of sexual violence as the result of an unjust, patriarchal society with failing legal systems that serve only a few dominant groups. Though Felman's theorisation of trauma as the 'radical crisis of witnessing' is in the context of being a witness to the Holocaust, the concept also applies to the context of this study in that it enlists the physically and mentally abused trans self at the crossroads between wanting to speak about their trauma and the overwhelming impossibility of articulating their woundedness.⁴² Revathi's testimony, as seen in this excerpt, is a testimony of how her identity is questioned by herself and society, and of how her trauma becomes a collective event that transcends her individuality and becomes an anthem for transgender people.

Additionally, the autobiographical narrativisation of the *hijra* experience cannot be reduced to trauma narratives. They also signify a reorientation from being the persecuted to being at home in a new yet familiar and welcoming community, as experienced by a migrant⁴³. Ahmed's philosophical approaches to queer phenomenology prove vital in understanding the integration of the non-normative exiled self within a host community. Revathi's travel to Delhi amounted to fleeing from a land she considered home by birth to a space where she was at home with fellow sisters from her community. The journey itself can be viewed as the process of reorientation from a disoriented self that was excluded by dominant bodies towards embracing new possibilities of existence in spaces that redefined what it meant to be a transgender woman whose existence was welcomed. The physical journey of the exiled self can be seen as leading to a transformed ontological awareness of a self-actualised transgender body, as signified by the following introspection by Revathi on joining her guru at the *hijra* community in Delhi: 'I am not a man now. I am a woman and I have a

⁴¹ Caruth C., 1996.

⁴² Felman S. & Laub D., 1991: xviii.

⁴³ Ahmed S., 2006.

family with a mother, a grandmother, and sisters-in-law.’⁴⁴ However, the awareness of the trans self is also culturally determined by the physicality of the gendered body. Revathi’s testimony raises the existential question of the crux of transgender identity. The horrors of non-medical interventions in what is now called gender-affirming surgery (GAS), documented in *The Truth About Me*, bring to attention the immense pain undergone by transgender women of Revathi’s time to reunite their mind and their body. While the stigma associated with transgender people, especially in the field of medicine, is actively being tackled in the third decade of the twenty-first century in India by awareness campaigns and protests, it is still extremely difficult for them to gain access to gender reaffirming surgeries in India. This study seeks to pose another question of interest in this scenario: in the grand scheme of linking one’s body with one’s gendered identity, is a transgender woman any less a woman if she chooses not to go through GAS? A critical perspective this study has to offer is that the identity of a transgender person is not validated by whether they go through GAS or not. The trans selfhood stems from the ontological awareness of their identity as a trans person, irrespective of conformity to bodily norms dictated by society. Transgender identity is, therefore, an internal state of existence marked by autonomous selfhood that need not necessarily involve bodily manifestations that correspond to the gendered awareness of the self. Revathi’s narratives demonstrate the painful reality of GAS for transgender women possessing intersectional marginalised identities that place them at a disadvantaged position due to their gender, sexuality, class, education, and power positions. The internal exile is intensified by the lack of access to safe medical options to fully claim their womanhood, creating a sense of disorientation and estrangement from who they are internally and their perceptions of their own bodies⁴⁵. The reclamation of womanhood for Revathi was defined by a layered experience involving pain, wounds, blood, relief, tenacity, and resilience.⁴⁶

Furthermore, the act of writing is a tool for claiming visibility for her identity as a transgender woman. Falling in line with But-

⁴⁴ Revathi A., 2010: 43

⁴⁵ Revathi A., 2010: 80; Ahmed S., 2006.

⁴⁶ Revathi A., 2010: 67-88

ler's notion of the implications of recognition, writing an autobiographical book narrativising Revathi's identity as a woman creates a respite from the visibilised invisibility of the non-normative transgender self. The othering experienced by those pushed to the margins of society, therefore, is reclaimed through the act of storytelling in which their lived experiences are shared with the world, which becomes a critical step towards challenging the physical and ontological banishment from society. Therefore, Revathi's *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* engenders the philosophical thought that autobiographical narratives of the gendered other cannot be seen solely as the manifestation of past pain; rather, it gives rise to critical channels of thought that engage with narrativising experiences of marginalisation as tools against perpetual exile from intelligibility. As explicated by Felman in her research, the narrative emerging from the witness of trauma⁴⁷, who in this case is the transgender person, facilitates related engagements of listening, witnessing, representation, and narrative reconstruction of trauma built within ontological exile, unpacking it for a society that must transform to be at the cusp of positive change. The truth that Revathi attempts to convey stands for the reclamation of her ontological awareness as a transgender woman with the agency to fight for her selfhood. As a result, debates surrounding internal exile and trauma are intrinsically linked to intersectional identities of being and becoming with socio-cultural and political discourses pervading into these dialogues. While a permanent resolution to the ostracisation of transgender people remains unreachable at the moment, scholarly undertakings such as this study ensure that such topics of critical importance continue to be actively discussed and debated, perhaps becoming vital in reaching the foundations of disparity and uprooting them.

Conclusion

While global understanding of exile in its primary sense is concerned with the geographical displacement of people with multifaceted causatives, this study creates a scholarly space for exploring exile as an ontological state experienced by people who embody

⁴⁷ Felman S. & Laub D., 1991.

intersectional marginalised identities. This is further studied from the perspective of transgender narratives in India, facilitating dialogues between the phenomenological exile, trauma, and trans selfhood. Using insights from scholars from various schools of thought, such as Paul Ilie, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Edward W. Said, Judith Butler, Cathy Caruth, Linda Brake, Sara Ahmed, and Shoshana Felman, this study has engaged in a philosophical discussion fueled by interdisciplinary ideas on selfhood, exile, gender performativity, and trauma. Revathi's testimony in the form of her autobiographical account titled *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* provokes discussions on exile as a rhythmic state of being marked by internal and physical crisis and estrangement between the subject and the self, the mind and the body, and the self and society. Ontological exile is embedded with traumatic experiences of ostracisation and upheavals that serve together as transformative processes towards recognition in which the self is realised through narrativising their lived experiences. Though the recognition of the non-normative person by the community that emplaces them cannot be achieved in its fullest sense, such recognition is vital to the perception of the self as an indispensable member of any given society, which in turn redirects the exiled towards a space that actively attempts to heal their fragmented self.

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Articles





Business and Marketing Ethical Dilemmas: On Moral Strategic Decisions

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Abstract

Ethics is the branch of study that deals with what is good of action for humans. Ethics is a requirement for human life. Business Ethics and CSR refer to an individual's moral judgments about right and wrong. Decisions taken in an organization can be taken by individuals or groups (corporations), but everyone has to be influenced by culture. The decision to behave ethically is moral. Everyone must decide how to act. Ethical decision-making can helpfully be thought of as a matter of marketing tactic/strategy. Marketing Ethics is an area of applied ethics that deals with the moral principles behind the operation and regulation of marketing. Marketing Ethics refers to making marketing decisions that are morally / ethically right. Marketing Ethics is a strategic consideration in organizational decisions.

Keywords: *Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Business Ethics, Management Morality, Business Ethics, Marketing Tactic / Strategy*

1. Introductory remarks: Corporate Social Responsibility and Marketing

"A business is a productive organization - an organization whose purpose is to create goods and services for sale, usually at a profit. Business is also an activity. One entity (e.g., a person, an organization) "does business" with another when it exchanges a good or service for valuable consideration. Business ethics can thus be understood as the study of the ethical dimensions of productive organizations and commercial activities. This includes ethical analyses of the production, distribution, marketing, sale, and consumption of goods and services" (Stanford Encyclopedia, 2016; Stark, 1993:38-48)

Marketing ethics is an area of applied ethics (Broni, 2019:802; Krishna, 2016; Majtán/Dubcová, 2006-2007) that deals with the moral principles behind the operation and regulation of marketing (Thompson, 1995:177-191). Some areas of marketing ethics (for example, ethics of advertising and promotion) overlap with media ethics (Hunt/Vitell, 1993).

Mobile Marketing Ethics is a set of rules or obligations following the area of applied ethics, which deals with the moral principles behind the operation and regulation of marketing activities in the specific context of m-commerce (Mobile marketing, as a branch of m-commerce (Varshney/Vetter, 2002), refers to any marketing activities conducted via mobile technologies. Usually, m-commerce is regarded as a subset of e-commerce (Coursaris/Hassanein, 2002). That is true, but due to the characteristics of mobile technologies, mobile marketing is different from other e-commerce activities. The first difference is caused by mobile technologies' ability to reach people anywhere and anytime; therefore, mobile marketing can take advantage of contextual information. Dey/Abowd (2001) defined context as "any information that characterizes a situation related to the interaction between users, applications, and the surrounding environment." Time, location, and network conditions are three of the key elements of context. The second difference is caused by the characteristics of mobile devices. Mobile devices have limited display abilities (Velentzas et al., 2018). The screens are usually small, and some of the devices cannot display color pictures or anima-

tions. On the other hand, mobile devices have various kinds of screen shapes, sizes, and resolutions. Thus, delivering appropriate content to specific devices is very important. Mobile devices also have limited input abilities, and this makes it difficult for customers to respond (Velentzas et al., 2018).

Basic principles and values that govern the business practices of those engaged in promoting products or services to consumers (Velentzas/Broni, 2017:61). Sound marketing ethics are typically those that result in or at least do not negatively impact consumer satisfaction with the goods and services being promoted or with the company producing them (Drucker, 1981:18-36; Akaah, 1996:605-613; Akaah/Riordan, 1989:112-121).

Marketing ethics are the moral principles and values that need to be followed (Kotler/Levy, 1969:10-15; D. Luck, 1969:53-55) during any kind of marketing communication (Broni et al., 2017a:145, 189, 541; Krishna, 2016; Majtán/Dubcová, 2006-2007). They are the general set of guidelines which can help companies to decide (Laczniak, 1983:7-18; Laczniak, 1993:91-96; Laczniak/Murphy, 1993; Murphy/Laczniak, 1981) on their new marketing strategies (Assael, 1993). But then it depends on one's own judgement of "right" and "wrong". Any unethical behaviour is not necessarily illegal (R. Deny, 1989:855-862). If an entity is making any kind of claims about their products (Ferreil/Fraedrich, 1997), and is unable to live up to those claims, it may be called an unethical behaviour (Ferreil/Gresham, 1985:87-96).

Marketing ethics basically promotes fairness and honesty (Jackson, 1990) in all their advertisements (Broni, 2019:816). Any kind of false claims to the consumers, invading consumers' privacy, stereotyping, and targeting the vulnerable audience [like children (Paine, 1983:119-146) and the elderly] are considered to be unethical behaviour by the companies. Even trying to harm the competitor's image is considered immoral.

Ethics are still subjective and should be openly discussed by the companies while making (Ford/Richardson, 1994:205-221) any marketing decisions (Carson et al., 1985:93-104; Langrehr, 1994:158-159; Fritzsche, 1991:841-852). Companies following the marketing ethics (Fritzsche, 1988:29-39) can gain the trust of the consumers (Korten, 1995) and create a positive image for themselves.

The root of the term "ethical marketing", naturally, is ethics (Broni, 2019:816). The word itself comes from the Greek word "ethos" (adjective: ethikos), which means "habit" or "custom" (Velentzas/Broni, 2013:43-44).

2. Corporate Social Responsibility and Management / Marketing

Corporate social responsibility has been a topic of academic study for several decades (Friedman et al., 1976; Carrol, 1979; Davis, 1973; Frederick, 1978; Freeman, 1984; Miles, 1987; Preston / Post, 1975; Wartick/Cochran, 1985; Anderson, 1989). It is usually studied in combination with the related area of managerial / marketing ethics (Clarke, 2004; Crawford, 2007).

One of an organization's primary goals is its obligation to operate in a socially responsible manner (Carroll, 1979; Colley et al., 2004; Kotsiris, 2002). Therefore, the recognition that the vast power of the modern corporation (Carroll, 2000; Mintzberg, 1983) carries with it an equally large responsibility (Chonko, 1995; Chonko/Hunt, 1985:339-359) to use that power responsibly is an important message for managers (French, 1995).

Numerous studies have tried to arrive at a consensus definition of social responsibility (Feltus et al., 2009) but have failed to do so (French, 1984). Although it is difficult to present a precise definition of social responsibility (Velentzas/Broni, 2017:579), much of the research attempts to identify various kinds of socially responsive activities (Haley, 1991), present the list of these activities to the business manager (Hoecklin, 1995, Triantari, 2024), and then measure and tabulate the relative frequency of response to which the activities are practiced by those agencies or people being questioned (Collins, 1995; Velentzas/Broni, 2017:623). Moreover, the concept of social responsibility is a continually evolving concept and means different things to different people (Stange, 1994:461).

Social responsibility refers to the obligation of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of objectives and values of our society (Bowen, 1978).

The fundamental idea of corporate social responsibility is that business corporations have an obligation to work for social betterment (Frederick, 1986; Broni, 2010).

Morality must be introduced as a factor that is external to both the profit motive and the law (Velentzas et al., 2018). This is the approach taken by most philosophers who write on business ethics, and is expressed most clearly in the following from a well-known business ethics essay (Laczniak, 1983): Proper ethical behavior exists on a plane above the law. The law merely specifies the lowest common denominator of acceptable behavior (Broni, 2009a; Vavouras, 2024).

The contemporary view is that businesses, as important and influential members of society, are responsible for helping maintain and improve society's overall welfare (Broni, 2009b).

A classic definition of corporate responsibility has introduced the following 5 propositions (Davis, 1975; Velentzas et al., 2018):

Proposition 1: Social responsibility arises from social power.

Proposition 2: Business shall operate as a two-way open system with open receipt of inputs from society and open disclosure of its operation to the public.

Proposition 3: Both the social costs and the social benefits of an activity, product, or service shall be thoroughly calculated and considered to decide whether or not to proceed with it.

Proposition 4: Social costs related to each activity, product, or service shall be passed on to the consumer.

Proposition 5: Business institutions, as citizens, have the responsibility to become involved in certain social problems that are outside of their normal areas of operation.

Many managers counter that the most socially responsible action a company can engage in is to maximize its profits [Milton Friedman's 1970 article 'The Social Responsibility of Business Is to Increase Its Profits' (*The New York Times Magazine*, September 13, 1970) is one of the most assigned, and most debated, papers in social issues pedagogy].

This view is founded on four related ideas (Stahl/Grigsby, 1997:100-101):

- Profit-maximizing is the only legitimate purpose of business.

- Social responsibility subverts the market system.
- The roles of government and business will be confused.
- The pursuit of social programs as well as economic goals could make corporations too powerful.

Managers today feel that a once clear separation between public and private sectors has broken down (Ciulla, 2004a; Ciulla, 2004b).

To respond effectively and efficiently to the major social issues and demands of the day, corporate social policy must be integrated into corporate strategy (Davis, 1973); at the same time, many of these stakeholders feel that much of the business community has not and is not adequately dealing with many of these social problems of concern (Velentzas/Broni, 2017:81).

In earlier times, managers had only to concern themselves with the economic results of their decisions (Ostas, 2001).

Today, it is generally accepted that business firms have social responsibilities (Fuller/Tilley, 2005).

Social responsibility is complex because it must be applied in a wide variety of areas (Mescon / Taylor, 1987).

Corporate social responsibility can be defined as the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time (Archie, 2000; Carroll, 1996; Kitson/Campbell, 1996; Velentzas/Broni, 2017:156).

The concept of corporate social responsibility means that organizations have moral, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities (Kotsiris, 2002; Kourtoglou, 2024) in addition to their responsibilities to earn a fair return for investors and comply with the law (Capaldi, 2005). A traditional view of the corporation suggests that its primary, if not sole, responsibility is to its owners, or stockholders (Decker, 2004).

However, CSR requires organizations to adopt a broader view of their responsibilities that includes not only stockholders, but many other constituencies as well, including employees, suppliers, customers, the local community (local self-government), state government, environmental groups, and other special interest groups (Viswesveran et al., 1998). Collectively, the various groups affected by the actions of an organization are called "stakeholders" (Velentzas/Broni, 2017:132)

Corporate social responsibility is related to, but not identical with, business ethics (Velentzas/Broni, 2017:61). Business ethics can be understood as the study of the ethical/moral dimensions of productive organizations and commercial activities, which includes ethical analyses of the production, distribution, marketing (Donaldson / Walsh, 2015), sale, and consumption of goods and services (Velentzas/Broni, 2010a; Velentzas/Broni, 2012).

The economic responsibilities refer to society's expectation that organizations will produce goods and services that are needed and desired by customers and sell those goods and services at a reasonable price (Decker, 2004). Organizations are expected to be efficient, profitable, and to keep shareholder interests in mind (McWilliams/Siegel, 2001). The legal responsibilities relate to the expectation that organizations will comply with the laws set down by society to govern competition in the marketplace (Stange, 1994). Organizations have thousands of legal responsibilities governing almost every aspect of their operations, including consumer and product laws, environmental laws, and employment laws (Conry/Nelson, 1991).

The ethical responsibilities concern societal expectations that go beyond the law, such as the expectation that organizations will conduct their affairs in a fair and just way (Broni, 2009a). This means that organizations are expected to do more than just comply with the law, but also make proactive efforts to anticipate and meet the norms of society, even if those norms are not formally enacted in law (Velentzas/Broni, 2010a; Velentzas/Broni, 2012). Finally, the discretionary responsibilities of corporations refer to society's expectation that organizations be good citizens (Kotsiris, 2002). This may involve such things as philanthropic support of programs benefiting a community or the nation (Collins, 1995; Mescon/Taylor, 1987). It may also involve donating employee expertise and time to worthy causes (Collier / Esteban, 2007).

Corporate policy should state clearly (Broni et al., 2017b:243, 344, 655). Illegal actions in any form will not be condoned or tolerated by the company (Conger/Kanungo, 1998).

Much of the battle that goes on between government, business, and society is a result of the conflict between their different views

on economic and social responsibility goals (Cornuel/Kletz, 2003).

Today, businesses cannot operate without contact and interaction with the government and its myriad of rules and regulations (Price, 2006).

The managers of the corporation must take responsibility to fulfill their duties to their stockholders and to the public (Green, 1994; Solomon, 1996) at large by extending themselves further by making more personal contact among employees, business management, the academic community, and political groups (Trevino/Nelson, 2004). This, in turn, will permit corporate leaders to become influential in political affairs to an extent never before realized (Bass/Steidlemeier, 1998; Broni, 2009b; Mendonca/Kanungo, 1998).

The most convenient way to explore this approach is to consider the supra-legal moral principles that philosophers commonly offer (Velentzas/Broni, 2017:591).

Five fairly broad moral principles suggested by philosophers are as follows (Fieser, 1996):

Harm principle: Businesses should avoid causing unwarranted harm.

Fairness principle: Businesses should be fair in all of their practices.

Human rights principle: businesses should respect human rights.

Autonomy principle: Businesses should not infringe on the rationally reflective choices of people.

Veracity principle: Businesses should not be deceptive in their practices.

The attraction of these principles is that they appeal to universal moral notions that no one would reasonably reject. But the problem with these principles is that they are *too* general (Fieser, 1996).

The above principles are abstract in nature. That is, they broadly mandate against harm and broadly endorse autonomy. Because they are abstract, they will be difficult to apply to concrete situations and consequently not give clear guidance in complex situations (Fieser, 1996). An alternative approach is to forget

the abstract and focus instead on concrete situations that affect the particular interests of consumers, workers, stockholders, or the community. The recent stakeholder approach to business ethics attempts to do this systematically (Velentzas/Broni, 2010a; Broni, 2009).

It may be expressed in the following (Velentzas/Broni, 2017):

Stakeholder principle: businesses should consider all stakeholders' interests that are affected by a business practice (Phillips, 2003).

A stakeholder is any party affected by a business practice, including employees, suppliers, customers, creditors, competitors, governments, and communities (Harrison / Freeman, 1999). Accordingly, the stakeholder approach to business ethics emphasizes that we should map out the various parties affected by a business practice (Clarkson, 1995). But this approach is limited since proponents of this view give us no clear formula for how to prioritize the various interests once we map them out (Weiss, 2003).

All stakeholders' interests must be treated equally -from the largest stockholder down to the garbage man who empties the factory dumpster. Probably no defenders of the stakeholder approach would advocate treating all interests equally (Freeman, 2000).

Alternatively, should the stockholders' interests have special priority? If we take this route, then the stakeholder principle (Marcoux, 2003) is merely a revision of the profit principle (Carroll, 1996).

Another way of looking at concrete moral/ethical obligations in business is to list them issue by issue (Goodpaster, 1991; Goodpaster/Nash, 1998). This is the strategy (Freeman, 1984) behind corporate codes of ethics that address specific topics such as confidentiality of corporate information, conflicts of interest, bribes, and political contributions (Freeman/Evan, 1990).

Although corporate codes of ethics are often viewed cynically as attempts to foster good public relations or to reduce legal liability, a corporate code of ethics is a reasonable model for understanding how we should articulate moral principles and introduce them into business practice (Heath, 2006). The practical advantage (Singhapakdi/Vitell, 1991:1-12; Singhapakdi et al., 1996:635-644) of this approach is that it directly stipulates the morality of certain action types, without becoming ensnared in

the problem of deriving particular actions from more abstract principles, such as the harm principle (Velentzas/Broni, 2010a). But, the limitation of the corporate code model is that the principles offered will appear to be merely rules of prudence or good manners (Smith/Quelch, 1993) unless we can establish their distinctly moral character (Smith, 1995:85-97; Tybout/Zaltman, 1974:357-368). And this requires relying on more general principles of ethics described above, which, we've seen, come with their own set of problems.

3. Ethical Principles for Business

3.1. The Six Pillars of Character

People with integrity value other principles, including honesty, respect, personal responsibility, compassion, and dependability. These qualities are integrated into the Six Pillars of Character (Josephson Institute).

The six Pillars of Character are the core ethical values of character counts, i.e., the core ethical values that transcend cultural, religious, and socioeconomic differences.

The pillars are (Velentzas, 2020:545; Velentzas et al., 2018):

- Trustworthiness
- Respect
- Responsibility
- Fairness
- Caring
- Citizenship

Each Pillar is consistently identified with a color: Trustworthiness - Blue, Respect - Gold / Yellow, Responsibility - Green, Fairness - Orange, Caring - Red, Citizenship - Purple.

a. Trustworthiness

Think "true blue"

- Be honest
- Don't deceive, cheat, or steal
- Be reliable - do what you say you'll do

- Have the courage to do the right thing
- Build a good reputation
- Be loyal - stand by your family, friends, and country

b. Respect

Treat others with respect; follow the Golden Rule

- Be tolerant and accepting of differences
- Use good manners, not bad language
- Be considerate of the feelings of others
- Don't threaten, hit, or hurt anyone
- Deal peacefully with anger, insults, and disagreements

c. Responsibility

Do what you are supposed to do

- Plan ahead
- Be diligent
- Persevere
- Do your best
- Use self-control
- Be self-disciplined
- Think before you act
- Be accountable for your words, actions, and attitudes
- Set a good example for others

d. Fairness

Play by the rules

- Take turns and share
- Be open-minded; listen to others
- Don't take advantage of others
- Don't blame others carelessly
- Treat all people fairly

e. Caring

Be kind

- Be compassionate and show you care
- Express gratitude
- Forgive others
- Help people in need
- Be charitable and altruistic

f. Citizenship

Do your share to make your community better

- Cooperate
- Get involved in community affairs
- Stay informed; vote
- Be a good neighbor
- Obey laws and rules
- Respect authority
- Protect the environment
- Volunteer

In addition to the Six Pillars of Character, the science (Josephson Institute) offers twelve Ethical Principles for Business Executives:

3.2. The Twelve Ethical Principles for Business Executives

Ethical values, translated into active language establishing standards or rules describing the kind of behavior an ethical person should and should not engage in, are ethical principles (Broni et al., 2018).

The following list of principles (Josephson Institute) incorporates the characteristics and values that most people associate with ethical behavior (Velentzas, 2019:25):

a. Honesty

Ethical executives are honest and truthful in all their dealings, and they do not deliberately mislead or deceive others by misrepresentations, overstatements, partial truths, selective omissions, or any other means.

b. Integrity

Ethical executives demonstrate personal integrity and the courage of their convictions by doing what they think is right even when there is great pressure to do otherwise; they are principled, honorable, and upright; they will fight for their beliefs. They will not sacrifice principle for expediency, be hypocritical, or unscrupulous.

c. Promise-Keeping & Trustworthiness

Ethical executives are worthy of trust. They are candid and forthcoming in supplying relevant information and correcting misapprehensions of fact, and they make every reasonable effort to fulfill the letter and spirit of their promises and commitments. They do not interpret agreements in an unreasonably technical or legalistic manner in order to rationalize non-compliance or create justifications for escaping their commitments.

d. Loyalty

Ethical executives are worthy of trust, demonstrate fidelity and loyalty to persons and institutions by friendship in adversity, support and devotion to duty; they do not use or disclose information learned in confidence for personal advantage. They safeguard the ability to make independent professional judgments by scrupulously avoiding undue influences and conflicts of interest. They are loyal to their companies and colleagues, and if they decide to accept other employment, they provide reasonable notice, respect the proprietary information of their former employer, and refuse to engage in any activities that take undue advantage of their previous positions.

e. Fairness

Ethical executives are fair and just in all dealings; they do not exercise power arbitrarily, and do not use overreaching or indecent means to gain or maintain any advantage, nor take undue advantage of another's mistakes or difficulties. Fair persons manifest a commitment to justice, the equal treatment of individuals, tolerance for and acceptance of diversity, they are open-minded; they are willing to admit they are wrong and, where appropriate, change their positions and beliefs.

f. Concern for Others

Ethical executives are caring, compassionate, benevolent, and kind; they like the Golden Rule, help those in need, and seek to accomplish their business objectives in a manner that causes the least harm and the greatest positive good.

g. Respect for Others

Ethical executives demonstrate respect for the human dignity, autonomy, privacy, rights, and interests of all those who have a stake in their decisions; they are courteous and treat all people with equal respect and dignity regardless of sex, race, or national origin.

h. Law Abiding

Ethical executives abide by laws, rules, and regulations relating to their business activities.

i. Commitment to Excellence

Ethical executives pursue excellence in performing their duties, are well-informed and prepared, and constantly endeavor to increase their proficiency in all areas of responsibility.

j. Leadership

Ethical executives are conscious of the responsibilities and opportunities of their position of leadership and seek to be positive ethical role models by their own conduct and by helping to create an environment in which principled reasoning and ethical decision making are highly prized.

k. Reputation and Morale

Ethical executives seek to protect and build the company's good reputation and the morale of its employees by engaging in no conduct that might undermine respect and by taking whatever actions are necessary to correct or prevent inappropriate conduct of others.

l. Accountability

Ethical executives acknowledge and accept personal accountability for the ethical quality of their decisions and omissions to themselves, their colleagues, their companies, and their communities.

4. Conclusion

Corporate social responsibility is essentially a concept in which companies voluntarily decide to contribute to a "better society" and a "cleaner environment". The socially responsible person not only fully fulfills his legal obligations, but also exceeds the limits of law enforcement by investing more in human resources and the environment.

Corporate social responsibility, as a process through which companies manage their relationships with a wide range of important stakeholders, which can substantially affect their license and its importance to business, becomes clear. That is why it is proposed to treat it as an "investment" and not as a cost, like "quality management".

Ethics in business and marketing shows the frightening dynamics, positive or negative, and the diversity of the social environment in which we live.

Moral education is not the miraculous elixir of virtue. But its lack would be a missed opportunity to develop the capacity for judgment with the rationale of promoting moral analysis in our new, unknown world.

We are facing a new categorical command, according to Kant: The better we want to live, the more responsibility develops; the more uncertainty spreads, the more responsibility increases; the more the "risk society" and its labyrinthine morphology expand, the more the dogmatic logic of prosperity through profit maximization will mutate into a logic of weighing.

The work in the moral field does not end with the revelation of only the moral truth, even with its passage to the moral consciousness.

The work in the ethical field in business and marketing does not end with the revelation of only the moral truth, even with its passage to the moral consciousness.

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Emotional Intelligence in the Works of Plato

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Abstract: One of the most significant figures in Western philosophy is Plato, who developed the theory of the soul that profoundly influences the understanding of human nature and existence. According to Plato, the tripartite division of the soul consists of the logical (logistikón), the spirited (thymoeides), and the appetitive (epithymetikon), with emotion residing in the spirited part. Since ancient times, the connection between emotion and an individual's behavior has been evident, as seen in the Delphic maxim "know thyself" and the Platonic assertion that "the whole process of learning has an emotional basis." This work delves into the deep philosophical exploration of the foundations of emotional intelligence through the fundamental Platonic works *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Phaedo*, *Charmides*, *Alcibiades*, and *Gorgias*, demonstrating that the tripartite soul and "know thyself" constitute the primary foundation for its subsequent development.

Keywords: *Plato, Emotional Intelligence, Know Thyself, Soul*

Introduction

In 1997, Goleman defined Emotional Intelligence as "the ability of an individual to recognize their own emotions and the emotions of others, to manage them effectively, and to create motivation for oneself."¹ Emotional intelligence is composed of four dimensions: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. More specifically:

- Self-awareness-self-knowledge is the individual's ability to fully understand their own emotions, tendencies, needs, and predispositions.
- Self-management-self-regulation is the individual's ability to manage their emotions, to be flexible, and to direct their behavior towards the desired direction.
- Social awareness-empathy is the individual's ability to perceive the thoughts of others, even if they themselves do not feel the same.
- Relationship management is the individual's ability to successfully handle their interactions with other people and to elicit the desired responses.

Although the term emotional intelligence was formulated by Daniel Goleman in the 20th century, it preoccupied human thought much earlier, particularly in the philosophy of Plato. Through his analysis of the balanced soul and "know thyself," Plato lays the earliest foundations of emotional intelligence. In the Platonic works *Republic* and *Phaedrus*, the harmony of the soul through self-knowledge is examined as a prerequisite for the existence of virtue and happiness (eudaimonia). In the Platonic *Phaedo*, self-awareness is a fundamental prerequisite for a person to choose what is higher and toward the Good. In the Platonic *Alcibiades*, the value of self-knowledge and the importance of its acquisition are emphasized, while it is simultaneously revealed that its absence constitutes an obstacle to assuming power in the city. In *Charmides*, reference is made to the concept of sophrosyne (temperance), which contains the notion of self-knowledge and self-regulation. In *Gorgias*, Socrates' stance towards Callicles is

¹ Goleman, D., *Emotional Intelligence*, Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group Inc, United States: 1996.

characterized by all the elements that compose the definition of emotional intelligence. In the *Republic*, Plato divides the soul into three parts: the logical (reason), the spirited (emotions), and the appetitive (desires). The harmonization of the three parts of the soul, with the logical dominating the appetitive with the assistance of the spirited, leads to virtue and the creation of internal balance. The dominance of reason over desires, self-knowledge, and discipline are core values in Platonic philosophy and set the foundations of emotional intelligence.

The internal balance of a person and their ability to recognize and manage their emotions are of paramount importance for the moral integrity of the individual. Thus, the term emotional intelligence may not have been coined by the ancient philosopher Plato, but he laid the foundations for its creation because "the entire process of learning has an emotional basis."²

The purpose of this work is to highlight the concept of emotional intelligence through the Platonic works, thereby showcasing the diachronicity and philosophical significance of the term.

Emotional Intelligence in Plato's *Republic*

The *Republic* (or On Justice) is one of Plato's most important works, written approximately from 380 BC to 374 BC. This particular work influenced many areas of everyday life, such as philosophy and political theory³. Plato's *Republic* does not directly refer to the concept of emotional intelligence, but can be indirectly connected in three passages of the work. A first connection of emotional intelligence with the work *Republic* is through the tripartite division of the soul. In the *Republic*, the city has a threefold stratification of classes, resembling the tripartite division of the soul. The soul, as an immaterial element of the human being, is recognized by modern psychologists through its manifestations via the body. Understanding the concept of the soul is difficult; Plato

² Dhani P. & Sharma T., "Emotional intelligence; History, models and measures", *International Journal of Science Technology and Management*, 5:7, 2016, pp. 189-201.

³ Naddaf, G., "Poetic Myths of the Afterlife: Plato's Last Song", in Rick Berrinez and Keping Wang (eds.), *Reflections on Plato's Poetics*, Berrima: Academic Printing and Publishing, 2016, pp. 111-136.

resorts to myth and imagery because he does not refer to some form or Idea of the soul. In the *Republic*, he gives the tripartite description of the soul based on the development of his political theory concerning the ideal state, because the ideal state serves as an image-model of the soul⁴. The soul is divided into three parts: the logical (logistikon), which is the divine part of the soul; the spirited (thymoeides), which is the will and emotion; and the appetitive (epithymetikon), which includes all human desires⁵. The spirit is the helper in the effort of the logical to dominate the appetitive. If a person desires to be unified, their interiority must be characterized by balance and harmony. The internal harmony of the soul is achieved through the division of the soul into three parts, where the appetitive is subordinated to the logical⁶. The internal harmony of the soul as a balance between emotion and reason is a result of self-awareness and the management of emotions⁷. A second connection of emotional intelligence with the work *Republic* (or *On Justice*) is through the formulation of the concept of justice. Platonic justice presupposes the tripartite division of the human soul, parts which are paralleled with the three classes of the Platonic politeia (state). Justice as an ethical concept, with the balance of the three parts of the human soul under the rule of the logical, resembles the human capacity to control and manage their emotions to maintain balance⁸. Furthermore, if each part of the soul, like each person, attended to its own functions and emotions without interfering with those of others, then there would be balance and justice. Also, a person with empathy who understands their own emotions and those of others will be just in the city: "to do one's own business and not to be a busybody is justice"⁹.

⁴ Plato, *Republic*, Book IV, 435 e – 436 a.

⁵ Plato, *Republic*, 440e, 441a.

⁶ Triantari, S.A., *Ethics in decision-making*, Thessaloniki: K. M. Stamoulis-I. Harbandidis, 2021, pp. 7-8. Cf. Triantari, S., "From Coaching to Mentor Leader: Profile and Skills of the Mentor Leader in Human Resources Management", *Dia-noesis*, 15, 2024, pp. 103-22, <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.38176>.

⁷ Triantari, S.A., *LEADERSHIP THEORIES, From the Aristotelian Rhetorician to the modern Leader*. Thessaloniki: Harbandidis, 2020.

⁸ Landauer, M., "What is constitutional in Platonic 'constitutional rule'? On Melissa Lane's of Rule and Office: Plato's Ideas of the Political". *History of European Ideas*, 50:6, 2024, pp. 1100–1102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2024.2322843>

⁹ Plato, *Republic*, 433a.

Finally, a third connection of emotional intelligence with the work *Republic* is in the seventh chapter, which discusses the Platonic allegory of the cave. The allegory of the cave involves a journey of self-knowledge. In the world of the cave, no prisoner distinguishes themselves from the others; there is no self-knowledge or knowledge of others, as they see only shadows of themselves and others. The ascent towards the light is a journey towards self-knowledge. The world of the cave depicts the soul's attachment to desires, resulting in mental confusion, disease, and imbalance of the three parts of the soul¹⁰. The harmonization of the three parts of the soul is the balance between the logical and the appetitive, through which a person, via the mind (nous), can recognize and manage their emotions. Self-awareness becomes the cornerstone of human existence because, through it, a person knows where they are, where they come from, and where they are going, and can relate to and manage their relationships with other people.

Emotional Intelligence in Plato's *Phaedo*

Plato's *Phaedo* is one of his most important works because it refers to the trial and execution of Socrates, and his final thoughts on the immortality of the soul. In these dialogues, Plato focuses on the soul's liberation from desires, the dominance of the logical, and the search for truth by controlling emotions. In his final hours, Socrates speaks about the care of the soul and the need for a person to know their true nature¹¹. In the *Phaedo*¹², knowledge liberates the soul from fears, superstitions, delusions, and desires, enabling it to gaze upon the purely intelligible, freed from the tyranny of the body. Reason purifies the soul of every earthly element,

¹⁰ Leigh, F., *Self-Knowledge in Ancient Philosophy: The Eighth Keeling Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2020, pp. 104-127.

¹¹Ebrey, D., Plato's <I>*Phaedo*</I>: Forms, Death, and the Philosophical Life (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108787475>

¹² Plato, *Phaedo*, 82 c ff. Cf. Vavouras E., "The platonic proof of the immortality of the soul with three arguments: a) the argument of anamnesis, b) the argument of the opposites, c) the argument of similarity - *Meno* 80a-86c and *Phaedo* 70e-80e", *Dia-noesis: A journal of philosophy*, Issue 8, 2020, pp. 127-140.

brings it into contact with the divine and the intelligible elements, and protects it from all injustice, which latter removes the soul from its resemblance to God¹³. Plato tries to teach that rational order does not mean immorality and unbridled freedom, which is dominated by desires and pleasures, leading to the deviation of humans from the correct course of their lives. Rather, when the logical dominates the other two parts of the soul, it signifies commitment, limits, and order to unbridled pleasure. The ruling mind (nous), at every moment, knows every desire, every manifestation of the soul, and this knowledge of the self always leads it to the most advantageous choice, "the choice of the best"¹⁴. Self-awareness, therefore, is a fundamental prerequisite for a person to choose the higher and the Good, without being swept away by passions, because the study of death is a removal from impulses and an internal introspection.

Emotional Intelligence in Plato's *Phaedrus*

Plato's *Phaedrus* refers to dialogues between Socrates and his young student *Phaedrus* concerning love, rhetoric, and the immortality of the soul, and was written in his mature years around 386-367 BC.¹⁵. In the *Phaedrus*, he depicts the soul as a chariot with a charioteer and two horses, one noble and the other unruly. The noble horse represents will and noble emotions, while the bad horse represents desires and passions. The spirited part is the beautiful, white horse, which assists the charioteer in taming the unruly, black horse.¹⁶. In the myth of the *Phaedrus*, due to hubris and the charioteer's inability to tame the soul, the bad and intractable horse causes the soul to lose its wings, while the appetitive, through desires, weighs it down, and it falls towards the earth.¹⁷. The soul, being in an unstable state, unites with the body to acquire stability and cease wandering.¹⁸.

¹³ Plato, *Phaedo*, 106 b; *Republic*, Book IX, 609 b and 610 e – 611 a.

¹⁴ Plato, *Phaedo*, 99 b.

¹⁵ Ryan, P., *Plato's Phaedrus: A commentary for Greek readers*. University of Oklahoma press, 2012.

¹⁶ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246 a-b and 253 d.

¹⁷ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 248 c.

¹⁸ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246 c.

In the case of the soul and the body, which are in constant conflict, if the unruly, black horse prevails, it destroys the chariot and the rider, and the soul loses its wings, because the charioteer and his horses constitute a single organism; therefore, both are saved or both are lost.¹⁹ The unruly horse distorts everything and makes judgments arbitrarily, unable to attain true knowledge.

This allegory in the myth of the *Phaedrus* shows the need for internal balance and self-mastery, the regulation between reason and emotion—elements that compose emotional intelligence. In the Platonic *Phaedrus*, emotions assist in the harmony of the soul; the charioteer tries to tame the black horse, much like modern psychological thought strives not to suppress emotions but to understand them²⁰.

Emotional Intelligence in Plato's *Charmides*

Plato's *Charmides* belongs to the Socratic dialogues and deals with the concept of *sophrosyne* (temperance), which encompasses the notion of self-knowledge and self-restraint: "For I almost say that this is temperance: knowing oneself."²¹

In the *Charmides*²² In the discussion about temperance, Socrates formally states that a person who possesses *sophrosyne* knows, in essence, what they know and what they do not know, because the awareness of knowledge is, in a way, knowledge of the self. When a person knows their emotions, they will act according to them. The individual's right actions, as moral actions towards others, make the individual happy (*eudaimon*) together with others. Conversely, what the individual does not know, they will not change

¹⁹ Belfiore, E., "Dancing with the Gods: The Myth of the Chariot in Plato's *Phaedrus*". *American Journal of Philology*, 127:2, 2006, pp. 185–217.

²⁰ Mauricio Garcia Dotto, P., "My dear *Phaedrus*, where is it you're going, and where have you come from": An Interpretation of the Opening Line of the *Phaedrus*. *Revista Archai*, 33, e03319, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.14195/1984-249X.33.19>

²¹ Plato, *Charmides*, 164d.

²² Chappell, S.G., *Humility among the ancient Greeks*. United Kingdom: Routledge, 2020.

their stance and disposition; they do not realize their situation, and will not proceed to actions and activities.²³

According to Julia Annas²⁴, in ancient Greek philosophy, sophrosyne has at least two meanings. Sophrosyne is defined both as self-control and as self-knowledge. Regarding the significance of self-knowledge, Annas emphasizes that it concerns knowledge of the individual's role in the social order and knowledge of their obligations towards others. Consequently, self-knowledge is formulated through three claims: a) self-knowledge is the essence of the virtue of sophrosyne, b) self-knowledge equates to the individual knowing their role in the social order, and c) knowledge of obligations towards others. Furthermore, regarding the aspect of emotional self-regulation and control, in the work *Charmides*, sophrosyne is also described as calmness and moderation: "[Critias] said that temperance seems to him to be doing everything in an orderly and quiet manner, both walking in the streets and conversing, and doing all other things likewise"²⁵. In the *Charmides*, Plato does not use the term "emotional intelligence," but refers to sophrosyne as knowledge of the self, self-regulation, and internal balance.

Emotional Intelligence in Plato's *Alcibiades*

Plato, in many of his works, refers to self-knowledge, with the most characteristic work for the concept "know thyself" being the dialogue *Alcibiades* I. In this work, Plato, through Socrates, identifies the concept of self-knowledge with knowledge of the soul: "It is the soul, then, which he bids us know—he who tells us to know ourselves"²⁶. In his dialogue with *Alcibiades*, Socrates tries to teach the young man the value of self-knowledge; he tries to lead him to the realization that he knows nothing, since the very awareness

²³ Moore, C., Plato's "*Charmides*." *Philosophical Review*, 134:2, 2025, pp. 203–208. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-11676141>

²⁴ Annas, J., "*Self-knowledge in Early Plato*", Platonic Investigations, Washington, D.C.: "Catholic University of America Press", 1985, pp.123.

²⁵ Plato, *Charmides*, 159b.

²⁶ Plato, *Alcibiades* IX, 130e and Joosse, A., "Olympiodorus of Alexandria: Exegete, Teacher, Platonic Philosopher". *BRILL*, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004466708>

of ignorance constituted for Socrates a parameter of self-knowledge (Plato, *Alcibiades* I). Through this dialogue, the value of self-knowledge and the importance of its acquisition are highlighted, while it is simultaneously revealed that its absence constitutes an obstacle to assuming power in Athens²⁷. (124b) "My dear fellow, believe me and the inscription at Delphi, 'Know thyself'—that our rivals are not these men whom you think, but we can only overcome them by care and skill." Furthermore, truth is connected to the process of self-knowledge. Agreement comes from both sides, however, through two negations with an affirmative function, with *Alcibiades* stating, "For my part, I am not lying"²⁸, and Socrates replying, "Nor indeed am I"²⁹. Another connection of emotional intelligence with the Platonic work *Alcibiades* is the relationship of the concept of self-knowledge through the seeing of one soul within another, and this is done through the example of the eyes. The philosopher analyzes that the part on which the soul must focus, if it wants to know the soul, is where the virtue of the soul exists, which is wisdom. This feature is the composite of knowledge and prudence (phronesis): "Can we say, then, that there is anything more divine in the soul than this, to which knowing and thinking belong?"³⁰. This composite constitutes the center of the soul, just as the pupil constitutes the center of the eye, where the point of its virtue exists. The virtue of the soul is the characteristic that makes the individual resemble God. "Then this part of it resembles God, and whoever looks at this and comes to know all that is divine—God and wisdom—will thereby also best know himself"³¹. Based on the above, we manage to learn about ourselves by knowing God. Essentially, Socrates' proposal to *Alcibiades* is an erotic surrender of the young man's soul to his experienced teacher, who possesses virtue and self-knowledge and will

²⁷ Plato, *Alcibiades* IX, 124b and Ambury, J. M., *Neoplatonic Pedagogy and the Alcibiades I: Crafting the Contemplative* (1st ed.). Cambridge Core, Cambridge University Press, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009109963>

²⁸ Cf. *Alcibiades* IX, 124d.

²⁹ Cf. *Alcibiades* IX, 124d.

³⁰ *Alcibiades* IX, 133c. Caution is required here: "εἰδέναι" (to know) refers to knowledge of the "Form" (eidos) and thus is not identical to wisdom (sophia) or prudence (phronesis).

³¹ *Alcibiades* IX, 133c.

help the young man to introspect on his soul³². It is a relationship between beloved (eromenos) and lover (erastes), where each participant becomes the eye within which the other will be mirrored, on the precondition of the unconditional acceptance of one by the other. In this way, *Alcibiades* will become a partaker of virtue through the mutual equality between the two. Socrates is the lover, through whom the virtue of self-knowledge will be transmitted to *Alcibiades*. Through this process, the body will be subordinated to the superior soul, and this will result in the acquisition of those necessary provisions for *Alcibiades* to engage with the political affairs of the city. Through seeing one soul within another, done through the example of the eyes, one encounters virtue, introspects their own soul, and learns about themselves. These elements compose the definition of emotional intelligence.

Emotional Intelligence in Plato's *Gorgias*

The Platonic work *Gorgias* constitutes a fundamental work of political and ethical philosophy. It is reputed to have been written approximately between 387 BC and 380 BC. At its core lies the conflict between rhetoric and philosophy, between power and justice³³. The concept of emotional intelligence can be traced through Socrates' dialogues, from the way he manages desires, conflicts, and his stance on the care of the soul.

Plato's *Gorgias* is a work where the limits of human ethics are tested. Emotional intelligence becomes the criterion of authenticity, the touchstone that distinguishes the rhetorician from the philosopher, the powerful from the happy (eudaimon), Calicles from Socrates. In Plato, the Lydian stone is used metaphorically as a symbol for testing truth and morality. Plato refers to the Lydian

³² The educational relationship proposed here can be represented by the analogy 1:1. It should be noted, however, that the education here concerns virtue. In this case, the multitude cannot meet the necessity, so with these references, the answer is given to what was discussed in section 110 ff., where the discussion focused on the concept of "justice." Proclus in his comments on this dialogue develops the issue extensively. For an approach to this Proclean interpretation of the aforementioned Platonic passage and the role the multitude plays in learning justice, see J. Mintoff, «Did *Alcibiades* Learn Justice from the Many», *Alcibiades and the Socratic Lover-Educator*, pp. 90-106.

³³ Dodds, E. R., *Plato: Gorgias*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959.

stone, which was a special rock used to assay the content of gold or silver through rubbing and examining the marks³⁴.

Specifically, Plato mentions the Lydian stone at the point in the dialogue where Socrates argues that rhetoric, although it can be a powerful art, must be used for the good and the truth. The Lydian stone serves as a standard of comparison to distinguish good from evil, true virtue from its counterfeit, just as gold is distinguished from other metals. Therefore, the "Lydian stone" in the *Gorgias* symbolizes ethics and truth, and serves to judge the quality of rhetoric. In the *Gorgias*, such a moment is the clash between Socrates and Callicles.³⁵, where Socrates is called upon to confront a soul unrestrained by desires.

Callicles is a prime example in philosophy of the contemptuous challenging of conventional morality. Callicles defends hedonism, the dominance of the strong, and denounces the virtue of justice as an artificial brake on self-interest and a deception that intelligent people should see through³⁶.

From Callicles' stance, the elements of emotional intelligence are absent; he extols hedonism, power, and imposition.

483c-d: "That is the reason why it is said to be wrong and shameful by law (nomos) to seek to have more than the many, and they call this 'doing wrong'. But nature herself, in my opinion, shows that it is just for the better to have more than the worse, and the more powerful than the less powerful."

491e-492a: "[Callicles says] that the man who is to live rightly should allow his own desires to be as great as possible and not restrain them, and that through courage and intelligence (phronesis) he should be capable of ministering to them when they are at their greatest, and of satisfying every appetite with whatever it desires."

498d: "Don't you realize that you say the good are good by the presence of good things, and the bad are bad by the presence of bad things? And that the good things are the pleasures, and the bad things the pains? "

³⁴ Vavouras, E., *Plato, Gorgias: The Right of the most powerful in ancient Greek thought*, Thessaloniki: Zitros, 2008, p. 519.

³⁵ Vavouras, E., *Plato, Gorgias: The Right of the most powerful in ancient Greek thought*, Thessaloniki: Zitros, 2008, pp. 217-260.

³⁶ Kamtekar, R., "The Profession of Friendship: Callicles, Democratic Politics, and Rhetorical Education in Plato's *Gorgias*", *Ancient Philosophy*, 2005.

Furthermore, regarding the thorough examination of the soul, a person must have three qualities to live in an orderly and adapted manner: knowledge (episteme), goodwill (evnoia), and frankness (parrhesia). Socrates discerned in Callicles these qualities that set him apart from the masses and even from great political orators, elements that make him a touchstone.³⁷ But Callicles represents immoral behavior as a new morality.³⁸, because according to Socrates and Plato, Callicles is wrong regarding the content he gives to human nature, to intelligence, virtue, and the good, regarding the meaning of political power, and also regarding the purpose of the superior man³⁹.

Conversely, Socrates advocates for the control of desires⁴⁰, sets the care of the soul as the ultimate goal⁴¹, insists that justice and temperance (sophrosyne) lead to happiness (eudaimonia), and shows empathy to "heal" Callicles—all these elements are recognized today as high-level emotional intelligence. Socrates argues that philosophy is the art of internal harmony and that a life without virtue is like a leaky jar, a soul full of cracks in which nothing can be retained; the soul becomes insatiable and unstable⁴², elements that show emotional immaturity and a lack of emotional self-regulation.

Plato's *Gorgias* is indeed a philosophical laboratory where the boundaries of good and evil are tested. Emotional intelligence is not merely a tool, but the Lydian Stone. Emotional intelligence, as the Lydian Stone, distinguishes the just and happy person from the powerful but morally poor one, where the ability to manage desires, emotions, and relationships is absent—elements that compose the definition of emotional intelligence.

³⁷ Vavouras, E., *Plato, Gorgias: The Right of the most powerful in ancient Greek thought*, Thessaloniki: Zitros, 2008, p. 318.

³⁸ Woolf, R., "*Callicles and Socrates: Psychic (Dis)harmony in the Gorgias*", Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy, 2000.

³⁹ Doyle, J., "The Fundamental Conflict in Plato's *Gorgias*", Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy, 30, 2006, pp. 87–100. Cf. Futter D., "Lear on Irony and Socratic Method", *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 8 (1), 2023, pp. 111–126. <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.31045>.

⁴⁰ Plato, *Gorgias*, 503c.

⁴¹ Plato, *Gorgias*, 513d-e.

⁴² Dodds, E.R., *Plato: Gorgias*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959.

“Know Thyself”

Socrates prioritized self-knowledge, inspired by the Delphic maxim "Know Thyself." Socrates does not stop at the oracle's pronouncements but seeks to discover the truth. In all of Plato's dialogues, the problem of self-awareness is raised. Plato's purpose is for the listener and reader to take an active part in the whole process, so that each one draws their own personal conclusions; this is why many of his dialogues do not end with a clear conclusion. Socrates forces his interlocutor to think and position themselves on a completely different, philosophical level, which is beyond ordinary daily conversation. Interaction with Socrates is a true philosophical and experiential quest. The person questions the purpose of their life, its origin, and its destiny. Plato does not provide specific answers; the only thing he offers is the method of dialectic, which can lead a person to know and make their own decisions with certainty. G. Reale considers self-awareness and the care of the self (*epimeleia eautou*) to be prominent pillars of his philosophy, centered on the study of man⁴³⁴³. A person who is ignorant of themselves cannot improve in anything, because they cannot know what they are called to improve. A person's stance in real life moves them to acquire knowledge about themselves. Self-awareness is the cornerstone of Plato's philosophy, with the result that self-awareness, as an act, significantly influences the entire being of the human. Self-awareness constitutes the beginning and the end of philosophy. The prisoner cannot leave the cave without self-awareness⁴⁴⁴⁴. The examination of the soul must be continuous because conditions change over time, and the person needs to reposition themselves in relation to them. However, the person who chooses the care of the body is subjugated to various desires and pleasures, resulting in a corresponding life full of tyranny and injustice. The pure state of the soul is intellection (*noesis*), and pure knowledge is the knowledge of the intelligible and the Ideas. Pure knowledge is achieved through dialectic, as the final stage of education for the acquisition of virtue. C. Griswold states that self-knowledge cannot exist without the existence of the

⁴³ Reale, G., *Socrate, Alla Scoperta Della Sapienza Umana*. Milano: Rizzoli, 2013.

⁴⁴ Plato, *Republic*, Book VII, 514 a ff.

Idea of the soul, because, since the Ideas provide the possibility of pure knowledge, a person without the existence of the Idea could not know their soul and themselves⁴⁵. The care of the soul has the consequence that the person awakens the souls of their fellow humans, so that all may live a happy life (bios eudaimon) in the city and return to the land of the blessed after the end of this life. Socrates "'know thyself" constitutes the cornerstone of emotional intelligence; the individual perceives their emotions as soon as they are born within them. Psychologists use the term self-awareness instead of "know thyself," meaning the individual's constant attention to their internal states⁴⁶. The Delphic maxim "know thyself" means the full knowledge and deep understanding of the human's psychic and intellectual state: "It is the soul, then, which he bids us know—he who tells us to know ourselves"⁴⁷. It is a process of the individual's conscious penetration into their own interiority.

Conclusions

1. Although emotional intelligence was formulated in the 20th century, its roots lie in Platonic philosophy. Plato did not separate the mind from the soul but believed that true knowledge is created by the harmony between the logical, the spirited (emotions), and the appetitive. The theory of the tripartite division and harmony of the soul in Plato's *Republic* constitutes the ancient basis for the recognition and management of emotions. Furthermore, the balance between reason and emotions is achieved by a just person distinguished by self-knowledge, self-control (enkrateia), and internal balance—core values of emotional intelligence.

2. In the Platonic work *Phaedo*, Socrates faces the topic of death with composure because he pursues self-knowledge; he exhibits emotional self-regulation and empathy through the guidance of rational order towards the immortality of the soul.

⁴⁵ Griswold, C., *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986, pp. 2-3, 7, 43.

⁴⁶ Goleman, D., *Emotional Intelligence*, 25th Anniversary Edition, London: Bloomsbury, 2020.

⁴⁷ *Alcibiades IX*, 130e.

3. The allegory in the *Phaedrus* myth demonstrates the need for internal harmony and self-mastery, balancing reason and emotion—elements that compose emotional self-regulation.

4. Temperance (sophrosyne) in the *Charmides* is also a central Platonic virtue because it refers to the understanding of one's own emotions and those of others; that is, sophrosyne refers to empathy. Sophrosyne is also referred to as moderation, self-restraint (engrateia), which helps a person manage their emotions and do what is right. Empathy and emotional control are basic skills of emotional intelligence.

5. In the Platonic *Alcibiades*, the concept of self-knowledge is identified with the knowledge of the soul. One encounters virtue, introspects their own soul, and learns about oneself through seeing one's soul within another, illustrated by the metaphor of the eyes.

6. In the *Gorgias*, emotional intelligence resembles a Lydian Stone that distinguishes the just and happy person from the powerful but morally deficient person, where the ability to manage desires, emotions, and relationships is absent—elements that compose the definition of emotional intelligence. Socrates advocates for the control of passions, places supreme emphasis on the care of the soul, and insists that justice and temperance lead to happiness; finally, he shows empathy to "heal" Callicles. All the above elements are recognized in our time as markers of high emotional intelligence.

7. Furthermore, a basic skill of emotional intelligence is encapsulated in the maxim "know thyself." The saying "Know Thyself," found at the entrance of the Delphic oracle, constitutes the supreme expression and foundation of self-knowledge. Self-knowledge, therefore, arises from the cultivation of the soul, which is the seat of the cognitive functions and of human action toward truth, prudence (phronesis), and knowledge of the self.

Emotional intelligence is thus directly related to the Platonic idea in the modern era because it concerns the profound awareness of one's own emotions and those of others, coupled with the effort for conscious action. The goal of emotional intelligence and "know thyself" is the harmonization of the individual's inner world with the attainment of a virtuous and happy life within society.

- Leigh, F., *Self-Knowledge in Ancient Philosophy: The Eighth Keeling Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2020, pp. 104-127.
- Mauricio Garcia Dotto, P., “My dear *Phaedrus*, where is it you’re going, and where have you come from”: An Interpretation of the Opening Line of the *Phaedrus*. *Revista Archai*, 33, e03319, 2023. https://doi.org/10.14195/1984-249X_33_19
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The Philosophy of Mediation Procedures in Ancient Greece

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Abstract

This study examines the historical development of mediating mechanisms for dispute resolution in Ancient Greece, starting from ancient Greek myths and Homer's epics to the implementation of the first mediating procedures in practice. It explores not only the institutional and practical application of these methods—such as the arbitrators in Athens or inter-state arbitrations—but, above all, the philosophical background that legitimized them and made them effective. A philosophical background that is, on the one hand, similar to today's, since the constituent elements of mediation remain largely the same, but on the other hand, so different, since the criterion for selecting the person called upon to conduct the mediation process was his prestige, their character, and their position in the state, rather than their appointment under relevant legislation. Particular attention is given to the works of Demosthenes, Isaeus, and Aristotle, which reveal not only the legal and procedural aspects of early processes resembling mediation, but also their ethical background, leading us to conclude that

ancient Greek mediation procedures were based on a strong ethical philosophy whose ultimate goal was to preserve social peace and the prosperity of the city.

Keywords: *Ancient Greece, mediation processes, private and public arbitration, Demosthenes, Isaeus, Aristotle, philosophy of mediation, social cohesion*

1. Introduction

Conflict resolution is a fundamental need of every human society, and ancient Greece was no exception in this regard: The roots of mediation procedures can be found in ancient Greece under the influence of ancient Greek philosophy.¹ Beyond the official courts, such as the Heliaea of Athens, the ancient Greeks developed and made extensive use of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, mainly arbitration and compromise (“*dialagi*”), which were usually applied as a preliminary stage to the first (arbitration). Although these procedures are not entirely identical to the modern concept of mediation, they incorporated its central principles: The participation of the parties, the use of a neutral third party who possesses the guarantees of impartiality, the pursuit of a mutually acceptable solution through an initial attempt at compromise, and the joint acceptance of the implementation of the decision of the parties involved.²

Examining the concepts of “ethos”, “pathos”, and “logos” as criteria for credibility, emotional intelligence, and rational solution, respectively, which must be present in the mediator, we discover that these elements already existed in ancient myths and Homer’s epic poem, *The Iliad*. At the same time, the community’s approval of the mediator’s decision prevailed as an element of social cohesion. This philosophical and ideological background of ancient times led to arbitration in the 4th century BC as the main mediation process, which constituted a comprehensive Pan-Hellenic legal system for the administration of justice and was divided into public and private. Through the principles of the leading orators of antiquity, such as Demosthenes, Isaeus and the great philosopher

¹ Delouka–Inglessi C., *Mediation in Greece / Mediation in Europe at the cross-road of different legal cultures*, ARACNE editrice S.r., Rome, 2009, p.53. And Antontelos S. and Plessa E., *Mediation in civil and commercial matters* Sakkoulas Publications, Athens–Thessaloniki, 2014, pp. 3–5

² Theocharis D., *Mediation as a means of alternative dispute resolution*, Legal Library, Athens, 2015.

Aristotle, the philosophical background of out-of-court dispute resolution procedures becomes clearly apparent highlighting the deeply rooted belief that justice does not always lie in the strict application of the law but in a set of other factors: In the freedom of the parties to choose an out-of-court method of dispute resolution, in the exhaustion of their attempts at reconciliation, in the sense of justice of the community, in its principles and values, in the figure of the average conscientious citizen as the “ adjudicator ” (to reconcile, to dissolve)³ and finally, the importance of the oath on the part of both the arbitrators and the parties involved, if requested - as a sacred guarantee of a fair decision on the one hand and as proof of the truth of the arguments put forward on the other. In any case, however, mediation procedures in ancient Greece were governed by the Aristotelian philosophy of the ‘golden mean’ (moderation) in the sense of the ‘middle way’ and “justice as balance”, as described in *Nicomachean Ethics*⁴ (*Ēthika Nikomacheia*) Because justice consists of the middle ground between injustice and excess, the just person acts as a ‘mediator’ between opposing parties. Mediation, therefore, is in harmony with Aristotle’s ethics of balance and logic.

2. Historical review of the first mediation procedures in antiquity

2.1 From ancient myths to the Homeric epics

2.1a. The Myth of the Abduction of Persephone

The earliest traces of the mediation process can be found in ancient Greek mythology, particularly in the myth of Hades and Persephone—a narrative that already demonstrates distinct roles among the parties involved. Although the term *mediator* was not used in Ancient Greece, the practices of private and public arbitration reflected key elements of what we now recognize as institutionalized mediation. Within this myth, two fundamental concepts

³ Magnisali S. A., *The Administration of Justice in Ancient Athens (5th and 4th centuries BC)* LEGAL LIBRARY publications, Athens, 2008 p. 61.

⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (V 1129b), (translation/comments Lipourlis D) Zitros publications, Thessaloniki, 2006 .

emerge that continue to underpin the mediation process today: the intervention of a third party as a person who, on the one hand, will encourage the parties to resolve the dispute and, on the other hand, will contribute so that the decision will be taken without passion.

According to the philosophy of the ancient Greeks, it was possible to influence the other side in decision-making. In other words, there was a belief that one could influence others in their decision-making by strengthening the credibility of one's own side and by understanding the other. This method of influence consists of the following stages: "Ethos", "pathos", and "logos". "Ethos" can be defined as a person's moral character and credibility. "Pathos" refers mainly to a person's emotional intelligence, i.e., their ability to understand the other side and put themselves in its shoes. Finally, "logos" concerns reason and a person's talent for persuasion and presentation of ideas.⁵ The elements of this philosophical approach, which originated in Ancient Greece, are applied today in practice in the institutionalized process of mediation, where the mediator's credibility is based on their intellectual and psychological background and experience, which are complemented by the necessary knowledge of the negotiation process.⁶

The myth of Hades and Persephone exemplifies the importance that the ancient Greeks placed on mediation. This is further underscored by the fact that the "negotiating table" is occupied by highly revered gods who are called upon to resolve the conflict that has arisen. The enduring presence of mediation, from ancient myths to contemporary practices of out-of-court dispute resolution,⁷ demonstrates its timeless connection to human nature and its role as an expression of civilization.⁸ According to the myth,

⁵ Gutierrez A., *The Seasons of ADR — A study of Mediation Tactics in the Context of Ancient Greek Mythology*, The American College of Civil Trial Mediators 2012, and Hurley D., *Greek Philosophy And Mediation Practice*, July 2008, <https://mediate.com/greek-philosophy-and-mediation-practice/> (last visited Oct 2025).

⁶ Stulberg J.B. & Love, L.P., *Between the Parties: The Neutral Third Party. Strategies for Successful Mediation*. (Translation: Mary Orfanou) 2nd Edition, Legal Library Publications, Athens, 2014.

⁷ Hurley D., *Greek Philosophy And Mediation Practice*, July 2008, <https://mediate.com/greek-philosophy-and-mediation-practice/> (last visited Oct 2025).

⁸ Plevri A. *Mediation in civil and commercial cases*. Sakkoulas Publications, Athens – Thessaloniki, 2021.

Persephone was the daughter of Zeus and Demeter, the goddess of fertility and harvest. She was so beautiful that Pluto, the god of Hades, fell in love with her and decided to kidnap her. One day, while Persephone was picking flowers with the Oceanids nymphs, she wandered off to pick a narcissus (the green flower) when suddenly the earth split open. Then Pluto appeared with his chariot and snatched the girl into the Underworld, without anyone realizing what had happened. Demeter searched in vain for her daughter, and her grief and tears caused the earth and crops to wither. The people were starving, and the days passed without Persephone reappearing. One day, the Sun, having seen everything, took pity on Demeter and told her what had happened. Zeus, moved by the pleas of the starving people, ordered Hades to release his daughter. Unable to disobey Zeus' orders, Pluto trapped Persephone by giving her a pomegranate to eat before letting her go, knowing that if she consumed food in the Underworld, she would be bound to it and unable to leave. The daughter ate only six seeds, and when Demeter found out, she was furious. The girl ate only six seeds, and when Demeter learned of this, she flew into a rage. At this stage of the family conflict, the goddess Rhea—Titan mother of fertility, motherhood, and reproduction, and mother of the three parties involved—Zeus, Hades, and Demeter—intervened to help find a solution that would satisfy all sides. A compromise is proposed: For every seed she had eaten, Persephone would stay in Hades for one month. Finally, an agreement is reached whereby Persephone would spend half the year with her mother and the rest with Pluto. From then on, during the six months that Persephone was in Hades, Demeter mourned, and with her mourned all of nature, and during the six months that she returned to Earth, everything blossomed with her joy.⁹

Attempting to relate the myth to today's reality, we could say that the plot of the myth resembles the resolution of a family dispute, as it deals with issues such as divorce and communication, or child custody with the parent. In any case, we have the function of a) an alternative resolution of the dispute with the parties involved; b) with Rea acting as mediator, or, according to others, the

⁹ Kakridi. I., *Greek Mythology, publication of Athens*, Athens, 1986.

goddess of justice, Themis,¹⁰ known for her impartiality and neutrality. She is often depicted in statues as blind—emphasizing public justice and the ideal of objectivity—holding scales in her left hand to symbolize fairness and a sword in her right to represent the power of justice (as also depicted by Homer).¹¹ Moreover, in the myth, c) there is a conflict of interest; and d) there are participants. They have already expressed their intentions, and the confrontation that has arisen is a given. Resolving the problem is vital, as according to the myth, crops are being destroyed and famine among the people is implied. It should be noted that two crucial stakeholders are absent from the mediation: Persephone and humanity, whose demands must be taken into account in the final solution, as both sides have an interest in the outcome of the case.

In short, while the myth of Persephone is ancient, it is indicative of the high regard in which the ancients held the importance of mediation in resolving disputes: Mediation and ultimately finding a solution to this particular conflict between the gods saved the human race.¹²

2.1b The Minoan (2600-1450 BC) and Archaic periods (800-459 BC)

Historians argue that the administration of justice by persons of standing began in Greece as early as the prehistoric period. Strabo, Diodorus, and Oecceus report that, as early as the Minoan era, there were laws and customs in Crete that were attributed to King Minos and continued to be applied long after the abolition of the monarchy. Minos is referred to in many sources as a king, judge, and lawgiver. Sometimes he judged himself, and sometimes he sent his brother Radamanthys for this purpose, as his supervisor for the administration of justice, as Homer mentions in the *Odyssey*.

¹⁰ Gutierrez A., *The Seasons of ADR — A study of Mediation Tactics in the Context of Ancient Greek Mythology*, The American College of Civil Trial Mediators 2012.

¹¹ Theodosiadis M., “The Flame and The Lyre”, *Cogito - Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, 2025. 83, 89, 96-7.

¹² Gutierrez A., *The Seasons of ADR — A study of Mediation Tactics in the Context of Ancient Greek Mythology*, The American College of Civil Trial Mediators 2012.

In the Archaic period, there were arbitrators and conciliators. The conciliator proposed compromise solutions to the parties, and the arbitrator (elected judge or “airetokrites”) judged their case and issued a decision. Although their roles were different, based on whether or not a decision was issued, this did not seem to concern the parties, who focused on the common outcome of their actions, i.e., the resolution of their dispute. At that time, arbitration and compromise were often confused and identified with each other or differentiated only slightly, in contrast to their clear differentiation today.¹³

2.1.c Early mediation in Homer

The first indication of the use of mediatory procedure in the Greek world is found in Homer’s epic poem, the *Iliad*, and in the striking and detailed description of Achilles’ shield, which depicted numerous aspects of everyday life and life in general of the ancient Greeks. Between lines 18/497-508, another incident from the real life of the ancients is described, which is the subject of analysis by historians. Specifically, the depiction concerns the narration of the case of two men regarding the payment of a fine (“penalty”) for a murder. One claims that he has paid the price for the crime, while the other refuses to accept it. The two men appeal to the elders of the city, who sit in a semicircle on polished stones, to resolve the dispute. In the form of a hearing, each of the two parties presents its position and its arguments. The elders reach a verdict, holding scepters in their hands. In the middle are two gold talents (ancient Greek golden coins) as a reward for the fairest judge. The crowd of citizens is also present, gathered around the elders and watching the trial, cheering for one side or the other.

The text in question is as follows: "But the people had gathered in the marketplace [a public gathering place]; there a dispute had broken out between two men over the blood of a man who had been killed; on the one hand, one of the two men presented his case to the people, claiming that he had paid for everything, while the other man denied that he had received anything. Both men

¹³ <https://www.diamesolavisi.gov.gr/selida/oi-istorikes-rizes-tis-diamesolav-isis-stin-ellada> (last visited Oct 2025).

wanted an arbitrator to decide the matter. But the people cheered both of them, supporting both sides. Immediately, the heralds restrained the people. The elders sat on polished stones within the sacred circle, holding in their hands the staffs of the loud-voiced heralds. Then, with these in their hands, they rose and successively delivered their judgment. And in the middle were two talents of gold, which would be given to whichever of them delivered the fairest judgment.

These few lines from an epic poem from 800 BC are the focus of research into the early recourse to neutral third parties for the purpose of issuing a final decision. Past research has focused on the people who held power rather than on the community itself. This research is based on the mistaken assumption that the privilege of issuing legal decisions belonged to some kind of aristocracy. Evidence of the existence of a central authority capable of issuing such decisions could be examined in the context of 'institutions' and 'procedures'. Although the passage itself clearly suggests the use of conflict resolution procedures, it is often only the conclusions drawn from the jurisdiction of the elders' judgment and the significance of the two talents that are examined.¹⁴

However, the central theme of the illustration on Achilles' shield is not to infer the existence of a central authority or legal methods of dispute resolution – after all, these were encountered four whole centuries later – but rather the participation of the people and the acceptance by the community of elders as arbitrators – mediators in the resolution of the dispute. After all, the emotionally charged participation of the community demonstrates its direct influence on the process.¹⁵ Furthermore, the method of adjudication and

¹⁴ Manley-Tannis, B. M., *Greek Arbitration: Homer to Classical Athens An Investigation into the Role of the Community in Private and Public Arbitration* A thesis submitted to the Department of Classics in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, Queen's University Kingston, Ontario, Canada 1998 p 22 and Wolff, H. J. "Marriage Law and Family Organisation in Ancient Athens: A Study in the Interrelation of Public and Private Law in the Greek City", *Traditio*. 2 1944.

¹⁵ Monro D. B. *Iliad, by Homer*, fourth edition 2 vols., Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1903 p. 350 and Manley-Tannis, B. M., *Greek Arbitration: Homer to Classical Athens an Investigation into the Role of the Community in Private and Public Arbitration* A thesis submitted to the Department of Classics in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, Queen's University Kingston, Ontario, Canada 1998 p 24.

final verdict was dependent on the approval of the participants as to what they perceived as a "fair judgment". The decisions of the Elders were therefore not absolute, but in order to be considered fair, they had to be legitimized by the people.

The process takes place in the "agora," a gathering place for all citizens, while the reward of two gold talents represents, as mentioned above, the reward for the fairest proposed solution according to the opinion of the citizens. The arbitrator, mediator, and judge/adjudicator are all the same person. There is no dividing line because the aim is not to follow a legal path or procedure, but to meet the objective need to resolve the dispute in a manner acceptable to the community.

Achilles' shield depicts a way of resolving conflicts that is very different from today's, which is logical given that the needs and circumstances were very different. In any case, the inextricably linked role of the community in resolving disputes is evident, as, whatever the name given to the person judging, their judgment ultimately rests with that of the crowd. Not only are the roles of the arbitrator, mediator, and judge indistinguishable, but so is the procedure itself. Similarly, the nature of the cases was also indistinguishable, as each one was not subject to a specific procedure. The nature of mediation-arbitration and the manner of adjudication depended on the community's need for justice and the specific needs of the disputing parties. In a society consisting of institutionalized legal rules, the mechanisms for enforcing them are found in the "state". Archaic Greek society, however, rejected such institutions. Nevertheless, two social constructs were created by the community: The use of customs and oaths. These social institutions imposed the role of a neutral third party in mediation/arbitration/adjudication.¹⁶

¹⁶ Manley-Tannis, B. M., *Greek Arbitration: Homer to Classical Athens An Investigation into the Role of the Community in Private and Public Arbitration A thesis submitted to the Department of Classics in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts*, Queen's University Kingston, Ontario, Canada, 1998.

2.2 Classical period (459-323 BC): Mediation procedures in practice: private and public arbitration

2.2 a. The practice of using therapists as an exchange of proposals on the dispute that arose

A common and straightforward procedural practice in classical antiquity was the use of “therapontes”, i.e., servants who conveyed proposals: This involved the discreet transfer, by a third party, of proposals and counter-proposals between the parties to a dispute who were negotiating a solution. The objective purpose of this procedure was to avoid publicizing their dispute, which would damage their social image and common interests by bringing them into the public eye, given that court hearings were public.¹⁷ However, we have very little information about this process, both in terms of the details of how it worked and the results it produced.

2.2 b Arbitration: A comprehensive mediation process

Arbitration in the 4th century BC was a comprehensive legal system for the administration of justice. It was divided into public and private arbitration and was a pan-Hellenic institution. Private arbitration, as found and applied in classical Athens through recourse to the institution of the “airetokrites,” i.e., voluntary recourse to an arbitrator chosen by the parties and the subsequent binding nature of the decision (called “dieta”)¹⁸ And the possibility

¹⁷ Triantari, S. *From Conflict to Mediation. Mediation as a Strategy and Policy of Communication*. Stamoulis Ant. publications, Thessaloniki, 2018. Cf. Triantari, S., “From Coaching to Mentor Leader: Profile and Skills of the Mentor Leader in Human Resources Management”, *Dia-noesis*, 15, 2024, pp. 103-22, <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.38176>.

¹⁸ Arbitrators usually decided according to leniency and not according to the rules of positive law, as confirmed by Aristotle: “For the arbitrator sees what is lenient, but the judge sees the law. And for this reason, an arbitrator was found, so that leniency might prevail.” (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* I, 1347b,20). “for what is lenient seems to be just, and what is lenient is what is just according to the written law...” Aristotle, *Rhetoric* I, 1347a,25), Kalavros K., *Law of Arbitration I. Internal Arbitration, Issue A*, Sakkoulas Publications, Athens – Thessaloniki, 2011, p. 82.

of invoking the decision as a treaty (agreement) between the parties due to the acceptance of the judgment is similar to the elements of mediation in the Western world today. It should be noted that the characteristics of the institution were speed, confidentiality, and specialization (when the arbitrator was an expert), i.e., elements that are also applicable in today's mediation procedures. An additional common feature of the so-called "Airetokrats" (who, incidentally, could be Athenian citizens, metics, or foreigners), i.e., arbitrators appointed by private individuals, with modern mediators, was that, unlike the public arbitrator who issues a decision after considering the evidence, the private arbitrator could propose solutions.

Public arbitration required the existence of arbitrators chosen by lot, who were also called "elected arbitrators" ('*diaitetai airetoi*') or "lot-chosen arbitrators" (*diaitetai klērōtoi*).¹⁹ They had to be Athenian citizens and were selected from a special list posted each year.

Athenian citizens who had not been deprived of their political rights, upon reaching the final year of their military service age—i.e., at sixty years old—were required by law to serve for one year as public arbitrators.²⁰ This obligation did not apply if, during that period, they held a public office or were absent from Athens for justified reasons, such as serving on a mission or as ambassadors. Arbitrators were compensated at the rate of one drachma per litigant for each day of service. If the proceedings were postponed, necessitating additional days, they received an extra drachma for each additional day.

In public (as in private) arbitration, the primary objective was to reach an agreement ('*diallagē*'/settlement) and, in case of failure, a decision is issued (called "*dieta*" as in private arbitration). In any case, it is particularly interesting to note that:

a) Both forms of arbitration consisted of two stages. The first concerned the attempt to reconcile the parties (*diallattein*, *dialyein*), and the second concerned the resolution of the dispute if the first

¹⁹ Demosthenes, *Against Aphobus*, 58; *Demosthenes Against Afobus*, Kaktos, Athens, 1995.

²⁰ Aristotle, *Athenian Constitution*, 53, 4-7, trans. Papadis, D. Zitros publications, Athens, 2009. Only those who were absent on a mission (embassy, delegation, etc.) at that time were exempt from this obligation.

stage failed²¹ (elements similar to the philosophy of modern mediation)²²

b) The arbitrator's task was to lead the two parties to a settlement and, if authorized, to issue a decision himself. In the case of a private arbitrator, the authorization came from the opposing parties and was granted in advance.²³ This was verbal or written for the handling of the case, the issuance of the decision, and compliance with its operative part ('emménein')- a feature of modern mediation as well - while in public arbitration, the authorization was granted by the city

²¹ MacDowell, D.M. "The Law of Athens in Classical Times, Papadima Publications", Athens 1996, pp. 321-324, & Andriolo N., "*Dieteti*," *Proceedings of the XI International Congress of Greek and Latin Epigraphy I*, Rome, 1997, Rome 1999, pp. 167-176, & Velissaropoulos J.-Karakostas j., "L'arbitrage dans la Grèce antique, période archaïque et classique", *Revue de l'arbitrage* 46, Paris 2000, pp 3-26, & Roebuck, D. "Best to reconcile. Mediation and arbitration in the ancient Greek world", *Arbitration*, 66, 2000, 2 pp. 75-287, Roebuck, D, *Ancient Greek Arbitration*, Holo Books, The Arbitration Press, Oxford 2001, Stefanopoulos S., *Greek Institutions*, Libanis publications, Athens, 2004 pp. 533-535, Harter-Uibopuu, K., "Ancient Greek Approaches Towards Alternative Dispute Settlement. Arbitration and Mediation in Private and Public Law", *Willamette Journal of International Law and Dispute Resolution*, 2002, pp. 47-69, Karabelias, E., "L'arbitrage prive dans l'Athenes classique", *Symposion*, 1995, pp. 135-149 (reprinted in *Recueils de la societe Jean Bodin* 63, *L'assistance dans la resolution des conflits*, pp. 9-35), Dekazou – Stefanopoulou F., F. "Permissive. Private arbitration in Menander," *Annual of the Centre for Research into the History of Greek Law*, Academy of Athens 40, 2007, pp. 29- Gemet, I. "*L'institution des arbitres publiques a Athenes*," REG, Paris 1939, p. 389), Gemet, I. *Droit et societe dans la Grece ancienne*, Sirey, Paris 1955, pp. 103-119. Just M., "Le role des diaitetai dans Isee 12, 11," *RIDA* 15, 1968, pp. 107-118

²² Directive 2008/52/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 21 May 2008 on certain aspects of mediation in civil and commercial matters, Official Journal L 136, ff. Member States were required to transpose the Mediation Directive into their legal systems by 21 May 2011 in conjunction with Greek Laws No. 4640/2019 and Law 4512/2018, which provide for an initial mandatory meeting before the start of dispute resolution as a first stage for the mediation process, and only after failure are the parties referred to the courts & Giannopoulos, P. *Mediation and Civil Procedure (Contribution to the interpretation of Law 4640/2019)* Sakkoulas publications Thessaloniki, 2020.

²³ Dekazou – Stefanopoulou F., F. "Permissive. Private arbitration in Menander", *Yearbook of the Centre for Research into the History of Greek Law*, Academy of Athens 40, 2007 42-43.

c) The decision of the arbitrators ("dieta") had to be accepted by both parties to have the force of *res judicata* and be enforceable, as in modern mediation.²⁴

The introduction of the arbitration process aimed to relieve the court of Heliaia from the accumulation of a large number of cases, especially during periods of heavy caseloads when there appeared to be an excessive workload. In this way, the time-consuming, complex, and costly administration of justice by the established court of Heliaia was bypassed, to the benefit of both the litigants and the court. The analogy with the rationale behind the establishment of contemporary mediation, as laid down in its preamble, is clear.²⁵

The arbitrator's decision, if accepted, became final. The arbitrator was obliged to record his decision in the archives of the Forty Judges. In public arbitration, there existed the possibility of appealing against this decision before the Heliaia court (the philosophy behind issuing and registering a decision is similar to current Greek mediation law, but appealing against a decision issued in public arbitration is similar to statutory arbitration and not to the institution of mediation, since in the latter no appeal is provided).²⁶

As for the conduct of arbitrators, it had to be fair and lawful, i.e., neutral (or "evaluatively neutral" and "objective" as Max Weber would say).²⁷ In the event of suspicion of bias on the part of the referee, strict control was provided before the public prosecutor.²⁸

In addition to private and public arbitration, there was also interstate arbitration between the city-states of ancient Greece, an institution that was particularly important in relations between two

²⁴ Greek legislation, with Laws, 4640/2019 and 4512/2018, accurately describes the validity of the mediation decision, which is enforceable without the right of appeal, in contrast to arbitration and court decisions, where this right remains. Giannopoulos, P. *Mediation and Civil Proceedings (Contribution to the interpretation of Law 4640.2019)* Sakkoulas Publications, Thessaloniki, 2020.

²⁵ Directive 2008/52/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council Plevri, A. *Mediation in civil and commercial matters*. Sakkoulas Publications, Athens–Thessaloniki, 2021 p. 18 ff.

²⁶ Greek Law No. 4640/2019 (Government Gazette No. 190/30-11-2019)

²⁷ Weber, M. *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, Papazisis Publications, Athens, 1991.

²⁸ Magnisali S. A., *The Administration of Justice in Ancient Athens (5th and 4th centuries BC)*, NOMIKI BIBLIOTHIKI publications, Athens, 2008.

cities.²⁹ Greek city-states used to conclude agreements (“symbola”) on issues concerning the judicial protection of their citizens, but from the 3rd century BC onwards, the phenomenon of inviting arbitrators/judges from other cities to process pending cases appears. Similarly, in the case of disputes between two cities or between a city and a third party, arbitrators or judges from a third city would take over.³⁰

There has been debate among historians as to whether the institution of arbitration preceded state justice in classical Greek antiquity and whether institutionalized justice originated from arbitration. The theory that arbitration was a precursor to state justice has been disputed. The view that arbitration and state justice co-existed has been correctly upheld. They were two different forms of dispute resolution with many points in common, but they always remained two parallel processes.³¹

3. Mediation through the ancient Greek philosophers: the philosophical background of mediation procedures in ancient Athens

a) Demosthenes

Through the work of the ancient orator Demosthenes (384 BC - 322 BC), "Demosthenes against Meidias" (348 BC), key elements of the character and philosophy of arbitration as a mediating process of his time are depicted.

²⁹ Gaudemet, J., *"Arbitration in territorial disputes between cities in Greco-Roman antiquity. The principle of status quo and uti possidetis,"* Recueils de la société Jean Bodin (Assistance in conflict resolution), 1996, pp. 37-46.

³⁰ More than 250 honorary inscriptions have been found referring to foreign judges who helped in similar cases, such as the resolution of the Thessalian city of Fallana for the judges who came from the also Thessalian Metropolis of Magnisali S. A., *The Administration of Justice in Ancient Athens (5th and 4th centuries BC)* LEGAL LIBRARY publications, Athens. 2008 The arbitration for the claim of territory between Milos and Kimolos was judged by *arbitrators from Argos around 338 BC.* (Pfohl, G. *Griechische Inschriften als Zeugnisse des privaten und öffentlichen Leben*, Munich 1966, no. 105, pp. 113-115. Another inscription from 300 BC informs us of the decision of the judges of Cnidus in favour of Kalymnos in a dispute it had with the city of Kos. (Robert, L. *Les juges étrangers dans la cité grecque*, Athens 1974, pp. 765-82.

³¹ Troianos S.- Velissaropoulou I., *History of Law*, Hellenic Publications, Athens 2002, p. 58.

Demosthenes' dispute with Meidius, although based on the attack and insult that the great orator received from Meidius at the Great Dionysia, where he participated as a sponsor in 348 BC, was personal in nature and originated from a long-standing rivalry. At the age of just twenty, Demosthenes had taken legal action against the trustees of his father's estate (Aphobus of Therippides and Demophon). He accused them of mismanagement and squandering his paternal inheritance, suing them for usurpation and dissipation of his paternal inheritance. However, due to the attack and interference of Meidias and following a proposal by the latter's brother, Thrasylochus, Demosthenes was obliged, because of this dispute and despite his difficult financial situation, to undertake a trierarchy (in ancient Athens a public obligation of wealthy citizens to fund and maintain a warship for one year) as a necessary condition for the preservation of his inheritance rights. The above events took place between 364 and 362 BC.³²

In this work, Demosthenes refers to the extrajudicial settlement of disputes, referring to the arbitration of Straton, who dealt with his case, but mainly – and this is particularly interesting – to the characteristics that should define him as a neutral third party. Straton is thus portrayed as a " 'chrēstos' " citizen,³³ That is, as the exemplary model of a conscientious citizen, in contrast to Meidias, who is portrayed as a man with an arrogant attitude and a tendency to flaunt his wealth. Straton is also a "penēs anēr kai apragmōn all' ou ponēros" (a poor man and quiet, but not wicked). The word "penēs" here appears as a synonym for pride (in the healthy sense of the term) for honest working people, in contrast to the lazy and dissolute rich.³⁴ . And, of course, the mediator/arbitrator who undertakes to resolve a dispute, in addition to examining the evidence, must include in his legal reasoning the

³² Xanthaki-Karamanou G. *Demosthenes "Against Meidius". Introduction, translation, interpretative notes*. Academy of Athens - Centre for the Publication of Works by Greek Authors, Athens 1989.

³³ Stratonas is thus portrayed as a "good" citizen (21.83) Xanthaki-Karamanou G., *Demosthenes "Against Meidius". Introduction, translation, interpretative notes*. Academy of Athens - Centre for the Publication of Works by Greek Authors Athens 1989.

³⁴ Dover, K. J. *Greek popular morality in the time of Plato and Aristotle*, Hackett Publishing, 1994.

community's sense of justice, its principles, and values.³⁵ And nowadays, judgment based on good morals and the common sense of justice still exists, although it is limited due to the existing complex and detailed legislative landscape. However, in Anglo-Saxon law, the significance of these concepts is more pronounced.

Straton's neutrality and respect for the law lead to a verdict in favor of Demosthenes and, at the same time, to the wrath of Meidias.³⁶

In his speech against Meidias, Demosthenes, which in principle concerns arbitration of a public nature, refers to a law called "the law of arbitrators", which refers to private arbitration. The law was as follows: "If some people have a dispute with each other concerning private agreements and want to choose any arbitrator, they should be allowed to choose the one they want as arbitrator."³⁷ ...” Similarly, Demosthenes in his work *Against Afobus* (*Against Afobus*, 29.1-5) states that citizens could choose an "arbitrator by common consent", i.e., an arbitrator of their mutual acceptance, to avoid the complexity of legal proceedings.

Since they jointly chose the above arbitrator, they must respect their agreement to resort to the mediator as a neutral third party and not appeal the decision that will be issued, so that it becomes final.³⁸ This is a process whose philosophy is similar to the modern

³⁵ Mc Dowel, D.M, *Demosthenes Against Meidiaw*, Oxford Clarendon press, 1990 & Manley-Tannis R., *Greek Arbitration: Homer to Classical Athens An Investigation into the Role of the Community in Private and Public Arbitration: thesis submitted to the Department of Classics in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts* Queen's University Kingston, Ontario, Canada 1998 p. 95.

³⁶ Mc Dowel, D.M, *Demosthenes Against Meidiaw*, Oxford Clarendon press, 1990; Demosthenes. 21.83-97.

³⁷ Since they could choose an arbitrator (diatiti elesthai) meaning that the arbitration was private. Talamanca M., *"La legge di Dem., 'Or. 21, 94' e l'appellabilità delle pronunce dell'arbitro privato in diritto attico"*, BIDR 17, 1975, pp. 93-159. Similarly, Demosthenes mentions this in his work against Aphobus (*Against Aphobus*, 29.1-5) Demosthenes, *Against Afobus*, 58; Demosthenes. *Against Afobus*, Kaktos, Athens 1995

³⁸ Demosthenes (21), *Against Meidius*, 94: LAW. [If any dispute among themselves concerning their own contracts and wish to choose an arbitrator, let them choose whomever they wish [as arbitrator], but when they have agreed upon a common choice, they shall abide by the decisions of the arbitrator, and shall not transfer these cases to another court, but the decisions of the arbitrator shall be final. Xanthaki-Karamanou G. *Demosthenes "Against Meidius"*.

mediation process, where the mediation decision is approved by the mediator and the opposing parties and becomes final automatically (i.e., without allowing for appeal), and differs from institutionalized arbitration, in which an appeal against the arbitrator's decision is permitted.

An element of the arbitration/mediation process is the oath, as a further element of impartiality of the third party who undertakes to settle the dispute. Demosthenes refers to the cases of Afobus.³⁹ Who resorted to private arbitration and persuaded Demosthenes to accept Arkhenos Drakonidis and Phanos as arbitrators/mediators. However, when he realized that the arbitrators would rule against him, he removed himself from the arbitration process. In another case, when Callippus challenged Apollodorus to arbitration, the proceedings were deemed unlawful because the appointed arbitrator did not take the oath required by law.⁴⁰

b) Isaeus

Isaeus, one of the great orators of ancient Greece, who lived during the period 420-350 BC and worked as a logographer and teacher of rhetoric, provides us with interesting information about private arbitration. In his speech 'On the Estate of Menecles', he refers to the agreement between the disputing parties to resolve their dispute, which could be granted either in writing or orally and was entrusted to one or more arbitrators of their choice, who had to possess the quality of impartiality. Subsequently, in his work 'On the Estate of Dikaiogenes', he informs us that there were two stages of arbitration/mediation: First, an attempt at reconciliation (conciliation) and then, if this attempt was unsuccessful, they

Introduction, translation, interpretative notes. Academy of Athens - Centre for the Publication of Works by Greek Authors, Athens 1989.

³⁹ *Against Aphobus*, 29.58: *Coming to the chosen arbitrator. Demosthenes, Against Aphobus*, Kaktos, Athens 1995.

⁴⁰ Golden M., "Demosthenes and the age of majority at Athens" Phoenix 33 1979 pp 25-38 & Manley-Tannis R., *Greek Arbitration: Homer to Classical Athens An Investigation into the Role of the Community in Private and Public Arbitration: thesis submitted to the Department of Classics in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts* Queen's University Kingston, Ontario, Canada & Hansen, M.H., *The Athenian Democracy in the age of Demosthenes. Structure, Principles and ideology*. Trans. J.A. Crook. Oxford, Basil, Blackwell 1990.

proceeded to resolve the dispute and the arbitrator/mediator issued his decision, after first taking an oath.⁴¹ However, the important element in this process was the moral commitment of the opposing sides to respect the decision that would be issued. The arbitrator, after hearing both sides, acted with relative freedom. "Only if the litigants allow us to decide in the interest of all," said the arbitrators in Isaiah's "'On the Estate of Menecles'," "will we proceed with the arbitration." The reference to the expression "interest of all" proves that there was prior consent of the parties and that the arbitrator applied the law with the interests of the parties in mind, as is the case in modern mediation. The arbitrator was sworn to resolve the dispute based on the laws and their correct interpretation ('ta dikaia diagnōnai').⁴²

c) Aristotle

Contemporary man can find information distinguishing the technique of mediation and the role of the mediator in the most comprehensive manual of rhetoric, namely Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Closest to mediation is the consultative speech, where the orator, through his argumentation, highlights the moral quality of his character, gains the trust of the audience, and activates their psychology. The art of rhetoric provides modern mediation with techniques which, according to the great and timeless philosopher Aristotle, are based on logic (i.e., the rational way of resolving differences) and persuasion (i.e., the psychological process of acceptance by both parties of the outcome of the mediation process). The modern mediator essentially borrows from the orators of antiquity those abilities and communication skills that will enable him to help the conflicting parties communicate and resolve their differences. The concept of the 'middle way' and 'justice as balance' ("golden") described by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* (V 1129b),⁴³ reflects the philosophical basis of mediation. Aristotle believes that justice consists of the middle ground between injustice

⁴¹ Magnisali S. A., *The Administration of Justice in Ancient Athens (5th and 4th centuries BC)*, NOMIKI BIBLIOTHIKI, Athens 2008, p. 70. *On the Estate of Dikaiogenes*, 31-33 id. 32.

⁴² Isaeus (2), *On the Estate of Menecles*, 30.

⁴³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (V 1129b), (translation/comments Lipourlis D) Zitros, Thessaloniki, 2006.

and excess; the just person acts as a "middleman" between the opposing parties. Mediation, therefore, is in harmony with Aristotle's ethics of balance and reason.

For Aristotle, the arbitral/mediation process could deviate from the strict letter of the law, and arbitrators were entitled and obliged to judge with equity. For this reason, Aristotle himself emphasized the value of out-of-court dispute resolution, urging the ancient Athenians to prefer to have their disputes resolved by a neutral third party rather than by the courts, because the arbitrator 'sees the matter with equity' ('to epieikes horāi', *Rhetoric*, 1374b19).⁴⁴ Aristotle also refers to private arbitrators. The meaning of "equity" here is not the meaning of the word itself, but the meaning of the principles of justice and the common sense of justice of the collective conscience of citizens. This allowed him to resolve the dispute in accordance with the spirit of the law and not the strict letter of the law. About the oath taken by judges, in his work 'Athenian Constitution', Aristotle clarifies that public arbitrators took their oath at the time of issuing their decision and not before. In contrast to the judges of the Heliaia court, who took their oath before assuming their duties, public arbitrators took their oath at the most critical and serious moment of the proceedings: Before pronouncing their decision. The oath thus constituted a religious guarantee of the validity of the decision. Aristotle, in the "Rhetoric," makes special reference to the oath of the litigants. The oath was preceded by the procedure of "challenge", i.e., asking each party if they wished to take the oath ("Do you wish to take the oath?"). In judicial proceedings, a litigant's refusal to take an oath had only a psychological effect on the judges' final decision. However, before the arbitrators, such a refusal was equated with an admission that influenced the arbitrator's decision in favor of the opposing party. If a party accepted the challenge to swear an oath, its claims were mandatorily accepted and the arbitrator treated the oath as confirmation of the truth of those claims.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* (1374b 19) translation/comments Lipourlis, Zitros, Thessaloniki, 2002. Cf. Valenzuela, P. (2022). "Fredrickson on Flourishing through Positive Emotions and Aristotle's Eudaimonia", *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 7(2), 37–61. <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.25202>.

⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* (1374b 19) translation/comments Lipourlis, Zitros, Thessaloniki, 2002, Means of proof (1375 a) were laws, "treaties" (documents), "testimonies", "torture" (testimony of slaves) and oaths.

Aristotle's observations in the *Rhetoric* on the use of evidence in both public and private arbitration are particularly noteworthy. It seems that the evidentiary process evolved from the archaic period to the time of Aristotle, the classical period. The arbitrator of the 4th century BC was now free to assess evidence, testimonies, documents, and interpret the laws. The influence of archaic justice is evident in two types of evidence. The first concerned the oath of slaves and the second the testimony of slaves. In fact, the arbitrator did not have the right to freely evaluate these two pieces of evidence because they retained their indisputable probative value, in the same way as they did in the archaic administration of justice.

4. Conclusions

In his monumental work "Legitimation through Procedure," published in 1969, Niklas Luhmann challenged the prevailing perception-prejudice that the legitimizing factor of decisions (taken by courts, parliament, the administration, and any other competent body) is their true, fair, and therefore correct content. Based on the findings of systems theory, Luhmann concluded that the element that legitimizes decisions is, in the final analysis, the inherent structures of the process itself.⁴⁶

Research into mediation procedures in Ancient Greece has shown that the roots of this judicial function began with a deeper social and philosophical background, much broader than the narrow concept of legal proceedings. The institutions of public and private arbitrators in Athens – the latter being very similar to today's mediators – as well as inter-state arbitration, were practical expressions of a broader philosophical concept: That justice is inextricably linked with equity ('epieikeia'), as defined by Aristotle – that is, the ability to interpret the law according to its spirit and not its narrow grammatical wording. The power of the arbitrator/mediator did not derive primarily from state authority, but from his "ethos" and impartiality, his honesty and social

⁴⁶ Luhmann, N. *Legitimation through Procedure*. (Translation: Konstantinos Vathiotis). Critique. Athens 1999. Cf. Evangelou, P. A., and G. K. Broni, "Influence and Preservation: Utilisation of Human Resources Protecting Tangible Cultural Heritage, Supported by the Ministry of Culture in Greece", *Dia-noesis*, 17:1, 2025, pp. 375-99, <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.41719>.

acceptance. This dependence on moral and social legitimacy as a means of restoring disrupted relationships underlines the deeply human-centered approach of ancient Greek philosophy to conflict. The concern regarding the rational or irrational understanding of justice by the individuals involved in it, as posed by John Rawls in his landmark work, *A Theory of Justice*,⁴⁷ did not apply in Ancient Greece, because the sense of individual justice largely coincided with the communal sense of justice that prevailed in the city-state. "Mediation" in ancient Greece was not simply an alternative form of resolving legal disputes, but a fundamental mechanism for regulating harmonious social coexistence based on the recognition that cooperation and mutual consent are the basis for the city's happiness. The "awareness of the good" in the consciousness of citizens, as G.W.F. Hegel would say, is identical to the good of the city. Therefore, the study of ancient Greek practices provides timeless lessons for contemporary Mediation, emphasizing that the effectiveness of the process depends on the moral quality of the neutral third party and the willingness of the parties to recognize that peace is superior to strict legal victory.



⁴⁷ Rawls, J., *Theory of Justice*, POLIS, Athens, 2006 p. 180.

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The philosophy of media from the *language of forms* and the representational nature of the subject in the work of Leroi-Gourhan and the phenomenology of language of M. Merleau-Ponty to a phenomenology of the *non-whole*

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Abstract

This article investigates the philosophical foundations of media by re-examining the concepts of form, representation, and embodiment through a phenomenological lens. It begins with André Leroi-Gourhan's notion of the language of forms, emphasizing how technical gestures and symbolic expression evolve together and showing how the externalization of thought into material supports lays the groundwork for the mediation between body and world. This archaeological perspective is then brought into conversation with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of language, in which expression is understood not simply as a vehicle for representation but as the very process through which meaning emerges within lived, perceptual experience. By tracing the dialogue and tension between these two approaches, the article introduces a phenomenology of mediation—an approach that examines how meaning arises through the interplay between embodied perception and media forms, rather than through fixed representations. Both thinkers, though distinct in their

frameworks, point toward a redefinition of mediation that unsettles the traditional subject-object dichotomy by highlighting the dynamic relationship between bodily activity and symbolic systems. Expanding on these foundations, the article advances the concept of a Phenomenology of the non-whole. This perspective understands media not as totalizing or closed systems of representation, but as open-ended, fragmentary processes that express the inherent incompleteness and relational nature of human experience; in other words, it explores how media articulate the partial, pre-representational structures through which sense is made. By clarifying these concepts, the discussion becomes accessible to readers from diverse backgrounds, fostering deeper engagement with the core arguments.

Keywords: *phenomenology of perception, philosophy of media, aesthetics, gesture, psychoanalysis, language of forms, unconscious*

Introduction

In this article, we will approach media as aesthetics and as a phenomenological consideration of both the "language of forms" (Leroi-Gourhan) and linguistic structure (M. Merleau-Ponty). In *Gesture and Speech*¹, Leroi-Gourhan situates the origin of the human not in rational consciousness but in the technical gesture—the hand's coordination with the tool and the face's coordination with speech. The language of forms thus designates a profound interdependence between manual activity and symbolic expression. From this standpoint, each tool created, image generated, and inscription rendered is not merely the product of physical action but also represents a symbolic aspect. Each of these material artifacts serves simultaneously as an action—rooted in the intentional gestures of the body—and as a sign, inscribed with meaning that transcends its immediate practical use. Consequently, the processes of creating and employing tools are never purely functional. Rather than simply serving utilitarian roles, rituals are imbued with symbolic gestures—such as a handshake or the exchange of wedding rings—that signify intentions, relationships, and meanings extending far beyond their practical functions. The act of making or using a tool encapsulates both the tangible

¹ This is the two-volume work *The Gesture and Speech of Man*, vol. 2, *Memory and Rhythms*. For the French edition: *Le geste et la parole*, vol. II, *La mémoire et les rythmes*, Paris 1964.

manipulation of materials and the transmission of meaning, binding the corporeal and the representational in a unified field of sense. Thus, the language of forms reveals how humans, through technical and artistic practices, continuously mediate and signify their relationship with the world around them. Every manual act—whether the making of an object, the tracing of an inscription, or the shaping of an image—not only expresses and externalizes thought but also serves as an embodiment of cultural and personal meaning. For example, when a potter shapes clay, the resulting vessel is more than a utilitarian item; it reflects the potter's cultural heritage, individual intention, and aesthetic choices, transforming the craft into a form of communication that extends beyond the physical object. Similarly, ancient artisans who carved petroglyphs on cave walls or inscribed tablets were not merely recording information—they were participating in ritual practices, imparting collective memory, and symbolizing beliefs central to their communities. Such acts are inseparable from their symbolic dimension, with the tool or form acting as a material support for meaning and communication across diverse cultures and historical periods. By considering these examples, we see how manual acts have continually functioned as vehicles for thought and meaning, inviting reflection on the rich interplay between creation, symbolism, and human experience in every era. This duality—referring to the interplay between physical actions (the manual, such as toolmaking or gesture) and symbolic thought (the use of language or ritual)—forms the foundation for the development of both technical and artistic practices. It demonstrates how bodily activity and symbolic expression co-evolve to mediate and shape the relationship between the individual, their environment, and the creation of meaning. For Leroi-Gourhan, exteriorization—meaning the process by which internal thought is projected outward through material supports like tools, images, or language—is not merely an additional aspect of cognition but is instead a fundamental condition that makes thought possible in the first place. For example, the invention of early tools or the emergence of spoken language illustrates how human beings externalize internal ideas, thereby transforming both their own capacities and their interaction with the world. This perspective resonates with Merleau-Ponty's notion that expression is not a passive vehicle for meaning but the very act through which meaning comes into being, further emphasizing the depth and

philosophical significance of Leroi-Gourhan's theory. From this perspective, media are not neutral carriers of information but the historical crystallization of bodily and cognitive rhythms. The evolution of technical forms—engraving, writing, photography, digital interfaces—marks a shift in the balance between memory, perception, and expression. The “representational” nature of media, then, must be understood as a structural displacement: each new medium redefines what counts as presence, absence, and representation itself. We will also propose a phenomenology of “non-whole” to study a philosophy of media in relation to the perceptible and the unconscious, considering that structural discontinuity or non-linearity is the true attribute of the human experience of perceiving realities by the subject. By examining the shift from “functional aesthetics”—where artistic forms originally served practical, utilitarian roles—to a focus on aesthetics for their own sake, centered on beauty and expression, and by considering the uniquely human ability to create representations (such as images, symbols, or language), we seek to clarify how the medium itself becomes a metonymy, or a concrete embodiment, of artistic action. In other words, the medium is not simply a passive channel but actively participates in artistic creation, expressing the interplay between function, representation, and meaning. This perspective makes explicit how the evolution from practical use to aesthetic contemplation, combined with our linguistic and representational capacities, underscores the logic of the medium as an essential component of artistic practice. Essentially, we redefine McLuhan's axiom: “the medium is the message” with the axiom: “the medium is the signifier.” The performative process of language and of creative action with any medium is nothing more than processes that concern the way signifiers are articulated and their arbitrary relationship with signifieds, so that the subject can grasp the phenomena of the world in which “appears and is simultaneously revealed to him”, following Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. At the same time, that which cannot be said but is present as such through the act of creation belongs to the “language of forms.” Therefore, every means of such an act is contained within it as the subject's ability to perceive phenomena with a dual intentionality. That of consciousness and that of the Freudian unconscious, which jointly shape the image that the subject constructs of the world. An image whose origin belongs to the Lacanian “mirror stage.”

Leroi-Gourhan's philosophical anthropology, as articulated in his famous work "Le geste et la parole», concerns a phenomenology of the human capacity to symbolize the world around us using our "representational capacity". Leroi-Gourhan's paleontology, starting from various zoological groups in comparison with human evolution and the pre-linguistic period, extends to the emergence of speech. In other words, it covers the emergence of the speaking subject who, alongside the construction of tools and the gradual symbolization of objects, produces meanings, names things, and enters into the linguistic phenomenon. All these evolutionary dynamics co-shape a multiple experience of the conscious world, while the archaic unconscious is transformed into an unconscious "structured like a language," to quote Lacan. Now the realities it perceives are contained in spoken language and subjectifies, while at the same time the representation of the world through the objects it constructs, the rhythm of movement, singing, shape the "language of forms." It therefore appears that the paleontology of language, together with the phenomenon of the representation of the world as a variable image of the subject through the "language of forms," lead to a "functional aesthetic" which, with social evolution and social bonds, "give birth" to the phenomenon of art and the aesthetic experience beyond visual perception. Specifically, in the sixth chapter of the first volume², which examines "the ability of the prudent man to express thought in symbols," a fact that is emphasized even in the structure of the most archaic rituals. The power of the symbol coexists with the symbolism of linguistic structure. It is not only the "tool" or technique but also the ritual that evolves the human animal. After all, Lacan states explicitly: "the symbol makes man"³.

Leroi-Gourhan's position is isomorphic to that of the American thinker Mumford, who refers to the duality of tools and rituals in his work "The Myth of the Machine." As does Wittgenstein's axiom⁴ that "Man is generally a ritualistic being"⁵.

² Leroi-Gourhan, *Le geste et la parole, vol.I, La technique et la language*, trans., A. Elefantis, ed. M.I.E.T, Athens 2000.

³ Lacan J., *Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1966.

⁴ Wittgenstein L., *language, magic, ritual*, trans. K.Kovaios, ed. Kardamitsa.

⁵ Wittgenstein L., *language, magic, ritual*, trans. K.Kovaios, ed. Kardamitsa.

The French thinker-anthropologist's position is based on a critique of the Marxist doctrine of tool/instrumentalization as man's dominant capacity in relation to the natural environment. The human imposes itself on the natural through the evolutionary dynamics of the construction of tools. Leroi-Gourhan studies the first social groups in which the dynamics of symbols appear in burial and other customs based on a pre-aesthetic experience or a "functional aesthetic" as mentioned above. The consequence of this is:

"human animals to materialize their relationship with each other and with the world of objects that appear in their consciousness. At the same time, they will be classified by names, attributing semantic values to things by abstracting them from their primary function and following the dual representation-symbolization process, with the result that they are now inscribed in the symbolic order of language"⁶.

At this point, we would like to emphasize that the vehicle of his representational capacity outside of man is his body. Both in its biological essence and in its symbolic and imaginary essence. Therefore, the main means of "representing the world" is the body and, consequently, its physicality, so that it can experience space and time as transformations of its imaginary physical image (Mirror Stage)⁷ As a subject of consciousness and the unconscious.

These are essentially transformations that are morphological in nature, since humans, using their three representational dimensions, construct their environment representatively and at the same time inscribe this construction into the symbolic order, activating what Leroi-Gourhan as "symbolic thought."⁸.

⁶ Mitrou Y., *Phenomenology of the Unconscious*, Thesis, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH)-Paris 8, 2017. Cf. Castro, P. A., "The Forgotten View of the Origin of Language: The Legacy of Herder's Philosophy". *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 10: 1, 2025, pp. 73-85, <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.37087>.

⁷ Reference to Lacan's radical study on human development until the completion of two years stage, when the concept of the imaginary image of the body appears. It was first presented at the IPA conference in 1936 and evolved during his research on Freudian psychoanalysis.

⁸ Leroi-Gourhan, *Le geste et la parole, vol.I, La technique et la language*, trans., A. Elefantis, ed. M.I.E.T, Athens 2000.

These are essentially operators that transform the biological from the physical to the human, shaping the uniquely human characteristic of "symbolic thinking." So, whether it is a linguistic phenomenon or the "language of forms," the subject desires to communicate with the Other and others to construct his ego through his imaginary identity.

The aesthetic experience of sight and body: the abstract logic of the origins of art

Our reference to the way of "representing the world" and especially our body introduces us to M. Merleau-Ponty's *propres corps*, as defined in *Phenomenology of Perception*, as well as to the gaze as a dialectic of "the eye and the spirit." At the same time, physicality in aesthetic experience denotes an articulation of kinesthetic and visual perception that shapes the aesthetic perception of the subject in relation to the objects it constructs or the murals it creates in caves (Lasko) since the Upper Paleolithic period. Our position is that the characteristics that shape aesthetic perception are uniform throughout the centuries, from the Upper Paleolithic to contemporary art in the digital and post-digital era. Their different manifestations concern the choice of media that function as signifiers that arbitrarily produce signifiers that interpret aesthetic qualities. Let us consider the cave with the murals as an "art gallery" where, together with the fire that the group maintains inside us, the murals of the bison hunt are revealed, while a song and a repetitive physical choreography capture the same theme as the painted representation. The *idio-gazes* meet, and the *idio-bodies* move in rhythmic patterns. All this produces the conditions for a multiplicity of sensory experience, or, in terms of contemporary art, the viewer's gaze is that of the actor interacting with the "visual gesture." Leroi-Gourhan refers to the abstract nature of archaic representation, of archaic creation. He uses as an example the Australian *churinga*, whose abstract motifs "depict the body of the mythical ancestor or the places where his myths unfolded." Leroi-Gourhan refers to the abstract nature of archaic representation, of

archaic creation. He uses as an example the Australian churinga⁹, whose abstract motifs "depict the body of the mythical ancestor or the places where his myths unfolded." He also discerns a representation of verbal mobility and rhythm, perhaps of the priest reciting the "magic words," activating for Leroi-Gourhan the two forms of expression: rhythmic-verbal mobility and graphic representation. Adding mobility to space, we arrive at a kinesthetic experience in relation to the perception of the general setting that involves the natural and the human. This is a prime example of interaction with an installation with such intentionality. This interaction, as in synchrony, shapes a different perception of the object, while an image emerges that is activated by the imaginary image of the body. It is the "birth" of form in the work of art, long before it appears as such, both as a shape and as a form. As Dolto said, the human shape is common to every human being, while the imaginary image relating to the unconscious is connected to each subject uniquely. Therefore, the intermediacy that governs art, especially today, even that which concerns the aesthetics of simulation, is determined by the trans-bodily¹⁰ of objects and subjects within any artistic practice.

The origins of art are therefore recorded as a highly abstract experience due to the archaic symbolic processes that constitute a primary aesthetic experience, which begins with its functional value and later, through the "language of forms," is transformed into aesthetic subjectivity. We could say that the "paleontology of language" in Leroi-Gourhan's work defines a "paleontology of aesthetics" where the phenomenon of art in its etymological reference belongs to the abstract.

The representational tendency with its realistic intention, which is reemerging today with the aesthetics of digital media, constitutes a fusion with the imitation of reality and differs from the aesthetic

⁹ Wooden or stone objects from central Australia, engraved with symbols. They are considered sacred by various Aboriginal tribes.

¹⁰ Mitrou Y., "The Art of Performance and the Condition of Intermediality in Public Space", article from the *proceedings of the Scientific Symposium: A scoping meeting Performance*. Cf. Mitrou, Y., and C. T. Kolyri. "Philosophical Interpretations of the Image of Women as Performative Act of Gendered Body and As Bodily Orientation in space: M. Merleau-Ponty - J. Buttler - S. Ahmed - Deleuze". *Dia-noesis*, 17, 2025, pp. 131-52, <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.41708>.

experience of the abstract, which more actively intersects with the symbolic. What, then, would an aesthetics of the media mean beyond a logic of the aesthetic through the signifier and its arbitrary interpretation? Our position is that phenomenology itself constitutes a radical experience of the aesthetic, which is represented as a transformative space-time structure in the subject, both in his perception and in his unconscious.

Towards a psychoanalytic approach to aesthetics within media philosophy and the phenomenology of the "non-whole"

Leroi-Gourhan demonstrated that the evolutionary process from hominids to humans concerned motor sets. Both those belonging to the expressive whole of the face, which lead to the production of sound sets, and those belonging to the kinesthetic capacity of the human animal. Thus, humans gradually enter the symbolic order, starting from a sound-synthesizing articulation that verbalizes the thing in a way until it is rooted in the polysemy of the meaning of verbal representation and in the necessity of recording their experience in the world to which they belong. From the moment the primary social structure classifies verbal sets so that its members can communicate, an archaic type of speech begins to emerge, still far from the power of rhetoric. The objects are still related to the immediacy of human physical experience, while representational practices as gestural realizations are determined by a "wild Being (*Être sauvage*)" as mentioned by M. Merleau-Ponty. The ritual structure, which was also used by Neanderthals in burial customs, indicating a developed social structure and the ability to communicate with sound sets and therefore verbal representations, determines the way in which the symbol, as an abstract gesture, depicts the visible world but also visualizes the invisible or that which is not immediately perceptible. Sensory experience is not only a set of biological factors that define audiovisual perception but is also mediated by the use of various means that, either as tools (utilitarian function) or as objects of the "language of forms," shape subjectivity. The "transition" to graphic representations and the naming of things "alienates" verbal representations and develops language so that organized speech is produced and the thing is distanced from the verbal representation that will

gradually become the word for the thing. We thus gradually move on to speech and then to writing, where the verbal or logothetic practices¹¹ of power, as Foucault understands them, now appear. On the other hand, Lacanian psychoanalysis identifies four types of discourse that constitute the social bond, starting with the discourse of the master, based on a variation of the well-known Hegelian dichotomy of master and slave in the realm of enjoyment (*jouissance*)¹². The physical experience, which M. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes throughout his phenomenology as being "rooted in the world where man dwells," because it contains something strictly archaic, along with what is perceived as such, is now established in language. The unconscious is «articulated as language»¹³ from the moment the subject is born within its structure and is constituted as a speaking-being (*parlêtre*). This is how desire (*désir*) and its complex path, which is overlaid by demand (*demande*), are formed, remaining rooted in the mental structure of the unconscious. Neurosis defines the subject's lack¹⁴ and determines the nature of the symptom. We are now entering what we call culture. So, the dominant discourse appears not as a humanistic transcription of "crystal-clear" human thought but because of the practices of power through discursive practices. Nowadays, in addition to the dominant discourse, we have the authoritarian practice of the dominant image. The combination of the two creates a logocentric and visual culture within a patriarchal type of knowledge, consistent with capitalism. Even the acceptance of gender fluidity is recognized through the "filtering" of this type of knowledge. Femininities and other genders can potentially define another articulation of the transfer of knowledge through contemporary orality, through artistic practices that escape the dominant image and ultimately through their radical rupture with the universal of meaning, inscribing themselves in a phenomenology of the "non-

¹¹ Reference to Foucault's work in which the subject is shaped by structures of power. Such power includes verbal or discursive practices.

¹² Reference to the fundamental concept of psychoanalysis in the Lacanian field.

¹³ Reference to the fundamental concept of psychoanalysis in the Lacanian field.

¹⁴ The subject of the unconscious, according to Lacanian theory, is structurally deficient. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, being is defined as Being-in-deficiency (*manque-à-Être*).

whole"¹⁵. So that they can reconnect with their physical roots, producing an aesthetic of the media because of the above phenomenology, to connect with the "not-all" of a world that is not limited to the arbitrariness of meaning but is recorded through the «processes of events»¹⁶ to activate truths. It is a connection of phenomenology and therefore of the aesthetics of the media with the unconscious, starting from the fundamental image, that which concerns the creation of the imaginary through the imaginary union of the "fragmented body"¹⁷. Liberation comes precisely through the "terrifying view" of reality, of bodily fragmentation and the finitude of existence, with the intention of reunification recorded as a radical experience that is repeated and reminiscent of the pleasure of Camus's Sisyphus, which cannot be justified or conceptually completed precisely because it is inscribed in the "not-all." So that they can reconnect with their physical roots, producing an aesthetic of the media as a consequence of the above phenomenology to connect with the "not-all" of a world that is not limited to the arbitrariness of meaning but is recorded through the processes of events to activate truths. This is a connection between phenomenology and, therefore, the aesthetics of the media with the unconscious, starting from the fundamental image, that which concerns the creation of the imaginary through the imaginary union of the "fragmented body." Liberation comes precisely through the "terrifying view" of reality, of physical fragmentation and the finitude of existence, with the intention of reunification recorded as a radical experience that is repeated and reminiscent of the pleasure of Camus' Sisyphus, which cannot be justified or conceptually completed precisely because it is written off as "not-all." Already in a post-humanist world where scientific and technological

¹⁵ We borrow the concept of "non-whole" from Lacan's 20th Seminar, *Encore*, in which he refers to the non-whole Woman in contrast to the totalizing and confining reality of man as a gender position. We consider that femininities as such, as well as fluid gender positions, are inscribed in the condition of the "not-all," within which they escape the domination of meaning and the logics it produces. Thus, they escape the dominant patriarchal discourse. Cf. Sakizli, A., "The Neutrality of Dasein and the Shame in the Female Experience: A Feminist Philosophical Analysis", *Dia-noesis*, 17, June 2025, pp. 313-30, <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.41716>.

¹⁶ Reference to the Event according to Alain Badiou as recorded in his seminal work, *L'être et l'événement*.

¹⁷ Reference to Lacan's "mirror stage".

supremacy promises a whole structured on the control of pleasure with the image of the post-human -human being trapped in the infinite set of information and digital representations, the political as aesthetic constitutes the direction for a capable resistance against bioterrorism, part of the new biopolitics that aims to control pleasure. And thus, also towards the control of a cultural policy that constructs media aesthetics that deactivate the non-linear and exclude the relationship with the "non-whole." Since the dawn of digital dominance, Bishop has referred to the eclipse of politics by the aesthetics of new media, while also referring to «the non-uni-directional mediation of social relations by media images»¹⁸. He raises the question of what the aesthetic object can be in the era of Web 2.0, if communication between users can itself be an aesthetic object. At the dawn of the digital age, with the normalization of user-media relations by the rules set by the Web 2.0 protocol (2002), a "useful art" emerges, based on the interactive relationship with the medium. After all, the medium as signifier, here as signifier of freedom of choice of information, determines its aesthetics and objects. At the dawn of the digital age, with the normalization of user-media relations by the rules set by the Web 2.0 protocol (2002), a "useful art" emerged, based on the interactive relationship with the medium. After all, the medium as signifier, here as signifier of freedom of choice of information, determines its aesthetics and objects. Now, in the post-digital era, the contradiction arises from the dominant power structure itself, precisely through the condition of exclusion. Web 3.0 advances through the promise of unlimited possibilities in the construction of virtual reality, reaching GPT4 with "folded" self-evolving algorithms that accumulate everything from information and transform it into an "image of knowledge." That is, an image where the signifier-medium shapes an imaginary of the possibility of producing valid knowledge through the appropriate selection of information. A phenomenology of the intermediate (M. Merleau-Ponty) records here the loss of the intermediate of the "flesh" (chair) within the eclipsing physicality of the subject. The aesthetics of the medium here concerns the aesthetics of completeness and the processes of achieving it through the continuous readjustment of information

¹⁸ Bishop Cl., *Digital Divide: Contemporary Art and New Media*, ART-FORUM 2012.

and the relationship of use with the algorithm. The communicative logic defined by M. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of language at the symposium of '56, through the prioritization of social relations over verbal meaning as well as the embodied experience of the linguistic phenomenon, is replaced by the capable combination of information in order to form a plausible relationship of communication with the user.

The change in paradigm from the early digital era to its later version in terms of aesthetic object reveals the need for a philosophy of both a theoretical and practical nature that will take a critical and open stance on the issue, essentially developing a new phenomenological approach as well as an active connection with psychoanalytic experience and knowledge. Art as a phenomenon and the aesthetics of the media are called upon, through eventful processes (poetic events), to activate philosophy in terms of truths and to inscribe themselves in the tropic of "non-whole" that contains non-meaning and lack as structural elements of the human and post-human condition. This is to avoid its fusion with a constructed necessity of a universal morality that sidelines the political as aesthetic and vice versa. After all, the failure of the humanistic vision and of high thought and art highlights the truth of the impossibility of universalities that objectify the arbitrary meaning of the world. There is no "pure" thought, uncontaminated by the unconscious, that can reassure us, nor is there a universal algorithm that will save us from our subjectivity and the discontinuity of a world that we never cease to appear in and that appears to us at every moment.

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Philosophical Notes





Leo Strauss and Islamic Political Thought

Rasoul Namazi

The Intellectual and Political Landscape of Iran Before and After the 1979 Revolution

A conversation with Michail Theodosiadis

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Could you briefly outline the intellectual and political landscape of Iran on the eve of the 1979 Revolution?

Iran has undergone a turbulent intellectual trajectory since 1979. The Revolution was launched and carried to victory with the participation of diverse intellectual currents whose influence decisively shaped the post-1979 landscape. Although heterogeneous, many of these currents leaned to the left. Across much of the world at the time, Marxism set the dominant terms of debate, and Iran was no exception. Numerous leading literary and intellectual figures were Marxists or shared left-leaning convictions. Even Islamist thinkers drew selectively on Marxist concepts and vocabulary to

formulate their understanding of Islam and their political project. Different strands—Islamic Marxism, Soviet-style orthodoxy, Maoism, and various forms of Third-Worldism—competed before and during the Revolution and left a lasting imprint on the formation of the Islamic Republic.

How did the Revolution reshape this intellectual landscape?

The Revolution was the work of a broad coalition of currents, but immediately after, one current gained clear ascendancy: Islamism as articulated by Khomeini and his followers. This is why many adherents of other tendencies still speak of the Revolution as having been “stolen” from them. Over time, Khomeini’s political program, often rendered in English as “Guardianship of the Jurist” (*velāyat-e faqīh*), secured the upper hand and was enshrined in the constitution of the new regime. It would be a mistake, however, to claim that the intellectual imprint of other currents was wholly purged. Elements of the Islamic Republic’s statist economic orientation, its anti-liberal ideology, and its anti-Western rhetoric reflect the legacy of leftist groups that participated in the revolutionary coalition.

How did the landscape change in the years following the Revolution?

It changed quite radically for several reasons. Some of the most important intellectuals died on the eve of the revolution or shortly thereafter. To mention two, Ali Shariati, who was probably the most influential intellectual before the revolution, died without witnessing the Islamic regime that adopted many of his ideas; and Morteza Motahari, a leading intellectual and prominent religious scholar, was assassinated after the revolution. The most consequential transformation, however, had a profound effect on the intellectual scene: the establishment and subsequent dominance of the Islamic regime itself. It altered the landscape so profoundly that many pre-revolutionary intellectual projects, which had responded to the secular and pro-Western character of the pre-revolutionary regime, became irrelevant after the revolution. Moreover, the new regime was inherently opposed to secular thought, so the dissemination of these ideas was severely restricted, and intellectuals who espoused them left the country and largely disappeared from public life until much later, when limited openings

within the regime and the development of information technologies once again allowed their work to circulate within Iran.

Could you explain the ideology of the Islamic regime founded after the revolution?

One can distinguish two aspects of its ideology. One was influenced by the leftist ideas that were dominant before the revolution: a statist economy; anti-Western, especially anti-American, ideas; an emphasis on the poor; and the nationalization of private enterprises. Another fundamental element was the Islamist doctrine developed by Khomeini. One should bear in mind that, before the revolution, Khomeini, while in exile, elaborated a political doctrine based on Shiite theology and thought that was quite unique; even among religious scholars, it was not a majority view. After the revolution, this doctrine, through some surprising moves by his followers during the meetings on the draft of the new constitution, was enshrined in the constitution. It seems that not many people were familiar with this doctrine, which was quite marginal, and that is why you do not see it mentioned in the revolutionary movement. There were only vague ideas about an Islamic government, the rule of Islam, and republicanism. So Khomeini's doctrine seemed to come out of the blue.

Is this the doctrine of the “Guardianship of the Jurist” (*velāyat-e faqīh*)? Could you mention its main aspects?

Yes. Briefly speaking, Shi'ism is a minority branch of Islam, whereas Sunnism comprises the global majority, with Shia Muslims representing roughly 10–13 percent of the world's Muslim population. Shi'ism is the predominant religious tradition in Iran. Within Twelver Shi'ism, religious scholars trained in Islamic law—the *fuqahā'*—hold recognized authority as jurists and as guides whom laypeople emulate in their religious practices. Their influence varies across individuals and periods, but collectively they have played a central role in shaping the religious and social life of Shi'i communities. When it comes to politics, most jurists have espoused a “quietist” or limited view of clerical authority. But a certain Mullā Aḥmad Narāqī (d. 1829), a jurist living in the 19th century, advocated an expanded role for Shi'ite religious authorities that went beyond the commonly recognized limited role accepted by most Shi'ites. This was a minority view and remained

highly contested among prominent scholars, but Khomeini systematized and radicalized this doctrine in his 1970 Najaf lectures, where he was living in exile, arguing that qualified jurists should exercise political as well as religious authority over Muslims. This was the political doctrine that was enshrined in the Islamic Republic's constitution after the revolution, shaping all aspects of the new regime.

In my recent studies, I have argued that Khomeini's regime is rooted in the idea that human intellect can perfectly comprehend and implement divine will. Elevated as a Platonic philosopher-king, Khomeini claims to represent the *al-insan al-kamil* (perfect man), exemplifying the philosopher's trap in practice. Plato argued that a 'Great Legislator' must shape a social reality in the image of a divine logos. As Hamid Dabashi claimed, this is echoed in al-Fārābī's philosopher-ruler version, upon which Khomeini's theocracy is (allegedly) justified. Do you agree with this statement? How do you situate the 1979 revolution in the broader history of Iranian political thought? Were there precedents that influenced its ideological foundations?

This is a good question, but a complex one. The debate turns on the origins of Khomeini's doctrine. One influential view emphasizes the Shi'i juridical background and treats his theory as an elaboration of ideas already present in that tradition. This is how Khomeini himself frames it: he argues that only a ruler fully knowledgeable in Islamic law, the *sharī'a*, can apply it to the full range of human affairs, including public matters, and that no one is more qualified than the jurists (*fuqahā'*) to apply Islamic Law. He supports this claim with *ḥadīth* evidence, reports attributed to the Shi'i Imams that are taken to confer a form of delegated authority on jurists, though this evidence is contested and its scope is not unambiguous. A second genealogy attributes the doctrine to Khomeini's engagement with the mystical thought of Ibn 'Arabī, especially the idea of the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*) as the metaphysical axis of the cosmos; on this reading, the Guardian Jurist embodies that role, and the political theory grows from a mystical anthropology. Whether these approaches align with Plato and Afarabi is a further question, since many scholars hold that neither thinker endorsed the supra-rational epistemic claims associated with the mystics.

Your work explores both the secular and religious dimensions of Khomeini's authority. Could you elaborate on how these dimensions interact and sometimes conflict?

Khomeini's thought undergoes a significant transformation after he comes to political power. Before the revolution, his writings and speeches were primarily religious in character, grounded in jurisprudence and theological reasoning. However, the experience of actually governing exposes the practical limits of his earlier doctrine and prompts a gradual revision that, in my view, distances it from its original religious foundations. His central argument for the necessity of a Guardian Jurist was the proper implementation of Islamic law. Yet, once in power, he increasingly recognized the tensions between the demands of political governance and the prescriptions of the *sharī'a*. In response, he came to accept—quite controversially—the legitimacy of suspending or overriding certain elements of Islamic law when required by the “interests of the Islamic state” (*maṣlaḥat-e nezām*). This marks a decisive shift: the political takes precedence over the legal and theological. From this perspective, Khomeini's later thought moves toward a distinctly political, even secular, rationale for authority—one that can be reconciled with religious doctrine only with difficulty.

How do Western political theories—particularly those of thinkers like Leo Strauss—help us understand modern Iranian political thought?

When it comes to Leo Strauss, on whose thought I have worked extensively, I would say that his interest in religion is of paramount importance for understanding societies like Iran, where religion continues to play a significant political and cultural role—something largely absent from most Western contexts. In a sense, Strauss makes it possible to take religion seriously again. I believe that in the West, since at least the French Revolution, the proper understanding of the relationship between politics and religion has significantly diminished, for understandable reasons: modern regimes were founded in large part to overcome what Strauss calls the “theological-political problem.” That project has been so successful that awareness of the problem itself has largely vanished from contemporary scholarly perspectives.

Are there intellectual movements in contemporary Iran that you believe are underappreciated or misunderstood internationally?

I would say that political thought in post-revolutionary Iran remains understudied. There is substantial scholarship from sociological and historical perspectives on this period that could be complemented by work in political thought. From this perspective, sustained attention to post-revolutionary political thought would constitute a form of scholarship on comparative or non-Western political theory, a vibrant and still developing field of study.

How have younger Iranian scholars and activists contributed to the reinterpretation of political thought since 1979?

Hegel has this famous saying that “the Owl of Minerva takes its flight only at dusk.” This has sometimes been taken to mean that genuine understanding of historical events comes only after an era has run its course. I think this also applies to the understanding of the political thought of Iranian thinkers in the past 40–50 years by contemporary scholars. Whether enough time has passed to give us a good perspective on these thinkers is not obvious. Perhaps it has not. Some of these thinkers are still alive, and many of the scholars who are supposed to study these figures are their contemporaries, have experienced first-hand many of the events discussed by these thinkers, and have often formed very specific judgments on the character, profile, and historical role of these thinkers. These factors can potentially skew our understanding of these figures. At the same time, perhaps enough time has passed: we are gradually gaining enough distance from these figures, especially considering that some of the prominent thinkers have already died. What also suggests to me that we are at the end of a period—one that may prepare us to have a good understanding of this era—is that we seem to have difficulty in producing new intellectuals and that the political situation in Iran appears at a decisive turn, ready to change fundamentally.

How does the Iranian political landscape compare with other similar regimes or in the Middle East?

In my experience, what distinguishes Iran from similar countries in the Middle East is that it has actually had the experience that many Middle Eastern thinkers have long hoped for without ever experiencing it directly—namely, an Islamic government. This

largely negative experience has had a clear impact on Iranian intellectuals and their self-understanding, one that one often doesn't see among non-Iranian thinkers. As a result, secularism and even anti-religious ideas are comparatively popular among Iranian intellectuals—positions that, in my view, are less prevalent among intellectuals in other Middle Eastern countries and can be striking—even shocking—to them when they meet their Iranian counterparts.

Looking forward, which intellectual trends or political movements do you believe will be most influential in shaping Iran's future?

This is a difficult question. The answer perhaps depends on how you see the future. I think we often assume we know how the future will look. For instance, the prevailing view is that we will have increasingly less-religious societies, more centered on economic activities, commerce, and technology, more cosmopolitan, and more mixed culturally. In that case, one would surmise that political doctrines that are less religious, less nationalistic, less left-leaning, and more globalist will be more popular. But it is also argued that the future is completely unpredictable, so perhaps we will see a more nationalistic, less global, economically communitarian, more religious world. In that case, political doctrines corresponding to these tendencies will be more influential. In other words, much depends on the context of reception. Although political doctrines shape societies, they also respond to political-social events.



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* *For books:* Lloyd S. A., 2009: 289-294 or Lloyd S. A., *Morality in the Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes: Cases in the Law of Nature*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 289-294.

* *For articles:* Ranson S., "Towards the learning society", *Education Management and Administration*, 20: 2, 1992, pp. 68-79.

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For articles: Ranson S., "Towards the learning society", *Education Management and Administration*, 20: 2, 1992, pp. 68-79.

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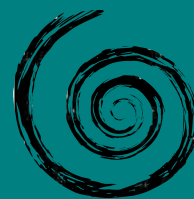
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