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Illuminating the Pathways: Buddhist Aesthetics in Charles Johnson's *Night Hawks*

Master thesis 2024
Master in English and Literacy Studies
Department of Cultural Studies and Languages

Faculty of Arts and Education

The Faculty of Arts and Education

MASTER'S THESIS

Study programme: English and Literacy Studies	Autumn term, 2024 Open
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Title of thesis: Illuminating the Pathways: Buddhist Aesthetics in Charles Johnson's *Night Hawks*	
Keywords: American literature, 20th century; American literature, 21st century; Buddhism in literature, Buddhist philosophy, Charles Johnson, narrative, short fiction	Pages: 97 + attachment/other: 9 Stavanger, November 2024 date/year

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Abstract

This thesis explores the integration of Buddhist aesthetics in Charles Johnson's selected short stories in *Night Hawks* (2018), examining how central Buddhist philosophy is embodied within the narrative. This project aims to illuminate the ways Johnson employs Buddhist tenets to enrich the multifaceted interpretation of his storytelling. The philosophy directs the characters' paths towards personal transformation that lead to spiritual awakening or enlightenment, while also providing a space for philosophical and spiritual reflection. The study investigates the ways narrative elements convey underlying Buddhist philosophy. In exploring the Eastern and Western philosophical ideas interwoven into the selected short fiction, this thesis aims to provide a broader perspective into his narrative. Ultimately, this thesis deepens an understanding of Johnson's literary artistry, contending that his works not only illuminate Buddhist philosophical thinking but also shed light on the role of literature and spiritual reflection in contemporary fiction.

Acknowledgement

I am deeply indebted to Dr. Eric Dean Rasmussen for his generous guidance, constant encouragement, and kindness throughout the process of my writing. Your mentoring, insightful instruction, and above all else—the passion and love for literature—have, time and again, illuminated and reignited my love for literary studies, which had once seemed dim. I have learned dearly how to be an enthusiastic, passionate teacher from you. All throughout this journey, I am grateful to you for fostering my academic and spiritual growth, and for paving the way to see literature as a bridge between art and more profound spiritual truths.

And I would like to say that it is truly a privilege and a blessing to work with you and Charles Johnson's literary works and non-fiction, which will, without a doubt, continue to accompany me as a guiding philosophy through the journey of life.

To my parents, who have always been there at every moment of my life—you are the brightest light in my darkest nights.

I would also like to thank all of the great teachers with whom I studied and all the wonderful friends I have made during my years at UiS.

Ultimately, as someone who takes refuge in literature and Buddhist philosophy, I can say that both have been my source of peace and guiding lights during turbulent times.

Introduction

The literary works of Charles Johnson are mostly recognized for his contributions to African American literature and his exploration of complex subjects concerning identity, race, philosophy, and spirituality. In addition to his role as an emeritus professor, Johnson writes essays, novels, cartoons, screenplays, literary scholarship, and philosophy. He has also received a critical claim for his novels—for example, *Middle Passage* (1990), which won the National Book Award for fiction—and he is the second African American, after Ralph Ellison, to receive this distinguished award. Johnson is described in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* as an author who has dedicated his career to creating new artistic ground for African American writers. In their descriptions of black life in the modern world, African American authors have been too limiting, reiterating the constrained findings from the sociologists and historians rather than expressing the diversity of black life and its underlying philosophical interests. Thus, his literary works are devoted to "breaking those stereotypes and exploring the philosophical traditions that African Americans have both used and transformed" (Wall, 1279). This is because several African American authors' writings are drawn and concluded from the traditional, and hurtful narratives of racial categories. Subsequently, they are unable to reject the rigid stereotypes.

Since Charles Johnson has produced a wide range of literary works that demonstrate his profound comprehension of philosophy, religions, history, and Eastern thoughts, his works have left impactfully deep and lasting impressions on readers' minds with their intriguing narratives, innovative style, and thought-provoking explorations. Throughout his career, Johnson's works have been met with critical critics who have expressed a wide range of opinions and perspectives. Many critics of Johnson often praise his literary expertise, particularly his capability to masterfully weave together the intricate narratives that explore complex themes, for example, race and identity. Critics often point out Johnson's philosophical background, and how he often incorporates his philosophical artistics into his fiction. One of the most important aspects of his writings is that they frequently contain philosophical insights that lie beneath the surface. His exploration of individualism, ethical dilemmas, philosophy, and creativity makes his writings recognized as spiritual literature due to their profoundness in delving deep into human nature, a sense of transcendence of self, and connection with others—elements that lead to inner

tranquility. His literary works are renowned for their enthralling storytelling, which gently entice readers to immerse themselves in the worlds he creates.

Starting his career in artwork as a cartoonist, Johnson then decided that he wanted to externalize his thoughts and ideas into words. Given that his most renowned literary works are novels that have received critical acclaim since the 1970s, Johnson states that his "writing roots are in the short stories" ("Introduction" *Night Hawks* 1). This is because he considers a form of short fiction attractive, and abundantly comprised of artistic aesthetics. Despite the fact that Johnson produces various kinds of literary works that illustrate his artistic skills and philosohical ideas, ranging from slave narrative, race, politics, to folk tales, he views his body of work as "one that is evolved over a lifetime, is generous in form and content, and offers a variety of different aesthetic experiences" (Johnson, *The Way of the Writer* 25). He opines that solely analyzing art through sociological, historical, political, or other single lenses would limit both the understanding and the aesthetics of the work—it reduces the art to one specific aspect, neglecting its full artistic potential (24). This signifies that his literary works aim to broaden and deepen readers' perceptions, knowledge, and outlooks on life and the world. As Johnson postulates that "All the things I've created, and the various disciplines I've studied, were part of a very conscious, systematic effort to create an interdisciplinary, multicultural body of work that is broad and deep, inventive and expansive" (26). Johnson has, therefore, deliberately pursued a variety of artistic and intellectual aspects from multiple fields and cultures, giving rise to profound understanding and diversity.

As a Buddhist, Johnson's literary works often offer a unique blend of literary aesthetics, philosophy, seamlessly integrating underlying Buddhist principles, which classified his works as spiritual literature. Johnson is known as a writer of color who has "embraced Buddhism as a source of inspiration for [his] work" (Bridge and Storhoff, "Introduction" 13). Johnson's aesthetics of the literary art are often interwoven with Western and Eastern philosophy in multiple perspectives. The narrative of *Night Hawks* is thus not only rich and multifaceted, but it also engages profoundly with philosophical themes, particularly those that are rooted in Buddhist philosophy. Known for the ability to incorporate Eastern philosophy with African American cultural experiences, Johnson has created an oeuvre of literary works that encourage the readers to decipher them in a variety of interpretations.

This thesis aims to examine how the selected short stories in Charles Johnson's *Night Hawks* (2018), through the lens of Buddhist aesthetics, incorporate its values and philosophy. The short stories offer an interesting basis for a deeper examination of these values. The objectives are to explore and analyze the literary works by looking at how the elements that construct a narrative work to display underlying Buddhist philosophical thinking. Most of the short stories, if not all, in *Night Hawks* generally engage with philosophical selfhood, emptiness, nonduality, and impermanence. My primary line of critical inquiry is to explore and analyze:

- How the narrative style, technique, language, and point of view affect the way Buddhist values and philosophy are presented and any possible meanings they are attempting to convey.
- How characters, events, motifs, or themes work to convey Buddhist values and philosophy.
- How the characters change and transform through the conflicts occurring.
- How these philosophical values challenge the characters' comprehension, presumptions, and perspectives on the subject matter.

Through an examination of the conflicts that appear as suffering and the path that leads to personal transformation or revelation, which in Buddhist thinking is perceived as an enlightenment, I will investigate the ways Johnson incorporates philosophical and spiritual insights into the narrative.

Ultimately, this thesis will argue that short fiction in *Night Hawks* not only serves as an exploration and meditation on human nature of self, thinking, and mind, but also as a reflection of the transformative potential of spiritual awareness in the face of life's general sufferings. As Johnson has asked himself, "How in heaven's name shall we live in a world smothered by suffering?" (Johnson, *The Way of the Writer* 110), and "How do I remain in the world and follow the dharma[1]?" (Johnson qtd. in Rushdy 402) Thus, in researching the primarily crucial elements of Johnson's works, the analysis of the elements that comprise a narrative—events, characters, plot, motifs, figures, and tropes—would be an essential part of the process, as it contributes to developing the research's theoretical framework, focus, and context. Through this approach, I

[1] The teachings of the Buddha

seek to demonstrate how Johnson utilizes literary techniques to evoke Buddhist thoughts, providing a unique narrative that transcends all the boundaries and dualism.

Short Stories synopsis in *Night Hawks*

Charles Johnson's *Night Hawks* is a well-crafted, thought-provoking collection of twelve short stories that are ultimately empowering with the underlying messages, and profoundly fulfilling with their depth. Short fiction in *Night Hawks* takes us through Johnson's deliberately imaginative journeys, where each of the stories takes place, in all respects, in a disparate place and time—from the ancient period of the Buddha's life, the ancient Greek era, the contemporary world, and ultimately to the dystopian future. All of which subtly liberate our perceptions and ways of seeing and understanding the world in which we live and, at the same time, reflect the values of human connections through depictions of the events and characters from all walks of life.

In a poignant story, "The Weave," a sneeze that costs the hairdresser her job ultimately drives her to commit a robbery of hair extensions worth thousands of dollars at the salon. "Prince of the Ascetics" is the retelling of the Buddha's life, specifically the path leading up to his enlightenment, masterfully integrating Buddhist thoughts, and narrated by one of his followers who constantly doubts his practice. "The Cynic," an exquisitely robust blend of Eastern and Western philosophy, is narrated by Plato, who struggles to define reality after the loss of his beloved teacher, Socrates, in a turbulent time when universal truth can no longer be addressed. "Kamadhatu: A Modern Sutra" is a warm and thoughtful story in which the Japanese priest constantly grapples with his relentless grief and shadows of the past until he meets an African-American scholar. "Follow the Drinking Gourd" follows a fugitive slave with survival's guilt who frees himself from the song that discreetly discloses the road to freedom by following the North Star.

"Idols of the Cave," with a witty and satire dialogue, giving a throaty laugh, is narrated in the second-person narrative, placing the reader in the position of a Muslim American combat medic facing a court martial after plunging into an abandoned cave once inhabited by the Buddhist monks in Afghanistan. After breaking into the home of a wealthy man in "Occupying Arthur Whitfield," a Seattle taxi driver, brooding over the unfairly large gap between the rich and the poor, discovers that the suffering experienced by all individuals outweighs the disparities between the wealthy and the poor. In the same manner, in "Welcome to Wedgwood," the narrator,

disgruntled by his new neighbor's loud music and expressing his frustration through a chain of thoughts, learns to let go by embracing compassion. Two of his short stories are in the science-fiction genre: "Guinea Pig" creatively revolves around a student participating in the experiment, allowing him to temporarily reside in the mind of the researcher's dog, and "4189," with a desolate dialogue and narrative, takes place in a dystopian future where death is both absent and forbidden. The last two stories are nonfiction, in which "The Night Belongs to Phoenix Jones" depicts a story with a real-life superhero who does not have a superpower yet raises the question of our socially constructed self, and "Night Hawks," where Johnson has a late-night conversation with his late friend about how important the arts are to the world as well as black people's conditions in the past decades.

Thesis Structure

In the collection of a dozen short stories, eight stories are selected for the project, as the selection criteria are their relations to Buddhist values and philosophy. Similar literary components from each short story will be grouped together. This would provide critical ground for analyzing the formal elements in the short stories.

In Chapter 1, I provide the background and theoretical framework that aim at framing *Night Hawks* in its literary contexts. This chapter consists of five parts: Johnson's enegagement in Buddhism, his views on storytelling, literary terminology, key concepts in Buddhism, and a review of secondary literature. In Chapter 2, I explore four short stories that represent Buddhist practices. The stories depict the literal representations of the Buddhist characters and the scenarios that depict the people practicing Buddhism. Four of which are "Prince of the Ascetics," "The Weave," "Kamadhatu: A Modern Sutra," and "Welcome to Wedgwood." The Buddhist elements that Johnson describes in the stories, and how they are portrayed will be studied to see how they complement the story's thematic contents. In Chapter 3, I examine "The Cynic," "Idols of the Cave," "Guinea Pig," and "4189" in terms of a form of spirituality, which is characterized by an encounter between Western and Eastern philosophical perspectives that, at the same time, reinforces Buddhist notions of emptiness, nonduality, and interconnectedness. While "Guinea Pig" and "4189," the science fiction short stories, are paired together due to their literary genre and their relations to Buddhist philosophical values.

Owing to his years of practicing Buddhism, Johnson's philosophical ideas are subtly reflected in Buddhist philosophical values and ways of thinking—such as emptiness, impermanence, the notion of self, and the interconnectedness of all things, which are woven into the stories' characters, events, themes, and motifs. Buddhist aesthetics in terms of philosophy and values have contributed promising ground to further explore his underlying Buddhist elements in *Night Hawks*, as there are certain features reflecting its practices. Due to his unwavering commitment to multiple disciplines, philosophy, and cultures, it is profoundly essential to investigate how they influence the narrative.

Chapter One: Literary Pathways to Charles Johnson

In this chapter, I aim to illuminate the pathways where Johnson's literary works and Buddhist philosophy intersect. Beginning with an exploration of Johnson's deep connection with Buddhist thinking, I will discuss how his spiritual beliefs shape his narrative style. Then to his view on storytelling, crucial literary terminology, and key Buddhist concepts in his literary works that I use in my analysis. From there, I will walk the reader through the scholarship of four critics to provide context and support for the examination of Johnson's works. Their insights help for further analysis and discussions of the primary texts.

1.1 Charles Johnson's Engagement in Buddhism

Since becoming a Buddhist in 1981, Johnson has developed a deep passion and interest in Eastern philosophy, particularly Buddhism. He has subsequently published several non-fiction works, including essays and writings concerning Buddhist philosophical values and thinking. During the Black movement in the late 1960s, a time of intense polarization between Black and white communities, Johnson postulates that Eastern philosophy became his "spiritual refuge" that "enriched and enabled that lifelong project" (Johnson, *Taming the Ox* 6). He also frequently notes that African American literature, if not all, often centers on the concept of a fixed, rigid identity. It commonly places African Americans in a binary opposition—or dualism—dividing them into categories of inferiority and dominance. Accordingly, he questions the notion of a fixed self, particularly in the context of African Americans. Through Eastern philosophy, Johnson finds an opportunity to thoroughly examine the concept of a static self—an essentialist belief that everything possesses an intrinsic nature—which has long been attached to and upheld by black authors and individuals.

Johnson argues that the reiterated narratives of African Americans, often associated with slavery, are so restrictive that black people remain confined by their own conventions, making it difficult for them to liberate themselves from such rigid narratives. These narratives have been imposed on them over the course of several centuries, and this fixed ideology has repeatedly placed constraints on them. His literary works, therefore, demonstrate an effort to defy the conventions of African American authors, as he seeks to break free from stereotypes by rejecting tragedy and instead promoting personal liberation and creativity. Seen in this light, Johnson's

literary writings frequently delve into the themes of selfhood and liberation from fixed, rigid boundaries. Due to his robust philosophical background and unwavering commitment to Buddhism, the concepts of emptiness and nonduality, which I will discuss in a later section, are recurringly reflected in Johnson's narratives, providing profound symbolic, philosophical, and spiritual meanings. Johnson utilizes literary techniques to evoke Buddhist thoughts, and aims to craft unique narratives that transcend rigid systems, preconceptions, and boundaries—elements that inevitably give rise to dualism.

1.2 Charles Johnson's Views on Storytelling

As a creative writing teacher, Johnson expresses his views about the art and craft of storytelling in several of his essays in *The Way of the Writer: Reflection on the Art and Craft of Storytelling.* He generously offers a thorough, robust exploration of his writing process, covering crucial features such as plot, structure, word choice, and character development that construct exceptional writing. Johnson deploys his vast experience as a writer and teacher to provide guidance to inspire the readers and writers through a thoughtful examination of the writing process that rigorously blends craft, philosophy discussion, and his personal experiences. In this subsection, my discussion will center on the chapters concerning his uniqueness in storytelling because they contain some of Johnson's salient points in relation to the study of short fiction.

Plot

In his essay, "The Importance of Plot," and "Storytelling and the Alpha Narrative," Johnson describes that a plot serves as "a skeleton, the spine" (103) of the story. It provides the foundation for other literary elements to further build on. It is not only a sequence of events advancing the story, but it also lays the groundwork for the development of characters, the exploration of motifs, deeper themes, personal motivations, and the unfolding of the protagonist's journey. All great stories, or what Johnson calls the "Alpha Narrative," are the ones that "compressed the complexity and difficulty of modern life 'into a few stark and massive symbols in which all our experience and all human history are locked'" (106). A great story thus requires the ability to effectively condense the vastness of human experiences into symbols that are clear and concise. The narrative is capable of conveying thoughts that are profound and complex, but it can also be expressed in a simple manner. In this sense, its elements resonate with Johnson's

short story form, which is compacted with his distinctive style of storytelling—the "elegance and compression" ("Introduction," *Night Hawks* 8).

Johnson defines the Alpha Narrative as a story that is profound with the ability to communicate truths in a manner that is not only captivating but also thought-provoking. The Alpha Narratives feature a compelling "ground situation" or conflict, which is a rich fictional premise with high stakes that drives the entire story. This premise is multilayered and complex; it requires a thorough exploration of all its facets and implications (*The Way of the Writer* 108). When the protagonist encounters this "state of disequilibrium" (110), the search for the opposite side is needed for them to regain equilibrium. It is intriguing to interpret the conflicts in Johnson's short story in *Night Hawks* as suffering[2] through a Buddhist lens—either from the external circumstances or as internal turmoil that the protagonists are striving to resolve. Therefore, in my examination, I am looking for the scene in which the characters are struggling in life and the way the text foregrounds different kinds of suffering.

Subsequently, there comes the change, in which the conflict drives the protagonist into "a *process* of transformation" (110, emphasis in original). The characters, going through certain types of struggles, become more mature or change as a result of the plot, which helps facilitate their development. A plot is not solely concerned with the events that transpire; it also reveals the significant reasons behind those events. According to Johnson, plot can serve as a way to understand and interpret the world. It is similar to how a philosopher presents their arguments: "the storyteller's equivalent to the philosopher's argument; its importance lies in it being an interpretation (one based on causation) of *why* the world works the way it does" (102). Johnson emphasizes in his approach to plot that stories offer ways for examining the human condition and have rich, multifaceted meanings that should be consciously interwoven into the narrative.

Revelation or Enlightenment

The storyline further leads to the process of personal transformation—the moment of revelation, or in Buddhist terms, the enlightenment for the character. In the chapters "Scene and

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[2] "The Pāli word *dukkha* (Skt *dukha*) encapsulates many subtleties of meaning, but its application spans pain, suffering, disappointment, frustration, things going badly, hassle, unease, anxiety, stress, dis-ease, unsatisfactoriness, non-reliability of people and things, limitation, imperfection. It sums up the problematic aspects of life: its mental and physical pains, obvious or subtle, and also the painful, stressful, unsatisfactory aspects of life that engender these" (Harvey, "Dukkha, Non-Self" 26).

Dialogue" and "On Craft and Revision," Johnson describes these processes of writing, where he creates a scene, comprising of "*entrance*, *rhythm*, the *hit*, and an *exit*" (97). In the entrance, he introduces the characters, who are facing conflict or about to face life's general suffering, while rhythm is the dialogue between two people. Then, the hit, in which a "true revelation" (97) is revealed through the heightened moment, leading to an exit. As Johnson posits, "the emotional encounter experienced by the characters in a single dramatic scene will cause them to register some degree of change psychologically, i.e., they will not exit that scene as clean as they went into it" (97). The essential element advancing towards the revelation is the fusion and interplay between the character and event where "the way the latter reveals the former, and the way the former leads inevitably to the latter" (79). In this manner, the character undergoes its own personal transformation.

This is regarded as a "true revelation," describing any moment in which a character undergoes a realization through transcendental experiences. Such moments might occur through dialogue exchange that, in Johnson's preference, "not only make us smile but also slap us upside our heads with a spiritual lesson" (100). Viewed through the Buddhist lens, this is comparable to the Zen koan—a dialogue or story aimed to provoke reflection and challenge the preconceived notions to achieve a more profound, nonconceptual view and understanding of reality to discover a sense of intuitive understanding. In the short stories in *Night Hawks*, Johnson's central characters experience a gradual awakening, shifting from a state of ignorance or limited understanding to one with a deeper, more expansive perspective. Through a pivotal event, they gain broader insight that ultimately leads to a process of personal transformation.

A Perception-Liberating Art

One of the crucial aspects of Johnson's storytelling is "the liberation of perception," on which he frequently places an emphasis. In his essay "Fiction and the Liberation of Perception," Johnson contends that the primary objective of great literature is to enhance, broaden, and deepen our understanding of the world and ourselves, stating that "the greatest literary art has an epistemological mission (198). He draws an emphasis on the relationship between literature and philosophy—both of which seek to enrich and widen our knowledge. This implies that the primary objectives of literary art extend beyond offering escapism, entertainment, and pleasure. It encourages the readers to actively engage with raising deeper questions regarding our

conceptualized ideas, presumptions, and preconceived knowledge that have been incrementally formed and calcified the way we think throughout our lives; to reflect profoundly and ponder critically; or even to reconceptualize our way of seeing and perceiving, which will, in turn, lead to a deeper comprehension of our existence from fresh and extensive perspectives. Johnson continues, quoting from Martha Nussbaum:

> All living is interpreting; all action requires seeing the world as something. So, in this sense, no life is 'raw.' . . ." (In other words, our experience is already cooked by our conditioning, education, intentionality, prejudices, assumptions, and presuppositions.) "The point," says Nussbaum, "is that in the activity of literary imagining we are led to imagine and describe with greater precision, focusing our attention on each word, feeling each event more keenly—whereas much of actual life goes by without that heightened awareness, and is thus, in a sense, not fully or thoroughly lived (198).

Human experience is never entirely objective or raw; rather, it is consistently influenced and shaped by our mental constructs—preconceptions, perceptions, and interpretations. Many of our actions, if not all, are influenced by our perception and comprehension of the world, which in turn shapes our worldview. Therefore, great fiction subtly provides us, the readers, with an opportunity to pause and contemplate life more deeply—as if we can live through it. In delving into the thoughts and feelings through the characters and their circumstances, great literature can help us understand the complexities of human nature and condition, and the different ways people experience the world. The readers can experience life more fully, thoroughly, and in depth when we have a better understanding of the world through literature.

In scrutinizing life that seemingly drifts by without a time to reflect, it somehow bears similarities to the Buddhist nature of perception. Johnson remarks that "Real fiction makes the familiar *un*familiar. It shakes up calcified ways of seeing. It activates in us a Beginner's Mind, as Buddhists would say" (200, emphasis in original). In this context, Johnson makes reference to the Buddhist concept of the "Beginner's Mind," which emphasizes the significance of approaching the world with an open, emptied mind, and a sense of curiosity and wonder, similar to how a beginner would approach anything for the very first time—without any preconceived ideas that prevent them to see in limited, narrow perspectives. For him, real or great fiction has the capability to let the readers cast a glance at mundane, ordinary aspects of life, and presents them in a way that makes them question their preconceived notions about their existence. This is

because the lived experiences and routines that people regularly engage in on a daily basis can give rise to fixed ways, and static perspectives of perceiving the world. Literary art, therefore, compels the readers to delve deeper and discern things from new, different, and multiple dimensions—it disrupts these "calcified ways of seeing," prompting readers to reconsider their preconceptions.

Real fiction is, accordingly, a vehicle for readers to shed light on their preconceived notions, and to gain fresh perspectives. Johnson highlights the capabilities of storytelling, acting as a catalyst for personal growth and expanding the readers' minds. By challenging their presumptions and offering fresh outlooks, fiction can effectively motivate readers to become more mindful and critical observers of "the wonder of our being" (199) and the world around them. It rotates around perspectives, exploring various points of view without necessarily favoring one because each truth is valid within its own context. The value of fiction thus lies in presenting diverse perspectives and insight. The simple act of providing fresh viewpoints can be a powerful component of art, as it reflects experiences, in which meanings are not static but rather change over the course of time. In other words, great fiction, in Johnson's opinion, does more for readers than just convey a story; it makes it possible for them to connect with and comprehend the perspective of the characters. This exploration of diverse perspectives can be a valuable experience in itself. As a result, the epistemological mission of literary art, as Johnson points out, offers the readers the opportunity to gently open their minds, defy their preconceptions, provoke their critical thinking, and deepen and broaden their understanding of the world and themselves.

Voice

In his essay "The Challenge of Voice," Johnson demonstrates the different ways the writers might use voice, from maintaining their unique style of writing or changing it to suit the story and the characters. The importance of voice is that it is an essential instrument to express the writer's vision of the world through the use of language. As he points out, "In developing a voice, what the writer does is transform or personalize the expressive instrument—language—adapting and individuating it to fit his experience, his vision of the world. Voice and vision, these are two sides of the same phenomenon" (84). Because voice and vision work in tandem to disclose the writer's vision, voice, as a result, is one of the crucial literary elements that should

not be overlooked because it offers nuanced dimensions to the narrative. In general, voice stems from the author's unique perspectives, which are contoured by their experiences, and vision of the world, influencing how they express themselves through language. It is by means of the writer's voices that their stories are presented with a distinctive style; consequently, their voices are consistent throughout all of their works.

On the other hand, Johnson maintains that his storytelling is called "narrative ventriloquism," in which he changes his voice to "fit the story being told" (85). He sees it as properly fitting for the first-person narrative, drawing a comparison between the changing voice and the actors' ability to wear different masks according to their roles, which demonstrates that "we do not have a static, unchanging, enduring 'self'" (85). This reinforces the Buddhist notion of emptiness, in which beings are devoid of intrinsic, fixed essence. In addition, this changing voice can as well be applied to the third-person narrative, which can have an effect on the sentence and word choice, depending on what kind of story it is. If it is not a traditional tale that employs a stock voice, the voice of the narrative will display the character's specific perspectives. As a writer, Johnson's job is to "compose *every* sentence so that each becomes a window onto [the narrator's] unique world of experience" (86, emphasis in original). Therefore, every word choice, description, and diction contributes to constructing the narrator's voice. In the collection of short fiction in *Night Hawks*, it is fascinating to observe that Johnson's ingenious ventriloquism has altered in accordance with the background and biography of each narrator. This demonstrates that Johnson is both deft and professional when it comes to narrative ventriloquism.

Language

As a philosopher, Johnson strives to encourage his readers to see the world from broader viewpoints through a vast array of philosophy. At the same time, he is also a literary artist who crafts his literary works with aesthetic forms and diction. In "In Defense of Our Language," Johnson underscores how essential the language is for crafting his works, declaring that "A literary work is, first and foremost, a performance of language" (45), where it is an entrance into the author's consciousness. Since language can shape our thoughts, it allows us to understand the world by giving our thoughts expression into tangible forms. As Johnson quotes Susanne K. Langer,

> Whatever has a name is an object of thought. Without words, sense experience is only a flow of impressions, as subjective as our feelings; words make it objective, and carve it up into things and facts that we can note, remember, and think about. Language gives outward experience its form and makes it definite and clear (Langer qtd. in Johnson 46).

Without language, humans' experiences would be subjective and unclear. Nonetheless, Johnson expresses his concerns regarding the use of vulgarity of language in the modern-day world, which leads to the "failure of language to reveal things in a fresh way. Rather than liberate our perception, vulgarity calcifies it" (47). This is truly essential because Johnson has perpetually emphasized the aesthetic characteristics of language by comparing writing to a musical or poetic composition. In the chapter "Telling it Long and Telling it Short," Johnson also states that he prefers the utilization of "long sentences for rhythm and music" (48), since he views "the sentence and paragraph as units of energy to be released" (48). His idea highlights the importance of rhythm, beauty, and flow in the literary art: "the elegant, long sentence is a thing of beauty, a self-contained entity worthy of study all by itself" (48). The diction, thus, should be expressive, appealing to the readers' senses and stirring their emotions in a powerful, impactful manner.

It is worthy to note that the aesthetic characteristics of language reinforce the short story form because short fiction are concise, generally focusing on a single plot, a single setting, and a few characters. Given its limited space and development, the short story needs to be treated with exceptional artistic skill. Johnson thus utilizes clear and concise language to bring characters to life in order to create a strong sense of immersion for the readers. Thus, in prioritizing the literary aesthetics, he considers that literary works can be powerful tools for both entertainment and knowledge acquisition.

1.3 Literary Terminology

Johnson employs a variety of techniques, styles, and structures to create meaning. These are essential key concepts in narrative theory that I use for my analysis of short stories to help readers gain a better understanding.

Implied author

The implied author, according to H. Porter Abbott, is neither the real author nor the narrator of the text. It is, in fact, "the idea of the author constructed by the reader as she or he

reads the narrative (252). The implied author's intentions somehow might not align with the author's actual intentions. The readers "are required to go beyond the sensibility of the narrator for a just assessment of the novel's import" (90). They are responsible for developing their own conception of the sensibility that lies behind the narrative. The implied author is thus an underlying sensibility that directs readers' interpretation of a text—it is essentially a unique "combination of feeling, intelligence, knowledge, and opinion" (91). As the readers interact with the text, their interpretation of the story is shaped by their own understanding of the implied author's sensibility, which they develop throughout the story. The implied author that Johnson, who is behind these short stories, is deliberately staging scenarios can make the readers think about Buddhism. In his works, the implied author often seems to invite the readers to challenge rigid boundaries, question fixed identities, and examine the nature of reality and self.

Focalization

Focalization is the perspective through which the readers see or experience the events in the story. This literary term is quite similar to point of view. While the point of view focuses on who is narrating the story, focalization "refers specifically to the lens through which, or vantage from which, we see characters and events in the narrative" (79). It is whose perspectives or thoughts the reader is focusing on, even though that character is not the one who tells the story. Through focalization, the perspective is not always fixed; rather, it could change often. As Abbott explains, "Focalization can change, sometimes frequently, over the course of narrative, and sometimes from sentence to sentence, as it can, for example, in intermixed passages of third-person narration and free indirect discourse" (250). The narrative may begin with third-person narration, in which the narrator knows about the events and characters; it then shifts to the inner thought or to free indirect discourse, where the readers see the events from a particular character, almost as if the readers are inside the character's head. This technique allows the readers to "pick up various intensities of thought and feeling" (80) from both voice and perspective that the readers experience while engaging with the narrative.

1.4 Key Concepts in Buddhism

Emptiness, Nonduality, and Impermanence

One of the crucial Buddhist elements to be explored in Johnson's literary works is the philosophical notion of emptiness (śūnyatā), which encompasses nonduality and impermanence. This notion is foundational in Buddhist philosophy and serves as an integral and profound principle that primarily appear in Johnson's writings. Buddhism is generally misunderstood as "a nihilistic erasure of the social world," but it is, in fact, "a religion dedicated to creative reconstruction" (Johnson, "Afterword" 236). In his essay "Be Peace Embodied," Johnson describes that emptiness in Buddhism is not the same as nothingness; rather, it refers to the interdependence and interconnectedness of all things (36). As he explains,

> In the Buddhadharma, the true nature of things is sunyata, or "emptiness." But we would be wrong if we interpreted this emptiness as a *lack* or as vacuous. In his outstanding book *Nonduality*, the scholar David Loy provides a concise account of *sunyata*: It comes from the root *śū*, which means "to swell" in two senses: hollow or empty, and also like the womb of a pregnant woman. Both are implied in the Mahāyāna usage: the first denies any fixed self-nature to anything, the second implies that this is also fullness and limitless possibility, for lack of any fixed characteristics allows the infinite diversity of impermanent phenomena (36, emphasis in original).

Emptiness is a profound idea in Buddhism that contradicts the way humans typically view the world. Since, by nature of reality, every entity lacks an intrinsic, fixed essence, it consequently cannot stand alone, revealing the connectedness, relatedness, and dependence of all entities. Like a womb, emptiness is therefore viewed as both an openness (hollow or empty) and a potentiality (fullness). An "infinite diversity of impermanent phenomena" arises because all things are subject to constant transformation due to their lack of an unchanging essence.

David Burton indicates that "all things are empty means that they are all dependently originating (pratītyasamutpāda); they lack or are empty of autonomous existence because they are reliant on causes to bring them into and sustain their existence" ("Emptiness in Mahāyāna Buddhism" 152). For example, the Buddha connotes that "When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases" (Emmanuel, "Introduction" 6). Buddhist emptiness thus refers to the nature of

all entities—including the self—which lacks its own being, or self-nature. It is empty of any separate existence of their own. This further gives rise to the idea of nonduality, which emphasizes the eradication of all subject-object and self-other distinctions that dissolve and transcend all forms of dualism. Seen in this light, all that exists needs to rely on each other for its existence as a chain of connected loops. Hence, there is nothing that exists in the world of our experience that can be considered independent. Buddhist emptiness encourages viewing the world not as a static or separate set of things but as an interdependent and ever-changing process.

The notion of impermanence (anicca) is an essential and inseparable component of the notion of emptiness. Without this idea, the realization of emptiness cannot be fully achieved. Impermanence is the view that everything—mental or physical—is constantly changing and evolving; nothing remains static or permanent. As P. A. Payutto, a renowned Buddhist monk and UNESCO Prize for Peace Education laureate, explains, "The principle of impermanence (*aniccatā*) relates to the arising, existence, and passing away of all things, including the most minute and detailed matters, as well as physical (rūpa-dhamma) and psychological phenomena (nāma-dhamma)" ("Six Sense Spheres" 65).

This philosophical idea of impermanence thus stresses that all things—living and non-living—are all in a state of flux. Buddhism emphasizes that "change and impermanence are fundamental features of *everything*" (Harvey, "Dukkha, Non-Self" 34, emphasis in original). All facets of life, including feelings, ideas, perceptions, and even the self, are subject to this principle. Johnson provides an insightful relation between impermanence and emptiness that, in order to apply the idea of impermanence, one has to understand the nature of all entities that are freed from intrinsic essence. As he explains, "This begins with the experience of emptiness or the lack of an enduring, separate, immutable, and unchanging essence or substance in everything" (Johnson, *Taming the Ox* 75). Being attached to the illusion of a fixed essence of all matters only creates a sense of clinging, which ultimately results in suffering. Payutto further notes:

> This way of thinking can lead a person to become tied up with thoughts that do not match the facts. When your life continues in a way that cannot keep pace with the conditions confronting you, then you will be dragged down, disturbed, and grasp at false illusions you have built up, only to deceive yourself in the end. Living like this is called slavery (65).

Thus, emptiness and impermanence yield a sense of freedom and liberation from fixed and rigid ideology that repeatedly confines humans.

In the analysis, I will delve deeper to see to what extent Johnson portrays Buddhist emptiness, and how the characters, after the enlightenment, change their views or perceptions of the world through the idea of emptiness and impermanence. These philosophical concepts—emptiness, nonduality, and impermanence—from the Eastern thoughts are reflected in many short stories, for example, "The Cynic," "Idols of the Cave," "Kamadhatu: A Modern Sutra," "The Weave," and "4189."

Meditative Mind

This essential practice of Buddhism could bring about the understanding of the characters' sense of self and their perceptions of the world through the practice of meditation. Even Johnson himself, at the age of fourteen, experienced how meditation brought him a peaceful state of mind, highlighting it as one of the important moments in his life:

> It was the most peaceful and renewing thirty minutes I'd ever known, an experience that radically slowed down my sense of time and cleared away the background noise always on the edge of my consciousness. … I was seeing without judgment. Without judgment, there were no distinctions. Without distinctions, there was no desire. Without desire, there was only clarity and compassion (Johnson, *Taming the Ox* 4).

The meditative mind encourages a person to fully embrace the present moment without any distractions from the past and the future. It helps one contemplate and reflect on the nature of all things. As a result, being immersed in the now provides a meditator to possess a beginner's mind—the one without any preconceived ideas and presumptions. As Johnson, while meditating, postulates that "all my attention rested peacefully in the present moment, a total immersion in the here and now very similar to the state of self-forgetting artists know well from focused moments of creation" (Johnson, *Taming the Ox* 4).

According to Daniel Keown, in the state of the medititive mind, "Distractions, worries, doubts, and fears lose their hold over the mind, and the meditator becomes generally more 'together', living more fully in the here and now" (*Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* 101). Being truly in the present moment could, in a sense, assist a person in developing wisdom and gain understanding of the true nature of reality. Keown further describes that what one views of a certain thing does not mean that they can, in fact, be the ultimate truth:

> Most people regard their mental life as their true inner essence (one thinks of Descartes's famous statement 'I think therefore I am'), but insight meditation discloses that the stream of consciousness is just one more facet of the complex interaction of the five factors[3] of individuality, and not what one 'really is' (108).

When an individual's perspective of the world shifts, so does their mind. The way to change one's views of the world starts from quieting the monkey mind, which is also exposed through a form of a chain of thoughts. In "Welcome to Wedgwood," the story depicts the protagonist's complex nature of his mind and thoughts, where he cannot detach from the contents of his consciousness.

It is noteworthy to explore the moment of creation and Buddhism, as a respectable abbot whom Johnson once met emphasized how creativity and Buddhism are linked together, commenting that "Buddhism was synonymous with creativity. It, too, was subject to change, process, and transformation" (Johnson, *Turning the Wheel* 14). Creativity, in this sense, stems from this certain practice of meditation, in which the state of mind is entirely freed from all the conceptualized ideas, and illusory nature of thoughts.

1.5 Kyle Garton-Gundling: Enlightened Individualism

In *Enlightened Individualism: Buddhism and Hinduism in American Literature from the Beats to the Present*, Kyle Garton-Gundling highlights the idea of "enlightened individualism" in American literature through the adaptations of Asian religions—particularly Buddhism and Hinduism—synthesizing with the American ideals of freedom and individualism. He describes it as "cross-cultural synthesis" (3), which is "a transformation of liberal and American identities through particularly Buddhist and Hindu influences" (4). Enlightened individualism challenges the concepts of individual autonomy that forms an isolated, fixed self by integrating Buddhist and Hindu philosophical notions of nonself to foster a more relational and interconnected view of selfhood. He adopts the term from Arthur Versluis, who coined "enlightened individualism" to indicate the synthesis between the mystical ideas of transcendence and individual rights, whereas he himself utilizes it through Buddhist and Hindu influences to specifically emphasize the

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[3] Five factors are the root cause of human suffering. They comprise the physical body (rūpa), sensations and feelings (vedanā), cognitions (saññā), character traits and dispositions (saṅkhāra), and consciousness or sentiency (viññāna) (Keown, Buddhism 51).

transformation of American identities. Garton-Gundling's transnational study of Asian religions and American literature on enlightened individualism refers to the principles, which, however, stand on the disparate ground: the European Enlightenment, concerning its importance on democracy and individual rights, and the Buddhist and Hindu enlightenment of spiritual transcendence (3). He asserts that although it might seem unrealistic to think that Buddhism and Hinduism may contribute to the American identity due to geographical distance and the slight amount of Asian religions in the United States, unexpectedly, the core beliefs of Buddhism and Hinduism seem to share compatibility with American ideals (3) that highlight the importance of individualism and freedom.

In examining this cross-cultural synthesis, he makes the observation that a number of American literary works that were published after the postwar period are appealing to him due to the distinctive characteristics that they possess, and he connects them with the concept of enlightened individualism. This is because these literary works enhance an understanding and help reexamining American individualism, which is argued that there should be a balance between social justice and individualism. This concept has been under negative criticism—such as territorial expansion, consumerism, and racism—that have problematized the aspects of American individualism for a period of time, facilitating "structural injustice" (3). This makes Garton-Gundling contend that "American literature's adaptations of Buddhism and Hinduism seek to ameliorate the most problematic aspects of American individualism" (3) because the writers he studies attempt to comprehend and reform the notions of American identity. Due to the fact that these authors—for example, the Beat writers, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, and African American writers: Charles Johnson and Alice Walker—have faith in individualism, independence, and democracy, they have made an effort to "retain but redefine key American motifs of freedom and individualism" (4) by integrating Buddhist and Hindu philosophical notions of freedom in their literary works.

In incorporating American ideals of individualism with Buddhism and Hinduism, their teachings, or dharma, are deployed mostly in the light of philosophy. As Garton-Gundling puts it, "Asian religions' presence in American fiction tends to be abstract and philosophical, a set of individual mental exercises rather than a communal practice" (159), and the philosophical concepts such as "the metaphysical theories of emptiness, nonduality, and transcendence" (21) from the intellectual traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism have thus played a significant role in

American adaptations of Asian religions. These Buddhist philosophies are also central tenets found in many of Johnson's literary writings. A key point that Garton-Gundling argues is that applying Asian wisdoms through literature can contribute to the renewal of American enlightenment concepts of individualism and freedom.

Garton-Gundling raises Charles Taylor's vital concepts of the "buffered self" and "porous self," to enhance an understanding of enlightened individualism through American adaptation of Asian religions. The buffered self is the self that is unaffected by "spiritual forces" (9) and constructed through individual rationality, as human beings are a "master of the meanings of things" (Taylor), whereas the porous self is "vulnerable: to spirits, demons, cosmic forces" (Taylor). And this immanent frame creates tensions, or what he calls "cross-pressures," for people in the modern West. However, the cross-pressures of Taylor's immanent frame are open to transcendence with God and with human capacity (Garton-Gundling 9-10). Enlightened individualism through Asian religions in Garton-Gundling's term is somehow different from Taylor's in a way that it does not involve God in its transcendence. Rather, he uses the notion of nonduality, which emphasizes "dissolution of all distinctions between subjects and objects" (10), since he contends that enlightened individualism "erod[es] the 'buffered self' of contemporary individualism. This does not mean the return of a porous self in a world of spirits, but rather a positive vision of compassion based on the interdependence of all phenomena" (10). Accordingly, enlightened individualism through American adaptations of Asian religions is not only derived from the buffered self, but also from Buddhist and Hindu tenets of nonduality:

> Enlightened individualism relies on individualist habits cultivated by the buffered self, such as inner depths, autonomous choices, and philosophical introspection. But the metaphysical notion of interdependence also changes this individualism into a more relational, embedded model. Enlightened individualism channels Asian ideas of transcendence into a greater openness to others by challenging the idea of a stable, fixed self (10).

Seen this way, it echoes his idea of "cross-cultural synthesis" that sheds light on how to read and understand Johnson's literary works. Furthermore, this frame also leads to the importance on how Garton-Gundling points out the distinction between religion and spirituality, stating that Asian religions adapted for the West have generally placed a greater focus on spirituality than on religion:

> One can further understand Buddhism's and Hinduism's role in US literature by differentiating between "religion" and "spirituality." . . . "religion" as an institutional affiliation with an attendant set of ritual observances and community membership. "Spirituality," on the other hand, is a personal search for transcendent meaning that often involves little or no formal practice (8).

Spirituality, perceived as an individual's pursuit of self-transcendence, has played an important role in yielding an opportunity for the individual to find "a truer, more authentic individual self" (12), which could in turn encourage reviving American individualism in many ways.

Among Garton-Gundling's analysis of the works of several authors who are white American, the literary works of African American writer Charles Johnson have captured his particular attention. This is because they have served as an exemplary exploration of enlightened individualism by integrating Buddhist and Hindu adaptations in order to redefine and enhance American multicultural society. Johnson's writings do not appear in a sense of counterculture, as that of the writers in Beat Generation, the anticonformists—such as Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, and Jack Kerouac—who critique their society at that time as "the hypocrisy, corruption, and complacency" (21) by "Buddhist disruptions of conventional thought to critique contemporary American decadence" (23). But his literary works appear "as a way of transcending countercultures and mainstream cultures alike, thus furthering his project of undercutting all orthodoxies" (138). This can be seen from his work as a political cartoonist, which demonstrates "an irreverent desire to undermine any fixed or extreme position" (138) during the Black Power movement.

As a Buddhist, Johnson's profound understanding and cognizance of Eastern philosophy and values, particularly Buddhism, contribute to the enrichment of his literary works, which, in turn, challenge the preconceived notions concerning issues of race as well as identity. His innovative approach, or so-called "Black Dharma" (Selzer qtd. in Garton-Gundling 119), that black American Buddhists apply the teachings of Buddhism poses a challenge to cultural and racial boundaries. In so doing, Garton-Gundling demonstrates the contradiction that while Johnson strives to construct a narrative that encourages a "reinterpretation of Asian religions as expressions of authentic blackness" (120), he also deploys Buddhist and Hindu notions of nonduality in order to "loosen the demands of authenticity" (120). Seen in this light, it could be

asserted that it is his effort to illustrate the cross-cultural synthesis between African American identities and Asian thoughts.

The central idea in Johnson's Buddhist path is his focus on Buddhist philosophy and values. He integrates Buddhism, which he perceives "not as a set of beliefs but as a philosophical and spiritual method for undermining fixed ideologies" (138), and creates his works of literature around the concept of nonduality, or emptiness, in order to "transcend race and all forms of dualism" (137). Garton-Gundling uses Johnson's 1990 novel *Middle Passage* as an ideal example of the concept of cross-cultural synthesis. To illustrate, the protagonist, Rutherford Calhoun, a recently liberated slave, endeavors to escape Isadora's marriage proposal. However, in an attempt to get away from his problems, he sneaks on board with the Republic, a ship sailing for Africa. He quickly learns, nevertheless, that the ship is full of enslaved people and involved in the transportation of the mystical tribe, the Allmuseri, into slavery. Involved more and more in the terrible events of the slave trade, Calhoun finds himself struggling with identity issues and ethical dilemmas due to the fact that he is egotistical, thieving, womanizing, and incapable of building connections based on trust (139). Throughout the voyage, however, Calhoun undergoes significant transformation as he goes through a profound personal journey in which he examines his own background and changes his views on duty and freedom.[4] In the end, Calhoun dissolves the boundaries between subject and object, or between himself and others:

> His previous habitus had been a particularly pernicious version of a buffered self that has an inherent, independent existence. His new understanding replaces the buffered self, not with a reversion to a porous self within an enchanted cosmos, but with a field of profound interdependence that implies a transcendence of subject-object divisions (143).

In other words, Calhoun experiences the "emptiness in the Buddhist sense of lacking of a fixed essence" by overcoming "the ethnic essentialism" (141) that assists him to transcend his dualistic thinking.

Garton-Gundling also notes that the Allmuseri embody Asian wisdom; they are more than just a tribe of people because they are not only "everyone's ancestor, but also everyone's contemporaries" (141), embodying spiritual transcendence. In representing the Allmuseri as everyone's ancestor, Johnson has attempted to dismiss ethnic essentialism by connecting Asian

[4] A Look Back On 'Middle Passage': The Evolution of a Literary Classic by Karen Grigsby Bates (https://www.npr.org/2015/08/01/428448005/a-look-back-on-middle-passage-the-evolution-of-a-literary-classic)

teachings of nonduality, or emptiness, in order to redefine and subtly erase racial trauma by asserting the identical nature in everyone:

> By locating Asian religions in Africa, Johnson's "useful fiction" is that Asian philosophy's origins are black. This move seeks to make black practitioners of Asian religions seem less strange, both inside and outside of African American communities. But by also emphasizing the Allmuseri's status as "the *Ur*-tribe of all humanity" (Johnson, *Middle Passage* 65), Johnson positions the tenets of Asian religions as universal wisdom relevant to everyone (142).

Johnson's piece of writing, as a result, aims to make Buddhism, or Eastern-inspired spirituality, accessible and relatable to black people by integrating Buddhism with African American, highlighting that Buddhism is naturally applicable to all.

Johnson has attempted to redefine an identity for African Americans, who have been traumatized and stigmatized by their preconceptions regarding ethnicity, and to combat prejudice. He is "eager to transcend race and all forms of dualism" (137), believing that Asian religions have specific philosophical values for American minorities, especially the African Americans, and that Asian teachings of nonduality can be effectively powerful resources for marginalized identities in "dealing with racial trauma" (119). The Buddhist nonduality thus demonstrates Johnson's essence of viewing race as an illusion, which is developed and constructed through a fixed and rigid ideology, as he views that human beings have originally shared a similarly related ancestry.

In addition, the importance of nonduality in the teachings of Buddhism and Hinduism is that they allow African Americans to claim Asian religions as their own because this doctrine is made possible by the notion that "ultimate reality is undifferentiated" (26). Johnson demonstrates that African Americans can, accordingly, find strength in their identity and critique racism through the nonduality of Buddhism and Hinduism. Johnson's literary works, thus, serve as an exemplary exploration of enlightened individualism, incorporating Buddhist and Hindu concepts to redefine and enhance American society. His innovative approach challenges cultural and racial boundaries, presenting a vision of the connectedness of all beings and shared humanity. His contribution lies in his ability to bridge diverse spiritual philosophy and identities, yielding a narrative that encourages the characters' enlightenment, and the dissolution of distinctions.

Garton-Gundling proposes enlightened individualism as a method to understand how American literature grapples with individuality and freedom through the lens of Asian religions,

particularly Buddhism and Hinduism, arguing that American literature's engagement with Asian religions could be seen as a "cross-cultural synthesis." He accentuates the importance of this "cross-cultural synthesis" as it explores the potential of Buddhist and Hindu philosophies to enrich and yield different perspectives on American individualism. In this regard, Johnson's literary works could serve as a case study to understand the enlightened individualism in literature, especially regarding issues of race and identity in the American contexts, as he integrates Buddhist and Hindu concepts—nonduality or emptiness, which highlights dissolving of the distinctions between oneself and others, to challenge racial boundaries, and offer a vision of shared humanity.

His concept of enlightened individualism has given rise to my primary line of critical inquiry and served as the methodology to explore and apply his concept to Charles Johnson's short stories in *Night Hawks* and analyze how the enlightened individualism works therein for the characters. What role does Buddhist philosophy play in shaping the character's understanding of self? And how does enlightened individualism contribute to the character's revelation? From the essential ideas in his book, I will apply his views on religions and spirituality, his concepts on enlightened individualism that integrate Buddhist philosophical notion of nonduality or emptiness, and lastly, the concept of "cross-cultural synthesis" that sheds light on how to read Johnson's literary works. Therefore, it is important to look at the short stories in Johnson's *Night Hawks* in two different aspects: the religion and the spirituality. In philosophical spirituality, I will discuss the short stories, in which Buddhist practice is not being literally represented; however, the characters represent the concepts are, in a sense, thinking and acting upon the Buddhist practice without realizing it. The other group embarks on an exploration of stories that feature Buddhist characters and/or the scenarios that depict the people practicing Buddhism.

Moreover, Garton-Gundling's critical approach has paved the ways on reading the narrative in Johnson's *Night Hawks*, regarding the notion of self, which is one of the central themes in his literary works. The idea of enlightened individualism, which was discussed earlier, is centered on the concept that challenges a stable and fixed self. Using Garton-Gundling's concepts on Johnson's writings, I hope to shed light on the concept of enlightened individualism—which stems from adopting Buddhist philosophical thinking—and I would like to use this term in examining his literary writings to see how it functions in relation to philosophical spirituality in *Night Hawks*. Lastly, the concept of "cross-cultural synthesis" would also be another vital

concept to explore in Johnson's short stories, due to the fact that several short stories in *Night Hawks* depict transnational encounters, revealing the cultural differences between the characters. For instance, in "Kamadhatu: A Modern Sutra," a Japanese priest encounters an African American scholar, or in "The Cynic," the encounter between Western and Eastern philosophy.

1.6 Gary Storhoff: Meditative Mind

In *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, Gary Storhoff discusses how Buddhism has been one of the major thematic principles in Johnson's literary prose narratives. He analyzes the way in which Johnson integrated Buddhist practice, paying special attention to the meditation, or the meditative mind—a state of awareness, mental clarity, and being mindful. Johnson's utilization of Buddhist meditation as a narrative technique offers a unique exploration of the characters' minds and their suffering, which finally leads to the epiphany, or the moment of enlightenment for the characters. Many of the short stories in *Dr. King's Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories* revolve around the motifs of state of "wakefulness and sleeping" (208). This is due to the fact that Johnson compares meditation as being similar to sleep, since "both involve letting go of rational consciousness" (208). Kosho Uchiyama, a Japanese Zen master, describes the concept of meditative mind as "an 'opening [of] the hand of thought: Thinking means to be grasping or holding on to something with our brain's conceptual 'hand.' But if we open it, if we don't conceive, what is in our hand falls away'" (Uchiyama qtd. in Storhoff 208). Thus, meditation is meant to be a transforming process in which the meditator's view is freed from distortion, and illusory thoughts that engender "ego-centered, dualistic" (208) perspectives. When the characters let go of their attachment to thoughts, they can detach themselves from the contents of their consciousness, and then comes the ability to quiet their minds—the state, in which the meditative mind occurs.

Given that Johnson develops this motif from a Buddhist perspective, the short story, "Better Than Counting Sheep," is a depiction of how Johnson displays the protagonist, Herwin Throckmorton, who is running after his ceaseless thoughts without any pause, or using the form of meditation practice, which is, as mentioned earlier, the opening of the hand of thought, preventing him from finding peace, and most importantly, sleep. However, Storhoff argues that Johnson does not vividly exhibit what the meditative mind is; he, in fact, shows "what is not" (209), and that is the thoughts chasing that are attached firmly to the protagonist. His suffering is

mostly caused by his endless thinking, and his desire to win $1 million if he can solve the question from the mathematics department; these are all derived from the ego. Throckmorton has grappled with them, but he eventually releases himself from the chains of these ceaseless thoughts that stir his mind, in which Buddhists view the mind as chaotic, and ego-filled:

> To a Buddhist, the mind is similar to a wild and drunken monkey in a cage, moving from one place to another with seemingly no purpose or direction; the mind's content in ordinary waking life is a flow—transitory, chaotic, unregulated, and inevitably colored by desire. Through meditation, Buddhists like Johnson practice watching the mind's movements, all to recognize the mind's illusory, insubstantial, and ego-filled nature (215).

These running thoughts are regarded as the root of human suffering. Throckmorton is, thereby, an exemplary behavior of someone who is completely "enmeshed in the self" (209) and his consciousness, that the meditator aims to transcend.

In addition, the meditative mind also appears in "Dr. King's Refrigerator." The narrative offers readers a brief glimpse into the life of the historical Martin Luther King Jr., who is struggling with his family burdens, economic concerns, other day-to-day responsibilities, and his sermon. However, this historical King is put into a new context. In Johnson's story, while his "consciousness is absorbed with what are in reality extraneous concerns" (222), the meditative mind is represented during his search for a midnight snack. In the same way as Throckmorton, Storhoff demonstrates that King is in "a state of deep, spiritual suffering (*dukkha*), for he is 'attached' to his own thoughts about his career, his marriage, and world justice" (222). Nonetheless, when he empties the food out of his cabinets and refrigerator, he is then fully mindful, noticing the various cultures and human lives that are represented by the food. After experiencing a spiritual awakening in his kitchen, he has come to realize that everything in front of him connects and relates to all things. The meditative mind King experiences contributes to his "mystical insight" (221), in which he gains the openness of thoughts, where the meditative mind arises. As Storhoff explains about the meditation that

> Those with some knowledge or experience of Buddhist insight meditation techniques (vipassana bhavana) will recognize in the story a meditative paradigm: loss of consciousness of self, a suppression of feelings and desires, a release from conceptualizations, language, and categorizations—all replaced by greater spiritual knowledge and an increase or widening of a vision of life (212).

On another level of interpretation, the fictional King's epiphany happening while he empties the fridge further leads to his thorough understanding that expands his vision towards all food, as nothing can be independent on its own; instead, everything is a part of everything else as a network. This liberation from his own perceptions encourages him to undergo a vast transformation. Through the meditative mind, the expansion of views for King, Johnson also promotes the importance of the Buddhist concept of the connectedness of all things, as King's epiphany shows him how he himself is closely tied to that of everyone else's living within his community. Accordingly, this also results in King's realization of "the Buddhist concept of dependent origination" (223), in which "the distinction between the meditating individual and the social and political domain dissolves: all actions, including meditative ones, impact other people, and the individual and society originate dependently upon each other" (223-224).

Seen in this way, it also reflects the Buddhist notion of emptiness, or nonduality, which is, as Storhoff maintains, "a recurring theme for Johnson" (222). It is, thus, essential to note how Storhoff describes what emptiness is from the Buddhist perspective:

> Emptiness in Johnson's Buddhist symbolism is not the same as vacancy, a space that awaits filling: it is not "nothingness" in the sense of the opposite of being or "somethingness." Instead, "emptiness" is the ontological consequence of dependent co-origination. Because of radical contingency, no unconditioned self can be found, and so people, things, and concepts are "empty" of any such unchanging essence (222).

Not only does King empty the refrigerator, but he also, metaphorically, empties his mind of all the concerns that he has been carrying around with him all the time. The meditative mind that King has come across during his search for a midnight snack in the kitchen is, as a result, the central path to his revelation, or spiritual awakening.

In the end, he comes to the realization that he is unable to exist without all the entities around him because of the connectedness of his surroundings; in other words, he is a part of everything else. It promotes the individual to grasp and see the illusory, and ego-filled nature of the mind, so that one can be detached from the thoughts to have a better understanding of oneself and relations to others. Unquestionably, Johnson frequently depicts his protagonists going through major transformations, suggesting that believing in a fixed essence of anything could prevent human growth and enlightenment (211). It is, therefore, crucial to view Johnson's literary works as both philosophical and spiritual literature, owing to the fact that his writings are

primarily concerned with how the characters or even readers can change, or transform, their perspectives and worldviews regarding particular issues, and evolve towards greater understanding and enlightenment.

Storhoff poses that Johnson employs Buddhist practice, meditation, in his works, and analyzes how he uses a meditative mind in a narrative to explore the characters' minds by diving deep into the cause of their sufferings, and the moments of enlightenment after they unknowingly embrace the so-called mindfulness. In Johnson's writing, meditation promotes the characters' attainment of greater awareness and understanding by allowing them to detach from their ego-driven thoughts. According to Storoff's perspective, Johnson's characters constantly evolve, implying that the epiphany and development might be hindered by the idea of a fixed self; as a consequence, Johnson's use of Buddhist philosophical thinking can be seen as both philosophical and spiritual that promotes a transformation and a broader worldview for his characters and his readers.

1.7 Gena E. Chandler: Ethical dilemma, and Creativity

In "Mindfulness and Meaning in Charles Johnson's "Dr. King's Refrigerator,"" despite the fact that "bedtime stories" may have the meaning in a literal sense, they can, in fact, foster "creativity and contemplation" (328). This is because, as Chandler puts it, they bear similarities with meditation, since readers are required "to be aware of [their] surroundings and open to the possibilities that are before [them]" (328). With this assertion, Chandler then argues that with Johnson's philosophical syncretism, his literary works often prompt his readers and characters to "examine moral and ethical conundrums" (329), and simultaneously, challenge their preconceptions about African American narrative, and this is where the creativity flourishes. Chandler uses the short story "Dr. King's Refrigerator," to explore Johnson's creative endeavors that show his philosophical cognizance to revise black narrative, and display the characteristics of the bedtime tale, which is able to promote the meditative mind.

In recreating fictional Martin Luther King Jr. in a new context, Chandler asserts that Johnson often reminds his readers to expand their views—for example, as mentioned earlier in Storhoff's meditative mind, King experiences the moment of epiphany during emptying food in the fridge. This expansive vision guides readers to further ponder Gandhi, one of the influential persons for historical King, who follows spiritual conduct from *The Bhagavad-Gita*, a part of

Hindu scripture that contains a dialogue between Prince Arjuna and Krishna, an avatar of the god Vishnu (Doniger). *The Bhagavad-Gita* also recounts about "self-mastery" that Gandhi embraces, stating that "the craving of senses dies away only when we cease to exist in the body" (Gandhi qtd. in Chandler 331). Therefore, it links to the fictional King, who has found spiritual awakening during his emptying in the kitchen, which is also regarded as a self-mastery, "an important element of the meditative processes" (331) because he finally empties his fixed idea of self and embraces the connectedness of all things.

Furthermore, Chandler poses that Prince Arjuna resembles the fictional King in many ways. For instance, they both are facing personal dilemmas towards the path of their transformation—for Arjuna, a battle, and King, a sermon. Seen in this light, Johnson has also intertwined Christianity and Hinduism, into the well-known kitchen conversion of King, who is also "a model of black Protestantism" (333), and Prince Arjuna, the Hindu, into a new the context. Johnson, thereby, as Chandler posits, encourages his readers "to contemplate these connections and expand our understanding" (332) of the fictional world. His fictional world is thus an imaginative place where the two characters can be met—similar to a bedtime story, that prompts our creativity and imagination. And in order to expand and transform the readers as well as the characters' minds through the story narrative, Johnson's "whole sight" (Byrd qtd. in Chandler 329) is necessarily required to encourage them to view narratives in a multidimensional way.

The ethical conundrums that both Arjuna and the fictional King have encountered are that they are trapped in their own inaction concerning their duties, according to Chandler. As for Arjuna, he is struggling with the "weight of his responsibilities" (335)—a personal desire to avoid conflict and his sacred duty as a warrior. However, after turning to Krishna, he has come to realize that "wholeness and spiritual awareness come "when consciousness is unified [and] all vain anxiety is left behind"" (*The Bhagavad-Gita* qtd. in Chandler 335). Arjuna, thus, experiences a spiritual awakening to perceive his presence in all things; it has expanded his perspectives to encompass the connectedness and relationship with everything around him. In the same manner, King is grappled with the weight symbolically from the burdens of day-to-day responsibilities, his dissertation, and his unwritten sermon, and literally from his hunger for food. These strivings cause him to "procrastination and aviodance" (335). Nevertheless, King's emptying both food in

the fridge and his physical desire represent releasing his preconceptions and achieving meditative moment, leading to a deeper understanding of the connectedness of all things in front of him.

In embracing the meditative mind, Chandler argues that King could let go of his burdens labeling him as "black, husband, and spiritual leader," and return being completely conscious of who he is, not who he should be (332). As a result , through meditation, King has gained a new perspective, seeing beyond himself and recognizing the ""fragile, inescapable network of mutuality" linking all "earthly creatures" together" (Johnson qtd. in Chandler 339). Even though meditation encourages quieting the mind, as previously mentioned in Storhoff section, it also calls for being mindful of our surroundings and having an open mind to the opportunities, asserting how Johnson believes that meditation is "inextricable from the creative process" (328). The story narrative not only links Martin to perceive the connectedness between himself and his surroundings, but also the readers to their surroundings while delving into the concept of self-mastery that one should be part of and not detached from all the entities (331). Hence, it could be asserted that the ethical dilemmas, encountering by both Arjuna and the fictional King lead them into the moment of revelation.

In addition, it is also important to note that in order to promote and strengthen the pursuit of freedom and creativity, Johnson sees how Eastern philosophy can change the narrative of African Americans in the twenty-first century. As seen in the fictional King's capability to transform his outlooks, regarding the relationship between himself and other entities, Johnson, at the same time, attempts to use Eastern philosophical thinking to expand the visions as well as liberate the black narrative. As Chandler asserts,

> For Johnson, an inability to release an adherence to "official stories and explanations and endlessly repeated interpretations of black American life over decades can short-circuit direct perception of the specific phenomenon before us" (Johnson, "End" 6); such adherence also limits a high level of creative productivity (338-339).

In this context, the "official stories and explanations" refer to the reiterated narratives about the slavery of black people. These narratives have been imposed on them, and, in turn, they have been constrained by this fixed ideology for centuries (Johnson, "The End of the Black American Narrative"). Johnson rejects what he views as the tragedy of traditional black fiction, preferring instead to portray a story, in which the struggle is the inner self, which leads to—inner revolution—rather than resulting from the outside prejudices (338). By conforming to the

traditional African American narrative, blacks cannot freely move outside of the limited perspectives of their life; thus, the creativity will not be born and made. According to Chandler, Johnson's religious syncretism could, therefore, enhance the "alternate pictures of reality" (Storhoff qtd. in Chandler, 329) in his works and encourage personal and creative liberation both inside and outside of his narratives, and he consistently urges his characters and the readers to pursue a "whole sight," or "broadening of [the] expressions and vision" (Byrd qtd. in Chandler, 329), as he believes these could influence how people view black life and art. Hence, his fictitious characters endeavor to seek a broadening of expressions and visions that shape perspectives of black life, encouraging readers to accept various narratives of the African American experience.

Also, it should be noted that the concept Johnson utilizes most likely stems from the Buddhist idea of emptiness, where he states that creativity can arise in situations without assumptions or preconceived notions about anything in particular. This is because Johnson's religious integration in his literary works frequently inspires new interpretations of reality and encourages individual and creative freedom through his stories. Johnson's writings often combine religious traditions to explore moral and ethical dilemmas, and defy traditional black fiction—by rejecting the tragedy of traditional black fiction and promoting creative and personal liberation. The story's potential for reinterpretation appears endless when all of these possibilities are taken into account. It is, thereby, as the black narrative can expand, "Dr. King's Refrigerator" is an example of this because the story draws on both literary and spiritual imaginations. Johnson's work promotes creative and personal liberty and broadens perspectives on black life and art, and his goal is to get readers to look at the African American experience from multiple perspectives.

Chandler's article demonstrates how Johnson's story incorporates elements of a bedtime tale that encourages readers to cultivate imagination and creativity. This is comparable to meditation, which bears the similarity to the state of mind in being mindful of the surroundings and being open to any possibilities. In blending philosophical and religious elements, Johnson explores the ethical dilemmas, challenges conventional black narratives—such as enslavement, and oppression; rather, he endeavors to stimulate an expansive, broad, and multifaceted perspective, or what he calls "whole sight," for both his characters and readers at the same time to see the connectedness and relatedness of all things. Chandler also emphasizes the Buddhist philosophical thinking of emptiness, as it contributes the creative freedom by letting go of

preconceived notions, encouraging readers to look beyond limited perspectives and embrace diverse narratives of the African American experience.

1.8 Ashraf H.A. Rushdy: Politics and Spirituality

In "Charles Johnson's Way to a Spiritual Literature," Ashraf H. A. Rushdy explores Johnson's literary writings, focusing mainly on the short story "Exchange Value," which subtly reflects Johnson's personal interest, concerning the relationship between spiritual and political aspects, primarily Buddhism and Marxism. Although some critics have argued identifying Johnson's works as "social activism" (Nash and Conner qtd. in Rushdy 402), others identify his works as "progressing into increasingly spiritual and religious avenues that resist specific political programs or solutions" (Nash and Conner qtd. in Rushdy 402). Nevertheless, Rushdy himself proposes that Johnson's literary works have integration from both spiritual and political angles. He further delves deep into Johnson's background, expressing that Marxism was his "passion and political orientation throughout [his] graduate school" (402), while he was also "fully surrendered to Buddhist ideas and meditative practice" (402) in 1981. Considering his literary writings as a type of spiritual literature, Johnson, however, declares that "when I think back over the products of thirty years, it seems to me that my fiction is at bottom a form of spiritual literature" (Johnson qtd. in Rushdy 401), posing further that Buddhism and politics do not need to be incompatible. As Rushdy writes,

> For one thing, it is important to note that Johnson does not himself see a contradiction—"Buddhism and politics need not be antithetical," he comments (Johnson, *Turning the Wheel* 44)—but he does also certainly maintain, in his interviews and essays, the primacy of the spiritual as a solution to social problems. (402).

This is thus an important point to see Johnson's aesthetic in combining Buddhist thinking and politics into his works.

In "Exchange Value," the narrative is about two brothers, Loftis and Cooter, who discover Miss Elnora Bailey's death and her hoard of almost $900,000. They, however, set out to rob her possessions that Miss Bailey inherited from her boss, Henry Conners, for whom Miss Bailey was once working as a maid. Following that, they handle their new-found wealth differently, with Cooter being extravagant, whereas Loftis ends up being a miser like Miss Bailey, and he criticizes his brother's extravagance, saying that "As soon as you buy something you lose the power to buy

something" (Johnson, "Exchange Value" 36). His statement suggests that "wealth is power only so long as it is not spent. (Rushdy 403). With complex underlying messages, many critics have asserted different kinds of opinions, mentioning that the themes in the short story are about class because the characters "cannot transform those riches into objects of desire and thus cannot transform themselves" (403), while some critics claim that the story's theme is about sorcery, revealing that the hoard is cursed from the inheritance since the wealth of the Conners family was derived from "the appropriation of the Native lands and then from the surplus value of expolited laborers" (405), and both Miss Bailey and the brothers are then cursed and "immobilized" (403) by their accumulation. Also, some critics emphasize the story as "racial reading" (403), in which the fates of the characters are a result of the "racist system" (Storhoff qtd. in Rushdy 404), making the characters veiw things in binary opposition, as they "think of the world only in contraries: things either gained or lost, things either saved or spent" (Storhoff qtd. in Rushdy 404). However, Rushdy downplays the theme of class, maintaining that the characters' class status will not be transformed by the hoard they possess; instead, the sorcery here is the racist economic order, which is a relationship to consumption derived from the cultural experience of African descent (404). This is because, as mentioned earlier, the history of money comes with the "evil demeanor of its past" (405), which is full of desire to accumulate.

Money, in general history, is an exchange value that is a quantitative relationship that compares one commodity to another. In other words, it is the price of a particular commodity (Fraser). Rushdy argues that, in the story, under capitalism, Miss Bailey and Loftis have been obsessed by their hoarding because they "adore exchange value" (405). This represents "the deviations that occur in human relations precisely when use value[5] is supplanted by exchange value" (405). When use value is replaced by exchange value, the most important factor in how people relate to one another and the deviances in human relationships happen. This is because the exchange value can lead people to miserly behavior, and finally change them into commodities. Miss Bailey and Loftis, thus, have the fear of depletion, and become obsessed with the desire for accumulation over consumption, keeping themselves and the hoard away from being a part of the "stream of circulation" and "social metabolism" (405). This also affects the relationships between human beings, and instead, they have become the "relations between commodities" (406).

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[5] Andy Blunden, Marxists Internet Archive Encyclopedia: Use value refers to the qualitative aspect of value, or how things meet human needs in concrete ways. (https://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/e/x.htm)

According to Rushdy, the story serves as a parable to critique capitalism, and its pitfalls for human desires. The story also delves into the intersections of Buddhism and Marxism, which demonstrates an exploration of spiritual and political ideas. Some critics view Miss Bailey's death as a way to foster a meditative mind in order to remind detachment from the material world (407). Despite some scholars perceiving a contradiction between Johnson's political and spiritual concerns, Johnson, nonetheless, emphasizes "the primacy of the spiritual as a solution to social problem" (407). His suggestion gives rise to Johnson's assertion that his fiction is a form of spiritual literature. This is because, as Rushdy contends, in Marxism, "miserliness, inspired by the seductiveness of exchange value, is in the end not simply a desire to accumulate things, but a desire not to share in and thereby be a full and capable participant in social and spiritual life" (407). This accentuates that the desire for not sharing, and not being a part of social circulation can eventually remove or separate people from social relations, which primarily comes from "the problem of the self" (407) that they do not spiritually comprehend. Consequently, they do not have a sense of sharing, belonging, and are not able to be a part of the circle; the accumulation and hoarding that the Conners, Miss Bailey, and Loftis have, in the end, become indubitably meaningless and valueless. Thus, it is noteworthy to highlight that, in the realm of social issues, the problem of one's own self is the most fundamental one, according to Johnson (407). This is what Johnson attempts to draw our attention to see the importance of the self, in which the self-transformation is the first step to reform a larger part—social transformation.

Additionally, suffering "arises from the belief in a separate, unchanging 'identity' for things. That is the foundation for attachment and craving" (Johnson qtd. in Rushdy 408). Thereby, in order to make society circulate, it is undeniably essential to distribute and redistribute resources on hand. And this idea will take us back to the Buddhist philosophical notion of emptiness or nonduality, in which every entity is interrelated and connected. As Rushdy postulates,

> Johnson cautions us against succumbing to precisely those acquisitive values that would prevent us from achieving the kind of openness that creates what he calls in "The Educadon of Mingo" a "complex skein of relatedness" (19) and what he quotes Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as calling an "inescapable network of mutuality" (*Turning the Wheel* 9). This focus on what Johnson describes as the greatest spiritual challenge—the capacity to live well in the world of desire (407-408).

"Exchange Value," thus, serves as a parable that combines politics and the spiritual path to balance the living in the modern world, dominated by materialism, as Johnson, who was fully devoted to Buddhism in San Francisco in 1981, has raised the profound religious and philosophical question on "how to use the wisdom of faith in a world governed by the marketplace" (403) or, in other words, how to "remain *in* the world *and* follow the Dharma?" (Johnson qtd. in Rushdy 402).

Rushdy proposes that this story "celebrat[es] the virtues of a vision that sees the deeper spiritual connectedness in all things. These are perhaps the most emblematic signs of our being in the presence of a 'spiritual literature'" (410), and that the story "is not a rejection of Buddhist spirituality or an embrace of Marxist politics or economic theory, but rather a parable that reveals how both spiritual and political values can be lost to the false sorcery of capital" (410). Rushdy stresses that Johnson's work blends spiritual and political aspects, asserting a profound relationship between Buddhism and Marxism. The story critiques capitalism and its influences on human desires, particularly the hoarding activity, reflecting the prioritization of exchange value over social metabolism and interaction that could disrupt both human relationships and social circulation. This, simulteneously, resonates with Buddhist thinking regarding the notion of emptiness that accentuates the connectedness and dependence. The concept of nonself of all entities in Buddhism also plays a vital role, where the suffering arises from attachment to a fixed identity of things and the desire for possessions, which is the beginning from the problem of the self, leading to affecting the public sphere. Johnson's story has broadened and deepened our visions to see spiritual connectedness in all things, inviting readers to contemplate the challenges in maintaining spirituality in a modern world.

Johnson's body of work, accordingly, provides profound observations on human desires and the complex interplay between political and spiritual features. His literary works are, thus, a multidimensional exploration of spirituality, economics, and human nature. This piece of writing invites readers to contemplate the challenges that people are encountering in maintaining spirituality amidst historical suffering, materialism, and political complexities in a turbulent world. "The Weave," one of the short stories in *Night Hawks*, is comparable to "Exchange Value" and will be analyzed as society is threatened by capitalism.

Chapter Two: Buddhist Practice: Exploring Spiritual Journey

In this subsection, I will first discuss the short stories that consist of the literal representations of Buddhist characters, and/or the scenarios that depict the people practicing Buddhism in order to portray how Johnson delicately interweaves Buddhist philosophical values, and thinking into his literary works. In *Night Hawks*, the short stories that delineate literal representations are "Prince of the Ascetics," "The Weave," "Kamadhatu: A Modern Sutra," and "Welcome to Wedgwood." I begin with "Prince of the Ascetics" first in order to introduce the Buddha and pave way for the reader to understand the philosophical notion of self in Buddhism. This is followed an analysis of three short stories.

2.1 "Prince of the Ascetics"

"Deconstruction without compassion is self-aggrandized;
deconstruction with compassion is Buddhism."[6]
– A conversation between Robert Haas and Gary Snyder

"Prince of the Ascetics," narrated by Mahanama, one of the Buddha's first five disciples, retells the story of Prince Siddhartha Gautama's journey to becoming the Buddha. In his spiritual practice to disentangle from wordly affairs, the narrator is resentful of the prince's presence. Reluctantly agreeing to follow the prince, he constantly doubts this young man's practices, whose quest differs from that of the five brothers. The prince refuses to abandon his pursuit of "a freedom that ha[s] no name" (29), exploring several extreme paths that reduce him "to skin, bones, and fixed idea" (30). Eventually, he even refuses to eat anything, but ultimately realizes this is not the right path. Until he finally "Awake[s]" (34) and finds a path to defeat the ego, or the "I-Maker" (33). The first-person point of view foregrounds the nature of the mind as well as the self. Simultaneously, his narration illustrates how the Buddha discovers Buddhist philosophical doctrines—the notion of nonself and the Middle Way.

The title refers to Prince Siddhartha Gautama, who has renounced his lavish royal life to seek liberation from life's general suffering—sickness, old age, and ultimately death. However,

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[6] From "Embodied Mindfulness: Charles Johnson and Maxine Hong Kingston on Buddhism, Race, and Beauty" by John Whalen-Bridge, pp. 153.

the title's paradoxical meaning introduces a sense of contradiction. Although "prince" holds a high social status typically associated with privilege, power, and material wealth, "ascetics" indicates a life of spiritual discipline that refrains from worldly attachments and ephemeral sense pleasures. The juxtaposition of these two terms is inherently contradictory, underscoring the unique nature and circumstances of the Buddha—whose name means "Awakened One" (Johnson, *Turning the Wheel* 3)—in ways that defy common expectations and assumptions. This contradiction arises from his abandonment of sumptuous life to pursue an unconventional, different path.

The narrative is recounted by Mahanama, representing entirely from his focalization. All events happening in the story are also filtered through his perspective and voice, highlighting his distinct tone. His interpretations of events and other characters are ostensibly subjective and reflect his own thoughts. In this regard, through his own narration, Mahanama could be read as a person who has been relentlessly wrestling with the perpetual emergence of the desires of his ego. Thus, the nature of the mind and self is manifested through the narrator's depiction. Although the implied author does not explicitly depict what the Buddhist concept of nonself is, he instead subtly delineates what constructs the ego and identity formation that leads to the elevation and intensification of the narrator's sense of self, which he has longed to dissolve, through the first-person narrative.

The attempt to seek liberation and eliminate worldly suffering is portrayed in parallel through the practices of self-emptying of both the prince and the narrator himself. Nonetheless, their journeys to find peace, wisdom, and the cessation of suffering are different. This is due to the fact that the path of the five men is devoted "completely to the life of the spirit" ("Prince of the Ascetics" 23). They are searching for a supreme being—something that is greater than themselves—whereas the path of the Buddha diverges from this pursuit. Rather, it focuses solely on "conquering himself" (29), and attaining self-mastery. Mahanama and his four brothers are all willing to walk a difficult path to seek liberation from suffering and to seek "peace and wisdom found only in the Atma (or self)" (23). They have all practiced in a way that is thought to be right and walk "always in a single file" (24), which symbolically means following the conventional ways that have already been paved by other spiritual teachers. Their pursuit of tranquility and wisdom, on the contrary, is opposed to that of the young prince—the Buddha-to-be—who

"Instead of going where the path might lead, he had gone instead where there was no path and left a trail for all of us" (33).

Throughout the story, Mahanama, who is in the fourth stage of life, is in search of peace and freedom. But from his perspective or how the story is recounted, it illustrates that his path to peace and freedom is impeded by his ego-filled mind, particularly in response to the prince's presence. This is because, initially, upon hearing the villagers praise the young man—who has captured their attention with his unrelentingly demanding practice that "gives new meaning to the words *sacrifice* and *self-control*" (25, emphsis in original)—the narrator abruptly feels vexed and angry. It is due to the fact that not only does the young man's presence result in the narrator's alms bowls being empty of the food villagers would usually provide him daily, but one villager adjures the five men to learn from the young ascetic, warning them that "if you are not careful, he will put you five lazybones out of business" (25).

The villager's advice affects the narrator—who, due to his meditative practice, is typically not "easily swayed" (25)—to the point that his mind becomes "capricious, like a restless *monkey* stung by a scorpion, drunk and possessed by a demon all at the same time" (25, emphasis added). In this instance, "monkey" alludes to the Buddhist idea described previously in Chapter 1 regarding the monkey mind, which, if not consistently acknowledged and subdued, naturally roams aimlessly from place to place. His action seemingly reveals the narrator's mind as uncontrollably chaotic, filled with fleeting emotions and thoughts tinted with self-importance, his own desires—the desire to be lastingly respected by the villagers. His impulsive rage stirs up and, in turn, obscures his perspective, metaphorically like "billowing clouds of dust" (26), causing him to see through a distorted lens.

Later, the narrator learns that this young man is actually a prince, whose life was once exhaustively sheltered from "the painful, hard, and ugly things of the world" (27). As a prince, he had access to everything "this world could offer" (27) within the palace walls; he was symbolically prevented from perceiving reality by constructing mental barriers. Before leaving the palace that kept him hidden from reality and the nature of sentient beings, he had never encountered illness, let alone death. He then decided to entirely let go of his royal life and all the "voluptuous life of pleasure and privilege" (27) to wander as an ascetic in order to seek liberation, truth, and a refuge from worldly suffering. Consequently, Mahanama is filled with skepticism about this pampered prince. Given that the prince, as a royal, belongs to a caste socially higher

than him, he doubts that anyone would be willing to relinquish a life full of pleasure and privileges to become an ascetic. Thus, Mahanama's perception is increasingly obscured by the illusion of his egocentric bias towards the prince, stating that,

> I, Mahanama, have never had an easy life. To achieve even the simplest things, I had to undergo a thousand troubles, to struggle and know disappointment. I think it was then, God help me, that I began to hate *every* little thing about him: the way he walked and talked and smiled, his polished, courtly gestures, his refined habits, his honeyed tongue, his upper-caste education, none of which he could hide. The long and short of it was that I was no longer myself. Although I consented to study with him, just to see what he knew, I longed, so help me, to see him fail. To slip or make a mistake. Just *once*, that's all I was asking for (28-29, emphasis in original).

Even though the narrator has been practicing to control his mind and thoughts by "taming the wild horses of [his] thoughts, the four kinds of yoga, banishing the ego, that toadstool that grows out of consciousness" (24), his narration demonstrates that he is still unable to attain the inner peace for which he seeks or detach himself from fleeting feelings that merely engender suffering from the duality of "twin illusions of pleasure and pain" (24). This is because, in Buddhism, feelings and emotions can be perceived as objects to be observed without attaching to them. Given that Mahanama strives to examine and contemplate the nature of his own being and minimize or even eliminate his sense of self by writing "*ahum*" (24) the Sankrit word for "I" each day at the back of his hand, believing that the self is "the source of all things" (24), his inner voice proves otherwise. It constantly reveals his ego-driven thoughts. His point of view portrays the underlying Buddhist thoughts regarding mental formations in which the intrusive thoughts and feelings affect the person's emotions and behaviors.

It should be noted that Mahanama, who is seemingly seeking equanimity within and living in "poverty and detachment" (23), is still attached to his sense of self and worldly desires. The words "I, Mahanama," which the narrator uses to define himself, appear three times in the short story, whereas the real name of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, is not presented. This, to a certain extent, suggests the ego-filled nature of the narrator. In stating his real name after the "I," it intensifies the formation of his self-identity, which is moderately "worldly affairs" (23) he has endeavors to forsake. His narration thus underscores the attachment of his sense of self that simulteneously strengthens his egotism. On the contrary, the name of the Buddha is not even once

introduced. In this sense, it infers, in some way, that the first-person point of view through the lens of Mahanama offers the Buddha's absence of self-identity—reinforcing the notion of Buddhist nonself as emptiness—in which the nature of all entities is freed from intrinsic, fixed essence.

Furthermore, Mahanama still has a strong sense of possession that engenders the formation of the self. When he finds that the prince is living in his neighborhood, he irritatedly blurts out how this young man "could have the nerve to install himself in *our* forest" (26, emphasis in original). "Our" emphasizes that Mahanama is unable to get rid of his sense of ownership over anything in his environment; he continues to hold onto the self-concept that constructs the ego. Holding onto the notions of "I" and "our" not only elevates the sense of identity, but it also imposes tensions through attachment. According to Peter Harvey, "To build an identity based on one's bodily appearance or abilities, or on one's sensitivities, ideas and beliefs, actions or intelligence, etc., is to take them as part of an 'I'" ("Dukkha, Non-Self" 35), and "to take anything as being such is to lay the basis for much suffering; for what one fondly takes as one's permanent, essential Self" (35). Mahanama holds that he has a self that is distinct from other people. This idea of a separate self that creates duality causes him to cling to what is transient and empty of independent essence, which results in clinging and suffering.

In the narrative, the narrator's self could be compared to "the tree bark" ("Prince of the Ascetics" 33) that has been "bloated by rain" (33). His ego, in the process, is added up, similar to the tree bark swollen and thickened by rainwater absorbtion. As a result, his sense of self becomes both enlarged as well as calcified—leading to suffering as he clings to a fixed identity rooted in attachment and ignorance. Nonetheless, in order to achieve the cessation of suffering, Buddhism encapsulates the importance of non-attachment even to the self. To achieve egolessness, a nonself-cultivating approach seeks to minimize or eradicate the sense of self. This is because life's genreal suffering is primarily caused by clinging to or having an obsession with the delusional self. It is thus crucial to stress that this attachment to the self is the foundation of all other attachments.

While Buddhist philosophy constantly questions the existence of the individual self, it does not negate the existence of "I," the one who questions and doubts the certainty of one's own existence. For this reason, the Middle Way—which is neither a doctrine of no self nor a self—is introduced by the Buddha. The narrative discloses the Middle Way, which is a path avoiding "two extremes: the pursuit of sensual pleasures and self-mortification" ("Dukkha, Non-Self" 40). The former involves belief in a self; as a result, it fosters attachment. The latter, in contrast, searches

for happiness through different forms of asceticism. The Middle Way is depicted through the lens of the narrator as the effort of the prince before he becomes enlightened as a Buddha. In seeking the highest truth and refuge from human sufferings, the young man initially sees his body as an enemy to overcome. He believes that it hinders the pursuit of enlightenment and needs to be "punished and deprived" ("Prince of the Ascetics" 30) until his extreme practices have reduced himself to "skin, bone, and fixed idea" (30). Neverthless, after he has been offered the milk porridge from a woman in the village, he then has recovered like a tree that has been watered.

In the last scene, the prince has come to the moment of revelation, where he is finally "awake" (34) and defeats "*ahumkara*, I-Maker" (33). It is the "I-Maker" that the Buddha has arrived at the understanding of the nonself state by overcoming his sense of self. In Buddhist philosophy, the term "I-maker" or "ahumkara"—which could be translated literally into self-making or ego-consciousness (P.A. Payutto, "What Is the Life Process?" 91)—is the root and cause of worldly sufferings. In the final part, when the Buddha attains enlightenment, Mahanama seeks to grasp what he has discovered, asking whether he is now a god or an angel; however, the young man denies both:

> "Are you a god now?"
>
> Quietly, he made answer. "No."
>
> "Well, are you an angel?"
>
> "No."
>
> "Then what are you?"
>
> "Awake." ("Prince of the Ascetics" 34)

In this sense, being awake means that the Buddha has "discovered his middle way" (34) after achieving a state of full awareness, realizing that the Middle Way offers a path that is between those two extremes. It can also be inferred from his response that he comes to understand the true nature of reality, which is devoid of essence and free from all illusions of self. In asking whether the young man is now a god or an angel, it implies that Mahanama is still in search of something larger than himself. Accordingly, being "awake" can be achieved by anyone because it does not involve acquiring a new identity or status, nor does it depend on divinity; rather, it involves breaking free from the cycle of delusion as well as ignorance.

With a blend of Buddhist core values and philosophical thinking, Johnson delineates a brief historical biography of the Buddha through the first-person narrative of one of his disciple's eyes.

It could be seen that the voice and focalization of the narrator has played an important part in revealing the underlying messages regarding the notion of nonself and the Middle Way in Buddhist philosophy through his own lens; however, not directly through the Buddha's perspective in order to combine and convey these familiar elements in fresh vantage point.

2.2 "The Weave"

"*The Dharma is, if nothing else, a call for us to live in a state of radical freedom.*"[7]
– Charles Johnson

"The Weave" is focalized through or seen through the perspective of the protagonist's boyfriend, Tyrone. The narrative centers around Ieesha, a young black woman who, after being fired from her job during the Great Recession at a beauty salon "where the elusive experience called beauty is manufactured every day" (12), is pressed to resort to committing a robbery with her boyfriend. The narrator urges Ieesha into theft, contending that she has been treated unjustly after her fingers slip due to a sudden sneeze, accidentally burning the lady of the city council's earlobe with a chemical hair straightener. A large amount of hair extension—originated from Indian women who "shave their heads in an ancient ceremony of sacrifice" (19)—has been stolen for their heist, and these are anticipated to be sold for a substantial profit. When it comes down to it, following the theft, Ieesha calls the police to report to turn herself and the narrator in for the larceny. Upon arriving at the Buddhist philosophical notion of nonself or emptiness, they experience a sense of liberation from the need for the pursuit of wealth and all the illusions of self that have been interpellated almost before they could articulate their individual desires. As a result, they are prepared to face the consequences of their crime from the collective needs.

The story's title not only denotes the real human hair woven into the weave but also reflects how the implied author deftly interweaves the intricate connection and underlying themes into the narrative. The narrative highlights one of the central themes: a profound exploration of human desires influenced by consumer culture, which fuels the beauty industry—a sector driven by massive profits in the world of capitalism. The unethical practice of the hair extensions business results in the exploitation of both female consumers and women in New Delhi, who

[7] From Johnson's *Turning the Wheel*, pp. 14.

"give [their hair] up in order to renounce all vanity" (19) because parts of their bodies are being exploited for economic benefits. In order to generate a source of profit, the beauty industry instead transforms the hair—which is a sign of sacrifice, devotion, and humility—into a commodity that is "worth a lot of bank" (17).

At its essence, not only do these merchants exploit and objectify these women, their business, in turn, perpetuates unrealistic, socially constructed ideal beauty standards that continue to exert social and cultural pressure of perfection on women. The capitalist society has long imposed a false sense of identity for women through the beauty industry, media, and advertising. This imposition of the beauty standards—somehow delusional—could often be seen in the "television, movies, or popular magazines where generic, blue-eyed Barbie dolls with orthodontically perfect teeth, Botox, and breast implants prance, pose, and promenade through the media" (15). All of which Ieesha dishearteningly affirms that she "can't look like that" (15). By establishing societal standards, the beauty industry implies that its female consumers are "not good enough" (15), resulting in tension as well as challenges for them to achieve the unattainable ideals of beauty they have imposed. Women thus are forced to relentlessly buy commodities to alter their appearances after being bombarded by television, movies, and magazines with the belief that the products can either define their identity or bring them contentment as they can live up to those ideals.

It could be contended that the wish to appear to align with social desirability is a product of the culture of capitalism. In this process, beauty is essentially an abstract product that has been "manufactured" (12) through human desires for financial benefits, which are concurrently sustained by the desires of the consumers to meet social expectations. The "exchange of desire" (13) between the beauty industry and their female consumers, accordingly, perpetuates the circulation of capitalist culture. This indubitably results in a vicious cycle and an unhealthy social metabolism because, in order to assist customers to fitting in, the beauty business develops items—for example, hair extensions and wigs—as a solution to the ideal concepts that they have deliberately interpellated. They unscrupulously manipulate consumers to purchase their products. Thus, female consumers need to visit the salon in order to conform to social standards of beauty because they can never accept that their hair is beautiful or even enough as they are. They do not appreciate their authentic selves and thus constantly seek to resort to artificial adornments, like hair extensions—to extend and define their selfhood by these materials. The implication of their

behavior is subtly suggesting that women in consumerist society often feel inadequate due to the pressure to adhere to illusory ideals that simply serve the benefits of the market over their own authenticity.

In addition, the theme of illusion is also portrayed through the recurring motifs of the eyes and the sights, such as “eyes,” “see,” “look,” “peer,” “stare,” and “watch.” These repeated words in the narrative allude to the idea that societal norms and expectations—which are not necessarily realities—influently shape the perception of beauty in women. Unknowingly, they are pursuing the illusions of socially constructed values and beliefs—what is discerned as beautiful, acceptable, and what is not—and counting on those as though they could fulfill what they believe they inherently lack. As a result of these socially constructed ideal beauty standards, the consumers always tend to be concerned about their self-images. The power then lies predominantly in the hands of the merchants—“who controlled this commerce as tightly as the mafia did gambling” (19). And women are compelled to submit themselves to the gaze of others.

Ultimately, these exchanges of desires simulteneously turn their female consumers into commodities. Ironically, women who intend purchasing the wigs wind up the opposite: “Every day the customers at Sassy Hair Salon and the wigs lovingly check each other out, and then after long and careful deliberation, the wigs always buy the women” (13). The narrative discloses that the wigs have the ability to exert influence and power over the consumers in this particular instance. In a capitalist world where exchange value is prioritized over use value, the wigs and hair extensions are thus symbols of wealth and social status, representing the consumer culture and the drive for material possessions that often characterize capitalist societies. Little do these consumers know, as they have “suspended in the darkness” (13) that their physical appearance is being exploited as a product from which the business can benefit. This process of commodification takes place when capitalist markets place a value on the physical appearance of women. Consumers would be able to achieve these standards as long as they continue to adhere to socially constructed ideals “to be desired” (13); however, throughout this process, they are subsequently objectified.

Unknowingly embracing the notions that other individuals would primarily gaze and evaluate their bodies, resulting in self-objectification, these women bear the resemblance to “a display case where sexy, silky, eiderdown-soft wigs, some as thick as a show pony’s tail, hang in rows like scalps taken as trophies after a war” (12-13). It is worthy to note that the power of

capitalism has frequently been associated with social privileges and power for individuals who meet beauty standards, thereby reinforcing classifications of both class and race. Hence, class and racial hierachy are also at play here. This could be seen when the lady of the city council, who is a "twice-a-month, high-spending customer" (14), demands that the owner of the salon fire Ieesha, superficially judging that "anyone working in a beauty salon should be looking damned good herself, and that Ieesha didn't" (14). Consequently, the individuals with financial power and the capacity to live up to socially constructed norms can take advantage of more social and economic opportunities, whereas those without them are left feeling marginalized and alienated. In this sense, it could be seen that human relationships have deviated when use value is supplanted by exchange value, which is a significant factor in how people relate to each other.

Thus, Ieesha's unconventional appearance, described as "unadorned, simple, honest, uncontrived, as genuinely individual" (14), perpetually leaves her with the feelings of being unfulfilled, unappreciated, and inadequate. Based on these conventions, women constantly evaluate their own appearance through the eyes of others, giving rise to the cycle of self-doubt and self-insecurity. These socially manufactured beauty standards—promoting narrow, limited concepts of beauty—have the potential to undermine diversity and individuality. Therefore, the wigs and hair extensions illustrate the theme of the illusions that lure women to delusionally construct their self-identity in order to conform to the socially constructed ideals. The narrative uses these recurring references to sight, highlighting the theme of illusion throughout the story, as societal beauty standards bring about negative consequences to women. These societal expectations are fabricated to create the illusion that women are striving to live up to them rather than appreciating their authentic individuality and being grounded in reality.

Such types of visions show how women pursue illusory desires that deviate from reality—placing pressure on them to attain the unattainable ideals and potentially inflicting sufferings throughout the process. These constraints often result in insecurity, and a distorted sense of who they are. These harsh societal expectations are expressed through the hurtful experiences that African American women have undergone, and this wound is delineated through the lengthy sentence brimming with distressing, sorrowful emotions:

> Unstated, but permeating every particle in that exchange of desire, is a profound, historical pain, a hurt based on the lie that the hair one was unlucky enough to be born with can never in this culture be good enough, never beautiful as it is, and must be scorched by

> scalp-scalding chemicals into temporary straightness, because if that torment is not endured often from the tender age of even four months old, how can one ever satisfy the unquenchable thirst to be desired or worthy of love? (13).

This sentence is compacted with vivid descriptions of unpleasent, hurtful experiences and emotional wounds caused by cultural and societal expectations, pressure, and beliefs that the natural hair black women are born with is viewed as undesirable and unattractive. This is because it does not align with the dominant perceptions of beauty that favor the opposite. They, therefore, have had to endure the painful process of the hair to achieve "temporary straightness" shortly after they were born—even before they could articulate their individual needs. This manufactured, inauthentic beauty is required due to the fact that they are subjected to living up to the illusions of socially constructed ideals in order to obtain external validation and acceptance from society for them to be desirable.

Additionally, the diction—"scorched by scalp-scalding chemicals into temporary straightness"—expresses Johnson's aesthetic use of the sounds /sk/, /k/, and /st/ that powerfully render emotions "experienced as harsh" (Johnson, *The Way of the Writer* 46). This lyrical language is utilized in order to express thoughts and emotions, which can "become sound" (46) that further elicits powerful, harsh feelings for the readers. The diction suggests that Johnson is not simply conveying details. Rather, he ingeniously shapes the language to generate specific emotional effects on the readers. In employing language with intentionality and artistic skills, he transforms this sentence into a lyrical element that creates captivating and overwhelming experiences for the protagonist as well as his readers.

After Ieesha gains a deep understanding of the origin of the stolen wigs and hair extensions, she experiences a profound shift in perspective. She has been unveiled to see through the underlying social issues stemming from human desires and the potential negative effects of her theft—which would only reinforce and perpetuate a system of exploitation. This system allows the hair extensions business to continue creating a vicious cycle and chain reaction of unethical exploitation and consumption for the female consumers in the capitalist system:

> From India, where these women cultivated an outward life of simplicity and an inward life free from illusion, the merchants transported their discarded dead hair halfway around the planet, where it was cannibalized as commerce in a $9 billion industry for hair

> extensions devoted precisely to keeping women forever enslaved to the eyes of others ("The Weave"19).

This incident turns out to be a significant catalyst, leading Ieesha to arrive at the moment of revelation. She recognizes the ironic circumstance in which the hair sacrificed as a spiritual act to detach oneself from worldly illusions ends up being transformed into a commodity—feeding the beauty industry that upholds vanity and superficial, unattainable ideals of beauty. Had Ieesha continued to remain indifferent to this situation, she would have been part of a problem that gives rise to a feminine burden of perfection and exploitation.

Ieesha, in the final analysis, experiences the essence of the Buddhist notion of nonself, or emptiness—in which the nature of all entities, including the self, is devoid of self-nature. She awakens and is open to her true self, the one which is "selfess, not only in a sense of compassionate, but also in the sense of empty of determinate and substantial ego" (Davis, "Forms of Emptiness" 190). She has undergone a personal transformation, having a chance to examine an ethical stance in which she has ultimately turned herself and the narrator in to the police, admitting that "it's the right thing to do" ("The Weave" 21). The act of turning herself in is a symbolic offering, similar to what Indian women do with their hair. The last scene depicts Ieesha's act of selflessness, as she is ultimately able to let go, freeing herself from preconceived ideas that have imprisoned her for a long time. For example, the pursuit of materialism and socially constructed concepts of beauty and race that only serve to create illusions as false beliefs and images for people to pursue, which only inflict suffering on them.

Ieesha's newly understood selfhood is no longer burdened by societal expectations and the cultural suffering from "color and caste," which are social constructs—or in Buddhist terms, the mental constructs—that have passed down for generations and have automatically attached to her. As the narrator depicts, "She looks vulnerable but not weak, free, and more than enough for herself. … She's letting go all of it—the inheritance of hurt, the artificial and the inauthentic, the absurdities of color and caste stained at their roots by vanity and bondage to the body" (21). This moment of revelation gives a sense of liberation and a rejection of attachment to appearances and cultural pressure that society has placed on her. Her act is a gesture for "clearing the mind of socially manufactured illusions" (Johnson, *Turning the Wheel* 54), like the Indian women who "give [the hair] up in order to renounce all vanity, and this letting go of things cosmetic and the chimera called the ego is their first step as nuns on a path to realizing that the essence of

everything is emptiness" ("The Weave" 19). Thus, the offering of herself resonates with the Buddhist thinking about letting go of attachment and the doctrine of emptiness. Ieesha's buffered self has transcended, becoming an enlightened individual. Spiritually, her newfound self relinguishes the egocentric perceptions and rejects the illusory sense of self that is constructed from desires and finally arrives at an understanding of the nature of reality that all entities lack intrinsic essence.

Essentially, human desires can never be fully satisfied as "the unquenchable thirst" (13) because societal perceptions of the ideals are elusive and in a series of ever-changing states all the time. This is how the capitalist and consumerist cultures continue to thrive. Beneath the surface, they work on human desires—an underlying, insatiable force—that are incessantly circulating and can never be completely satisfied. This system fuels a chain reaction rooted in human desires that sustains capitalist societies. As the narration suggests, "if you tug a single thin strand of hair … you find it raddled to the rest of the world" (20), and this "test[s] the limits of what we think we know" (12). In an echo of the short story's title, it illustrates how humans are all connected as "the weave" that has been interwoven, although as loosely as it may seem, as a thread. Whatever one does will have an effect, directly or indirectly, on other individuals. Thus, both the individual and society are dependent upon one another for their existence. As a result, the Buddhist concept of emptiness provides Ieesha a sense of freedom and liberation from these illusions the mental constructs—the fixed and rigid ideology—which is regarded as an illusion that causes humans to be confined.

"The Weave" serves as a social and spiritual criticism, portraying a nuanced critique of capitalist culture and the impact that it puts on individuals as well as society as a whole. The story reflects the difficulties that individuals are encountering to maintain their spirituality in the midst of capitalism. Nevertheless, Ieesha has undergone a personal change, transcending the limitations towards a more interconnected perspective of the world. For this reason, as discussed in the previous chapter, Johnson is perpetually emphasizing that individual transformation is the first step towards building a better society and that personal change can subsequently lead to a greater change in society. The narrative incorporates Buddhist philosophical thinking, which has the potential to serve as a lens through which readers and characters can experience transformations and gain a deeper understanding of the world and themselves.

2.3 "Kamadhatu: A Modern Sutra"

"To study the way is to study the self.
To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things.
To be enlightened by all things is to remove the barriers between oneself and others."
– Dogen[8]

"Kamadhatu: A Modern Sutra" revolves around the Japanese priest who, with unresolved inner turmoil, lives alone in an old, abandoned temple that he presumes would keep him from the feelings of "ruin and abandonment" (59) and the sufferings from the social world. Neither does excluding himself help him overcome his self-doubt nor does it offer him inner peace. After losing both his parents during his teens, the protagonist, Toshiro Ogama, an only child, is left with a huge hole in his heart. Seeking solace from his parents' premature passing, which has been "engraved into the emulsion of his memory" (49), the priest has been renovating and residing in an empty, deserted temple that is slipping into disrepair as an object on which he can meditate deeply regarding the transient state of all entities to make peace with his haunting past. His secluded retreat, however tranquil, however undisturbed, could not thoroughly allow him to achieve that matter—until he encounters an African American scholar, whose book he is translating for a living. Her presence, inadvertently, helps him experience the briefest glimpse of enlightenment that once seemed elusive. By interacting with her, Ogama has forever lost his boundery, dualistic thinking, and giref that have partitioned him from understanding profoundly of the nature of the mind and existence in Buddhism.

The title suggests how we can embrace a spiritual journey in a modern world. "Kamadhatu" refers to "the realm of illusion" (59), or in other words, the world of desires in which all sentient beings are driven by craving and attachment and thus bound in the cycle of desires. "A Modern Sutra," however, implies that the Buddhist scripture still resonates in dealing with thorny issues in the contemporary world, as it sheds light on the path for liberation from suffering. The narrative, told from a third-person point of view, delineates the theme of Buddhist central philosophy: the notion of emptiness or nonduality. The crucial Buddhist tenet is conveyed through the elements of the movie: the screen and the projector—which delicately represent Buddhism's psychological analysis of the human mind, the nature of reality, and human perceptions of the world. Additionally, the short story also demonstrates Garton-Gundling's idea

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[8] Dogen qtd. from Johnson's *Turning the Wheel* pp. 3

of enlightened individualism through the concept of cross-cultural synthesis between East and West, represented by Asian and American characters. It is this cross-cultural synthesis—the encounter between the protagonist, a Japanese priest, and a black American pilgrim and a Sanskrit scholar at the University of Washington named Cynthia Tucker—that brings the priest an awakening to liberate his imprisoned self from his unresolved trauma.

By alienating himself from worldly relations in order to attain peace of mind, Ogama seeks to shield himself from being exposed to other people, assuming that social interaction with others would merely inflict relentless, unnecessary sufferings on him. Yet and still, his withdrawal could not entirely yield him a sense of contentment. He continues to be burdened by the inerasable, painful, haunting memories of his past. In Buddhist philosophy, this ongoing span of emotion is discerned as suffering, or dukkha[9], and suffering also arises further from attachment to all the lived experiences and phenomena. Attempting to overcome his sorrow over his parents' premature deaths, Ogama thus moves to Anraku-ji temple, turning it into his own "private sanctuary from suffering and all the unpredictable messiness of the social world" (51), wishing to distance himself from human connection in search of tranquility. In spite of that, his retreat only leaves him with a sense of being "neither truly peaceful nor at ease" (49) all the same.

The young priest's emotions as well as a state of mind before he meets Tucker epitomize the pervasive dissatisfaction and discomfort stemming from his attachment to delusions of permanence. These include "whatever exists therein of feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness, [the Buddha] sees those states as impermanent, as suffering" (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi qtd. in Harvey 7). These are all mental and physical facets of the human experience, and each part of a person's experience should be regarded as transient and devoid of a permanent, inherent self. In this sense, clinging to his heart-rending memories and being "locked in a cycle of emotion" ("Kamadhatu" 59), the priest cannot utterly unfetter himself from the chain of grief and frustration or even continue to peacefully live in his undisturbed temple. Consequently, being held captive in mental anguish, Ogama is unable to set himself free from these incessant emotions

[9] The Pāli word *dukkha* (Skt *dukha*) encapsulates many subtleties of meaning, but its application spans pain, suffering, disappointment, frustration, things going badly, hassle, unease, anxiety, stress, dis-ease, unsatisfactoriness, non-reliability of people and things, limitation, imperfection. It sums up the problematic aspects of life: its mental and physical pains, obvious or subtle, and also the painful, stressful, unsatisfactory aspects of life that engender these (Harvey, "Dukkha, Non-Self" 26).

and the recurring negative projections of his mind, which causes the feelings of despair and desolation.

As discussed earlier in Chapter 1, Buddhism stresses that change and impermanence are all fundamental features of every living being and non-living thing, and anything that can arise must also have the potential to cease. Hence, attaching to anything that is in the state of transience would only cause suffering to a person. As Johnson postulates,

> Suffering, then, arises from the belief in a separate, unchanging "identity" for things. That is the foundation for attachment and craving. Put another way, we cling to our static ideas about things, not the fluid things themselves, which are impermanent and cannot be held on to (Nothing can endure change yet remain unchanged) (Johnson, *Turning the Wheel* 12).

However, Ogama could not conform to, or live up to this most essential and central tenet of Buddhism. This is because, day in and day out, he has been reliving the past. Desiring to eliminate those unpleasant feelings by withdrawing himself from the social world would not give him the equanimity for which he has been seeking. This is because, as Johnson states, "even the 'desire' for liberation from suffering can become a trap, a form of attachment, an instance of dualism ('I am not free; I wish to be free') (15). The young priest thus has no sense of peace as a result of his inner craving for peace and desire for absolute solitude.

Unexpectedly, Ogama has experienced the moment of revelation or realizations of Buddhist perception about the perception of the mind, emptiness, or nonduality when watching the film from the projector. Since the moment that Ogama was determined to become a priest, he has constantly regarded himself as an "imitation priest" ("Kamadhatu" 56), believing that he is living a lie and doubting, in his lifetime, that he would never experience "*satori*" (56, emphasis in original) or a sudden moment of profound insight—or enlightenment—the true nature of reality in Zen Buddhism. Nevertheless, at some point, Tucker does show up to the temple occupant, assuring him that "all beings are potential Buddhas. Anyone or anything can bring us to a sudden awakening—the timbre of a bell, an autumn rose, the extinguishing of a candle. Anything!" (55) Tucker's statement suggests that all humans possess the innate potential to experience a moment of revelation because everyone has a Buddha nature—the ability to become enlightened like the Buddha.

The scene in which Ogama is watching a film from the old projector that Tucker discovers and fixes as part of her volunteer service brings Ogama to an understanding of his place in the world after it has been completely upended, full of disquiet. It has also helped him come to terms with his personal anguish because of a sudden, tragic loss. All three elements—the blank screen, the projector, and the home movie that was made by the priest's predecessor half a century ago—are utilized as metaphors for the Buddhist way of thinking about the perceptions of the human mind:

> Someone has placed a small, white handkerchief over her face, and as a young man seated beside her, perhaps her eldest son, suddenly lifted the cloth and kissed her cold forehead, Toshiro felt his back shiver, the experience of ruin and abandonment that overcame him during his own parents' funeral welling up inside him once again. In spite of himself, he surrendered his personal anguish, his pain—the powerful energy of his emotions—over to the people at this funeral, and this transference thickened the screen so thoroughly that the young priest's nose clogged with mucus, his eyes burned with tears, but even as he sobbed uncontrollably, he knew himself to be locked in a cycle of emotion (his own) which these fleeting, black and white images borrowed, intensified, and gave back to him in a magic show produced by the mind, a dreamland spun from accelerated imagery (59).

This excerpt delicately depicts the protagonist's profound realization during a funeral ceremony projected through a silent film. Here, Ogama experiences a sudden, powerful, and profound emotional response as a result of the fleeting images of the funeral that appear on the screen. These continuous images have brought him back to his own memories and reminded him of the unresolved grief that he experienced during the funeral of his parents. The young priest realizes that it is not only him who has undergone through a great loss. The film illustrates that it is a universal and natural phenomenon, with shared grief serving as a form of collective suffering that all sentient beings must endure regardless.

Not only does he undergo an abrupt and intense emotional reaction to the flickering funeral pictures that flash over the screen, but he also gains insight into Buddhist perception about the nature of the mind. The flicker of the images could be compared to what Johnson calls "the brief, flicker-flash passing of a feeling *as* no more than a feeling, a transitory mind-created object *as* no more than a mind-object" (Johnson, *Turning the Wheel* 30, emphasis in original). It reinforces Buddhist philosophical thinking of the nature of human feelings and thoughts,

believing that the nature of feelings is provisional and impermanent—they rapidly arise, exist for a moment, and then dissolve. The priest's anguish stems from his failure to grasp that the feelings and emotions are bound to arise and then pass away eventually.

The fleeting images that are projected by the projector serve as a metaphor for the nature of the human mind, which are mental constructs that Ogama has been revisiting and clinging to despite the fact that the events causing those emotions have long vanished and ended. The funeral displayed on the screen thus symbolizes a projection of the protagonist's own mind—as within, so without. For Ogama, this is a "magic show produced by the mind," the experience driven by his own inner projection. The young priest finally recognizes that his endless cycle of disconsolate emotions is being "borrowed" from the past and projected into the present and, at the same time, "intensified" by his persistent pattern of ruminating on the events, which continuously engenders sorrowful emotions and suffering for him. In this passage, additionally, Johnson demonstrates his artistic skills in these long, powerful, and full-of-emotions sentences that abruptly evoke and express all of Ogama's suppressed feelings, which have constrained him all along for several years.

In light of his realization that his mind has been perpetually projecting the same images of his parents' passing and emotionally attaching to the circumstances over the years, Ogama has developed an understanding of the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness or nonduality:

> After a second, he realized this—yes, *this*—was what the sutras meant by *kamadhatu*, by the realm of illusion, by Samsara. By Prapanca. All at once, the ribbon of film in the projector broke, returning the screen to an expanse of emptiness completely untouched by the death and misery projected upon it. For these last few moments he had experienced not the world, but the workings of his own nervous system. And this was truly all he had *ever* known ("Kamadhatu" 59, emphasis in original).

Here, not only does the ribbon of the projector break, but so do all the chains of Ogama's never-ending misery and overwhelmingly distressing emotions. Only then is he left to be entirely enveloped by "an expanse of emptiness," without coloring his past upon the blank screen. Also, the blank screen symbolizes Buddhist emptiness—a glimpse of the true nature of reality, which is a lack of own-being, meaning that all things are dependently originating, like his traumatic past that turns into the repeated mind projection.

Due to the fact that every entity is dependent on causes to bring them into existence and to maintain their existence, they do not possess or are devoid of intrinsic, fixed essence. Thus, everything is connected, and the temporary existence is due to causes and conditions (Davis, "Forms of Emptiness in Zen" 193). At this precise moment, the young priest is fully present in a state of meditative mind. He is in a state of self-emptying, releasing any attachments on which he has been holding from the past. In this state of emptying his mind, where he embraces the moment of here and now, Ogama is free from illusion that his mind has continuously created, from "Prapanca[10]," the conceptual fabrication (207). The young priest, therefore, can remain in the present without reliving and being victimized by his sorrowful past.

Ogama's suffering results from holding onto a fixed, intrinsic self-nature and misconceptions of fleeting events for everlasting reality. His thoughts and emotions have been shaping and creating his reality all along. This is also represented through the metaphors for the film and the blank screen:

> There was no sound, only the flicker of images on the *tabula rasa* of the screen, slowly at first, each frame discrete and separated by spaces of white, as if the pictures were individual thoughts, complete in themselves, with no connection to the others—like *his* thoughts before he had his first cup of tea in the morning. Time felt suspended. But as the projector whirred on in the silent temple, the frames came faster, chasing each other, surging forward, creating a linear, continuous motion that brought a sensuously rich world to life before Toshiro's eyes ("Kamadhatu" 58, emphasis added).

In this passage, the individual thought, each of which is complete and separate from the others, is similar to the state of the mind before it becomes fully engaged with the world, like "the flicker of images." However, as the frames increase in speed, they begin to pursue one another and surge forward, thereby its continuity produces a film. In the Buddhist lens, the continuous experience of the discrete frames parallels the mind's ability to construct a reality from a separated raw picture, giving rise to the cycle of endlessly repeated projection of the mind.

Moreover, Johnson ingeniously connects the Western philosophical concept of "tabula rasa" to Buddhist or Eastern thoughts of how the mind naturally works. The philosophical

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[10] Prapanca is the tendency of the mind to overelaborate on sense objects, which are frequently illusory and repetitive, that prevents mental calm and clarity from being achieved (Olendzki).

concept of "tabula rasa," according to Robert Duschinsky, is a Latin term for "blank slate." As he describes,

> Tabula rasa, in Latin, referred to the state of a tablet after the inscriptions in the surface of wax had been removed. The tabula rasa is generally taken today to mean a state of formlessness prior to text, in line with Brill's 'blank slate'. However, if we attend more closely, it can be observed that a more precise translation would be 'a slate that has been blanked', the effect of the erasure of text (510).

Thus, "the tabula rasa of the screen" represents the idea of the human mind before ideas were learned from the outside world through human senses (Duignan). It is the mind that existed before any experiences were imprinted on it. The blank screen here can refer to the state of mind in its blankest, purest state in Buddhist thinking, like to the blank slate in Western thought. Johnson deploys the screen and the projector as metaphors for Buddhist epistemology in reference to human perception of reality, which is ineluctably shaped by the mind.

The tabula rasa also resonates with the paratextual citation at the beginning of the story, saying that: *The body is the Bodhi tree; / The mind is like a bright mirror standing. / Take care to wipe it all the time. / And allow no dust to cling* ("Kanmadhatu" 49*)*. The poem emphasizes the nature of the mind and its importance of maintaining a mind that is empty and pure, like a blank screen devoid of any imprints. In this sense, Johnson has interwoven the concept of the purest state of mind in Western thinking with the Eastern one. The poem thus suggests keeping the purity and unclouding of the mirror-like mind "like a screen, remained Lotus flower pure and in a state of grace" (59) in its fresh perspective and thinking because the reality of a person's world is the projection of the mind.

As stated earlier, the fact that Ogama has no sense of peace in his mind is because he has isolated himself from human connection as well as community. By dividing himself into two categories—self and others—he inevitably constructs duality that makes him lose touch with the outside world. Neverhteless, after achieving enlightenment once watching the funeral film, Ogama has transcended his dualistic view: "At that moment, Toshiro Ogama understood. He knew. He saw clearly into his own self-nature, and forever lost *the sense of twoness*" (59, emphasis added). After the epiphany, Ogama's perceptions have transformed, arriving at an understanding of Buddhist nonduality, which dissolves the separation of any entity into "twoness" and distinction, like himself from other people. In the end, the young priest realizes that one is

unable to peacefully live through extreme detachment but through integration with other beings. Ogama thus understands the Buddhist notion of emptiness and nonduality, in which he lets go of attachments, dissolves all distinctions, and mindfully attends to the present moment. The young priest has attained an ineffable peacefulness.

It is interesting that the focalization helps see how Ogama perceives himself. Although the narrative is presented through external focalization, the focalizer slightly shifts to an internal one—a more intimate perspective—where the readers can see from free indirect discourse: "How would she judge him if she knew the depths of his own failure?" Here, Ogama's buffered self reveals his attachment to worldly concerns and his sense of self. It feels as if the reader can slip into his mind. However, his buffered self that he had formed throughout his life has ultimately dissovled, transformed, and transcended to become one with other fellow beings, as Ogama would invite the villagers from his community to join the temples, which symbolically means merging with all people. Tucker has played a vital role in helping Ogama internalize the Buddhist notion of emptiness and nonduality to become an enlightened individual, as her deed and presence serve as a symbolic meaning that propels Ogama to experience the moment of revelation of nonduality. The young priest has changed the way he thinks about relationships with others. Then, by implication, the encounter between the two people from different geographical differences, West and East, gives rise to the concept of cross-cultural synthesis that accentuates the notion of nonduality.

It is important to note that the short story brings to light one of Johnson's most recurring themes—emptiness or nonduality—the idea of sharing the oneness of all things that were once separated by the mind. He has integrated this Buddhist philosophical thinking in order to offer a vision of shared humanity in which all beings are inescapably related, connected, and dependent regardless of all differences as We-relation. The title "Kamadhatu: A Modern Sutra" also displays how we can embrace a spiritual journey in a modern world. The film and the projector are perfect examples in which one can attain enlightenment even through modern, contemporary objects. It emphasizes that Buddhadharma is somehow still relevant in the modern world because the moment of enlightenment could be achieved through one of the most simple things, like watching a movie on the screen, as Tucker suggests.

2.4 "Welcome to Wedgwood"

"The whole world is one neighborhood.[11]"

– Franklin D. Roosevelt

Narrated by a retired man, the first-person story portrays the protagonist's ceaseless train of thoughts that continue to have "clogged his consciousness" (101). After being blasted by "mind-blinding music" (104)—the intrusive, loud noise coming from his new neighbor's party—he begins to "feel exiled from the familiar" (103). As a consequence of the disruption of tranquility he has cultivated over decades of meditation practice, the narrator develops a rash and rude attitude towards others. However, as soon as he learns about his neighbor's physical condition, the initial hostility towards him—which arises from the disturbance of his serene surroundings—is at once dissolved. The story underscores the indispensability of compassion in dispelling prejudice and fostering deeper understanding and, more essentially, the importance of the presence and absence of sound and silence. Ultimately, the narrator also realizes that his persistent negative thoughts and emotions are not caused solely by the explosive noise pollution or other external factors, but are largely a result of the internal cause—his intrusive thoughts that keep him stuck throughout the narrative.

The narrative places an emphasis on the conflict happening in the contemporary world that has become a melting pot[12]. The title highlights the significance of the locale in which long-time inhabitants and newcomers engage in a process of integration through welcoming gestures. As previously mentioned, Johnson's literary works do not give an impression as counterculture. Rather, most are philosophical and spiritual works that uphold humankind's unity yet encourage multiculturalism[13], one in which people from a variety of backgrounds can peacefully coexist with one another. In the story, the narrator's once perfectly peaceful neighborhood of Wedgwood, "a quiet hidden oasis within Seattle" (100), has gradually changed, as everything else in the world is in a series of ever-changing states. While his neighborhood has remained relatively peaceful, there have been some indications of change—for example, the influx of younger

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[11] Franklin D. Roosevelt: Address to the White House Correspondents' Association on February 12, 1943 (https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-white-house-correspondents-association)

[2] An environment in which a variety of components, including people, styles, and theories, are combined with one another. The term is most commonly used to refer to a nation that is perceived to be one in which people of various races and cultures are assimilated (Oxford Reference).

[13] Multiculturalism promotes the inclusion of diverse societal views and contributions, respecting their differences, and recognizing and appreciating differences in race, ethnicity, religion, language, and other cultural factors (Eagan).

residents: “But here and there things had begun to change. Younger people were moving in, and some years ago the police raided a home that someone had turned into a meth lab. Yet and still, violence in Wedgwood was rare” (100).

Through the use of vivid descriptive language, the narrator delineates the idyllic serenity of his neighborhood, where he finds it to be an incredibly peaceful place to reside. Nevertheless, the narration instantly shifts to a completely different tone. While savoring the late afternoon leisure and beginning to practice meditation in perfect posture in the backyard, the narrator’s ears, instead of hearing the “hymnal silence, a few soothing notes sounded from the wood chimes hanging from [his] house, accompanied by bird flutter and the rustle of leaves at about ten decibels” (101), catch the explosive blast of music from nearby, “like a clap of thunder or a volcano exploding … And it *did* rock—and shock—the neighborhood with a tsunami of inquietude” (101, emphasis in original). As “tsunami of inquietude,” the music depicted evokes a sense of interruption, tension, and conflict. A sudden influx of intrusive noise—metaphorically representing an intrusion of change in his neighborhood—disrupts the retired man’s tranquility, thereby causing him to lose his sense of peace.

This explosive, loud music discerned as a disruption and a nuisance is represented metaphorically as the process of the incoming diverse individuals and cultures that the narrator feels as if they are invaders intruding into his private property. As he grumbles, “Who are these *rude* people? These *invaders*?” (105, emphasis added). This creates a potential for a sense of conflicts and disruption within such processes in his environment through a significant change in his perception of Wedgwood: “I no longer recognized Wedgwood as my neighborhood. All its virtues—the magnificent views of Lake Washington and the Cascade Mountain Range, its old-world charm—had vanished” (103). This could be asserted that the virtues and “old-world charms” of the narrator’s Wedgwood are in a state of dissolving and melting into a new environment that causes a sense of unsettling feelings during the state of transformation for the residents.

The “discomfort [he] [is] feeling” (105) further manifests itself in the narrator’s unrelenting thoughts. Being interrupted by an intrusive sound from the newcomer’s house, the narrator has explicitly become attached to his own brooding, chasing his own thoughts, which causes him to suffer without end. This train of thoughts is depicted numerous times in the narrative where the narrator says to himself, for instance, “I kept thinking,” “I swear, I think,”

and "I kept wondering" (106). And these relentless thoughts are somewhat scattered, jumping, without any rest, from one thing to another—the supermarket employee who has been arrested, an elderly woman, and the cashier. More importantly, in spite of his long-term meditation practice—which he believes should enable him to become as "magnanimous and civilized as any post-Enlightenment Western man who had control over himself after thirty years of meditation" (104–105)—he, without being aware, begins to engage in rude and irritable conversations with his wife and the cashier at the supermarket. The narrator's rudeness stems from his never-ending internal monologue about the situation that has already come to an end yet has been lingering through the projection of his own mind. It has a negative impact on his overall mood.

Since the narrative is structured around the narrator's restless, agitated, and distracted mind, which manifests through his thoughts that are random, fragmentary, nonstop, and presumptive, it is depicted as an intrusive chain of thoughts without any pause, or in Buddhist terms, the monkey mind. The first-person narrative thus effectively helps reflect the narrator's thoughts that ceaselessly move in a chain, giving the readers an insight into the complex nature of his mind and character. Despite the fact that the narrator is at a great distance away from his new neighbor's speaker that produces explosive sound, he continues to be preoccupied with and attached to his troubling thoughts and feelings. And ironically, even though the narrator depicts that the explosion to blaring music has drowned out his thoughts, the narrative as a whole proves otherwise:

> The music, if I may call it that, was intrusive, infectious, wild, sensual, pagan, orgasmic, jangling, indecent, and filled me with foreign emotions not of my own making, completely overwhelming and washing away my thoughts and the silent, inner speech we all experience when our soul talks to itself (102).

It could be seen that throughout the story—from the opening scene to the end—the narrator can never, indeed, quiet his monkey mind that is a mental construct, causing incessant thinking, which inflicts unnecessary suffering on him.

The narrative, simultaneously, reflects the Buddhist theme regarding the meditative mind, which the narrator temporarily lacks despite over three decades of practicing meditation. He cannot truly control how to respond his emotions to the blast of music. Nevertheless, after releasing himself from the tight grip of these incessant thoughts, the narrator eventually realizes that his suffering is caused not by the intrusive noise or outside influences but by his own

thinking, keeping him mired and unable to escape from it. The release of thinking he has been firmly holding appears metaphorically in the final part, where he loses his grip on groceries because of his dog's movement. Additionally, the event reveals a deeper understanding of his own self-nature and the impact of the internal factors—his fleeting thoughts—on his mental state when he is self-emptied:

> He sprang forward for the steps—Westies hate to get wet—and that snapped my left arm straight out, which sent cans of sliced pineapples, soup, and tomatoes, bottles of maple syrup and milk, and bags of raisins, potatoes, and rice cascading back down the declivity, littering the street like confetti or a landfill. For the longest time, I stood there, head tipped and sopping wet, watching my neighbor's guests flee inside to escape the rain, lost in the whorl of violent, invisible vibration, and I was disabused forever of the vanity that three decades of practicing meditation had made me too civilized, too cultivated, too mellow to be vulnerable to or victimized by fugitive thoughts—anger, desire, self-pity, pettiness—triggered in me from things outside. These would always arise, I saw, even without noise pollution (108).

At this moment of revelation, the narrator has understood that he has been blinded not only by the "mind-blinding music" (104), but also by his delusion that meditation can free him from his own chaotic, endless thoughts that inflict suffering and all the negative feelings. And even in situations that seem tranquil, he is, yet and still, capable of experiencing the negative emotions arising from his own mind. Being "disabused" also indicates that the narrator has permanently lost his prior belief, which, inadvertently, creates a sense of illusion and presumption that he can become and remain calm through meditative practice and ultimately be able to separate himself from all uncomfortable feelings.

When the narrator lets go of his attachment to thoughts, only then can he detach himself from the contents of the thoughts, and then comes the ability to quiet his minds—the state in which the meditative mind occurs. A meditative mind, according to Storhoff, as discussed in the previous chapter, is intended to be a process of transformation whereby the individual's perspective is liberated from delusions and distortions that give rise to dualistic, egocentric viewpoints (Storhoff, 208). Therefore, in this moment, the narrator could separate himself from what is inside of his mind if he lets go of his attachment to his incessant thoughts.

Furthermore, the retired man's intrusive thought that appears as presumption resurfaces at the conclusion of the narrative. Metaphorically, the intrusive neighbor can also serve as intrusive thoughts that are filled with preconceptions for the larger part in the narrative. After the emotionally draining music stops, symbolizing the quiet state of his mind, he encounters another epiphanic moment through simple, mundane aspects of life that brings him an understanding of himself and compassion for this seeming invader—a young soldier who serves the country and suffers from "unnecessary tragedy of tinnitus" ("Welcome to Wedgwood" 109), likely caused by bomb blasts during his service in the Middle East. The narrator's moment of realization is a step towards his greater self-awareness, understanding of his endless, floating thoughts and emotions, and liberation from his own delusion. At this point in the story, the narrator is "opening the hand of thought," allowing his conceptualized and preconceived ideas to finally fall away, leaving him with nothing but gratitude and humbleness.

As a result of the encounter, the elderly man is filled with a sense of humility because he realizes that there is something to learn from the young man who is standing in front of him "trying to read [his] lips" (109). As he states, "how sound and silence, so universal in our lives as to normally be ignored, were profound mysteries I'd never properly understood or respected until now when the absence of one and the presence of the other was so badly disrupting my life" (105). This demonstrates the importance of the dichotomy between sound and silence, which, although prevalent with abstract entities, is often disregarded and undervalued in human daily life. The realization has thus transformed the narrator's profound understanding and perception regarding the interdependence of all things and that everything is a part of everything else—without sound there would be no silence and vice versa. He finally becomes an enlightened individual by dissolving the distinction between subject and object and warmly welcoming his new neighbor into his neighborhood.

The dichotomy also serves to reinforce the idea of multiculturalism and the melting pot that stresses recognition, appreciation, and a perfect balance between various cultural factors. This is because it is necessary to establish diversity and inclusitivity, which are truly essential for a fulfilling, harmonious, and peaceful society in the contemporary world. Therefore, it is possible to assert that the implied author has woven Buddhist aesthetics as the need for open-mindedness through the meditative mind. It can transcend preconceptions and distinctions at a time when the

world is in the midst of transitioning to become oneness—like the neighborhood of Wedgwood which has evolved over time along with everything else in the world that is in a transient state.

Chapter Three: Exploring Buddhism: Paths to Spiritual Insight

In this chapter, I delve into the short stories that engage with Buddhist philosophical thinking. I begin by "The Cynic" and "Idols of the Cave," which illustrate how Johnson ingeniously interweaves Eastern and Western philosophy, and cultural perspectives together with the underlying Buddhist philosophical values, e.g., emptiness, nonduality, and the connectedness of all things. Then, I proceed with the science fiction short stories "Guinea Pig" and "4189." They are paired together due to their literary genre in order to explore their comparability regarding the genre, and their relations to Buddhist philosophical values. These two short stories are paired together to see how "philosophy, Buddhism, and science fiction at their best (as well as science itself) challenge our views and transform our perception" (Johnson, *The Way of the Writer* 206).

3.1 "The Cynic"

"Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form[14]."

– The Heart Sūtra

"The Cynic" is narrated by the fictional Plato. After losing his beloved teacher, Socrates, during a difficult period when the pursuit of perfection and the universal truth have become unachievable, Plato finds himself struggling to search for "exactitude and precision of abstract thought" (45) and an absolute reality, as "nothing was universal anymore" (38). He laments the chaos "in the wreckage of a spiritually damaged society" (38) that has arisen after the war because the traditions and faith in moral order that the ancestors followed have been arbitrary. Despite all the chaos of the postwar period, he is still grieving the passing of his mentor. Imagining dialogues with him, whom he truly relies on as a voice of wisdom, helps console him. Since the fictional Plato is preoccupied with his ideal theory that the realm of pure Forms is the true, ultimate reality that one cannot grasp through their senses and the physical world is merely its shadow or representation, Diogenes, an ascetic, challenges him by asking about the idea of emptiness. Having long been limited and constrained to fixed, static ideas, Plato has finally released and loosened his grip on ideal conceptions and his static self-identity in response to Diogenes' question, enabling him to dissolve his calcified, rigid way of thinking.

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[14] From Bret W. Davis "Forms of Emptiness in Zen" pp. 190.

"The Cynic" is situated in the ancient Greek period. The significance of the title lies in its multiple layers of meanings. At first glance, it can denote Diogenes, the archetype in Cynicism, the school of thought in Classical Greece. However, as the narrative unfolds, the meaning of the "cynic" in contemporary context could apply to the fictional Plato, who embodies the pessimistic outlook throughout the story. In this sense, the first-person narrative foregrounds the narrator's nature of thought. Plato's ideal thinking discloses the central tenet in his philosophical system—the Theory of Forms—a metaphysical concept concerning the nature of reality and how we can understand the world. In his narration, Plato's central theory concurrently imposes dualistic opinions as well as rigid boundaries. This is because he believes that there is the existence of a superior realm of reality that exists beyond our physical world. This realm is inhabited by entities that are eternal, perfect, and unchanging; they are the true essences of things that humans encounter in our physical world—for example, a perfect form of Beauty, Justice, or Goodness. All of which are referred to as "Form" or "Idea" (Bruce).

Consequently, what humans can perceive in our physical world is not the ultimate reality, but only the representation or shadow of the absolute, eternal reality of the realm of Ideas. As W.J.T. Mitchell postulates, "Representations, Plato reasoned, are mere substitutes for the things themselves; even worse, they may be false or illusory substitutes" ("Representation," 14-15). Plato stresses that knowledge of the Forms, or other-worldly ideals cannot be obtained directly through human senses, or experience; rather, it could solely be perceived through intellectuals or philosophers (Bruce). In this respect, Plato draws a palpable distinction between the realm of Form and our physical world with examples of those concepts, assigning the former the higher and eternal status, while our physical world is merely serving as a reflection or imitation.

The fictional Plato, in the narrative, is overwhelmingly burdened by the weight of his thoughts, and "intoxicated by ideas" ("The Cynic" 45). Since the beginning of the story, he has been struggling to search for an absolute, perfect reality for the state and civic life in the wrecked, damaged society, lamenting that the new men, the foreigners, are rife with "collective self-delusion" (36). This is because, after the war, these so-called Sophists[15] established new societal values in which "common, shared values had all but vanished, truth was seen as relative to each man, if not solipsistic, and nothing was universal anymore" (38). It implies that, in Plato's view,

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[15] Plato's Sophist is a master of illusion, and a foreigner, who is considered the opposite of a true teacher. (Jowett)

the new men's perceptions of a given thing are shaped by their unique experiences and perspectives. The shared false beliefs or misconceptions held by a group of people, in effect, have a tendency to subvert Plato's theory of Forms.

These new men's individual truths—a personal construct—might pose a threat to the public because their truths have the possibility of being deceiving owing to their rejection of Plato's absolute truths. It is also possible that they do not accurately reflect the ultimate truth of the thing that they represent, and they could distort the comprehension and supremacy of the realm of Forms, which leads to confusion because words no longer precisely correspond to reality. Thereby, the polis, the Greek city-state, is in a state of transformation in the matter of societal values and truths. Plato has thus been devastatingly bothered by these social and political disorders that are far removed from his ideal conceptions. In this sense, his obsessive attachment to the perfect Ideas of how things ought to be and his incessant pursuits for the ultimate, permanent nature of things give rise to his burdensome, critical opinions—which, in turn, create dualistic thinking. Subsequently, his thoughts leave the perceptions of the world with imperfections as well as illusions, the roots that have a significant impact on his worldviews.

The main philosophical dispute in the narrative is a quest for wisdom in ancient Western philosophy. The narrative focuses on Plato's ideal perspective regarding the theory of Forms as opposed to Diogenes' Cynicism. Plato perpetually defines everything through the lens of Forms and comparison and clings "desperately to the crystalline purity and clear knowledge of numbers, the Apollonian exactitude and precision of abstract thought" (45). For example, he compares Diogenes' appearance in relation to the form of a tree: "Diogenes was a clown with hair like *leaves* and *tree bark*, gnarled *rootlike* hands, and eyes like scars gouged into stone" (41, emphasis added). Additionally, his thought process discloses the words that have a sense of calculation and measurement—such as "orb" and "margin" (46)—that simultaneously indicate the orderliness, limitation, or boundary of form. It could thus be seen that the narrator is, if nothing else, undoubtedly immersed in his personal conception of the idea of Forms and patterns.

On the contrary, Diogenes, in all respects, is essentially different from the narrator. He places values on practicing a life of asceticism and living a life as it is in its simplest way. Diogenes, who holds a philosophical concept called Cynicism which was founded by a student of Socrates, embraces living a life that is free from socially constructed limitations and conventions. Instead, he promotes a life lived in harmony with nature due to the fact that social norms can

impede the pursuit of a well-lived life by eroding individual freedom while establishing an ethic that clashes with the nature (Piering). The key to achieving independence, according to Diogenes, is to adopt a lifestyle that is uncomplicated and consists of few possessions, like the way animals live their lives because they are "natural, unself-conscious, and unspoiled by convention and hypocrisy" ("The Cynic" 41). His way of living and worldviews, as a result, appear to be entirely opposite to those of Plato, which inflexibly grasps "a realm of pure forms and beauty, where everything has the order and perfection of mathematics" (45). Accordingly, the narrator cannot peacefully accept things as they are since he has "denied the reality of [the] shattered world" (45) and tried to chase unrealistic and unattainable perfection. Plato grapples to find and attain his ideal Forms of society, whereas Diogenes, in Plato's perspective, has "lapped up the illusion, like a dog indifferent to whether he was dining on a delicacy or his own ordure" (45). Through Plato's intellectual examination, it can be inferred that Diogenes is susceptible to illusions and has a limited understanding of the misery and political turmoil occurring in the Greek city-state.

Given that this short story seems to ostensibly portray various philosophical ideas of the key Western tradition, it is crucial to read Johnson's work with an expansive vision, or "whole sight," as mentioned earlier in Chapter 1. This is also because Johnson stresses that oversimplification, one-dimensionality, and a lack of depth in a writer's work can be detrimental to the work itself, as they diminish its complexity and reduce the range of possible interpretations (Johnson, *The Way of the Writer*, 27). "The Cynic" thus exhibits Johnson's artistic, intellectual, and spiritual interests as a place in which his creativity and philosophical aesthetics flourish. The implied author introduces an integration between Western and Eastern philosophy in new contexts. He has also crafted significant values on Western philosophy, which subtly integrates with Eastern one by using the major Greek philosophers to represent a syncretic combination of Western and Eastern philosophical thoughts. The story thus offers an interesting basis for a deeper examination of the other underlying theme—the Buddhist philosophy.

The narrative framework of "The Cynic" serves as a platform for another deeper theme regarding Buddhist thinking of the nature of reality, and the amalgamation of two separate schools of philosophy: East and West. Although the story is remarkably packed with foundational Western philosophy, represented by ancient Greek philosophers, it somehow embodies the underlying Buddhist philosophical thought. In addition to being a Cynic, Diogenes' actions could be interpreted through the lens of Eastern thought. The similarities between Buddhism and

Cynicism beg to be noticed because both delve into the nature of reality and human perceptions of the world. The implied author's exploration of creativity is shown through his attempt to interweave the Eastern philosophical notion of emptiness, which, in consequence, helps dissolve the fixed ideology and transcends all dualistic thinking of the narrator.

The implied author has incorporated the notion of emptiness, fundamental to Buddhist philosophy, into the story in order to facilitate the combination of Eastern and Western ways of thinking. The narrative emphasizes that he is enthusiastic to transcend the concepts of dualism, and calcified ideas and forms that compel one to perceive the essence of any entity in polarization. This can be seen during the narrator's moment of revelation in the final part of the story. Throughout the story, the fictional Plato has been clinging to his fixed conceptions about the ideal concepts of Forms that influentially shape his perception of reality. Despite the fact that this way of thinking can be useful for simplifying complicated things, it, without a doubt, gives rise to his dualistic thinking. It also has the potential to restrict his comprehension by ignoring subtleties and other variations, which further results in the formation of the narrator's rigid judgments and thought processes.

In the narrative, Diogenes, according to Plato, is the one who enjoys having an illusion in a chaotic world. Nevertheless, the ultimate truth and its representations that Plato is seeking, in fact, appear as a form of illusion in Diogenes' eyes. Attempting to define reality—a mind and conceptual construct—is a challenge for Plato. This is because he has long been attached and confined to the ideas of ideal Forms, believing that their natural intrinsics are eternal and permanent. And when the chaotic polis does not meet his expectations or fits in with his ideal of Forms, Plato has experienced tremendous suffering, disappointment, and frustration, grumbling that "Things are terrible today! Everyone is suing everyone else. There's so much anger and hatred!" ("The Cynic" 44) Ironically, he himself has turned into being cynical, or the cynic, as the title implies, due to his brooding and his lack of trust in anything, leading to a state of distress. Hence, the cause of the narrator's suffering is rooted in his attachment to the core belief in a static and fixed idea of the self-nature of entities. Through a Buddhist lens, Plato's perception of the world is distorted since he seeks permanence and certainty when, in reality, they are not achievable, as everything is in a changing, transient state and devoid of inherent essence. This could be seen when Diogenes derides Plato because he is chasing certainty or permanence in things, saying that "He's a mystic. And so—so dualistic! He actually wants certainty where there

is none" (43). This, to a certain extent, suggests that Plato has been enslaved by the attachment to his conception that obscures his capacity to see things as they are.

Through Diogenes' inquiry regarding the form of emptiness, Plato sheds his long-imposed constraints on ideal conceptions and static identity, allowing his calcified, inflexible thought process to erode. Upon encountering this daringly unconventional philosopher, Plato is challenged to reevaluate his entire perspective. Believing that "there were countless cups in the world, there was only one *idea* of a cup. This idea, the essence of cupness, was eternal; it came before all the individual cups in the world" (42, emphasis in original), Plato then is being questioned, "where is the emptiness that comes before this empty cup?" (43). Unable to answer Diogenes' question, Plato, again, is asked to simply look, not explain, at the night sky. At this very moment, he is being speechless, no longer enslaved by his perfect notions of reality, allowing himself to be fully wrapped in the emptiness of the night sky for the moment. As he delineates,

> I looked at the plenitude of what I saw—the moon emerging from clouds like milk froth––could not be deciphered, and its opacity outstripped my speech. I was ambushed by its sensuous, singular, and savage beauty. Enraptured, I felt a shiver of desire (or love) rippling through my back from the force of its immediacy. For a second I was wholly unconscious of anyone beside me, or what was under my feet. As moonlight spilled abundantly from a bottomless sky, as I felt myself commingled with the seen, words failed me, my cherished opinions slipped away in the radiance of a primordial mystery that was as much me as it was the raw face of this full-orbed moon, a cipher so inexhaustible and ineffable it shimmered in my mind, surging to its margins, giving rise to a state of enchantment even as it seemed on the verge of vanishing as all things do—*poleis* and philosophical systems—into the pregnant emptiness Diogenes had asked me to explain. (46, emphasis in original).

During this epiphany, through the Buddhist lens, Plato's assumptions about the nature of knowledge and understanding have altered—he is by no means trapped by his own lens of Forms and precision of thought. Instead, he is utterly unrestricted by any and all fixed, rigid conceptions of reality. By purely perceiving, without giving opinions on what he sees, Plato becomes one and is "wholly unconscious" of anything around him, since he feels himself "commingled" with the

world around him. He is so engulfed with rich, ineffable, and profound experiences that he could not thoroughly articulate them in his system of words and their meanings.

The statement "words failed me, my cherished opinions slipped away" implies that the narrator is unable to convey or even apprehend what he sees through a form of language that has constructed his views of the world. It is "a cipher" that Plato is unable to decipher. And as Johnson puts it,

> Words can be webs, making us think in terms of essences; language is all concept, but things in the world are devoid of essence, changing as we chase them. Life must always be greater than our ideas about life. For the Buddha, "Man's sensual desires are only attachments to concepts (Johnson, *Turning the Wheel* 13).

In Buddhism, it could be asserted that human perception of the world is shaped by the mental constructs that are created by language. These mind-created constructs generally provide a sense of certainty and meaning. However, according to P.A. Payutto, "The Buddha encouraged people to recognize language merely as a means of communication, without attaching to conventions or becoming enslaved by language" ("Six Sense Spheres" 74). Thus, when it comes to language, the attempts to define reality boil down to, in some way, concepts and ideas. This is because every entity is not fixed with intrinsic essence, but it is, all the time, in a state of changing, and it cannot possess a certain, inherent existence. Therefore, the narrator's awakening, to a large extent, indicates a limitation of language that he is never aware of.

After his "vision unsealed" ("The Cynic" 48), Plato has finally realized that perhaps it is of no use to define everything since, by some means, words have "no longer the same relation to things" (37). They have limitations to capture the essence of things. As Plato stresses, "I could plaster *a thousand interpretations* on the overwhelmingly present and palpable orb above us, but at that moment something peculiar took place, and to this day I do not understand it" (46, emphasis added). "A thousand interpretations" conveys that there are multifaceted perceptions and possibilities, and there could never be merely one perfect Form or reality, a theory on which he has been long holding. In these descriptions, Plato is thus unable to make sense of the circumstances that he finds himself in at the moment.

In light of Plato's new understanding, he has momentarily dismissed his previous central tenet, the realm of Forms or other-worldly ideals. In accordance with his theory of Forms, the acquisition of true knowledge is accomplished by means of intellectual contemplation and

comprehension of these Forms, rather than by means of direct sensory experiences of the physical world. Nevertheless, in this very moment, where the narrator's sense of fixed identity—his buffered self—vanishes and his attachment is weakened, he senses a profound understanding that could more or less be experienced by just being entirely in the present. Without deciphering what surrounds him, Plato transcends the partitions between the two realities—the realm of Forms and the physical world. More importantly, the narrator's flowing, sensuous, lengthy sentences reveal the dissolution of a fixed, rigid sense of self as a result of his commingling with his surroundings. Intriguingly, the language that Plato depicts during his revelation changes into sensational adjectives and verbs—for example, "sensuous," "singular," "unconscious," and "commingled." Plato's moment of realization thus destabilizes the concept of Forms and enables him to transcend his dualistic views on conceptions and reality.

During the moment of self-emptying, Plato has a realization of Buddhist notions of emptiness and impermanence. He has emptied his mind of all the concerns and concepts that he has been carrying around with him all the time and has arrived at an understanding where the ultimate truth is emptiness—all entities lack their own being or self-nature and are devoid of mentally constructed concepts. Therefore, language is not able to capture the essence. As Peter Harvey puts it, "the ultimate truth, then, is that reality is inconceivable and inexpressible." Thus, reality is only left with "thusness" or "suchness," which signifies that things are as they are, without adding or subtracting anything from them (Peter Harvey qtd. in Davis "Forms of Emptiness" 207). And when things are seen as they really are, they are "empty of all the [egocentric and reifying] concepts by which we grasp them and fit them into our world, empty of all we project upon them" (207). In the moment of revelation, Plato, in arriving at Buddhist emptiness, has been awakened to the "suchness of reality" (207).

This idea of emptiness also links to the notion of impermanence, which is an inseparable component of the doctrine of emptiness. Since everything is constantly changing and evolving, nothing remains static or permanent. The narrator eventually understands that his ideal theory is "on the verge of vanishing as all things do" ("The Cynic" 46). He, ultimately, lets go of the attachment to his philosophical system, language, and conceptions, only to be enfolded in "the pregnant emptiness" (46). Added to that, by letting go of his ceaseless thoughts, Plato is in a state of meditative mind in which he is freed from illusory thoughts that give rise to, as Storhoff posits, "an ego-center dualistic" (Storhoff, 208) viewpoints. This Buddhist philosophical notion of

impermanence also resonates with the paratext at the beginning of the story: *The ruler of the world is the / Whirlwind, that has unseated Zeus*. It marks a significant theme of impermanence in the narrative. Here, the implied author deftly interweaves Western and Eastern concepts regarding change, or the state of flux of all things in the world, as nothing lasts forever, but in a process of ever-changing phenomena. These phrases may emphasize that, in the nature of things, nothing can endure in the same condition, reinforcing the Buddhist idea of impermanence by suggesting that even the king of gods can be uprooted from his highest position by a simple natural phenomenon like the wind.

Seen in this light, Plato's newly understood selfhood, to a certain degree, has changed his perceptions of how to understand or view the world from multifaceted angles—where he is no longer suffered by intoxicated ideas and incessant opinions. As he reveals, "I felt only wonder, humility, and innocence, and for the first time I realized I did not have to understand, but to *be*" ("The Cynic" 47, emphasis in original). This, in fact, upholds Diogenes' Cynic perspective, which prioritizes direct experience and living authentically, and that reality depends on each individual's perception. It is necessary to transcend conceptual thinking in order to have a direct and true experience of the world. Simultaneously, it reinforces Buddhist philosophy, which emphasizes the illusory nature of existence and the importance of having an original or pure state of mind to understand reality.

For the first time, Plato is confronted with an experience that is beyond his intellectual capabilities. As a result, he is left with a profound sense of wonder and doubt where his static, calcified conceptions have been dissolved. It is not necessary anymore for Plato to "dialogue it to death" (47) due to the fact that he is in a state beyond the reach of words or concepts. Hence, the narrator is propelled to contemplate the possibility that when he becomes one with all entities, it is more important to be and perceive things as they are than it is to desperately search for an external answer and understanding. Rather, it could be perceived precisely through human senses and direct experiences. The protagonist's buffered self has transcended, becoming an enlightened individual.

Moreover, not only is Plato attached to his theory of Forms, but also to his mentor's ways of teaching. Socrates' teaching is a method of inquiry, based on asking questions to stimulate critical thinking as well as ideas for his students (Ambury). Referring to Johnson's "whole sight," interestingly, it should be noted that Socrates' way of teaching is similar to koan in Zen

Buddhism. The purpose of the question is to test the analytical capacity of the individual and to push the mind closer to enlightenment. However, Zen koan needs to be understood through direct, intuitive insight rather than logic. As venerable Gyomay M. Kubose explains, "The koan is never solved by reason or by the intellect. Koans are solved only through living experience or intuitive understanding" ("Introduction" xiii). In the same manner, Diogenes applies this thought-provoking inquiry to Plato in order to push him to lose his rational, intellectual thoughts and deals with wisdom that transcends worldly knowledge by letting him discover a sense of understanding through his intuition and mind.

Intriguingly, by letting Plato look at the moon, it is comparable to Zen teaching as the moon in the sky with a finger pointing at it. As Zen master Shōhaku Okumura Roshi postulates,

> Often in Zen teaching we are cautioned, "Don't see the finger, but see the moon directly." The assumption is that any teachings or expressions or poems are merely methods or tools to point to the moon, so we should not look at the finger but see the moon, reality itself. When someone points to the moon so that we can see the reality of it, it's just a tool to help us find the moon (Roshi).

The finger represents words or verbal expression, and the moon represents reality itself. In the narrative, it could be seen that Plato is still attached to his teacher, Socrates, as he constantly imagines having a dialogue with him. Thus, the event Johnson places into the story can serve as a reminder to avoid becoming overly attached to words and/or teachings, as well as to avoid confusing with the things that they are pointing to.

"The Cynic" portrays a robust blend between Western and Eastern philosophy that, simultaneously, exhibits Johnson's extraordinary gift and creativity that he strives to connect and bridge the gap of all distinctions and duality through the intrinsic Buddhist philosophy—emptiness and impermanence. It helps enhance our understanding of the narrative and pave ways in order to analyze this story. When presuppositions and preconceived ideas are unveiled, Plato has undergone a personal change and transcends the limitations of his ideal concepts. He is no longer bothered or burdened by the weight of his preconceptions, as he finally lets go of his ideal conceptions after being confined to and enslaved by them for a long time. It allows him to dissolve his hard, inflexible way of thinking and his fixed, static selfhood. These are all Johnson's philosophical and artistic skills that he interweaves into his literary writings.

3.2 "Idols of the Cave"

"We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,
tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.[16]*"*
– Martin Luther King, Jr.

"Idols of the Cave" opens with a narrator named Wahab Khan, a Muslim American combat medic who is on the trail after plunging into a two-thousand-year-old cave carved by Buddhist monks believing in "the inescapable interconnectedness and non-duality of all things" (73) in Afghanistan. The narrator and his platoon are ordered to clear out these treasurable cultural sites, which have been destroyed by the Taliban. This ancient library stirs up dissension between him and Major Billy Joe Tyler, who, blinded by his prejudice against people from different cultures and being completely unaware of all those invaluable treasure troves, burns Aristotle's treatise with Avicenna's commentary. Little does Major Tyler know how these immeasurable resources have contributed to all humans, as all are a part of world history that creates a rich tapestry of humanity. When it comes down to it, the narrator pulls the trigger on his commander, expressing that he could not determine whether the event should be interpreted as Aristotle's "*comedy or a tragedy. Or maybe both*" (85, emphasis in original) for humanity.

Told from a second-person point of view with a satirical tone, Johnson crafts this short story in intriguing ways because he puts his readers in the narrator's boots. This type of narration is commonly considered an experimental approach to storytelling because it is relatively rare compared to the first and third person; it is not a usual method when we tell a story in our lives. H. Porter Abbott explains that "second-person narration will always seem strange—which, in turn, can be one of its great advantages, depending on the effect an author wants to create" (76). Therefore, Johnson's using "you" in the narration serves a useful purpose that offers the story a unique viewpoint, simply because, as Abbott puts it, "it is a kind of masked first-person narration (since a 'you' implies an 'I' addressing the 'you'" (77). This unique point of view thus directly engages the readers in the narrative, giving them the impression that they are taking part in the action in the story rather than merely observing it. With a strong sense of immediacy and engagement, this short fiction allows the narrator to directly address and share his personal thoughts and feelings with the reader in order to foster deeper understandings as well as empathy

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[16] Martin Luther King, Jr., qtd. in Johnson's *Turning the Wheel.* pp. 9

of the narrator's experience. In this regard, it could be asserted that "Idols of the Cave," which addresses contemporary civilizational conflicts about religions, allows the readers to position themselves in the protagonist's shoes. Since the narrative contains contemporary challenges and issues that are associated with religion and faith, the readers are given the opportunity to pause and reflect to investigate their own ideas and beliefs about the ongoing political and societal tensions.

The setting is essential to "Idols of the Cave," as it takes place in Afghanistan during this time period in the wartime setting. With Johnson's vigorous philosophical background and knowledge, the narrative inevitably involves essential philosophical discussion. The underlying philosophical themes are deftly woven into the narrative. This could be seen in the title, in which "idols" denotes the practice of idolatry—the worship of idols or excessive devotion to something. The narrative begins with the historical incident where the two colossal statues of the Buddha, carved into the sandstone cliffs of Afghanistan's Bamiyan valley in the 6th century, were demolished by the Taliban. This extreme political and religious group adheres to a harsh interpretation of Islamic law and asserts their own interpretation of law and order (Maizland). The destruction of these Buddhist monuments—the cultural landscape—is seen as a significant loss by many Afghans, despite the fact that Islam is the dominant religion. These monuments, nonetheless, were an essential part of their history, and an immeasurable cultural treasure ("Bamiyan Buddhas"). Added to that, the destruction was seen as a "crime against history, art and humanity" (United Nations General Assembly), as the statues, situated along the Silk Road, represent a remarkable meeting of civilizations and a heritage that belonged to all humanity. However, because these figures of the Buddha appeared as "idols" representing "false god" that conflicted with the Taliban's view, they were thus demolished. Labeling them as "un-Islamic" (Joselow and Elbaum), the Taliban believed that the statues are symbols of idolatry—the representation as objects of worship. And that their destruction, under their interpretation, was necessary to uphold their religious law.

Interestingly, the narrative unfolds multiple layers of irony. Both the Taliban and Major Tyler demonstrate the practice of idolatry, although an abstract one, through their actions, as each rigidly adheres to their ideology based on their religious beliefs. The demolition of the Buddha statues reveals the Taliban's excessive devotion to their supreme god. While this may not appear in the form of a physical figure, their rigid attachment to their interpretation of religious law

suggests, to some degree, another form of idolatry—an explicit act of reverence towards their god. Johnson draws an intriguing parallel between the Taliban demolition of the Buddha statues and Major Tyler's destruction of Aristotle's treatise. The commander ironically ends up repeating the same gesture as that of the Taliban. He also serves as a prime example of the practice of idolatry since he is engulfed by his extreme attachment to his beliefs. Being excessively devoted to his religious belief, he boldly asserts to the narrator that "My God is bigger than your god. My tribe is stronger than yours" ("Idols" 74). It reflects his inclination to feel superior to others based on religious or cultural beliefs. Importantly, the practice of idolatry implies the structure of the religious system, which, in a way, replicates Platonic thinking. It simultaneously engenders a sense of hierarchy, leading to a divide between religious groups. Thus, this can further develop a form of prejudice. This is because when people worship idols or are highly devoted to something, they somehow develop a sense of superiority over those who do not share common beliefs—resulting in discrimination and even violence against people who are thought to be inferior or different from them.

This could be seen in the narrative. The narrator, as a Muslim American combat medic, has been subjected to prejudice and discrimination at the hands of his commanding officer, who holds preconceived notions and fixed ideas about Islamic people based on his personal presumptions and cultural influences. For the most part, the narrator becomes an object of ridicule on account of his difference in religion and ethnicity. While accusing the narrator of having a tendency to dismantle anything given the slightest opportunity, Major Tyler is, in fact, the one who does it. As he says,

> if something isn't in the *Qur'an*, you Muslims believe it's unimportant and it just has to go like the way T-man blowed up those Buddha statues. But if it *is* in the *Qur'an*, then you don't need it so it *still* just has to go. Do you practice that? *My* people, my tribe wouldn't do that. That's why we're at war (76, emphasis in original).

His statement reveals a misinterpretation or misunderstanding of Islamic beliefs and practices. He naively believes that "In your religion, in mine, we both need something to struggle against" (80), when in fact, humans can coexist peacefully without the need to exert power over others to strengthen a sense of identity. Thus, it could be asserted that Tyler's power of sight has been solidly sealed with preconceptions and misconceptions. Possessed by this fixed ideology, adhering to the notion that his god is superior to others who worship "false gods," and that people

from other cultures are less human, less civilized, and morally inferior to him, he destroys one of the world's most significant historical artifacts due to his blind devotion.

The fact that Tyler burns the treatise is simply because Khan tells him that what he has accidentally found are the Arab manuscripts, which is, as Khan states, like discovering the Dead Sea Scrolls[17]. Tyler, who is "deliberately dirt-ignorant about other countries and people of a different confession" (75), views that the duty for which he is responsible resembles "A holy war, like the Crusades" (76). His limited knowledge and ignorance prevent him from recognizing that Aristitle's lost treatise, with the renowned Arab scholar Avicenna[18]'s commentary, which he burns, is a historically and culturally indispensable artifact—a global inheritance to humankind, which is similar to the Buddha statues.

At its essence, the implied author has incorporated Buddhist concepts of emptiness and nonduality primarily for the purpose of transcending cultural and hierarchical divides and accentuating the concept of the interconnectedness of all things, both being and non-being, by challenging and questioning established, calcified beliefs and ideas. It is his effort to illustrate cultural synthesis by blending different cultural elements into a new understanding. The narrative integrates Buddhism, which Johnson treats "not as a set of beliefs but as a philosophical and spiritual method for undermining fixed ideologies" (Garton-Gundling 138), in order to transcend all forms of dualism. Being veilded by delusion, prejudices, and ignorance, Major Tyler is unable to recognize and understand how, although loosely and vaguely as it may seem, humans and all things are inextricably connected and related.

The implied author deploys the Buddhist concept of dependent origination, in which everything is connected and dependent on other things; nothing can exist independently. Without Khan—a Muslim that Tyler has relentlessly belittled—saving his life, he would die in an instant from the bomb. As Khan states, Tyler "looked dazed and frightened and confused, but he was conscious and praying to *his* god when it was *you* giving him oral antibiotics from your combat pill pack" ("Idols" 79, emphasis in original). Here, he draws a parallel between the narrator, who is, time after time, treated as an outsider, and Aristotle, as he, too, was "never quite accepted by

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[17] The Dead Sea Scrolls are regarded as one of the most important archaeological discoveries of the 20th century. They have reconstructed and cast new light on an understanding of the Bible, Judaism, and early Christianity. (Davies)

[18] Avicenna was one of the most significant philosophers in the pre-modern era. He made important contributions to Islamic philosophy and medicine. (Rizvi)

the Athenians because he was an outsider from Macedonia" (82). However, both have been an integral part of the existence of everything else.

Most importantly, without Aristotle's treatise, there would not be civilization today because, in addition to being an important contribution to the fields of arts, logic, and science, Aristotle's ideas have helped pave the way for the Renaissance[19], an intellectual period that has profound impacts on various fields. As the narrator delineates,

> All his works and even the skills of reading were lost during the catrastrophic European Dark Ages, but when Muslims conquered Syria they discovered there a treasure trove of Greek culture that came from the earlier conquests of Alexander the Great, a student of Aristotle, and these works they preserved (as you would preserve this work on comedy) when they swept across North Africa into Spain, thus reintroducing arts and sciences to European Christendom, giving the West back Aristotle, the inventor of formal logic, general sciences, and an understanding of marine biology that was not improved on until the nineteenth century. And all that set the stage for the fifteenth-century information explosion that we called the Renaissance (83).

Failing to understand these connections and their contributions to the world, similar to the Taliban's prejudice and ignorance, Tyler's destruction of the treatise is represented metaphorically as the annihilation of one of the world's treasure troves and developments that have shaped the modern-day world in which we live. This excerpt highlights the intellectual contributions made by Aristotle and the significance of collecting, preserving, and rediscovering knowledge across a variety of cultures and time periods. In addition to this, as Khan states, "Maybe Aristotle's treatise will be seen as yet another gift from the Arab world that made Western civilization possible. That the East-West division is false" (83). Johnson takes this thinking further, suggesting that the contributions that Islamic civilization has made were a crucial part of bringing civilization to the world, particularly through the preservation and dissemination of Greek knowledge to the Western world. Therefore, there is no such thing as East or West—we are all "at the crossroads of the world" (81) without any borders or divisions, and we are all a blend of everything around us.

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[19] A few of the Renaissance's most significant innovations include advancements in astronomy, humanist philosophy, the printing press, Leonardo da Vinci's and Michelangelo's painting and sculpture techniques, world exploration, and, towards the end of the Renaissance, Shakespeare's works. ("Renaissance Period")

This concept of interconnectedness upholds the Buddhist notion of emptiness in terms of dependent origination, as all entities are dependent on each other; nothing can be independent on its own. In other words, everything is a part of everything else as a network. Nothing in the contemporary world is able to exist without all these entities around the narrator. This interconnectedness appears as a metaphor of the honeycombing caves carved by Buddhist monks who once, in this cave, "sang prayers of how no distinction existed between I and thou and that everything was a part of everything else" (84). Khan sees nothing in any kind of independent existence because everything around him is dependent on external factors to bring it into existence and sustain it as well.

Here in the cave, Johnson aesthetically creates the setting in which all three religions—Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism—interact with and rely on one another, thereby establishing a sense of unity or oneness. As the narrator reflects, "We *are* forever joined" (83, emphasis in original). This demonstrates how humans are all ineluctably linked to one another. Major Tyler fails to discern this idea that "this pagan joke book is going to make Christians see themselves *in* Muslims? As *being* Muslims? Like we're mirrors of each other? Joined at the hip or something like that?" (83, emphasis in original). Blinded by the delusion, he ultimately resorts to burning crucial Aristotle's lost treatise. And this makes Khan wonder whether the absurd circumstances he has come across in the cave could be classified as Aristotle's definition of comedy or tragedy. While tragedy delves into more serious topics and human suffering that happen to the characters, comedy seeks to portray human flaws frequently through the use of humor and satire (Simpson). At the end of the story, Johnson leaves an absence of closure for readers' interpretation, for it could be either or both. On the one hand, the story satirically depicts the human flaws of the Taliban, Major Tyler and the narrator, who shot his commander in the end; on the other, the dire consequences caused by the Taliban and Major Tyler result in a devastating loss for humanity.

This short fiction portrays Johnson's endeavor to transcend these cultural and hierarchical divides through the Buddhist concepts of dependent origination and nonduality to erase the illusion of partitions that are the root of social conflicts that happen in today's world. As previously explained, Johnson's literary works generally show his attempt to erase preconceptions regarding ethnicity and combat prejudice for African Americans. However, in "Idols of the Cave," Johnson interestingly places a protogonist in a new context, a Muslim character, and expresses that

> Being Muslim in 2017 was, you decided, a bit like how black people could never move ceaselessly in a country like ours, how you always had to hold yourself to a higher standard, how you were always involved with the real meaning of *jihad*, which is an "inner struggle," a critical self-examination aimed at the goal of achieving peace. You never had the luxury of making mistakes (76, emphasis in original).

In this stance, Johnson has shifted the focus to a different, novel, and more contemporary perspective from black lives to followers of Islam due to contemporary civilizational conflicts about religions. This underscores Johnson's eagerness to dissolve and "transcend race and all forms of dualism" (Garton-Gundling 137) on the religious conflicts occurring in the present-day world.

Johnson's stance reinforces the second-person point of view in the narrative. From this point of view, he attempts to put the readers in the boots of the narrator in order to position the readers to perceive how people from other cultures endure hardship as a result of prejudices. The story also reflects the concept of Otherness, which could be referred to as duality in Buddhist terminology. It is, however, only our thoughts and prejudices that have the potential to obscure visions and prevent us from perceiving the reality that humans and all entities are inescapably connected and are an integral part of something larger than ourselves. Johnson strives to encourage the individual to grasp and see the illusion, which appears to be prejudice and ignorance, so that one can detach from the thoughts to have a better understanding of relationships with others. He believes that Buddhism has specific philosophical values that could be applied to everyone. The narrative reflects Johnson's perspective that human differences are illusions—a mental and conceptual construct shaped by a fixed, rigid ideology.

With Johnson's insightful perspectives, philosophical knowledge, and wisdom, "Idols of the Cave" deepens as well as broadens our understanding of the world through the art of his storytelling by blending or merging different cultural elements into fresh, unique perspectives for the readers to see how deeply human beings are all historically and spiritually connected. When viewed from a Buddhist lens, the connectedness and relatedness of humankind could be achieved by attaining a clear understanding of true nature and reality, which involves the elimination of ignorance and delusion. Johnson's contribution lies in his capacity to bridge a variety of spiritual philosophy, which results in a story narrative that encourages, on the part of both the characters and the readers, expansive visions and dissolves distinctions.

3.3 "Guinea Pig"

"Every now and then a man's mind is stretched by a new idea or sensation, and never shrinks back to its former dimensions.[20]"

– Oliver Wendell Holmes

Within the context of the experiment, "Guinea Pig," recounted with humorous, satirical sense from the perspective of university student Jeremy Tucker, creatively centers on him, who momentarily inhabits in the mind of the researcher's dog. As a result of financial difficulties paying for his education, Tucker—who is majoring in both philosophy and English—has been taking part in a large number of scientific experiments. This experiment known as the body-swap illusion, being carried out by the out-of-his-league, high-profile Dr. Samantha Corner and aimed at investigating the mysteries of the self-identity, is the one in which he takes part this time. However, the other test subject for this unprecedented project is Dr. Connor's dog. For a brief instant, Tucker is able to see himself through Casey's eyes—not only do they feel as if they have switched their bodies but so do their minds. After the experiment, the narrator feels as if he has been "freed from his skin, after stepping outside a fixed idea of [himself]" (119), propelling him to view the world with the different eyes. Given that Tucker relentlessly feels undervalued and marginalized due to his seemingly unimportant academic specializations, he, for the second time, insists on asking Dr. Conner out for dinner, affirming that he could assist her in bridging the gap between arts and sciences.

The title of the short story refers to the protagonist, who is being objectified in the field of science as a human guinea pig. With savvy, satirical narrative, the implied author may wish to highlight the tension that exists between the world of science, which usually focuses on experimentation, data, concrete evidence and more rational approaches, and the fields of philosophy and English—the "broken and declining (if not already dead) fields in higher education" (111)—that are essentially concerned with subjective experiences and individual interpretations, as Tucker thinks. The narrative places an emphasis on the devaluation of degrees in the humanities in comparison to degrees in the fields that are more practical or technical—for example, sciences. Initially, Tucker describes himself as a "lowly, financially ludicrous

[20] https://quoteinvestigator.medium.com/quote-origin-every-now-and-then-a-mans-mind-is-stretched-by-a-new-idea-or-sensation-and-never-5e6d4b36be8c

philosophy geek in the unscientific, subjective world of literary studies" (112). This is partly because majoring in these areas of expertise, in the eyes of the general public, would not produce substantially tangible contributions and benefits to the society at large—in contrast to the scientific field, funded by one of the world's most successful, affluent supporters, and having access to "the high-tech labs and über state-of-the-art scientific equipment" (111).

The narrator, as a result, is under the impression that he is a failure in the eyes of society, whereas Dr. Conner, the owner of the project to whom he is excessively drawn, is situated on the polar opposite side of him. Assuming that she is an intelligent woman who, as he recites, might have "won prize after prize at science fairs in middle school, a child prodigy who skipped high school, started at MIT when she was thirteen" (112), Tucker thus feels even less qualified and inferior at the same time when being compared to her social, academic achievements, and intellectual standing. Because humanistic education is not given sufficient values and importance by the public, described by the narrator as being "about as good as one in basket weaving" (113), Tucker, who "couldn't afford both tuition and food" (111), is compelled to participate in numerous scientific experiments that are consistently funded and supported by the government. The opening scene portrays the clash between the fields of arts and sciences. As Tucker describes how he has been making a living by selling his "vital fluids to the blood bank" (111), the narration abruptly contrasts with the scene where he is currently sitting in the laboratory, volunteering for the science experiments in the innovative, cutting-edge science building rather than getting ready for classes the upcoming semester.

Most importantly, it becomes evident from his narration that Tucker, having been a research subject, has been objectified as an individual. In fact, he even regards himself as "a human guinea pig" (116). This is because he has been taking part in countless experiments—some of them might have brought about unexpected consequences that would even lead to death. Besides, many of these government-funded scientific pieces of research are ostensibly not always significant or even absurd. For instance, experiments on the brainwave patterns when chewing different colors of M&M, the sexual attractiveness of male university students comparing with tennis balls, musical condoms, and, above all else, the injuries from falling coconuts, which have resulted in "the bumps" (117) on Tucker's head. Even so, some of these government-funded ludicrous research projects have even been granted awards for "the most ridiculous scientific research" (116). As he narrates,

> Maybe when I signed the consent form, which elaborated on the possible side effects of this experiment, but also pointed out that some consequences were unpredictable and might cause death, maybe I should have told her then in that tiny office of hers, with a wall of awards, the sawdust smell of new books, and a view of Lake Washington, that some of those government-funded studies I survived won or were finalists for the Ig Nobel Prizes handed out for the most ridiculous scientific research conducted each year (116).

In this context, it could be seen that Tucker, in the scientific research, is being treated as an object rather than a fellow human who deserves, as humanely as possible, to be given the proper respect and a sense of humanity. The narrative is depicted in black humor and satirical manner how these ridiculous yet potentially catastrophic consequences studies, for which the scientific areas have accepted and that may cause other individuals to risk their lives, could manage to win all the supports, surpassing and outweighing the humanistic field of study in terms of funding, collective judgment, and social acceptance.

In addition, when it comes to the world of science, Tucker is lessened to nothing more than the concepts of measurement and quantification—very much like an object, an experimental apparatus—in which his being is merely converted into inanimate, static facts and values in numbers. Metaphorically, being in humanistic studies, the narrator is basically reduced to the role of an animal—a human guinea pig—for the sole purposes of scientific research. The "guinea pig," the title of the short story and that Tucker is also referring to himself, could be interpreted as a metaphor for him and other individuals in humanistic studies who have the perception that they are being exploited or manipulated by society's conformity and expectations. Consequently, this gives the impression that Tucker is both helpless and powerless in the face of his circumstances.

On the contrary, as opposed to those of the scientific areas, the humanities largely concentrate and place values as well as importance on human sensations, subjective experiences, and individual interpretations. As Tucker delineates,

> And I knew my desire for her was not just painful but also impossible. By the way the world reckoned things, I was a loser headed for the night shift at McDonald's. ("Would you like fries with that and a definition of *agape*?") Microsoft didn't need a resident metaphysician. And a bachelor's degree in English was about as good as one in basket

> weaving. Nevertheless, I had a theory that all those messy, bottled-up feelings and the wild, sensual joy celebrated in the sloppy humanities but repressed in the sciences by quantification and reducing everything to the crystalline clarity of numbers just might under the right conditions explode like a truckload of Chinese fireworks (113, emphasis in original).

In this sense, it appears to the general public that the humanistic studies are not only regarded as unpractical as the areas of sciences, but also seemingly unproductive. However, these essential "messy, bottled-up feelings and the wild, sensual joy," regularly studied in the arts, philosophy, and literature, are somehow indispensible components of being humans. And these human experiences and emotions, as Tucker notes, if given the appropriate context or possibilities, could have a powerful and explosive effect on the world—like "a truckload of Chinese fireworks."

This is because rather than concentrating on technical, quantifiable, and objective scientific methods, humanistic learning frequently prioritizes more on the system of thoughts, embracing values, and crucial understanding of human beings and human experience—which profoundly explores sensual, emotional, intuitive, imaginative, and flexible features that are commonly sidestepped or disregarded in scientific research. In the sciences, nonetheless, these emotions, as the narrator puts it, are often "repressed," objectively quantified, or eventually reduced to numbers, which in turn results in eliminating the richness, complexity, and some of certain nuances of human emotions. These areas thus emphasize the experiential, emotional facets of human beings.

Nevertheless, the "mind-warping sensation" (114) that the protagonist experiences during the experiment ultimately transforms his perspective and perception of his worldview. As Tucker experiences the world through the perspective and perceptions of the dog, he senses things he might otherwise overlooks:

> Only at that instant did I realize it was me seen from Casey's side of the room. Not just through the camera in his helmet, but through the exotic difference of his mind as he experiences the roomscape as an explosion of odors sweet and pungent, subtle and gross, moist and dry, everything elemental, not lensed through language, not weakened by a web of words, not muddled by culture or cultivation. I hear a collage of sounds and can pinpoint the source in one eighteen-thousandth of a second, sounds four octaves higher than humans can perceive (118).

The narrator's views and perceptions have tremendously altered when his body and mind have been swapped with the dog. He can perceive his surroundings in a completely disparate manner—not only through his eyes but also through his physical senses. During the time that he is temporarily inhabiting in Casey's body, Tucker is also "lacking in depth of field" (118) in terms of the clarity of his sight. However, he has instead improved more sensory experiences through other senses such as smell, auditory, and hearing—that are far beyond what humans can ever perceive.

Buddhism comes into play here to serve as an instrument interpreting this context through the notion of emptiness and nonduality in terms of the nature of self and human perceptions. Tucker's revelation is somehow similar to that of the fictional Plato in "The Cynic," where his static, calcified sense of self and conceptions are dissolved. In the beginning, Tucker is portrayed as someone who embodies inferior status due to his dualistic thinking. Nevertheless, in the moment of epiphany, he has freed himself from the "tight Cartesian[21]cage that always held the self cloistered, locked in a solitary confinement as a lonely monad forever separated from other unreachable monads" (114). It can be inferred that, before his realization, he, along with other people, is thought to be confined as a lonely, solitary entity wandering through life without profound connection with one another. Individuals are unable to interact with other subjects because their sense of self is restricted within their own boundaries, preventing them from connecting with other beings.

After the experiment, however, Tucker experiences the Buddhist emptiness of the subject-object duality: "I was completely in Casey's body, he in mine: two entangled electrons" (119). Tucker's fresh comprehension of selfhood is achieved through a beginner's mind as "the way a two-year-old sees it" (119), which is not filtered by preconceptions since it is comparable to a blank slate without any stains painted on it. When their "minds ha[s] commingled" (119), Tucker's perception of the nature of self has altered, "not lensed through language, not weakened by a web of words, not muddled by culture or cultivation" (118). This is because the shift in perception implies a temporary erosion of the concept of self he had long embodied. His newfound self is no longer a static or fixed one that was confined by his mental constructs,

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[21] The philosophy of René Descartes, known as Cartesianism, refers to a philosophical dualism between mind and matter. It is a form of rationalism, which is a philosophical perspective that considers reason to be the primary source of knowledge (Watson).

partitioning him from "the rest of the world, its objects and others, always "over there"" (114). Through the dog's mind, Tucker has developed perceptions in sensory fields, which are completely raw, unseasoned, arising before language—and not being processed or filtered through cultivation and conceptions that construct human comprehension of the world and perception of reality.

His califled way of thinking in duality has thus dissolved, as he understands that what saparates himself and other entities is derived from his rigid, calcified mind and a limitation of the system of language, which are fundamentally mental and conceptual constructs. Tucker has encountered a central tenet in Buddhist philosophy—entities are empty of subject-object duality—by letting go of the attachment to the individual self. As he expresses, "But having been freed from my skin, after stepping outside a fixed idea of myself, I couldn't exactly find my way back in, as if inside and outside, here and there, had always been the real illusion and I just never noticed it before now" (119). Tucker's revelation is perceived through direct experience, and his intuition resembles Buddhist enlightenment, which cannot be fully grasped through intellectual or conceptual capability. Also, as Johnson explains, Buddhism "frees one from dualistic models of epistemology that partition experience into separate, boxlike compartments of Mind and Body, Self and Other, Matter and Spirit" (Johnson, *Turning the Wheel*, 54). The narrator's buffered self has thus dissolved and transcended, becoming an enlightened individual.

In this sense, at the end of the story, Tucker, with an expansive perspective, has the courage to ask Dr. Conner out for dinner again after her first rejection before the experiment due to his erosion of his buffered self and his calcified, dualistic way of perceiving the world. The narrative, with a humorous and satirical tone, reveals that Dr. Conner, who represents scientific areas—a field of static logic and quantification—is yet stuck and perceives the world in two dimensions, in duality. As she says to Tucker, he seems "much more useful and . . . *feral*" (123). Her statement still suggests a sense of devaluation of the narrator to the role of an animal, a test object. This upholds what Tucker means by the nuanced and complex feelings that the world of science ignores and represses but intensifies in the field of the humanities. In this regard, returning to the distinctions between the fields of humanities and sciences, Tucker, after his realization, is thus attempting to bridge "the gap between the arts and sciences" (122), for he perhaps knows that once they are brought together, they have the potential to have a remarkable

and explosive impact on the entire world, much like "a truckload of Chinese fireworks." This reinforces the implied author's idea that everything in the world is related and interconnected.

After the revelation, Tucker has finally transcended dualistic thinking that keeps partitioning him from perceiving himself as inferior due to his so-called "basket weaving" fields of study and from dwelling in a self-contained, bubble state with other entities in his surroundings. He is thus no longer "isolated, solipsistic (114), and the transformation lets him discover an understanding of the nature of self and human perceptions through his intuition and mind. The body-swap illusion reinforces the idea that our perception creates our world; we can only experience the limited representation of reality our bodies are able to generate. The narrative also emphasizes the importance of nonduality, which in unity, there is no duality. Additionally, Johnson might be attempting to make an experiment that defies the readers' logic through his science fiction, where anything is possible.

3.4 "4189"

"… in the face of death, human hearts were most alive[22].

– Brother David Steindl-Rast

"4189" is a short story that Johnson cowrites with science fiction writer, Steven Barnes. A science-fiction short story narrated from multiple points of view. The narrative takes place in a future dystopia in which death, "Forbidden fruit" (134), is absent. Living on a planet where nothing changes for all of eternity, Shane, the narrator except for the final part, and Ferris, his partner, desire to taste death as a means of escaping the monotony of their existence. The only thing they can temporarily resort to is the illegal vial of Thanadose—which gives them a brief glimpse of the sweetness of an ending. But that cannot quench the fire of their longing to forever depart from life. When all else fails, they both decide to encounter death together by visiting the death brothels to take a pill to kill themselves, yet they miserably fall short. Shane wakes up after the incident only to discover that Ferris is a sex doll, part of a plan by the city-state to monitor its citizens, preventing them from being destroyed.

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[22] Brother David Steindl-Rast writes in "Foreword" in Thich Nhat Hanh's *Living Buddha, Living Christ.*

This piece of short fiction does not depict Buddhist thought in an explicit manner, like most, if not all, stories that can be interpreted in that fashion. If the Buddhist perspective is being utilized in this instance, the implied author does, however, leave room for philosophical and spiritual reflection on the ideas of impermanence, imperfection, and death regarding their aesthetics as well as values. In this light, it begs questions as to whether these thoughts hold their own aesthetics and values, and to what extent our understandings could be obtained by examining their roles in our comprehension of the truth of life. These Buddhist philosophical values are delicately interwoven in the story. They provide and alter the readers' perspectives on the unpleasantness and undesirability with which humans perceive reality, allowing us to gradually discern the values and beauty of these phenomena. Because of the protagonist's perception of death, the readers are encouraged to recognize the positive features that exist within the impermanence and imperfection of the world.

The year that the story takes place is most likely the year that is referred to by the title "4189." It somehow makes a reference to the year that Johnson was born, 1948, but it is rearranged in a different sequence to highlight how much time—which seems like an eternity—has passed. With a desolate setting and dialogue, most of the sentences are noticeably short, creating a post-apocalyptic ambience that is laden with tedium and weariness. Even though each and every life on the planet is eternal and "untouched by time" (127), the city-state and its citizens give the impression of being depressingly lifeless because they will wake up, setting out to work every day, and having "tomorrow, and tomorrow, and every tomorrow thereafter" (127) without any changes regardless. Since death has been eradicated from the polis, Shane, to some degree, comes to the realization that it appears to be a form of confinement. This endless cycle of life goes against the fundamental nature of living beings. Earning a living by repairing whatever is sent to him, Shane lives in the constrained domed polises with other "10 million perfectly regulated lives" (128). Being "perfectly regulated" by the city-state to keep them remaining in the same perfect conditions exhausts him to the point that he wants to liberate himself in order to "feel that *some*thing changes. And matters. To wake up from this nightmare of forever" (134, emphasis in original). The protagonist develops the potential to see beauty in the transience of all that exists, delineatling that "Age, even decay, has made it *strangely beautiful* and somehow *precious* in its *impermanence*" (126, emphasis added).

For Shane, the most intimidating and discouraging idea is the prospect of remaining in the same condition for an infinite amount of time. His existence, marked by repetitive routines, feels too stagnant for him to experience any real change or difference. To comfort himself, he turns to "watching the *roily, ever-changing* water [that] would bring a bit of tranquility to [his] brooding" (131, emphasis added), and seeks solace in lovemaking with Ferris, which brings a brief orgasm—the "little death" (128) as the French call it—to add up his existence some meanings and drives to continue to live. Also, the important element to consider is the name of the drug they take during lovemaking, Thanadose, that allows their "veins [to] stop whispering *eternity*" (126, emphais in original). This may be crucially related to Freud's theory of drives—Eros and Thanatos. And when Shane visits the death brothel, a liminal space—where the "Uppers and Lowers shed their assigned status and [meet] secretly for every sort of illegal sex" (137–138)—he sees "death and twisted Venusian embraces commingled in exhibitionistic ecstasy" (138). These life and death instincts represent basic human needs that give individuals a sense of completeness and fulfillment, underscoring the fundamental aspects of human condition. However, Shane can sense the small death from time to time, and since the actual death is unachievable, it leaves him feeling more or less empty and hollow.

Consequently, Shane's need for even the smallest change drives him to attempt cutting himself, not only in an effort to emotionally fulfill the senses of being human, but also to further differentiate himself from the others in the polis, who all somehow possess homogeneous qualities. Nonetheless, his attempt falls through due to the state-controlled regulation designed to keep its citizens alive. As he depicts,

> Trembling, taking a deep breath, and with just a single stroke, I cleanly sliced open my left wrist right to the bone. Blood… It should have geysered from the ugly gash I opened. But the microsynthes work with abominable speed. As if in a dream, I stared at my wrist as they worked, repairing me, removing even the individuating scar that would have distinguished me from everyone else in the polis. Suddenly, I felt a scream spasm up through my throat. I could have cut off my entire hand, but I would have just been printed another identical one from my genome file (134).

The act of slicing his wrist does not allow the narrator to feel even the slightest bit of pain. Here, Shane also yearns to assert his sense of self; nonetheless, he fails to do so because the microsynthes impeccably heal his personal wound like the wind—without leaving any traces

behind. He is simply left with feelings of melancholy and despair because he merely senses the scream but cannot, in any manner, articulate it out loud.

Having nothing to distinguish himself from the entire crowd indicates, to a certain extent, an absence of individuality in the protagonist. It should be noted that there is not in the least a sense of imperfection on the planet—only artificial, synthetic perfection is permitted within the colony. This could be seen in the protagonist's kitchen, where "every stain and odor, sweet or offensive, was obliterated by roaming microsythe colonies" (134). Despite the fact that everything is under the micro-surveillance of the city-state to ensure that everything remains in flawless, enduring condition, Shane is, yet and still, unable to find inner peace or contentment—even a pulse to life—in this so-called eternal and full-of-life, however barren, rigid polis.

Not only does the city-state have the desire to ensure the existence of its subjects, but it also exercises strict authority and complete control over its citizens in order to "regulate deviancy" (145), securing that none of them are deviating from the societal standards and conventions. The excerpt above illustrates that the narrator has lost his sense of self; even the "individuating scar" that has the potential to naturally individuate him from others and helps him achieve a distinct identity has prevented him from doing so. Shane constantly moans to the fact that "No single person is special or unique" (129), simply because every single person is subjected to staying permanently in the same condition without ever changing. As the city-state disregards its subjects' needs, asserting that

> What you—or any of us—want isn't important. We're all essential parts of the whole. Of the city-state. The clan. The family. And it is the height of selfishness to see oneself as separate or special within that collective. That's what brought the old world to an end, you know: the delusion of individuality and personal identity (146).

The idea of personal identity and individuality is considered to be a deceptive and potentially harmful illusion for the city-state. For the city-state, the collective is, therefore, the highest attainment and most essential task that its subjects must adhere to for their survival. However, in the story, this way of thinking results in a loss of personal freedom and autonomy for the individual as portrayed through the protagonist. The city-state subverts the values of individuality that concurrently give rise to the beauty of diversity, in which everyone possesses special, unique attributes.

In addition to being relatively short, most sentences in the narration are full of verbs of motion, but it somewhat lacks variety in the decoration of adverbs and adjectives that could describe, elicit a sense of feeling, and paint a richer, deeper understanding and an emotional experience to the characters. It could be viewed that Shane's never-ending life cannot offer him fecund and rich lived experiences, despite the fact that he has been "given a gift for which kings and pharoahs would have gladly exchanged their crowns" (146). He has been drifting through life, however isolated, with the rest of the planet, where it is likely that intimate relationships are not permitted and feelings are ignored. As Shane laments, "I want [Ferris] forever and that is forbidden" (129). The narrative also seems to imply that he somehow could not perceive the feelings for other human beings. As Shane discloses, he has "dreamed of [Ferris]. It is not love. But it is what I have" (130). Hence, it is possible that the implied author would like to promote the concept that humans—as sentient beings—live to feel what they are experiencing; otherwise, life would be desperately meaningless and hopeless.

In essence, a connection can be made here between the protagonist's idea of appreciating beauty and values in the process of change and diversity and the Buddhist philosophical thought. The Buddhist tenets can be a crucial model for understanding the correlation that the implied author perceives. Johnson gives a fundamental description of these values through the Japanese Zen Buddhist term "wabi-sabi," which allows us to discern any entity from multifaceted angles, emphasizing that

> Zen Buddhist term *wabi sabi*—that is, art that provides a direct, intuitive insight into truth. Far different from Western theories of the beautiful derived from Greeks' notions, in *wabi* (things fresh, simple, and quiet) *sabi* (things radiating beauty with age), which covers arts as diverse as Zen gardens, flower arrangement, the tea ceremony, poetry, and the music played by wandering monks (*honkyoku*), we find a preference for such features as imperfection, impermanence, immediacy, the idiosyncratic, incompleteness, modesty, and humility (Johnson, *Taming the Ox* 9-10, emphasis in original).

It can be asserted that "wabi-sabi" is a practice that yields essential intuitive perspectives to perceive and appreciate the reality and nature of existence, which are the values and beauty of its ephemeral, transient state, imperfection, and diversity. The concept of aesthetics in the Buddhist sense is opposed to that of the traditional Western one, which places importance on the perfect proportion: order, symmetry, and definiteness (Sartwell).

According to the Eastern school of thought, beauty can be found in the mundane, ordinary things and experiences, discovering values in natural imperfections, and embracing the state of transience. As Johnson further postulates, "it is through the everydayness of such an (un)remarkable art that we are blessed to experience the ordinary mind as a portal to transcendence and liberation" (Johnson, *Taming the Ox* 10). The implied author may wish for the readers to take a moment to pause and meditate on how it would feel if all of existence, including our lives, remained in the same perfect conditions without emotional fulfillment and close, meaningful relationships for all eternity—like that of the citizens, whose lives are in stasis, residing insipidly in the city-state. When we are able to acknowledge the significance and appreciate the values of imperfection and impermanence that are perpetually discerned as undesirable, only then are we able to liberate ourselves from grasping the unattainable, unrealistic expectations of reality—the illusion of perfection and permanence. Therefore, the cultivation of an appreciation for the impermanent and imperfect nature of all that exists is one of the central tenets of Buddhist philosophical thinking to loosen the demand and attachment for fixed, static ideas on all things.

Above all else, in the story, with his intuitive insight, Shane begins to see and feel that death is not an unenviable thing as the city-state imposes this notion on its citizens to internalize. On the day when the sky is clear, Shane delineates, "I can see their towers. Kilometers high, *beautiful as death*" ("4189" 132, emphasis added). All the city-state's subjects, as Shane recalls, have been interpellated with the idea that "Death is not beautiful. Life is beautiful" (132); nevertheless, the whole narrative proves otherwise. The implied author may have the intention of challenging conventional perceptions of humans by conveying the antithesis to the concept of death, which is commonly thought to be unpleasant and undesirable to humans, causing them to be afraid of this utmost phenomenon. It could be contended that the narrative seeks to eradicate the concept of duality and instead places an emphasis on the completeness or wholeness of all existence—not only the facets that appear as beautiful but also the seemingly decaying, ugly, and imperfect ones. Essentially, an intriguing aspect to contemplate is how the narrative point of view shifts from the first person to the third person in the final section of the short story. After Shane's memory is erased, it implies that Shane is symbolically dead because he continues to live his life endlessly in a world where there is no extinction, and he does so without his own voice to assert his individuality.

Decomposition and death, when viewed from the Buddhist perspective, are not the antithesis of the concept of beauty but rather a reflection of the temporality, constantly changing state of all things. It is important to note that this impermanence does not eliminate the possibility of having aesthetic experiences. Rather, according to wabi-sabi aesthetics, the fleeting nature and the imperfection of all things should be praised for their grace and beauty. There is thus nothing that is inherently undesirable, as even the most beautiful flower will eventually wither and decay due to the passage of time. Ultimately, the story allows the readers to deconstruct our attachments to superficial beauty, and to ponder the end-of-life moment in order to make sense of it, as it is an inherent phenomenon that there is no possibility for any existence to evade. It is an intrinsic component of life because it makes life complete in itself. With an awareness of death, humans would lead meaningful lives. By developing a profound comprehension of impermanence and imperfection, we can foster a more profound experience of the aesthetics by appreciating the beauty that exists within all of existence.

Correspondingly, the paratext at the beginning of the story, which is a quote from a distinguished philosopher, Martin Heidegger, reinforces the concept of death, stating that

> Anticipation [of death] reveals to [the I-self] its lostness in the they-self, and brings it face to face with the possibility of being itself, primarily unsupported by concernful solicitude, but of being itself, rather, in an impassioned ***freedom towards death***—a freedom which has been released from the Illusions of the "they," and which is factical, certain of itself, and anxious (125, emphasis in original).

Heidegger asserts that death is an important component of life. It is the awareness of death that allows humans to reflect on their existence, "the I-self", in order to embrace their distinctiveness and uniqueness, regardless of whether it is perceived as imperfect. Being authentic can be achieved through our awareness of death, as "it is only in being-towards-death that one can become the person who one truly is" (Critchley). This is because it opens up the possibility for individuals to live their lives in an authentic manner and liberate themselves from "the they-self," or from being subjected to shared social beliefs, societal norms, and expectations. Thus, the understanding of death can shape humans' authentic lived experiences as individuals. Heidegger's idea somehow resonates with the Zen Buddhist aesthetic, wabi-sabi, in terms of the acknowledgement of impermanence and idiosyncrasy, stressing the aesthetics of diverse individuals due to their distinctiveness and uniqueness. As discussed previously, several of

Johnson's works essentially promote the unity of humankind, sharing the same ancestry; however, he does not disregard individuality, which simultaneously fosters a sense of beauty in diversity in the world at large.

"4189" is a short fiction in which the protagonist has not directly experienced a moment of epiphany. Instead, it is the readers ourselves who have the potential to experience a particular moment that allows us to reflect and refine our ways of perceiving and experiencing the world, as well as recognize positive aspects that are contained within the world of impermanence and imperfections. The story also emphasizes the values and importance of individuality among humans, which gives rise to the beauty of diversity. Besides, the notion of death, which humans are inherently afraid since always, has been redefined in a positive light. Death could be "the sweetness" (127), as the protagonist declares. The realization that our lives are fleeting enables us to appreciate the value of life itself with the limited time we have. Being conscious of our mortality is always the first step towards self-awareness, which allows us to discern different perspectives on any existence around us. Most importantly, the last words that Ferris, in the form of a doll, speaks to Shane, "*Don't be afraid*" (148, emphasis in original), are perhaps what the implied author speaks to us all regarding the ever-changing state of all things and this ultimate but simple truth of life—death—as a way to lessen the burden of our attachments and calmly let go of what we have been grasping, and to recognize the ephemeral state of the nature of all things that exist.

Conclusion

In exploring the short stories in *Night Hawks* through the lens of Buddhist aesthetics, this thesis has examined how the core Buddhist philosophy is embodied within the narrative through the analysis of narrative elements. Through analyses of the selected short stories, this thesis has sought to explore Buddhist tenets that shape the characters' path towards personal transformation, leading to the moment of revelation, as well as a place for philosophical and spiritual reflection for the readers. Since the characters in each short fiction encounter different types of predicaments, most of which arise from mental constructs, Buddhist thinking has come into play, illuminating them to transcend those conflicts or sufferings. It could be seen that the chosen short fiction in *Night Hawks* reflects human nature and condition and universal sufferings in life. The suffering appears in a form of attachment to a fixed essence of things, calcified conceptions, assumptions, and human desires. However, Johnson also offers the Buddhist-inspired spiritual insights through the narrative, inviting the readers to meditate deeply on them. His unique approach to storytelling lies in his effort to dissolve and transcend cultural and even mental bounderies in his literary works.

Given its limited space and development, the selected short stories are packed with multilayered meanings. This demonstrates Johnson's exceptional artistic skills. He also crafts his short fiction to integrate it with Buddhist aesthetics, embodying its underlying philosophy and values, which are delicately embedded in the narrative. The Buddhist aesthetics I refer to are its philosophy, which helps us perceive our surroundings with different eyes and without any preconceptions involved. Buddhist aesthetics aid in recognizing the nature of reality of all things—emptiness, nonduality, and impermance. Johnson masterfully interweaves these central tenets in Buddhism into his short stories and makes them universally applicable and relatable to all individuals from diverse backgrounds. This could be seen through each selected short story in *Night Hawks,* in which the time and settings take place in completely different locations and time periods. Also, through Buddhist philosophy, the characters can achieve personal transformation or enlightenment. Even we, the readers, can pause and reflect upon those spiritual truths.

The concept of enlightened individualism from the critic has paved the way to interpret Johnson's works. Through analyses of each story, I have tried to develop the notion of enlightened individualism to see how the characters transform themselves into the enlightened ones. The

protagonists in "The Weave," "Kamadhathu: A Modern Sutra," "Welcome to Wedgwood," and "Guinea Pig" all, in the end, can erode their buffered, calcified self that they formed through lived experiences throughout their lifetime. It could be seen that the interplay between the characters' individual autonomy and Buddhist notions of emptiness and nonduality can dissolve their sense of isolated, fixed self to a greater openness and a more interrelated and interconnected self with the rest of the world. This reflects the idea that no one can be completely self-contained, independent, and separate from others. The main characters have experienced a gradual increase in understanding—shifting from a state of limited perspective to one with greater knowledge through a certain event—which finally provides them with the deeper and broader insights and ultimately to a process of personal transformation. This subtle yet powerful personal transformation may lead to a larger impact—the social transformation. In reaching enlightened individuals, each of the characters lets go of all rigid ideas and sheds their skin to become integrated into oneness with their surroundings.

However, oneness in this sense does not mean the sameness. Although Johnson places an emphasis on harmonious culture, he ostensibly does not reject multiculturalism. His writings do not appear in the sense of counterculture but rather as a philosophical and spiritual work that strengthens the unity of humankind and promotes diversity. This is evident in "The Weave" and "4189," where he strives to highlight Buddhist philosophy in terms of the importance and beauty of diversity, idiosyncrasy, and authenticity to uphold the aesthetics of diverse individuals due to their distinctiveness and uniqueness. Thus, he does not disregard individuality or fail to recognize cultural diversities and differences, which simultaneously fosters a sense of beauty of diversity in the world at large because he aspires to transcend preconceptions and distinctions at a time when the world is in the midst of a transitioning state.

In the contemporary world, where there are a multitude of truths and realities that are relative to each person's perception, determining which, if any, is the ultimate one is impossible. Both "The Cynic" and "Idols of the Cave" incorporate this concept into their narratives; declaring an absolute truth often brings unrest among humans. These short stories are similar in terms of philosophical aspects. However, in "Idols of the Cave," the encounter goes beyond the scope of subjective perception but to the colllective one and brings to light the larger cultural and societal implications of religious conflicts. Both stories reveal a form of Platonic thinking in which there is a superior realm or abstract entity other than the physical world. This concept simultaneously

establishes a sense of hierarchy, and what inevitably comes after that is the preconceptions and prejudices. The fictional Plato is burdened by the weight of his thoughts regarding his ideal perfection, whereas Major Tyler is attached to his own rigid ideas about his religious beliefs. It is evident that both characters form the concepts that keep partitioning things into hierarchy, including themselves from others. They both are explicitly victimized or enslaved by their own ideology—a mental construct. Nonetheless, Buddhist philosophy asthetically comes into play to dissolve these calcified ideas.

In science fiction short stories, Johnson asserts that philosophy, Buddhism, and science fiction have the ability to challenge and transform our perception, stating that "To imagine things differently is the first step in changing the world as it is given to us. It is, in fact, the first step toward freedom" (Johnson, *The Way of the Writer* 206). It could be seen that he offers novel ways for readers to perceive a world from diverse perspectives, to engage in spiritual reflection, and to liberate our perceptions. "4189" depicts a flawless world without death or change, where everything exists in an absolutely perfect state, which might be just as intimidating, perhaps even more so, than the world we are in. "Guinea Pig" portrays the way humans understand the world through their perceptions—sensory input, and cultural and societal conditioning. The narrative suggests that our perceptions construct and shape our world, and we can only experience the limited representation of reality, one that our bodies are capable of generating. What confines and partitions human relations is merely a mental construct.

It could be contended that the selected short stories reflect Johnson's endeavor to transcend all cultural divides and dualistic thinking through Buddhist philosophical notions such as emptiness, nonduality, and impermanence. These aims dissolve and ultimately erase the illusion of divisions that are the root of personal or social conflicts in the contemporary world. Buddhist aesthetics that Johnson uses in his narrative serve to provide profound symbolic, philosophical, and spiritual meanings to transcend all the rigid systems, preconceptions, and boundaries that inevitably give rise to dualism. It could be seen that every selected short story is centered on the theme that challenges a static, fixed self and calcified conception. His narrative broadens and deepens our visions to see spiritual connectedness in all things, inviting readers to contemplate the challenges in maintaining spirituality in a modern and complex world. Buddhist aesthetics, therefore, recognizes the similarities that all people share as fellow sentient beings,

striving to transcend the superficial differences that often divide individuals, in contrast to modern human society, which emphasizes the negative aspects of these differences.

Ultimately, Johnson constantly addresses the importance of art, including literature, as "the transcendental space" (Johnson, "Afterword" 231), which he regards as a place to "cast aside our presuppositions, to "let go" for just a moment our conditioned ways of seeing the world, and all our explanatory models for experience" (231). Being in this trance-like state, Johnson compares it to the "philosophical method known as phenomenology, which was never about creating new knowledge, but instead only promised to deepen our perception of what we think we already know" (231). Delving into literature and Buddhist philosophy can help the readers understand the complexities of human nature and the different ways people experience and perceive the world. From his passion for philosophy, literature, as well as Buddhism, Johnson has undoubtedly brought his gifts to the literary world by contributing his aesthetics into the compelling narratives that make him an exceptional writer in the contemporary period.

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