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Revisiting the Semiotic: A Study of Jorie Graham's Poetic Consciousness in *Sea Change*

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Abstract: The present paper analyzes Jorie Graham's "Sea Change", the eponymous poem of her 2008 poetry collection, through Julia Kristeva's theories on semiotic and the abject. By tracing the historical attitudes towards embodiment, this research attempts to examine Graham's outlook towards the mind/body and by extension nature/culture dichotomies in her poetry. The previous studies on the *Sea Change* collection have mostly focused on Graham's formal structures and ecological concerns; no other research has used Kristeva's theories to examine the importance of one's embodied experience of the world in her poetry to reveal how negative attitudes towards the body lead to a fractured existence for the human subject. Graham's poetic language addresses the neglect to which the semiotic has been subjected, redefines the body in terms that are not abject and opens up a safe cultural space for it. Her poetry illuminates how mystification and degradation of the body have a positive correlation with oppression of the nature, as concepts belonging to similar dichotomous lines of thought, and highlights the call for a re-evaluation of the attitudes towards the human subject's existence in the world.

Keywords: Jorie Graham; *Sea Change*; Julia Kristeva; Embodiment; Body; Nature.

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1. Introduction

The ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates (c. 470-399 BC), advocated that human life and the myriad systems of thought upon which it is predicated need to be continually subjected to careful examination so that any possible shortcomings or lack of insight can be detected and addressed. Socrates's philosophy reflects how an "unexamined life"¹ is not a worthwhile endeavor. The echoes of the same thought pattern are reverberated through the philosophically-grounded poetry of the American contemporary poet, Jorie Graham. This paper is concerned with Graham's thematic preoccupations in her poetry, namely the linguistic expression of the body and the way it finds significant relevance to the human subject's existence in the world.

The marginalization and overlooking of the body in Western philosophical debates has a long history that continues up until the recent present. (Grosz 1) The mind or the soul has been traditionally located as the site of human identity and agency. Rationality, permanency and the source of all knowledge were believed to reside in the mind, making it worthy of being in the center of attention. The body, in opposition to the mind, is all that threatens the order and carefully-designed structures of a civilized society. Its chaotic primitive presence must be subjected to strict regulations, lest it causes the downfall of the magnificent monuments solely erected by the powers of the mind. As a by-product of these attitudes towards the body, the human subject has been viewed:

...as a being made up of two dichotomously opposed characteristics: mind and body, thought and extension, reason and passion, psychology and biology ...Dichotomous thinking necessarily hierarchizes and ranks the two polarized terms so that one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart. The subordinated term is merely the negation or denial, the absence or privation of the primary term, its fall from grace... (Grosz 3)

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, Marx's emphasis on the importance of human labor, that applies its force on the surrounding environment, was the first theoretical viewpoint that somewhat recognized the human experience's embodiment. However, complete awareness and thorough examination of one's embodied experience of the world occurred at the end of the nineteenth century in theoretical view-points such as the Pragmatic philosophy of Charles Sanders Pierce and later those of William James and John Dewey which examined how we acquire a knowledge of our surrounding environment and the world through bodily skills. In the twentieth century, Martin

¹ . A dictum by Socrates recorded in *Plato's Socrates*.

Heidegger like the Pragmatists, argued that we conduct our lives through a bodily engagement with the world, that our existence in the world depends upon our bodies and it is through acceptance of our mortality and the limitations of our bodies that a knowledge of the self and the world becomes possible. Later on, Heidegger influenced the phenomenological philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his analysis of how our consciousness is embedded in the physical reality of our bodies and that of Jean Paul Sartre in his argument that we experience freedom in the world through our bodies. (Edgar and Sedgwick 31)

In Western political theory as well, liberalism's emphasis on rationality and the mind ignored the body and our embodied experience of the world until recently. Liberalist policy-making, which accounts for the majority of the policies enacted in the West from the twentieth century onward, emphasized that the establishment of the political order will only be possible through the domination of the rational and the mind as opposed to the chaotic and overly-emotional qualities associated with the body; an attitude that kept women out of the political sphere for so long. In 1980s, thinkers such as Michael Sandel in *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (1982) criticized contemporary liberalism by arguing that it is only through the body that humans can gain self-awareness and experience the world. In the absence of this bodily experience, the individual simply cannot exist.

In cultural theory the semiotic field of study situates the body at the centre of the analysis of linguistic and communication methods. A semiotic examination of the body regards it as the site where meaning occurs and cultural beliefs are enacted. "The body is indeed a key site at which culture and cultural identity is expressed and articulated through clothing, jewellery and other decoration and through the shaping of the body itself (through tattoos, hair-styles, body-building and dieting for example) ..." (Edgar and Sedgwick 32) Julia Kristeva (1941-) similarly belongs to the same line of body-positive thinkers whose theories are used as the methodological framework to examine Jorie Graham's poetry in this paper.

Jorie Graham (1950-) is one of the most distinguished contemporary American poets. She has been a poet for more than thirty years, publishing numerous collections of poetry. Graham believes that the role of a poet is like that of a philosopher who needs to address the most urgent issues of the time. She explores various themes in her poetry including subjectivity, consciousness, history, the body, environment and the apocalypse. The poems in Graham's *Sea Change* (2008) collection invite the reader to be wary of a reality in which an already endangered natural world finally inflicts an irrevocable

damage to life as we know it. She believes in the importance of inculcating the world view that the natural world is our home and if not properly taken care of, will be lost to us. Expressing her concerns through the materiality of the body reveals her attempt to depict that our experience of the world is an embodied one, so the physicality of this experience needs to find visibility and linguistic expression. Graham examines a world in which its inhabitants lack an awareness of the consequences of their actions. Her poetry challenges us to envision a reality in which understanding for one another and our home planet's wellbeing is an important part of our lives.

By relying on the historical and cultural analysis of one's embodied experience of the world and using the framework of Julia Kristeva's notions of the semiotic and the abject, this research attempts to answer the following queries: How does Kristeva's theoretical point of view elucidate the significance of body imagery in Graham's poetry? What is the importance of examining our embodied experience of the world through literature? What place do discourses of body visibility occupy in today's world? How does a look at the historical treatment of the body help us remedy the negligence towards it in intellectual and cultural spheres of life?

2. Literature Review

A review of previous literature on Jorie Graham's poetry reveals that while her formal experimentalism has received ample critical attention, her thematic concerns can be analyzed from fresh points of view to shed light on the various issues that she has addressed in her poems. Caleb Paul Agnew (2019) by analyzing Jorie Graham's visual and structural experimentations in *Sea Change* and *Fast* collections argues that Graham's poetry resembles a prose poetry, mostly consisting of short lines with cryptic import that thwarts our desire for a unified verse and consistency of meaning in order to demonstrate our limitations in preventing environmental catastrophes. Mariam Alghamdi (2018) applies Antonio Damasio's neuroscientific theories of the cognitive structures of the self on Jorie Graham's poetry to argue that the self in her poetry takes form as a result of contact between a series of neural processes and a person's lived and future experiences. Roghayeh Farsi (2017) has made use of the chaos/complexity theory to analyze a poem in Jorie Graham's *Swarm* collection, *Fuse*, to argue how the poem reveals order amongst the chaotic experimentations in Graham's post-modern poetry. James Richie (2013) analyzes how Jorie Graham belongs to a generation of post-war poets that make use of a highly subjective poetic voice and linguistically and epistemologically radical notions that resist consistency of meaning and intellectual certainty to create an entirely novel

poetry that depicts our historicity in terms of a continuing chaotic evolution that gives rise to the tenuous borders of the self. Lisa K. Perdigao (2012) analyzes Jorie Graham's poetry in *Erosion* and *Materialism* collection to reveal that her poetry expresses anxiety over the limitations of language in a visual culture that misleads us towards wrongful cultural practices. Sarah Howe (2009) in a review of Jorie Graham's poems in the *Sea Change* collection has referred to her stylistic inventions and the musicality of her poetic voice. The visual layout of the poem has been organized as if to turn words into a "spiral staircase" that gives off an invigorating, unique energy. James Longenbach (2008) in a review of *Sea Change* collection argues that the alternation between short and long lines in Graham's philosophically sublime poetry read as a breaking off from human restraints and her apocalyptic descriptions act as a prelude to the rebirth of a world where disaster can be prevented. Brian Henry (1998) argues that Jorie Graham has given new energy to the long line in her poems. Her poems are not arbitrary, passive artifacts but are carefully designed to convey linguistic, psychological and emotional fluctuations.

3. Theoretical Framework

Julia Kristeva, the Bulgarian-born French philosopher and semiotician emphasizes the role of language on how "subjectivity" comes to be shaped. Kristeva considers the language as having two aspects: the semiotic and the symbolic. The semiotic is the instinctual, connotative aspect of language which does not consist of structure or meaning. It is associated with the body, especially the maternal body, and we see its manifestations through a rhythmic language and its tonality. The symbolic is the communicative, denotative aspect of language and is expressed through syntax, grammatical structure and logic. Premising Jacques Lacan, Kristeva explains that when a child reaches an age that differentiating between the self and other becomes possible for her, she develops a separate identity from the mother by moving away from the semiotic. At this stage, she becomes a "speaking subject" by entering the symbolic which is a sphere of collective language and culture shared socially and associated with the masculine and law of the father. In effect, entry through culture occurs by abjection of the feminine and maternal. However, Kristeva argues, in marked contrast to Lacan, that even after entering the symbolic, the semiotic is not completely erased and there is always an exchange occurring between the two, which causes the "speaking subject's" identity to be always a work in progress and never complete. Kristeva argues that this exchange has immense subversive potential. In effect, the onset of the semiotic in the symbolic allows the infusion of a "poetic language" in this domain that can redefine the symbolic sphere of language as the object of study for linguistics, creating a "speaking

subject” that has more diverse avenues of expression and attains a more intimate relationship with the “truth” of being. The symbolic “shifted by the advent of a semiotic rhythm...would deflect linguists toward a consideration of language as articulation of a heterogeneous process, with the speaking subject leaving its imprint on the dialectic between the articulation and its process.” (Kristeva 24, 25) Kristeva’s critique sheds light on the importance of the assimilation of the body into the realm of language and culture, revealing how the notion of the “speaking subject” is a crucial concept for her. It resides at the heart of a multitude of seemingly disparate critical domains; literature, identity, sexuality, culture and politics. In Kristeva’s thought, the “speaking subject” becomes a site, connecting all these domains together, where “unconscious drives” are released and where the liberation of instinctual and innovative discourse from the traditional mode of communication needs to occur. The “speaking subject” is shaped by and shapes the forces from these various domains and is constantly in a state of change. Subjectivity for Kristeva is a dynamic process that can never be completed and needs to be revised and rethought, taking the multitude of disparate life forces into consideration.

Kristeva offers an influential interpretation of the notion of abjection which further clarifies the relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic. Abjection is the result of detachment from societal norms and cultural sense of what is morally acceptable. It disrupts the society’s definition of a conventional identity and upsets cultural sensitivities and a communal sense of social order. “There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, ... ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.” (Kristeva 1) The reality of abjection leads to a cast-off, separated existence. It occurs when the corporeality of our existence intrudes in the symbolic order. Kristeva argues that the abject are parts of ourselves or those parts of our identity that have been rejected and discarded as abnormal and unacceptable, because they exist outside of the borders of social order and cultural rules. Therefore, when we are confronted with the abject, we go through a traumatic experience as one does when confronted with objects that affront cultural sensibilities and must remain out of sight such as filth, waste or a corpse. The symbolic order is the composite of all that we consider civilized, refined and imperative to social order and since the abject resides outside of the symbolic order, we find confronting it deeply disturbing. Kristeva argues that since entry in the symbolic order and construction of an independent identity are dependent upon rejecting the semiotic, the maternal and the feminine are granted an abject status and excluded culturally. However, Kristeva contends that the boundaries between the semiotic and the symbolic and “nature and culture” are never clear and

She warns of human vanity and misguided faith in our ideas, which is wreaking havoc in nature and will not leave humanity intact. She depicts how nature and the human body are interconnected and the way we are one with the elements of the nature:

“...Also sustained, as in a hatred of a thought, or a vanity that comes upon one out of nowhere & makes

one feel the mischief in faithfulness to an

idea. Everything unpreventable and excited like

mornings in the unknown future. Who shall repair this now...

...Consider

the body of the ocean which rises every instant into me, & its

ancient e-

vaporation, & how it delivers itself

to me, how the world is our law, this in drifting of us,

into us, a chorusing in us of elements...” (Graham 8)

Graham's insistence on engaging with physical materiality has a significance that can be traced back to the attitudes towards the body that have a long history of being discussed in philosophical, cultural and political debates. Historically, the body is considered a part of our experience in the world that needs to be forced to the margins, forgotten about, solely kept private. The negative representations of the body in theoretical debates has resulted into an absence of a cultural space for it in the social sphere. Julia Kristeva, regarding the processes of human growth throughout life, discusses the psychoanalytic debates that define maturity as a process in which we reject the sphere of the body to enter the domain of the mind. Identity is defined in terms of discarding our corporeal reality and entering the realm of logic and intellect that are associated with the mind. Entering the symbolic order which officiates the process of maturation is all about the mind at the expense of the body and Kristeva argues how troubled this frame of thought is. She elucidates that there is no part of ourselves that we can conceal and overlook. All that is covered and obscured will always find a way to make its presence known.

Graham's poetry reflects how we come to the world through our bodies, go through our day to day lives by the help of the body and yet an entity that has such a pervasive presence in our lives, makes us feel ashamed and gives rise to the urge to run for cover. It has been preferable and much more desirable, from a historical point of view, to make claims of high powers of logic and intellect for humans that elevate and mystify them as creatures that are decidedly different from animals and belong to a higher realm. Thus the body becomes abject through its associations with the nature and the animal world, an abjection that has started with "primitive societies" and continues to the present:

The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animal or animalism. (Kristeva 12)

The body as related to the feminine and the maternal similarly has an abject status and belongs to a realm that needs to be rejected so that boundaries of language, the self and the symbolic become clearly demarcated. However, rejecting the body is a revolt, and a reluctant one at that, against aspects of the self itself:

The abject confronts us, on the other hand, and this time within our personal archeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity... It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back...the symbolic helps the future subject...in pursuing a reluctant struggle against what, having been the mother, will turn into an abject. Repelling, rejecting; repelling itself, rejecting itself. (Kristeva 13)

The natural world receives the same treatment at humanity's hands. Nature has just as pervasive a presence in one's life as the body does and yet it tends to be ignored and taken for granted; so Graham uses the hyperbolic metaphor of apocalypse to confront us with what is right in front of our eyes and depict that it is through our bodies that we can exist in the world. The nature and the human body are eternally intertwined. Despite all our aspirations towards the higher realm of intellect, we are just as vulnerable and mortal as animals are and Graham's poetic end-of-the-world imagery tends to remind us of this mortality with a sharp verbal blow that knocks us out of our delusions. Mathew Griffith in *Literature and Sustainability* (2017) argues that in *Sea Change*, Graham has presented an aesthetic view of the world in which we consider ourselves rightful owner of all that this world has to offer and grant ourselves complete, unjustified power and control over all its resources without acknowledging our role as organizers of this world as it is. "Danger arises, though, when we do not see that we have created the world and

instead naturalize our conception of it. This would be to sustain a conventional idea of ourselves without acknowledging our active role in doing so.” (Griffith 224) Rebekah Taylor-Wiseman (2022) explains that depictions of the planet as Mother Earth or Mother Nature in the form of secular and non-secular myths and archetypes are part of Western culture and therefore prevalent in English literature. However, the dichotomized, ideological attitudes towards mind and body, culture and nature, man and woman have led to the oppression of woman, body and nature. Jorie Graham’s attempt to express her concerns over the condition of the natural world through the linguistic expression of the body reflects her agitation towards the cultural conceptualization and representations of the body. By reconciling body with discourse and granting linguistic visibility to it, Graham delivers her critique of the unexamined dichotomized attitudes towards the human subject with much subversive power.

Judith Butler, the American philosopher, has argued that Kristeva has assigned a “pre-discursive” locus to the maternal body, therefore depriving it of any subversive potential and feminist theorists have expressed the concern that there is an essentialist aspect to Kristeva’s thought in equating woman and the body with nature. However, Kristeva is often a misunderstood thinker and aspects of her work have frequently been neglected or misinterpreted. Sara Beardsworth explains that Kristeva is fully aware that the associations between woman, body and nature and their pre-discursive locus are social and cultural constructs. In fact, she attempts to track the historical line of thought that has conceived the modern notions of woman, body and nature as inferior and the “other” of man, mind and culture. Beardsworth argues that the definitions of what constitutes the body and “woman and nature” in Kristeva’s thought remain “open and contestable” (219) and, contrary to Butler’s critique, are granted the subversive energy that has been taken away from them through cultural suppression.

Butler’s theories, despite her criticism of Kristeva, similarly result in highlighting the power of discourse and culture on shaping the status of the body as downgraded. Patricia Ticineto Clough (2012) maintains that her theory eventually leaves the materiality of the body powerless and grants the power to shape only to form. “Butler’s performativity none the less leaves certain oppositions in play such as human and non-human, nature and culture, form and matter. So although for Butler neither form nor matter pre-exist each other, only form is productive.” (Clough 183) Clough refers to Pheng Cheah’s critique of Butler’s treatment of the body to argue that she has neglected to investigate the reasons why discourse has formative power over materiality of the body and the ways that the body can attain a culturally-safe space and discard the passive role it has been assigned.

Cheah explains that the notion of the body being granted materiality through language and discourse cannot be avoided, since language is a part of humanity and any theory concerned with the status of the body needs to conceptualize embodiment on grounds that are linguistically communicable.

Kristeva argues that the abjection of the body, its cultural marginalization and even absence, is a willful historical process, one that at its heart constitutes a deeply flawed attitude towards the human subject. In her theories, art and literature can address and remedy these misconceptions, reversing the lowly status of the body and endowing it with the “dynamism” and subversive energy of which it has been deprived. The significance attached to innovative cultural artifacts is what makes Kristeva’s point of view unique, a quality that is absent in Butler’s theory. Jorie Graham’s preoccupation with body representation in her poetry is a good example of how the borders of discourse determine the parameters of what is culturally acceptable and possible, how the reality of life is tied to the limits of what is considered culturally imaginable and permitted.

Sara Beardsworth clarifies the significance and meaning of culture and art in Kristeva’s thought. The opposition between “semiotic and symbolic”, “nature and culture” discloses “the problem of the neglect of the semiotic in modern secular discourses.” (240) What is noteworthy in Kristeva’s work is the argument that “artistic production counters the failure of modern discourses and institutions to give the semiotic symbolic form.” Culture in her thought is “the general—and autonomous—field of modern artistic production.” A significant part of her writing “...is devoted to demonstrating transformations of meaning and the subject in cultural artifacts. One implication of this is that art steps into the gap left by the failure of modern discourses and institutions to give the semiotic symbolic form...” and there is also the implication that, “if society fully regulated its members, there would be no subjectivity.” (Beardsworth 240) Jorie Graham’s poetry here is the quintessential specimen of the literature and art, that Kristeva believes, through its semantic and structural novelties has the potential to open up the space for the presence of the semiotic in the symbolic, deconstructing the mind/body and culture/nature dichotomies in the attitudes towards the human subject.

Graham’s poetry resists consistency of meaning and ordered, well-structured language to give voice to the chaotic, the disorderly, the “poetic language” of the semiotic, to all that cannot be contained and neatly categorized by the “symbolic order”. Her poetry breaks all restraints in the exchange between “the semiotic and the symbolic”

and becomes overflowed with the fully subversive and powerful presence of the semiotic to grant visibility to an aspect of life that does not require control and regulation, but needs to be allowed in its natural form. Her poetry opens up the space to give voice to the fact that what is interpreted as chaos and disorder permeate our lives alongside what we consider as order and tidiness. Possibilities for representation of the body can be realized only so far as linguistic limitations and blockages allow this. Graham's poetry echoes the concern that we do not consider ourselves the agents that are behind deciding what is linguistically representable. Denying ourselves this agency in order to get away with the consequences of our actions is what brings about Graham's apocalyptic wind:

“...The permanent is ebbing. Is
leaving nothing in the way of

trails, they are blown over, grasses shoot up, life disturbing life, & it

fussing all over us, like a confinement
gone insane, blurring the feeling of
the state of being. Which did exist just
yesterday calm

and true...

...the huge mis-understanding round
me now so still in

the center of this room, listening—oh,

these are not split decisions,
everything is in agreement, we set out
willingly...” (Graham 8)

Kristeva argues that the language of literary avant-garde with its structural novelties and semantic innovations, as Jorie Graham's poetry reveals, holds within the potential to transform into the embodiment of “a new discourse (and of a new subject) thus bringing about a mutation... [devising] another original, mobile, and transformative knowledge” (92), that facilitates myriad possibilities for change. Thus Graham's poetry has the potential to create that “new discourse” and reformed “speaking subject” that can move closer to the “truth” of human existence. Graham depicts how the act of creation of her poem is felt, through a moment of fleeting consciousness, by her body. She forges connections between the linguistic communication that her poem is trying to achieve and the physicality of the body, revealing signs of concern that no one may be

confront us with these disquieting feelings and reveal that it is only through the acceptance of our limitations that we can move past them and build a world that is not pushed towards annihilation. At the same time that Graham's poetry tends to alert us towards the consequences of our own actions, her poems try to reconcile one with the uncertain and the unexpected. Willard Spiegelman describes Graham's thematic concerns in her poetic oeuvre, that extends to the *Sea Change* collection as well, as constantly preoccupied with "political, philosophical and aesthetic causes and consequences." Her poetic language possesses a quality that tends to "unify and diversify", fuse and shatter, "courting the unexpected", eluding closure, "moving mysteriously" in search of "adequate forms." (Spiegelman 175)

5. Conclusion

Julia Kristeva's theories illuminate that there is an uneasy relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic. However, both realms constitute part of human existence. This uneasy relationship reveals the problematic conceptualization of language and culture throughout history, specifically as the means to articulate the truth of human existence. It is true that human societies' definitions of culturally acceptable and culturally abject are evolving and becoming more progressive with time. However, literature and art, especially the kind with avant-garde qualities, help us to be more alert towards the social malaises that persistently maintain power over us. Jorie Graham's poetry reveals that the body, as the locus of cultural anxieties, and one's embodied experience of the world are human concerns that need to find linguistic and cultural manifestations. She is preoccupied with human limitations in dealing with the complications of existence and a denial of human agency and will that makes facing the consequences of one's actions not possible. Graham is revolutionary in performing the role of an astute poet who is sensitive to the cultural and societal issues of her time. Likening her concerns to confrontation with an apocalyptic wind attest to the urgency with which she has donned the mantle of social change and presents a clear-eyed vision of the world in which we must be constantly vigilant towards our shortcomings and the narrow-mindedness of our cultural attitudes. Her poetry summons our imagination to visualize a bright future that can be accomplished, if enlightened and responsible attitudes towards life are encouraged and pursued.

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