

The Embodied Reader and Experiential Death: Emerging Readership for 'Brooksian' Fiction

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Fortunately, there will always be a necessity for stories, and therefore, there will always be an audience. The act of reading is one of the most defining features of civilisation. Stories, whatever form they may adorn, have always been the guiding beacon of intellectual growth in society. It adds culture to everything that is deemed as the human condition. It is a constructive process where knowledge is gained and modified at a rapid rate. As Rosenblatt notes, reading is an opportune time where there is a transfer of both efferent or factual and aesthetic or pleasurable information from the text to the reader. Thus, reading can be collectively considered a transactional event where the reader and the text turn into an amalgamated entity. "By its very nature, engagement in the literacy act assumes an active reader whose interpretations are not stagnant but continually shaped by the influx of new information" (Almasi 315). When it comes to defining reading communities, it is more often formed by a group of people that share a selective interest in reading. It is incepted as a culture of literacy. Participating in the act of reading as a community certainly paves the way for a holistic understanding of the world and society at large. Any community or circle of readers binds themselves as a group simply due to a single aspect, and that is the text. Such a group is not forged by any formal rules. Surely it is a matter of shared preferences. The neurological engagement offered by the process of reading is quite an interesting topic to focus on. Contemporary research on reading communities embellishes the idea that reading can truly act as a tool to build empathy. "In other words, reading fiction lights up the brain in ways that mimic the neural activities of the experience you're reading about. For example, if you read a well-written passage about a character hiking through the wilderness, your brain reacts as if you're on that hike. If you read a passage about a character drinking lemonade, the part of your brain that activates when you taste something sour lights up. You might even start salivating" (Kidera). The simulation caused by fiction can profoundly educate the reader. If a reading community chooses to deal with fiction that exposes them to the cruelty of slavery, the members of this reading club may probably reach a point of empathising with the enslaved as they will be moved by their narrative. This will certainly sensitise them to never commit such inhumane acts in real life. They will be educated to never indulge in racism. Keeping the same in mind, can readers be educated about death? Literary fiction has long been quintessential in defining what it truly means to exist. Death has to be endowed not only as the end of life but also as a very important part of it. People do not really contemplate much about understanding death, and this begs the analysis of a book club dedicated to comprehending the stark macabre side of life. Bringing together a reading community is a tasteful way to disseminate knowledge to the masses. Given the fact that reading fiction is a pursuit of pleasure, the hypothesis that this paper will try to prove is quite simple. Will people form a community to read about death? And if so, what good can it do for the betterment of the human experience?

The Terror of Existence

Given the Eastern perspective on the philosophical question of purpose, there is obviously a link between the existentialist viewpoints proposed by Radhakrishnan as well as Kierkegaard. No matter which direction we take (east or west), humanity is lost for meaning. In essence, to be alive is a calamity of its own that every human being has to come to terms with. It is peculiarly tempting to promote the idea that fiction or a specific type of fiction can avert an existential crisis or, at the very least, function as a promising defence against such a conundrum. This brings the focus of the paper to the writings of Geraldine Brooks, an Australian-born American writer of the twenty-first century. Brooks is a storyteller who

indulges herself in writing works of historical fiction. To say the least, she is a winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, and she has a total of six novels to her name. Her works, at the onset, seem to be portraits of life encapsulated in a particular historical frame of time. But her writing has a notable style that is quite unique to make her stand apart from her contemporaries. This is attested by her ability to express, with a severe use of graphic detail, a sordid portrayal of the human condition in its most distasteful state of affairs. Unflinching, death applies itself as a predominant theme in all of Brooks' novels. The writer clearly has a liking to bring to the surface the darkest periods in the history of the world. She tries to unravel an unapologetic picture of war, plague, colonisation, poverty, and, more importantly, human primitivity in its basest form.

It is quite absurd to think or even try to conceptualise the idea that people would ever come together as a group to read about death. It is a concept that is least discussed or ruminated upon by the public at large. Knowledge about death is the least preferred topic tolerated among the common masses. It cannot be argued that philosophers and psychoanalysts have long been taking the initiative to understand how death shapes human culture. But at the unconscious level, there is a keen aversion towards dealing with death from the perspective of the general public. Liran Razinsky affirms that people have not been able to completely understand death even through all these years of careful deliberation. The concept has been quite incomprehensible to most. Razinsky says that death is arbitrary, and this aspect of it being so abstract makes death a frightening topic altogether. "A fourth frightening aspect of death is that we actually know nothing about it. We normally treat it as the ultimate negation or the end of life, but regarding the specific nature of this negation or end we hardly know anything. I described our lack of understanding as to why or from where death comes. But we lack knowledge on more fundamental issues: What is death? What kind of state is it? What does it make of us?" (Razinsky 398-399). It is important to be aware of Kristeva's theory of abjection, where the human mind tries its best to reject everything that reminds it about the total decay or nothingness of the perceptive subject. Kristeva claims that the ultimate reason for looking away with disgust at the sight of a cadaver is due to the connotation it creates. This deeper connotation is the signification of the nonexistence of the perceptive subject. Philosophers have tried their hand at understanding the concept of death but, the general public refuses to take it to heart that it is indeed a topic worth their speculation. Becky Fisher puts it nicely by stating, "Two subjects have been taboo in our society, sex, and death. We could not acknowledge our entry into the world, and have been afraid of our exit from it. Today we are recognising the importance of sexual information and guidance for children. Numerous books and articles are available to help discuss and explain the process of birth, and include it in life's processes. We are still afraid, however, to acknowledge death as a factor in our lives" (Fisher 21). This is why, predominantly, people refrain from discussing the perpetual end of life.

Despite the fact that literary works across the world feature death, it is always picturised aesthetically. Adriana Teodorescu firmly states that the representation of death found in literature is often over-aestheticised. He further justifies this claim by adding that death is only used by writers as a thematic tool that does not, in any way, affect the social reality of the reader. The romanticisation of death robs it of its graveness which is quite necessary as a didactic tool. Taking the reader's response into account, the reaction of the ideal or, rather, the embodied reader must have some interesting prospects to analyse.

The relationship between literary fiction and the perception of death held by society, in general, requires further deliberation. Death has always been a powerful yet common occurrence both in life as well as in stories. As natural as the sun setting in the western sky, death is a prominent part of life. Unlike primitive apes, humans have acquired psychological defence mechanisms that keep impending thoughts about death at bay. This is probably a much-needed requirement for a species that is predisposed to unmitigated capacity coupled with an ephemeral existence. In short, people live so that they may hopefully die one day. Lifting the 'painted veil' for the sensible being has led to either considering life as a

meaningless endeavour altogether or condemning existence as simply absurd. According to this mode of interpreting human action and human motive, it is prescribed that people handle the terror of identifying themselves as finite beings by creating meaning or purpose that is subjectively appropriated. People pursue this concept of meaning all their lives as either individuals or as a collective group. This seems to be the cause of many common practices that are held sacred in the confines of culture, religion, and society. Paradoxically, being reminded about death can propel humanity to move beyond the impairment created by an existential crisis. This has led to the analysis of the human psyche in coming to terms with death as a prominent study of behavioral psychology. According to relative sources, "Terror Management Theory (henceforth – TMT) is a theory in social psychology that grew out of existential psychology, especially the writings of Becker (1973), in the wake of Kierkegaard's (1957) philosophy" (van Peer et al. 33). The major part of TMT is propounded by the joint collaborations of Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon and Jeff Greenberg. But the theory has grown to be applicable in other respective branches of the humanities as well.

Tom Pyszczynski claims that death "...is a driving force behind the human motives for self-esteem and meaning in life, and thus plays an important role in diverse aspects of human behaviour" (1). Researchers in this area of study have conducted experiments to prove that thoughts about death can act as catalysts to direct human effort and behaviour. In these experiments, subjects were put through word association tests, word fragment tests, and questionnaires that were all infused with the purpose of inducing death thought access or DTA. The results of these experiments are also concurrent to the claims made by TMT. DTA is a phase where a subject is pushed to deal with the fear of death when it reaches the conscious level. In one experiment, a handful of municipal court judges in the United States were primed with DTA, and their behaviour showed severe alterations when they were passing judgement on perpetrators at court. Petty criminals like jaywalkers and prostitutes were often left with a fine to pay for their transgression of the law. These judges resolved to implement harsh and severe punishments for crimes that were less serious offences. When a subjective being is threatened by thoughts about his mortal nature, he or she is bound to respond. This reaction can be a fully investing involvement to uphold one's own beliefs or to submit to conformity among peers to get their validation. It motivates the subjective individual to form a sense of strengthened self-esteem by participating in socially, culturally, and religiously approved practices. It is more than obvious that these experiments make extensive use of language to create primers of death-related thoughts. Brian L. Burke and his associates, in the paper, "Two Decades of Terror Management Theory: A Meta-Analysis of Mortality Salience Research," claim that – "We coded the types of MS manipulations into four categories: (a) standard death essay questions (e.g., Rosenblatt et al., 1989), (b) subliminal death prime (e.g., Arndt, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1997), (c) survey questions (e.g., fear of death questionnaire), and (d) other (e.g., video, story, or slide show with death themes)" (Burke et al. 177). Narratives about death produced in the form of a novel or any other shorter form of fiction may have the essential components to act as a primer for DTA. The human psyche is naturally predisposed to negate or avoid thoughts about death. This is purely an unconscious process. According to TMT (Terror Management Theory), people are protected against thoughts about death with the help of internalised defence mechanisms that act up when death-related thoughts try to penetrate the conscious mind. In such circumstances, Death Thought Access occurs; that is, death-related thoughts reach the surface of the conscious mind forcing the subjective being to acknowledge death as a valid possibility. When DTA occurs, this activates Mortality Salience. MS refers to the defence mechanisms that come in handy to fend off these impending thoughts about death that cause DTA. This essay tries to claim that Brooks' novels that constantly talk about death produced in the form of a novel or any other shorter form of fiction may have the essential components to act as a primer for DTA.

In her first attempt as a novelist, Brooks made a thorough research on the Great Plague of London that swept away the lives of nearly half of England's population during the

years 1665 to 1666. *Year of Wonders* documents the lives of the villagers of Eyam, a small village in Derbyshire, during the plague. Following her success with *Year of Wonders*, Brooks went on to write *March*. This novel fetched her the accolade of being a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist. In this narrative, the readers are taken through the happenings connected with the American Civil War during the late nineteenth century. It is clear that all of these novels are set in hazardous environments where characters are put through quite an ordeal to barely survive their horrible predicaments. At almost every turn of the page, there is death. The well-rounded major characters, as well as the minor characters, are simply never safe in Brooks' writings. They are always on the lookout for ways to escape circumstances created by war, disease, fate, and murder. Furthermore, these episodes that showcase death are never abstruse. They are so minutely detailed that there will be no requirement whatsoever for the reader to imagine these dreadful portrayals. Macabre and body horror have long been part of literary writing and mainstream cinema. Readers, as the present paper contends, are not exactly passive participants in the act of reading. The reader brings the text into existence, and this reader should not be taken for granted. As a cognitive being with easily activated responses (emotionally and physically), the reader reconstructs the text as it is being read. Hence, the text that is read can be capable of propelling the reader into worlds that can be quite uncharted. Intriguingly, the reader is subject to experience sensations that have never been felt before. Promisingly, this capacity of the text to open up new avenues of sensory exploration is the primary reason why people still indulge themselves in fiction.

Embodied Cognition and Literary Experientiality

Among the tripartite of the narrator (author), narrative (story), and narratee (reader), the person who gives animation to the words on the page, the reader plays the most determinantal role in the whole paradigm. The rules of cognition and their presumed aftermath are more or less the same to both individuals as well as a group of readers in general. Every text is written with an appropriate audience in mind. Reader response theory has always posited the importance of the ideal reader. It can be agreed that "One of the most conspicuous aspects of contemporary literary criticism is an emphasis upon readers and the act of reading, to the exclusion, and even to the avowed extinction, of authors and literary objects. The phenomenology, the psychology, the poetics, the experience, the esthetics, the competence, the erotics, and the prudery of reading are among the current theoretical concerns of criticism" (Markley and Demaria 463).

The reader thus becomes the subject of attention at this juncture. The quality of the text in terms of the effects it viably creates is authenticated only by the reader. Readers are cognitive beings who apply their faculties to decode the text to form meaning (often subjective). The later part of the twentieth century has proposed many great claims that are revolutionary in understanding the cognitive aspect of reading. One of the assumptions is that of 'embodied cognition'. More than an assumption, it is a theory that is backed up by a reasonable number of experiments. According to this way of looking at the cognitive processes of the brain, it can be said that "... processes that are generally accepted as cognitive are, in fact, instantiated in areas of the brain that form the motor cortex" (Rowlands 82). The human body is not seen as a distinct entity but rather as a complementary counterpart that processes information. Here, the sensory-motor systems are seen to work quite actively in synthesising the external world into relevant data. This becomes a relative topic to discuss, especially when a vast majority of researchers have now begun to claim that language processing is itself an embodied process. In an essay entitled "Embodied Cognition and Language Learning in Virtual Environments," it is pointed out that "intentional actions activating the brain resources used for the motor system are also engaged in lexical-semantic processing and language comprehension. Additionally, the motor system is automatically activated under the following three situations: when a person (a) observes manipulable objects; (b) processes action verbs; and (c) observes the actions of another individual" (Lan et al. 640). Based on this, it can be surmised that reading fiction is not exactly as simple or as passive as watching a movie. In a recent study, "Toward naturalistic

neuroscience: Mechanisms underlying the flattening of brain hierarchy in movie-watching compared to rest and task,” made by Gustavo Deco and his colleagues at Oxford, it was concluded that watching a movie required a very meagre amount of neuro computation. This is quite contrasting to reading fiction, where the brain is more neuro-cognitively engaged. Gustavo Deco used nearly 176 participants in his study to analyse their fMRI readings as they watched a series of movies. The results of the experiment confirmed that there was actually a flat neural activity in these readings as the subjects were engrossed in a movie. The audience in a movie theatre need not put their imagination to the test in order to consume the narrative offered by the screen.

There is a much deeper engagement that is initiated in the act of reading, which is neurological in nature. The experience is quite different when compared to consuming other forms of narratives (TV shows, cartoons, movies, etc.). No other format of narrative storytelling compels the narratee or reader to make necessary efforts to enjoy the story as fiction does. Novels provide a lively experience, a kind of simulation of foreign sensations. Fiction makes this process possible as it aims to describe every minute detail faithfully. More importantly, the language of fiction is proven to have a significant impact on the sensory-motor neurons involved in visual (seeing), auditory (hearing), tactile (touch), gustatory (taste), and olfactory (smell) processing. Linda Parsons claims that “When reading for pleasure, the lived-through experience of the text is the primary goal, and the reader focuses on the sensations, feelings, and images that result from the transaction with the text. Thus, the reader engages actively, critically, and personally” (257). The experience of the real requires a lot of neuro-computation derived from sensory perception. But in the case of a movie, the experience is less labored. As a reader goes through a text, the words are tuned into appealingly believable mental images that require a certain amount of neurocomputation of data received from the text (as found in the fMRI readings studied by Natalie Philips).

It is only logical that the reader will be persuaded to let go of the real world when met with such a text-based pseudo experience. This unique attribute of fiction is termed ‘experientiality’. Monika Fludernik is open enough to equate narrativity with experientiality. She simply calls narrative storytelling a “mimetic evocation of ‘real-life experience’” (Fludernik 12), a kind of literary realism that persuades the reader to be more emotionally invested in the text. This label of narrative processing is consequently a result of embodied cognition, and it is entirely anthropomorphic in nature. Here the fictional world presented by the written word of the text is mimetically turned into a life-like simulation through past experiences that are triggered once again in the cognitive schemata of the reader. Narrativity or experientiality is initiated by the existence of a human narrator in the story. The narrator transfers or lets the narratee share the experience of the situations offered by the narrative. Wherever there is a detailed description of human consciousness, there will be narrative experientiality. This mimetic realism can be observed as a mediated after-effect found in the reader. Through experientiality, the reader is transported into the world created by fictional accounts. This is made possible when the cognitive parameters of the mind are designed to process both real-life experiences as well as textual representations of such experiences in the same way. Fictional writing that describes the emotional and physical states of the protagonist with utmost clarity is prone to create experientiality. In short, “Narrativity can emerge from the experiential portrayal of dynamic event sequences which are already configured emotively and evaluatively, but it can also consist in the experiential depiction of human consciousness tout court” (Fludernik 22). When a text is written with intended experientiality, it becomes a powerful catalyst for evoking emotional responses that are similar to real life. Thus, reading fiction not only grants exposure to events, characters, and settings but rather a more immersive simulation of the words on the page. This concept is very much similar to the concept of virtual reality headsets that are dominating the video game industry these days. Like the experience, a gamer is likely to receive through a VR headset, a simulation of events is made possible by the simple act of reading fiction. The lines between reality and fiction are made thin in this process. Readers are recorded to be

affected by such a process that it can inadvertently affect their interactions with the real world. This includes changes found in perspective, behaviour, ideology, and action. The act of reading thus becomes a more powerful prospect in changing the individual as well as the society at large, and this is rightly regarded by social psychology as 'narrative persuasion'. Here experientiality can be seen as an investable process that "is a complex, dynamic relation in which real-world and story-driven experiences become intertwined" (Caracciolo 49). Therefore, it is only reasonable to assume, from this point onwards, that the ideal reader is replaced by the embodied reader as the primary focus of attention. Taking the reader's response into account, the reaction of the ideal or rather the embodied reader towards the awareness of death created by fiction must have some interesting prospects to analyse.

Implications of Cognitive Literary Theory on Experientiality

It is simple enough to conclude that the reader is engaged with the text at the neurological level. This idea has been embodied by some of the recent literary lab experiments conducted by researchers at Stanford. These literary scholars analysed the novel *Mansfield Park* by Jane Austen using an array of eighteen Ph.D. scholars who were placed in an fMRI scanner for their brains to be studied. They read the novel being placed in the scanner, and their cognitive engagement with the book was monitored using the latest scanning technology. Neural engagement, as reported by Natalie Philips, who led the project "Your Brain on Jane," claimed that blood flow in the readers' brains was different when engaged in the novel both for pleasure and for serious reading. Barsalou studied the process of cognition in ex-hockey players as they read about the sport they have been a part of for years. As they read about the sport of hockey, sensory-motor neurons were activated in them as if they were on the pitch. Language is a highly persuasive tool to evoke emotional and muscular responses. This aligns itself as one of the reasons why the act of reading fiction is still popular in the age of the internet. When a reader is engaged in the process of reading, he or she converts the words on the page into mental images reconstructed using memorised past experiences. To highlight this further, Anežka Kuzmičová says:

Briefly put, it has been suggested that in the processing of language referring to sensorimotor contents, whether it is an isolated phrase such as "grab the cake" (Raposo et al.) or a full-fledged narrative (Speer et al.), our sensorimotor cortex becomes automatically activated in much the same way as if we were acting out the represented actions and perceptions ourselves. For instance, when a story protagonist is reported to pick up an object, e.g., a textbook, this is reflected not only in the motor but also in the visual area of the brain that would be active if the reader actually picked up the same object. (Kuzmicova 276)

As all these claims suggest, the human mind is so advanced enough to change the neural patterns of the brain. The brain actively reconfigures itself as it learns something new. Reading communities are, therefore, participating in one of the most powerful methods to shape themselves. Engaging in a novel or a short story can be an efficient way to alter one's psychological functioning. If a person comes across the word 'sea' in a narrative, the processing of that word involves the evocation of mirror neurons or the sensory-motor neurons that were once recorded in the brain when the person visited the sea during his lifetime. If this is the claim that is substantiated by a handful of theorists of cognitive neurology, then the question arises as to how words related to death can be processed in the act of reading fiction.

Brooks' novels consist of a variety of scenes that portray death in a disturbingly direct fashion. They are experientially depicted through a first-person narrator, as found in all of her writings. The grief, trauma, shock, and devastation are transferred easily to the reader with the help of some detailed expressions. In *Year of Wonders*, the descriptive voice is that of a woman who becomes a helpless witness to countless deaths caused by the plague. Anna Firth loses both her infants to the cruel disease. These deaths are documented with the utmost experiential detail to make the reader feel the loss that a mother is fated to

experience in such a travesty. The clarity of expression used in her writing really makes the transportation of the reader to the society of seventeenth-century England an assured possibility. Unlike the regular usage of death as a sentimental tool to make the character be empathised by the reader, Brooks uses death in its most unadulterated form. Death, when represented in the media, also maintains the same level of desensitisation. When people usually die in a cinema or in TV shows, they are always shown as calm heroic figures who have something profound to say. But, in reality, death is not as dignified as it is projected to be. It is not a good sight at all. When people generally die, there is always an unbearable stench that fills the room. There is never enough time to record words of wisdom. The pain and anguish of life coming to a close are never accurately represented in popular culture. This is where books come into perspective as authentic portraits of the human experience. In Brooks' novels, the depiction of death is to the point. Her fiction is never shy about guts being ripped open, pieces of skull flying out, bowels being released, and the general agony felt by the characters when death slowly approaches their soul. Keeping the embodied reader in mind who is in a position to simulate these episodes, a careful assessment of the psychological impact it can elicit has to be scrutinised. How will people process experiential death? What can be the result of such a pseudo-experience of death? These questions can only be answered by discussing the claims made by TMT researchers.

The analysis made on the capacity of literary fiction to be primers of DTA is quite scant. People develop all these practices that are socially acceptable so that they can shield themselves from the idea of death. If self-esteem bolstering and investment in cultural worldviews are the solution to averting oneself from being tormented by death-related thoughts, then this is probably the solution to fend off existential terror as well. People who are afraid that life has no apparent meaning can become aware that life is a relatively short enterprise in which meaning and purpose become a subjective affair. A communion of readers is always a possibility because people, in general, look for structured environments where there is order. This is purely compensation for the lack of structure or logic found in their personal lives. Readers find a sense of homeostasis when they read fiction, as every story is potentially fused with a beginning, middle, and end. The number of people who would rather spend their Saturday evening on the new best seller has become considerably less. This is due to the advent of other effortless modes of entertainment that came about in the twentieth century. But there is always a species of humanity that seeks unmitigated pleasure from the written word. Keeping this statement in mind, reading for pleasure will not be possible if the content recons to remind the sensitive reader about death and the possible state of permanent nothingness that emanates. Despite the paucity of literature on the possibility of fiction being able to create DTA, and at the same time, proven to be impossible, this paper makes a consolidated effort to assert that fiction is certainly a powerful primer to induce thoughts about death. This is proclaimed with assurance by keeping the embodied reader rather than the farfetched ideal reader in mind. The embodied reader who simulates Brooks' novels is bound to come to a phase of self-actualisation that life is indeed finite (develop DTA). The same principle is applicable to the reading community in general, even if they form a collective group or as individuals who read her novels. To cite an example from Brooks' writings would be helpful to understand how death is portrayed in her novels. In one of the episodes in the novel *March*, the narrator finds himself in the army hospital where the army doctor tries his best to tend to the soldiers who are wounded by gunshots and bombs. The narrator witnesses how one of the young men in the hospital dies due to a mortal injury – “He sat up suddenly, desperate for breath. His pierced lungs, it seemed, couldn't draw air for him, so I just held him there, his mouth gaping like a landed fish, while his skin turned slowly to the color of oatmeal” (Brooks, *March* 48). Here, death is not described as a romantic notion but rather as a disgusting and grief-provoking sight of terror. The careful selection of words used in this passage requires attention. Skin turning into the colour of oatmeal is a rather tasteless description of death. Words are turned into images, and when death-related words are used in a passage, it leads to the creation of death-related images. This can be deemed as a natural impetus to cause DTA in the reader. As the plague set

itself deep in the village of Eyam, the villagers could not afford to take time to prepare coffins and perform funeral rites as the number of deaths increased each day. The author tries her best to capture how the villagers cope with this travesty, and this is directly imparted to the reader as a vivid experience. "Families simply carried their loved ones to their graves, or, if they were not strong enough, dragged them thither with a blanket slung beneath the armpits of the corpse. Mr. Mompellion prayed over each one by candlelight and then helped in piling the soil back into the graves" (Brooks, *Year of Wonders* 160). This raw portrayal of death strikes a serious chord in making the reader think about the finitude of existence. It can be concluded that in contrast to Adriana Teodorescu's claim about death being used as an aesthetic tool in literary writing, Brooks offers a more realistic and relatable portrayal of death. This is in accordance with the ability of the text to impact the psyche of the reader as he or she traverses through a realistic simulation of death. This is where the embodied cognitive aspect of reading fiction comes into play. This engages the reader at a deeper level to contemplate death at the conscious level, which is quite difficult otherwise. When the reader processes words that paint images about the harsh and cruel aspects of death, this leads him or her to experience the suffering it offers in the form of a simulation. This can truly be considered an educative process.

Rieger and his colleagues have made an exemplary study of media and its ability to create internal buffers to fend off thoughts against death. The article "Distressful Empathy in Reading Literature: The Case for Terror Management Theory?" produced by van Peer and his team, suggests that reading literary fiction cannot be a valid instigator of death-related thoughts. The article sheds light upon two experiments that were carried out to prove their hypothesis. The text that was used in the first experiment is a deathbed scene from *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoyevsky. When the subjects of the experiment (87 college students) were asked to read a literary text primed with death-related content, they were immediately asked to write an essay that discussed their own death. Some of the participants did not even attempt the essay out of fear. The experiment came to a conclusion after analysing the essays that people seriously considered their own deaths after they read about macabre content in a literary form. Other tests did conclude, however, that the participants could not achieve mortality salience or the need to create more buffers to defend themselves against death-related thoughts. The problem could be with the texts that were used to initiate thoughts about death. Brooks' fiction, on the other hand, must be tested on such accounts (as it was done using *The Brothers Karamazov*). The texts of Geraldine Brooks should be used as a priming stimulus in the same experimental model to unveil or state for sure that literary texts can create DTA or mortality salience. The results of such an experiment would surely favour the hypothesis that literary texts can create thoughts about death. Theoretically speaking, it is safe to assume that Brooks' writings offer a kind of literary realism that can affect the reader neurologically, and this offers the audience a simulated experience of death. This can very well be deemed as a didactic tool to make the prospect of life clearer by unburdening the human species from troubling existential doubts.

Conclusion

The reading community is a consortium of diversely designed individuals whose only link to the group is the literary text that they preferably share. The novels of Geraldine Brooks are still unprecedented to many Asian as well as European audiences. If a reading community should come together to celebrate such a kind of macabre-themed writing, that highlights the finitude of life, then the effects of such an ordeal can be calculated to have a positive underlining if they can cure immediate existential conundrums. Reading, being a habit purposed for pleasure, may not necessarily look for books that depict gruesome deaths, murders, wars, oozing ulcers, dripping bowels, or slit throats. But such an audience who do take it upon themselves to simulate these circumstances can enable themselves to initiate a mission to find meaning in their potentially meaningless lives. This distinct use of literary fiction to repeatedly converse about death and to cause mortal terror in the recipient of the text must have a suitable label. Throughout the history of world literature, there have been

works that illuminate the finitude of life. But Brooks' novels do not have a direct purpose in depicting the fragility of the human body. They are found as stark representations of the ephemeral human experience. Such a style of writing can be considered as 'Brooksian'. That is, a kind of fictional story-telling that advertises an experiential simulation of death. The readers of Brooks' novels, if so in the future, can be 'Brooksian' readers. Their purpose in coming together as a group of readers is to consciously remind themselves that death is a pertinent possibility from which there is absolutely no chance of escape. They can train themselves to comply, without hesitation, that everything that lives will surely die. As per the claims made by TMT, coming to terms with their own death will make such readers of the 'Brooksian' community develop mortality salience. Being exposed to the mortifying terror of their own demise will surely instigate the adoption of strongly invested cultural worldviews as well as self-esteem-bolstering behaviour that is oriented towards the approval of their society. In short, they will alter their thoughts and behavioural patterns to become better human beings. They will be aware that there is a need to create a meaning of some sort to be pursued throughout their finite existence. Looking at the need for literary fiction as a tool to cure society of varied crippling illnesses, it is impossible to assume that there will be a time when reading communities will cease to exist. As long as there is man, there will be books. As long as there are books, there will be readers. As long as there are readers, there will be culture and life.

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