



## Epochal Changes in Contemporary Narratives? A Performatist Analysis of *Trust Exercise* by Susan Choi

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### ABSTRACT

*Among various post-postmodern theoretical propositions to signal the end of postmodernism, performatism by Eshleman (2008) is also considered to be a significant development in the literary theory. It is not just a theoretical perspective but also a do-it-yourself manual that invites researchers to further explore and analyses literary works from performatism perspective. The current research paper is an attempt to analyses one of the current popular novel Trust exercise by Susan Choi (2019) from performatist perspective with the overarching research questions if various features of performatism are present in the literary work. The aim is to ascertain if performatism could stand out to be a suitable label to define the current crisis of literary theory in which researchers and scholars are trying to fill the gap that has arisen after the pronouncement of the death of postmodernism. The researcher has found that although there is monism, double framing and theism in the novel but complexity of subjects, ambiguity, and open-ended closures are still among the salient features of the novel. The deviation from postmodernism is there yet more features and works need to be explored in order to develop a comprehensive contemporary literary theory.*



### Introduction

From a myriad of propositions to chart the conditions of contemporary literary theory and culture, Performatism (Eshelman, 2008) and Metamodernism (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010) are being regarded as the most systematic and defining ones to replace postmodernism (Bunnell & College, 2015; Ciorogar, 2019; Xue, 2018). This claim does not substantiate the argument that other theoretical concepts like Cosmodernism (Moraru, 2011), Hypermodernism (Lipovetsky, 2005), Remodernism (Childish & Thomson, 2015), Altermodernism (Bourriaud, 2015), Digimodernism (Kirby, 2009), Automodernism (Samuels, 2009), Renewalism (Brooks & Toth, 2019) and Post-postmodernism (Nealon, 2012) and others do not hold ground and could be rejected out rightly. The researches and evaluative works are going on in order to ascertain as to which one of these could best describe the contemporary moment to declare once and for all that postmodernism has lost its grounds and is being supplanted by the new theoretical paradigms (Rudrum & Stavris, 2015). Quite a good number of researchers, scholars and theorists are involved into this activity Hucheon's (2002) claim about postmodernism that it was over and that there was a need for new label and new ways of charting the cultural changes happening around the world. The workings and involvement of many scholars in this process has also led to groupings among them which could be roughly categorised into three. One of the groups still holds the view that postmodernism is not dead and it is very much there in the expressions of contemporary arts and writings with continuous evolution and enlargement into the multitude

of concepts of postmodernism (Ghirardi, 2021; Manolache, 2014). This group goes so far as to declare that it is quite improbable to rid ourselves of the remains of postmodernism as it has seeped through almost all the cultural expressions of the human kind living on this planet. The second group vehemently emphasizes that postmodernism is dead and has been replaced by other concepts as mentioned in the beginning of this paragraph. However, there are two types of scholars belonging to this group; either they come up with their own new theoretical proposition as Huber (2014) and so many others mentioned earlier. In this endeavor they also tend to criticize and evaluate the rest of the propositions in order to develop rationale for their theory as done by Vermeulen & van den Akker (2010) and the others. The other group in this category is of the scholars who have tried to support any one of the above given propositions as performatism, one of the proposition has been supported by (Dorfman, 2020; Moraru, 2013; Badra, 2021; Seah, 2012). The third and the last group of the scholars in this enterprise consists of those who are trying to accept on the one hand some of the features of any of the contemporary proposition and on the other they are also insistent that postmodernism still lives on even though in the backdrop (Viires, 2011).

Considering this phenomenon, the academia is also involved in evaluating and analyzing the given propositions to ascertain as to which one is the most suitable as so far there has been no unanimous decision (Quintero, 2022). The current research paper is part of this debate with an aim to evaluate one of the leading literary theories i.e. performatism by Raoul Eshelman (2008) and to see if it could be the most befitting response to postmodernism by studying its features in the contemporary literary works. This study conducts performatist analysis of a recent American novel i.e. *Trust Exercise* by Susan Choi (2019) with an objective of exploring various features of performatism if these are present in the work. This research paper also tries to develop the discussion find out if performatist elements are not present in the work then what other features could be found other than postmodernism.

## Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

In order to explore how performatism is being analysed and evaluated in various current art forms, it is pertinent to study what performatism is and how it differs from postmodernism as formulated by Raoul Eshelman (2008). Performatism deviates from postmodernism from the very basis on which it holds its grounds i.e. the concept of signs. For Eshelman, “the sign (or, more precisely, the free-floating signifier) is the starting point for acquiring knowledge, not the thing itself” (p. vii) but there is a marked difference between the understanding standing of sign as it was taken up by postmodernism and performatism. Postmodernism is developed on the thesis of “the split concept of sign and the strategies of boundary transgression typical of postmodernism” (p. 01) while performatism reinvigorates the unified concept of sign. Eshelman says that “As I see it, we are now leaving the postmodern era with its essentially dualist notions of textuality, virtuality, belatedness, endless irony, and metaphysical skepticism and entering an era in which specifically monist virtues are again coming to the fore” (p. 01). By the use of the word “again” Eshelman tries to connect the debated of dualist and monist concepts of signs with history suggesting that there have been alternations between these two concepts as each has its merits and demerits. So one concept of signs i.e. dualist cannot be regarded as the ending debate over the issue. Therefore, contemporary arts and culture is witnessing the rise of monism in signs. Yet the aesthetic trends have changed and there are strategies applied in art works that manifest a clear tilt towards monism, closure, identification, theism or authorial modes of narration.

Putting forward this concept of monism in signs as the basis for performatism, Eshelman (2008) opines that his theory of performatism has four basic features that could be explored and studied in the current works i.e. ostensivity, double framing, opacity and density of subjects, and theism. The presence of these features in any work would suggest the onset of the trend of performatism and the change in the epoch of postmodernism. Ostensivity is monistic semiotics through which “common projection or meaning beneath the threshold of conventional, semantically organized language” (Eshelman, 2008, p. 9) are arrived at. Ostensive sign, as Eshelman suggests, has no meaning of its own rather it is a name that refers back to the successful performance. The successful performance is the one in which the subject transcends the given frame. Performatist subjects are opaque and dense with their featured characteristics of “singularity and inscrutability” (p. 08). It is also because of their these traits that they sometimes invite the enmity of the people among who they are living and in turn end with sacrifice or develop a reconciliatory scene. Eshelman also argues that he has observed, resultantly, five major patterns as a result of making successful performance in contemporary art works. These patterns of plot include “playing God; escaping from a frame; returning to the father; transcending through self-sacrifice; and perfecting the self” (p. 13). In order to develop these plot patterns, performatist signs and strategies including ostensive signs, double framing, subjectivity and theism. The strategy of double framing is a novice addition in performatism according to which two frames i.e. originary inner frame and outer frames are introduced in the work in order to create a specific aesthetic closure in the work. Inner frame consists of

the unity of sign and thing while the outer frame is newly constituted and introduced in the work for the specific purposes of either driving the readers back to the inner frame or to present the reader with some sort of solution to the problem raised in the work. This resolution can also be introduced from the domain of the transcendence. The interlocking of the inner and outer frames keeps the work unified and saves the readers from entering into the endless regression. However, the unification and closure of the work through double framing if “forced and artificial” (p. 3). Coercively used double framing thus makes it possible for the readers to believe in whatever the artist has wanted his audience to believe. Even though, it could be for a limited period of time. Likewise, theistic plots are developed with spatial and temporal coordination so that the unity could be maintained throughout the work. Thus any performatist study of the work would mean that the features of double framing, ostensivity, subjectivity and theism must be looked for in the work.

The study of performatist features in the contemporary cultural, literary and artistic works has been initiated by various scholars yet arriving at conclusions with mixed opinions. Gourdarzi (2017) conducted research on the three novels of David Forster Wallace written in different times. He has concluded that his early novels were inspired by modernism and postmodernism while his latest novel *The Pale King* (2011) contains performatist elements suggesting a marked deviation from postmodern styles and strategies of novel writing. His main argument is that the dullness which was scattered around in postmodernism has been replaced with hope and unity in the latest works. This is a movement from melancholy and depression to hope also indicating a trend from postmodernism to performatism. Bunnell and Colledge (2015) also conducted research on Wallace’s novel but a different one i.e. *Lyndon* (1998) and have concluded that, “It may not be this year or the next, but a metamodernist culture of negative idealism is poised to displace postmodernism as the dominant cultural paradigm” (p. 7). It is also interesting to note that metamodernists i.e. Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010) have argued that performatism is also a metamodernist strategy yet they have not been delving into the detail of how that may be possible in spite of suggesting that unity and closure could be regarded as deviations from postmodernism. (Morgado, 2021) conducted research on the contemporary fashion culture from performatist perspective and came up with the conclusion that “it does appear that aesthetic features and cultural practices described in theories of post-postmodernism are evident in a variety of novel contemporary clothing and appearance styles, consumer behaviours, marketplace practices and related fashion phenomena” (p. 335). Among his list of post-postmodern theories, performatism occupies a significant place yet he also argues that features of metamodernism are also present in the contemporary fashion and culture. The study of these research works suggests that performatism does resound significantly in the list of post-postmodern theories but no exclusivity is being imparted to these and that there is a need to study it at individual and detailed level.

Performatist analysis and evaluation of some other literary works has also been conducted but the conclusions have not been quite in the favour of performatism to be the most suitable replacement of postmodernism. Mahasen Badra (2021) conducted research on Brian Friel's (1990) *Dancing at Lughnasa* and concluded that in the wake of corona pandemic the aesthetic belief that is being propagated through performatism has a very limited view to offer to the world in this new millennium. It would be rather a very restricted understanding of the world and its various speedily and drastically changing events. Although the play deviates from postmodern irony but the belief that it offers is not of momentary type as suggested in performatism. Rather it is of permanent nature that is presented in a manner to last forever in the world. Huber (2014) also evaluates performatism and sees some worthwhile basis for double framing but he is keenly skeptic of other features of performatism like theistic belief, monism and opaque subjectivity. Contrary to this criticism, Viires (2011) argues that performatist trend is in vogue in the world literature today and it is also being followed in true letter and spirit. However, his findings are based on the study of Estonian literature.

### **Methodology**

The review of the research works mentioned in the preceding paragraphs renders at least two conclusions. The first one is that there are divided opinions about the suitability of performatism as the leading label and theoretical dimension to chart the changes after postmodernism. The second is that there is still dearth in the performatist study of the substantial amount of contemporary literature to draw conclusive boundaries about the viability of performatism as occupying a significant place in the list of contemporary literary theories. The current paper is an attempt to add to the existing body of performatist studies and also to make the contours of performatism clearer in order to define its exact position in post-postmodern scenario. The West is considered to be the trend setters in the field of knowledge for the past few centuries and their literature is also considered to be having a vast impact worldwide, therefore, the researcher has selected one of the recent popular novel *Trust Exercise* by Acevedo (2019) as a sample of performatist study. The textual analysis of the novel has been conducted within the parameters of Belsey's (2013) method of analysis because of the leverage

of delving deep into the work with background information and interdisciplinary approach that it gives to the researchers of literary texts. The task of the researcher in conducting textual analysis is to make as educated guess as possible for all the likely interpretations that could be made of the text (McKee, 2001). However, there are certain steps that need to be followed in undertaking this type of study i.e. choosing a topic and developing research questions, listing the most relevant texts, developing the sense of the semiosphere of the text which also includes the contextual study, and finally interpreting the text in order to find answers to the research questions. Thus the textual analysis of the novel is conducted for the research question if performatist features are present in the work.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Choi's *Trust Exercise* (2019) is a narrative divided in three parts with each part getting more enigmatic and brief as the plot of the story moves forward. The clearer of these three is the first part that revolves around two adolescents Sarah and David when they fell in love with each other in a school of performing arts in 1980s. "Their romance has started in earnest this summer, but the prologue took up the whole previous year" (Choi, 2019, p. 1). Soon they were head over heels in love and love making wherever they could find an opportunity. They could be easily discerned at school and even in class that they were couples. David was somewhat sensitive while Sarah was a girl with aspirations of independent and self-reliant lifestyle with undertones of being a loner. Their first physical encounter occurred during Kingsley's class when he switched off the lights and asked the students to "see what they found" (p. 2). David found Sarah, "how he'd found her. No word to describe it except recognition. Some chemical made her for him, him for her" (p. 7). David gradually started becoming serious and wanted an open declaration of love for her as his sole girlfriend. So he bought her a gift and tried to give it to her openly in the class. "Finally stepping onstage in the role of her boyfriend. Sarah his girlfriend. David viewed these roles as sacred; they were the two roles he most cared about" (p. 15). Although Sarah had seen the box in David's hand earlier but something made her refrain from taking it. She could only say to the dismay of David that she would open it later. That moment marked the beginning of the distance between the two which increased with the passage of time to an extent of managing to live without each other yet haunted by the adolescent love affair throughout their lives.

Kingsley was the teacher assigned to teach them how to perform onstage by encountering their fears and expressing their emotions. One of his favourite techniques was conducting trust exercises. "Some involved talking and resembled group therapy. Some required silence, blindfolds, falling backward off tables or ladders and into the latticework of classmates' arms" (p. 02). From the theoretical perspective of performatism, trust exercises serve as the ostensive signs in the novel that also formulate the semiosis emitting further signs to develop monism in the novel. Throughout the novel trust seems to be the thematic focus that is breached by various characters especially the males in order to emphasize that women have been going through this painful ordeal since long. Trust exercise is a sign that does not contain its own meaning but it refers to the object or the thing for successful performance of the characters in the novel. When Sarah realized that she had wronged David by not openly accepting the gift, and after some days when she asked him for the gift David like an angry heartbroken male said that he had thrown that away, the breach of trust had already started. Observing the desperate condition of Sarah, Mr Kingsley jumps in and tries to play god for her. He gives her time even after school and also involves David and Sarah in mirror exercises but all this proved to be in vain. The ostensive sign of trust exercise reigned supreme throughout the novel reminding readers what the novel was actually about although creating ambiguities in the plot lines at certain places of the novel.

Through trust exercises the aim of the teacher was to develop trust among the characters so that during stage performances they are able to trust each other during different scenes. This was the lesson being taught at school but in actuality things were happening otherwise. Instead of knowing each other well during these exercises, the students, quite ironically knew very little about each other. But when they were outside school, they started understanding each other better. "Lara, had in no time learned and broadcast what facts about Karen nearly two years of trust exercising had not excavated" (p. 80). However, out of this ostensive sign of trust exercise originary frame is formulated and strengthened which gives way to other semiotic signs in the novel. The originary frame of the novel is about the value of trust in human relationships particularly in the context of male and female relationship. Within this originary frame, other semiotic signs of love, hatred, anger, adolescence, worldly resources sprout that further reinvigorate monism in the novel.

With the widening of distances between Sarah and David, their lives start taking different directions. Sarah gets involved with Liam while David is seen with some other girl. Instead of deviating from the originary frame revolving around the trust, Choi introduces outer frames so that the readers are driven back to the originary frame. David and Sarah's lives with their new counterparts could have moved further in descriptions about other details of their lives but since writer's focus seemed to be around the sign of trust in the novel, the readers are pulled back through outer frames at different occasions. One such example could be the event at

Kingsley's house where Sarah and David were also present but with their new partners and the pangs of their love for each other could be seen clearly in their actions and words. Sarah was about to be driven towards drugs and despair, Kingsley arrives at the spot and asks Sarah to leave the house. "Please give that to me and go home" (p. 109). The postmodern endless transgression is avoided and the readers are forced back into the frame. She moves out but has nowhere to go. It was late at night and she could only remember Karen's phone number. Karen's mother picked the phone and sent a taxi for her to be fetched to her house. Looking at her, Karen's mother recognizes that "I can tell you have a broken heart" (p. 116). These remarks force the readers back to the originary frame and also remind them of the central sign of trust in the novel. As Eshelman (2008) suggests that outer frame performs two major functions. It cuts the readers from the uncontrollable context of the novel and then it forces them back to the work. The introduction of the outer frame of Kingsley's appearance on the scene and asking Sarah to leave performs these two functions.

In each part of the novel, the introduction of the originary frame performs the similar functions of forcing the readers back to the novel although unexpected and artificially designed it may seem. In part two of the novel, everything was going smooth during the performance of the play written by Martin. Martin had come from England during the school days of Karen and there had developed a love affair between the two. However, Karen was left alone yearning for him by Martin as he left her when he had gone back to England. Again the readers are reminded with the reiterated theme of betrayal of trust by the males in the society. After some years, when all the characters are grown up and Martin comes back to America to perform in his own play, Karen is placed as the opposite heroine character in the play. Everything was going wonderful, the performance, stage setting and the enthusiasm in the crowd. Sarah, David and Kingsley were also there, although now quite grown-ups. In the scene of the play, Karen was to shoot at Martin. Instead of using the fake gun, they had chosen to use the real one for better sound effect. The context of the story was going uncontrollable as everything was going smooth and trust was getting developed among the characters especially Karen and Martin. Outer frame is introduced. Karen shoots directly at Martin who falls down on the stage wounded. Karen's words resound deep into the consciousness of the readers and they are forced back into the originary frame of the novel. Karen says, "'You won't die,' Karen reassured Martin. 'You just won't be the same.'" (p. 207). The actual truth is reiterated for the audience that there had happened a betrayal of trust and this shooting was the result of that past incident. As it never same for Karen after her failed London trip in which Martin had completely avoided to meet her and she had to return filled with pain and anguish. She was never the same again and could not trust anyone in her life anymore. That truth could have been hidden if the play had ended happily and the characters had developed a happy and amicable relationship among each other as if nothing had happened in the past. But this introduction of the outer frame drives readers' attention back to the original idea of the novel. Although it may seem an artificial insertion of the outer frame but Eshelman (2008) seems to be aware of it for he affirms that artificial mediation of double frame with their internal lock and fit relationship is the strategy that could be found in the current literary works.

Similarly, in the third part of the novel, the same theme is monistically presented through Claire, the illegitimate child of Karen, who, years later, goes back to school to find out about her mother. Claire only knows that her mother had once attended the school of performing arts. Mr Lord, initially declines any information, but then calls her to his house for private meeting and furnish her the required info. Reluctantly she goes there and eventually found herself standing in the upper private room of Mr Lord who tries to force his body on her. It was a betrayal of trust that she had made on that older man. Claire vomited and then ran away from the scene. "Shrugging through the door she rushed back down the stairs" (Choi, 2019, p. 226). The betrayal had come again for the female by a male. The last lines of the novel reiterate the writer's authoriality and desire that females need to be looked at, not from the wrong eyes as objects of desire, but with the right eyes as being human beings who have their own individual spaces and needs in the society. "Are we still recognized if seen by the wrong eyes? But by then it was too late to go back and say, 'Tell me her name' (p. 227)". In each part of the novel, within every layer of the events, monism seems to be overarching throughout. When Eshelman (2008) suggested the epochal deviation from postmodern split concepts to unified concepts of signs, he seemed to suggest this kind of work in which the unified concept of the sign of trust is established until the complete specific closure of the work.

Are the subjects of *Trust Exercise* dense and opaque? The opacity and density of the subjects in performatist perspective is to be seen with reference to the "milieu" (Eshelman, 2008, p. 8) in which they are performing. In their innocence of adolescence, Karen, Sarah, David and Claire seem quite simple and opaque. They also have their singularity and inscrutability as they are in love with all their merits and mistakes. But then the betrayal shakes them and they start turning into complex and clever characters. They do not remain the same. They try to rise above their given frames. Sarah becomes a writer and a satisfied person in her life yet with lurking longing for David. Karen is happy to be the assistant but then the painful scars of love are

there haunting her. David becomes successful with his drama production but he supports the marketing of Sarah's book without even talking to her and letting her know. The innocent love is there in the hearts of characters. To this extent the characters in the novel seem opaque and dense but with maturity and age, they also turn out to be complex. It could be either due to the perfection of the selves that they had achieved and rose from their given frame or it could also be ways of escaping the given frame. In either case, both of these patterns of plot are performatist as Eshelman (2008) had suggested. For each of these characters, strong and successful performance comes in different ways. Sarah seems to have completed herself and thus has risen from the ordinary frame. Karen seems to escape from the frame but it not successful until she rises by facing her pain and taking revenge from Martin. David also seems to get adjusted in his life without Sarah by escaping the given frame. Claire also escapes from Mr Lord and has to live without knowing the name of her mother. In opting any of these two patterns, they escape the anger and response of their surrounding and become acceptable for them. Their transcendence from the given frame is also a privileged and positive experience that has aestheticism. However, it would be too scanty a comment to give on the characters that they were just opaque and dense for their traits of complexity are also present. It could also be due to the author's choice of keeping certain things enigmatic in the novel. So, the perspective of performatist subjectivity does not seem to quite fit in here in the novel.

Characters in the novel also have chance to orient themselves with and then give a strong performance. This phenomenon is regarded as theism by Eshelman (2008). Time and space are so coordinated that characters have the chance to understand the changes that have occurred in their surrounding and then make a decision or choose a specific way of transcending the given frame. This is applicable of all the major characters of the novel i.e. David, Sarah and Karen. Sarah is left heartbroken in the first part of the novel but in the second part readers are informed that she went to England and spent quite a long time there getting involved with other guys which bought her time until she transcends the painful given frame of betrayal of trust and turns out to be a popular writer. In order to orient herself with the change, Choi placed her in London away from her hometown and at such a time where everything in her life at hometown seemed to be completely shattered. From the moment she was made to realize by Karen's mother Ellie that "Don't be embarrassed honey. You are lucky, having your heart broken. That means you were really in love" (Choi, 2019, p. 115) to the time when she becomes a writer, different time and space are created by Choi so that she could orient herself to live in a world of betrayals. She had breakup with other males also but those breakups do not shatter her the way David did. This signifies that she had risen above her given ordinary frame.

### Conclusion

*Trust Exercise* by Choi (2019) does seem to have some of the major features of performatism yet there are also deviations from performatism in the novel. Ostensive semiotic signs of trust, trust exercises, car, sex and love are there that sprout from the main sign of trust and are carried forward monistically till the end. However, the specific closure of the work is missing not because outer frame is not provided. Outer frame is inserted in each part so that the readers are driven back to the original story but the ending is kept open and vague which seems to be a deliberate attempt. Readers never seem to know what happened to the quest of Claire and even the betrayal of Karen while shooting Martin who for the part of the play had trusted her is also left vague and unclear. For the most part the deviation from the performatist feature of opaque and dense subjectivity, this novel does not seem to serve the ideal examples as the characters have their complexities which are not openly expressed by the writer. It also suggests that, on purpose, Choi seems to suggest more than just the limited opaque characters. There are predators and preys in the novel but they seem to be surrounded by ambiguities. Finally, the mode could also be regarded as theistic as well as deistic. At a certain level of showing the interactions between the males and females to relate betrayal of trust, there is theism, a well-grounded coordination between time and space yet there is also abruptness in the way second and third parts of the novel begin and end. Although the study of the novel has been conducted from performatist lenses yet further interpretations from other lenses are also possible.

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