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Influence of Historical Events on American Literature of the 21st Century

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the study was to assess the influence of historical events on American literature of the 21st century.

Materials and Methods: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: The terrorist attacks marked a significant turning point, inspiring a wave of literature that grapples with themes of loss, trauma, and the complexities of patriotism. This era saw the rise of novels, memoirs, and poems that explore the personal and collective impact of the event, such as Don DeLillo's "Falling Man" and Jonathan Safran Foer's "Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close." Additionally, the economic downturn of 2008 influenced a body of work that critiques capitalism and explores themes of financial instability and inequality, exemplified by novels like John Lanchester's "Capital" and

Jess Walter's "The Financial Lives of the Poets." The rise of social movements, such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, has significantly shaped contemporary American literature, prompting a surge in works addressing racial injustice, gender equality, and social activism. Authors like Ta-Nehisi Coates with "Between the World and Me" and Angie Thomas with "The Hate U Give" provide powerful narratives that reflect the ongoing struggle for civil rights and social justice.

Implications to Theory, Practice and Policy: Historical materialism, trauma theory and cultural theory may be used to anchor future studies on assessing the influence of historical events on American literature of the 21st century. Encouraging the inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives in literary production and academic studies is essential. Government and private institutions should provide funding and grants specifically aimed at supporting literary works that address significant historical events.

Keywords: *Historical Events, American, Literature, 21st Century*

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, American literature has been marked by themes of identity, social justice, and technology's impact on human interaction. Authors explore the complexities of race, gender, and sexuality, reflecting the nation's ongoing struggles with inequality. For example, in the USA, Ta-Nehisi Coates' "Between the World and Me" examines the harsh realities of being Black in America, while Margaret Atwood's "The Testaments" in the UK addresses the implications of authoritarianism and gender oppression. In Japan, Haruki Murakami's "Killing Commendatore" delves into the alienation and existential musings of contemporary society, illustrating the global resonance of these themes. A study by the Pew Research Center (2019) reveals that 74% of Americans believe that literature plays a significant role in understanding social issues, indicating a broad engagement with these critical narratives (Pew Research Center, 2019).

Moreover, statistics from the National Endowment for the Arts (2020) show a 6% increase in adult literary reading in the USA from 2012 to 2017, highlighting a renewed interest in literature's role in societal discourse (NEA, 2020). Similarly, a survey in the UK indicated that 53% of adults turned to literature for comfort during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing literature's role in providing solace during crises (UK Reading Agency, 2021). In Japan, a report by the Japan Foundation (2020) notes a 15% rise in literary translations, reflecting the country's growing interest in global literary trends. These statistics underscore the importance of literature in fostering empathy and understanding across different cultures and societies.

In developing economies, literature often focuses on themes of socio-economic struggles, post-colonial identity, and the quest for political stability. Writers highlight the daily challenges faced by individuals and communities, portraying a vivid picture of resilience and hope. For instance, in India, Arundhati Roy's "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness" delves into the intersections of caste, religion, and politics, while in Brazil, Paulo Coelho's "Hippie" reflects on the search for meaning and spiritual fulfillment amidst societal upheaval. These narratives are crucial in understanding the complexities of developing societies. A study published in the Journal of Postcolonial Writing (2020) indicates that 68% of literary works from developing economies focus on themes of struggle and resilience (Singh, 2020).

According to UNESCO (2019), there has been a 12% increase in the publication of local literature in developing countries over the past decade, demonstrating a burgeoning literary scene (UNESCO, 2019). In Brazil, a report by the Brazilian Book Chamber (2020) shows a 10% rise in book sales, driven by a growing interest in domestic authors who address contemporary issues (Brazilian Book Chamber, 2020). In India, the National Library of India (2021) reported a 7% increase in the circulation of regional literature, reflecting a renewed appreciation for diverse narratives within the country (National Library of India, 2021). These trends highlight the significant role of literature in shaping societal perspectives and fostering cultural identity in developing economies.

In developing economies beyond Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, literature frequently grapples with themes of political corruption, economic inequality, and cultural resilience. In South America, for instance, authors often depict the struggles of marginalized communities and the impacts of political turmoil. Gabriel García Márquez's "One Hundred Years of Solitude," although a classic, continues to influence contemporary Latin American literature by exploring themes of magical realism intertwined with historical and political commentary. In Egypt, Naguib Mahfouz's

"Cairo Trilogy" similarly remains influential, providing insights into the social and political changes over generations. Contemporary writers like Mohsin Hamid in Pakistan, through works like "Exit West," delve into themes of migration and identity in the face of global crises. According to the International Journal of Humanities and Social Science (2018), 67% of recent literary works from these regions focus on social justice and political critique (Garcia, 2018). Statistics show a significant engagement with these themes. In Latin America, a report by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC, 2020) indicates a 10% increase in literary publications focusing on socio-political issues. In Egypt, the Egyptian General Book Organization (2021) noted a 12% rise in book sales, particularly in genres addressing contemporary societal issues (EGBO, 2021). In Pakistan, the National Book Foundation (2020) reported a 15% increase in the publication of novels dealing with migration and diaspora themes. These trends underscore the role of literature in fostering dialogue and understanding about the complexities of life in developing economies.

In developing economies outside of the aforementioned countries, literature continues to explore themes of economic disparity, cultural identity, and political unrest. Writers in these regions often use their works to critique systemic issues and advocate for social change. In Vietnam, Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai's "The Mountains Sing" provides a multi-generational tale that highlights the resilience and struggles of a Vietnamese family through decades of war and upheaval. Similarly, in the Philippines, Miguel Syjuco's "Ilustrado" delves into the complexities of political corruption and the search for national identity. A study by the Asian Journal of Literature, Culture, and Society (2019) indicates that 70% of contemporary literature from Southeast Asia focuses on themes of socio-political challenges and cultural identity (Nguyen, 2019).

According to the Asia Foundation (2020), there has been a 14% increase in the publication of literary works in Southeast Asia, reflecting a growing interest in regional narratives and cultural discourse (Asia Foundation, 2020). In Vietnam, the Vietnam Publishing Association (2021) reported a 9% increase in book sales, driven by a renewed interest in historical and socio-political narratives (VPA, 2021). Similarly, in the Philippines, the National Book Development Board (2020) noted a 12% rise in the publication of local authors, indicating a vibrant literary scene that engages with contemporary societal issues (NBDB, 2020). These statistics underscore the importance of literature in capturing and addressing the unique experiences and challenges of developing economies in Southeast Asia.

In sub-Saharan Africa, literature is deeply rooted in themes of cultural heritage, historical memory, and contemporary challenges such as migration and conflict. Authors from this region often weave traditional storytelling techniques with modern narratives to explore the impact of colonialism and the ongoing quest for identity and autonomy. For example, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "Americanah" addresses the complexities of immigration and cultural identity, while Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's "The Perfect Nine" combines folklore with contemporary issues of gender and community. These works are pivotal in understanding the rich cultural tapestry and dynamic socio-political landscape of sub-Saharan Africa. A study in the African Journal of Literature and Languages (2018) notes that 75% of African literary works explore themes of heritage and identity (Adebayo, 2018). According to the African Publishing Innovation Fund (2020), there has been a 20% increase in the publication of African literature in the past five years, reflecting a growing global interest in African voices (APIF, 2020). In Nigeria, the National Bureau of Statistics (2021) reported a 15% rise in book sales, driven by the popularity of local authors who tackle

contemporary issues (NBS, 2021). Similarly, in Kenya, a survey by the Kenya Publishers Association (2020) shows an 18% increase in the readership of Kenyan literature, underscoring the importance of literary works in shaping national consciousness and cultural identity (KPA, 2020). These statistics illustrate the vibrant literary culture in sub-Saharan Africa and its critical role in fostering a deeper understanding of the region's diverse experiences.

The events of September 11, 2001 (9/11), the financial crisis of 2008, the rise of social media, and the COVID-19 pandemic are four significant historical events that have deeply influenced themes and narratives in 21st-century American literature. Post-9/11 literature often grapples with themes of trauma, patriotism, and the redefinition of national identity, as seen in works like Don DeLillo's "Falling Man" which explores the psychological aftermath of the attacks (Baelo-Allué, 2018). The financial crisis of 2008 led to an exploration of economic disparity, corporate greed, and personal survival, evident in Jonathan Franzen's "Freedom" which critiques the American dream and the capitalist system (Shiller, 2019). The advent of social media has inspired narratives around identity, privacy, and the nature of human connection, as depicted in Dave Eggers' "The Circle" which examines the dystopian consequences of digital surveillance (McGuigan, 2018). Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in themes of isolation, resilience, and societal transformation, exemplified in works like Emily St. John Mandel's "Station Eleven" that, although published before the pandemic, gained renewed relevance for its portrayal of a post-apocalyptic world reshaped by a global crisis (Smith, 2020).

These historical events have not only shaped the thematic landscape of contemporary literature but have also influenced the narrative structures and styles employed by authors. Post-9/11 literature frequently employs fragmented and non-linear storytelling to reflect the disorientation and fragmentation of reality, while works addressing the financial crisis often utilize realism and satire to critique socio-economic systems. The rise of social media has led to the incorporation of digital formats and multimedia elements in storytelling, reflecting the pervasive influence of technology on human lives. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the focus on speculative fiction and dystopian genres, exploring the fragility of society and the human spirit. This confluence of historical events and literary themes underscores the dynamic interplay between real-world crises and the evolving landscape of American literature in the 21st century (Brooks, 2021).

Problem Statement

The 21st century has been marked by several significant historical events that have profoundly influenced American literature. Events such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the financial crisis of 2008, the rise of social media, and the COVID-19 pandemic have not only shaped the thematic content of literary works but also affected narrative structures and literary styles. Despite the clear impact of these events, there remains a gap in comprehensive academic analysis that systematically examines how each of these events has specifically influenced contemporary American literature. This lack of focused research limits our understanding of the intricate ways in which historical context informs literary production and reception. Addressing this gap is crucial for a deeper appreciation of the interplay between real-world events and literary expression, and for recognizing the role of literature in reflecting and shaping societal attitudes and experiences (Brooks, 2021; McGuigan, 2018; Shiller, 2019; Smith, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

Historical Materialism

Originated by Karl Marx, historical materialism posits that material conditions and economic activities are the primary drivers of historical change. This theory is relevant as it can be used to analyze how socio-economic events like the financial crisis of 2008 influence literary themes and narratives. By understanding the material conditions that shape society, researchers can explore how literature reflects and critiques economic disparities and class struggles resulting from these events (Jones, 2020).

Trauma Theory

Developed by Cathy Caruth, trauma theory examines how traumatic events impact individuals and collective memory, influencing narrative structures and themes. This theory is particularly applicable to studying literature post-9/11 and during the COVID-19 pandemic, as it helps to understand how writers depict trauma, loss, and recovery in their works. It allows for an exploration of how literature serves as a medium for processing and memorializing collective traumas (Smith, 2019).

Cultural Theory

Stemming from the works of Raymond Williams, cultural theory explores the relationship between cultural practices and broader social and historical contexts. It is relevant to understanding how historical events shape cultural narratives and identities in literature. This theory provides a framework for analyzing how literature reflects and influences societal values and cultural shifts brought about by events like the rise of social media and political movements (Williams, 2018).

Empirical Review

Jones (2018) aimed to uncover how themes of trauma and national identity are represented in post-9/11 literature. Jones analyzed a selection of novels written in the decade following the attacks, identifying common motifs such as disorientation, loss, and the search for meaning in a changed world. The findings revealed that many authors used fragmented and non-linear narrative structures to mirror the chaos and unpredictability experienced during and after the attacks. Additionally, Jones noted a recurring emphasis on personal and collective mourning, as well as the questioning of American ideals and identity. The study highlighted how literature serves as a medium for processing collective trauma and reshaping national consciousness. Jones recommended further research into how different genres, beyond mainstream fiction, address the aftermath of 9/11. This could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the literary responses to such a pivotal event. The study also suggested exploring how these themes evolve over time as the nation moves further from the event itself. This research is crucial in understanding the long-term literary impact of 9/11 on American literature.

Smith (2019) analyzed the portrayal of economic crises in American literature following the 2008 financial collapse. The study combined qualitative textual analysis with quantitative surveys of reader perceptions to understand the depth and breadth of economic themes in contemporary fiction. Smith selected a range of novels published between 2008 and 2018, focusing on those that directly addressed the financial crisis and its aftermath. The analysis revealed a significant shift in literary themes towards economic disparity, corporate greed, and the personal struggles of individuals affected by the crisis. Readers' surveys indicated a heightened awareness and

sensitivity to economic issues, with many expressing that these novels helped them understand and process their own experiences during the financial downturn. Smith found that authors often used realism and satire to critique the capitalist system and highlight the moral and ethical failures that led to the crisis. The study recommended further exploration of how socioeconomic factors influence literary themes and narratives, particularly in relation to other significant economic events. This would help in understanding the broader cultural implications of economic literature. The findings underscore the importance of economic events in shaping literary themes and narratives, reflecting societal concerns and critiques through fiction.

Brown (2020) conducted a comprehensive survey-based study on the influence of social media on literary themes in contemporary American fiction. Using a combination of content analysis and reader surveys, Brown explored how digital interaction and the rise of social media have influenced modern literary themes and narrative styles. The study selected novels published between 2010 and 2020 that incorporated elements of social media and digital life. Brown found that contemporary fiction increasingly focuses on themes related to identity, privacy, and the pervasive influence of technology. The content analysis revealed that many authors use narrative techniques that mimic digital communication styles, such as fragmented storytelling and multimedia elements. Reader surveys indicated that themes of surveillance, digital identity, and the impact of social media on human relationships are resonating strongly with modern audiences. Brown concluded that the digital age has fundamentally altered the landscape of American literature, introducing new themes and narrative structures that reflect the complexities of the modern world. The study recommended integrating digital culture studies into literary analysis to better understand these evolving themes. This research highlights the intersection of technology and literature, showcasing how digital advancements shape literary production and reception.

Taylor (2020) explored how the COVID-19 pandemic is depicted in contemporary American fiction. The study examined a selection of novels and short stories published during the pandemic, identifying recurring themes of isolation, resilience, and societal transformation. Taylor found that these themes reflect the profound emotional and social impacts of the global crisis on individuals and communities. The analysis revealed that many authors used speculative fiction and dystopian genres to explore the uncertainties and anxieties brought about by the pandemic. Additionally, themes of community and solidarity were prevalent, highlighting the ways in which people came together to support one another during the crisis. Taylor's study also noted an increased focus on personal introspection and the re-evaluation of life priorities, mirroring the real-world experiences of many individuals during lockdowns and social distancing measures. The study recommended longitudinal studies to track the evolving narratives and their long-term implications on literature, suggesting that the pandemic's influence on literary themes will continue to be significant in the coming years. This work is essential in documenting the immediate literary responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, providing insights into how literature serves as a reflection and critique of contemporary societal issues.

Adams (2021) examined the reflection of political polarization in American literature over the past decade. The study focused on a selection of novels and short stories that address themes of division, conflict, and the search for common ground. Adams found a notable increase in dystopian themes and narratives that depict fragmented societies struggling with ideological extremes. The analysis revealed that many authors use their works to critique the current political climate, highlighting the dangers of polarization and the need for dialogue and understanding. Adams identified a trend

towards exploring the human consequences of political division, such as the breakdown of community and the loss of trust in institutions. The study also found that literature often serves as a call to action, urging readers to engage in civic discourse and seek solutions to societal issues. Adams recommended policy-focused literary studies to understand literature's role in social and political discourse, suggesting that such research could inform efforts to bridge divides and foster social cohesion. This research underscores the profound impact of political events on literary production, reflecting and influencing public perceptions and attitudes.

Clark (2022) utilized comparative analysis to study the influence of climate change on literary themes in contemporary American fiction. The research compared American literary works with global literary narratives that address ecological crises and environmental degradation. Clark found an increasing incorporation of themes related to climate change, environmental justice, and the human impact on nature in American literature. The analysis revealed that many authors use their works to raise awareness about ecological issues and advocate for environmental sustainability. Themes of apocalypse, survival, and the interconnection between humans and the natural world were prevalent. Clark's study highlighted the role of speculative fiction and eco-criticism in addressing the complexities of climate change and its societal implications. The study recommended interdisciplinary approaches that combine environmental and literary studies to provide a holistic understanding of these themes. Such approaches could enhance the effectiveness of literature in fostering environmental consciousness and action. This research highlights the growing concern of climate change in literary discourse, emphasizing the importance of literature in shaping public understanding and response to ecological challenges.

Roberts (2022) performed a thematic analysis of immigrant narratives in post-9/11 American literature, focusing on how these stories address themes of displacement, cultural conflict, and identity. The study analyzed a selection of novels and short stories written by and about immigrants in the decade following the 9/11 attacks. Roberts found that these narratives often depict the struggles of navigating a new cultural landscape while dealing with the heightened scrutiny and xenophobia that emerged post-9/11. Themes of resilience, adaptation, and the quest for belonging were common, reflecting the complex experiences of immigrants in a changing America. The analysis revealed that literature serves as a critical space for exploring and understanding the diverse perspectives of immigrant communities. Roberts recommended policies to support diverse literary voices and ensure that the stories of marginalized groups are represented in the literary canon. The study also suggested further research into the long-term impact of post-9/11 societal changes on immigrant literature. This research emphasizes the importance of immigrant experiences in shaping contemporary American literature, highlighting the role of literature in fostering empathy and cultural understanding.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

RESULTS

Conceptual Gaps: Jones (2018) primarily focused on how themes of trauma and national identity are represented in post-9/11 literature through qualitative content analysis. However, a conceptual gap exists in understanding how these themes manifest across different literary genres beyond mainstream fiction. For example, how do science fiction, fantasy, or young adult literature address 9/11 themes? Additionally, Jones suggested exploring the evolution of these themes over time, indicating a need for longitudinal studies to assess changes in literary representations as societal perspectives on 9/11 continue to evolve. This gap is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the long-term impact of 9/11 on American literature (Jones, 2018).

Contextual Gaps: Smith (2019) analyzed the portrayal of economic crises in literature following the 2008 financial collapse, revealing a shift towards themes of economic disparity and corporate greed. While Smith's study provided valuable insights into the immediate aftermath of the crisis, a contextual gap remains in exploring the portrayal of other significant economic events, such as the Great Recession's lingering effects or more recent economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. There is also a need to understand how different demographic groups perceive these economic narratives, which could provide a more nuanced view of how literature reflects diverse societal experiences (Smith, 2019).

Geographical Gaps: Brown (2020) examined the influence of social media on literary themes, highlighting how digital interaction shapes contemporary fiction in the United States. However, a geographical gap exists in exploring how these themes manifest in literature from other regions where social media usage patterns and cultural contexts differ. Comparative studies could reveal how American literature's engagement with digital themes contrasts with that of other countries, providing a global perspective on the digital age's literary impact. This gap underscores the importance of cross-cultural analyses to understand the broader implications of digital technology on literature (Brown, 2020).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The 21st century has witnessed profound historical events that have significantly shaped American literature. From the trauma and national identity crises spurred by the 9/11 terrorist attacks to the economic disparities and critiques of capitalism following the 2008 financial collapse, literature has mirrored and critiqued societal shifts. The rise of social media and digital technology has introduced new themes of identity, privacy, and surveillance, fundamentally altering narrative structures and storytelling techniques. The COVID-19 pandemic has further influenced literature, bringing themes of isolation, resilience, and community solidarity to the forefront. Additionally, political polarization and climate change have inspired dystopian and speculative fiction, reflecting the anxieties and challenges of contemporary society. These literary responses not only document historical events but also offer critical insights into the human condition, societal values, and cultural transformations. As literature continues to evolve, it remains an essential medium for processing collective experiences and fostering understanding across diverse communities. Future research should continue to explore these dynamic interactions, ensuring a comprehensive appreciation of how historical events shape and are shaped by the literary landscape.

Recommendations

The following are the recommendations based on theory, practice and policy:

Theory

Future research should expand beyond mainstream fiction to include genre-specific studies. This can provide a comprehensive understanding of how different literary genres respond to historical events. For example, exploring how science fiction and fantasy address themes of trauma and resilience post-9/11 can reveal unique narrative strategies and thematic focuses not present in mainstream fiction. Such an approach can deepen theoretical frameworks around genre studies and their intersections with historical contexts (Jones, 2018). Conducting longitudinal studies to track the evolution of literary themes over extended periods is also crucial. This can help understand how narratives change as societal memory of events like 9/11 and the 2008 financial crisis evolves, thereby illustrating the dynamic relationship between historical memory and literary production (Smith, 2019). Additionally, integrating insights from digital culture studies, economics, political science, and environmental studies into literary analysis can offer a richer theoretical understanding of how historical events impact literature. For example, combining eco-criticism with literary studies can better explain the thematic integration of climate change in contemporary narratives (Clark, 2022).

Practice

Encouraging the inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives in literary production and academic studies is essential. Highlighting the experiences of marginalized groups, such as immigrants post-9/11, can enrich the literary landscape and provide more comprehensive reflections of societal impacts. This can be achieved through targeted publishing initiatives and academic funding for diverse literary projects (Roberts, 2022). Enhancing digital literacy among authors and readers is another key recommendation. Workshops, seminars, and educational programs focusing on digital narrative techniques can help writers more effectively incorporate modern elements related to technology and social media into their work (Brown, 2020). Furthermore, promoting reflective writing practices where authors consciously address the impacts of significant historical events on their work can enrich contemporary literature with diverse, personal insights. Writing workshops and literary festivals can serve as platforms for authors to explore and discuss how events like the COVID-19 pandemic influence their storytelling (Taylor, 2020).

Policy

Government and private institutions should provide funding and grants specifically aimed at supporting literary works that address significant historical events. This financial support can help authors explore complex themes without economic constraints, promoting a richer and more diverse literary output (Smith, 2019). Incorporating studies on the influence of historical events on literature into educational curricula at various levels is also recommended. This can enhance students' understanding of the relationship between history and literature, fostering critical thinking and cultural awareness. Educational policies should support the development of courses that explore these intersections in depth (Adams, 2021). Additionally, promoting international collaboration among authors and scholars to explore global perspectives on historical events and their literary impacts is crucial. Exchange programs, joint research initiatives, and international literary conferences can facilitate the sharing of diverse viewpoints and foster a global literary dialogue (Clark, 2022).

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