The Lighthouse Journal of Literature & Linguistics, Vol. 04, Issue 01, Summer 2025, pp. 1-13

Aesthetics as a Web of Anxieties in the Postmodern American Literature

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ABSTRACT

Aesthetics can be defined as the responsiveness to appreciate and understand nature in its uncontaminated form. However, the existing form of nature has become more 'toxic' rather than 'aesthetic'. The study approaches toxicity by focusing on the aesthetics and ethics of the toxic in Postmodern American literature. Qualitative in nature, it uses Gare's book Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis *as a theoretical support to explore the connection between toxicity and aesthetics, focusing on the cultural and environmental dimensions. A thematic analysis using close reading technique focuses on how postmodern American literature implies the anxieties of contemporary life and the interplay between narratives and toxicity, to reveal a strong connection between human experiences and ecological realities. The discussion illustrates that the postmodern literature blurs the boundaries between toxicity and aesthetics. It depicts 'aesthetics' as a nasty web of ambiguities and tensions. It also illuminates the dual status of aesthetics when apparent beauty often conceals impairment and destruction, leading to apprehension.*

Keywords: *Toxicity; Aesthetics; Postmodernism; Ecology; Fiction*

INTRODUCTION

Human perception has a profound relationship with nature, reflecting the inherent qualities of natural world and human experiences. Nature in the form of landscape, beauty, sound, light, animals, plants, responds to human perceptions, which is understood as a sensory appeal in aesthetics. Such sensory qualities resonate with the senses and stimulate emotions. These qualities are thus rightly called 'a dialogue between human and nature' (Ibhakewanlan, 2016; Krishnamurti, 2008; Dockray, 1858).

Human beings are sensitive to the natural world. These relationships are the responses to the structure and various dynamics of nature developed as a response to evolutionary needs. It may be inferred that nature also responds to human senses, creating a strong relationship with the experiences and perceptions of individuals. It also connects the human consciousness and emotions to an ecological understanding that reflects human interactions with the natural world through

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Manuscript Submitted: April 30, 2025
Manuscript Accepted: June 26, 2025

various senses, such as smell, taste, touch, vision, etc. In the postmodern era, a global culture has established. The world's consumption of natural resources has transformed beauty into toxicity and identity crises has emerged as the most sensitive issue.

Colonialist, Capitalist, and patriarchal ideologies have posed threats to ecological sustainability. A desire for power and dominance over nature has caused humans the worst consequences, disrupting Mother Nature. Moreover, these ideologies have intensified toxic behaviours, turning humans into selfish, greedy, disregardful, and exploitative. Excessive consumption results in the dispersion of toxicity to nature. This also raises ethical concerns about the interaction of individuals and societies with the natural environment.

The vibrant colours of the natural world for instance, the scent of rain-affected soil often make individuals contemplative. Different sensory faculties evoke various emotional responses, such as the sight of green fields and sea waves causing a particular feeling of calmness and serenity. One immediately wishes to preserve nature in its uncontaminated form. The natural world is strongly connected with metaphysics, culture, and spirituality. Nature has often been viewed as a source of meditation and reflection in isolation. The connection between humans and the environment depends on individual experiences, emotional vibrancy, and ecological awareness. These interns influence the actions and beliefs of human beings regarding nature. Recent decades have witnessed a drastic shift from aesthetics to toxicity in the context of human interaction with nature. The beautiful and harmonious has turned into corrosive and destructive as a result of scientific advancement. This shift has led to a perception of human beings as the cause of toxicity to the physical and psychological environment.

The present study explores ‘aesthetics’ as a nasty web of ambiguities and tensions within the larger backdrop of postmodernism. It also links aesthetics and toxicity to highlight human experiences and ecological crises.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Exploring a new definition of aesthetics requires an overview of the word in its historical contexts. Appraisal or disapproval of an object is defined as aesthetics in terms of common understanding. However, the term is not confined to philosophy or literature only. The question of defining an object as 'ugly' or 'beautiful' has always been debated by philosophers. Attard (2018) explored the connection between aesthetics and literature to see if both were relevant. He pointed out the commonality between aesthetics and literature, i.e., vocabulary and pleasure, which are the focus of both. Lamarque (2014) highlighted the reluctance of literary critics to approve the connection between literature and aesthetics, thereby distancing themselves from the importance of emotions and pleasure derived from reading. Contrarily, aestheticians acknowledge and promote the connection between literature and aesthetics, focusing on their common features. The link is more obviously found in the sensory and visual experiences of the work of art. Beardsley (1981) illustrated the relationship as ‘aesthetics of literature’, focusing on the appreciation of ‘literature for its own sake as well as an art for different reasons’. A value is added to literature which ‘transmits an aesthetic character to experience’ (Beardsley, 1981); this ‘promotion of aesthetic experience’ was further defined as ‘the production of beauty’ (Carroll, 2001). Carroll (2001) argued

that the failure of literary critics could not provide a conceptual theory of aesthetics due to their focus on critique rather than appreciation. The expressive feature of a literary piece leads to an aesthetic experience. Quality and appreciating others are independent of each other's influence (Carrol, 2001). Walton (1993) focused on 'pleasure' as the foremost characteristic of an aesthetic experience (1993). It closely resonates with Keatsian philosophy: 'A thing of beauty is a joy forever.' Also, the pleasure is drawn by evaluating the object itself. Imagination is another added value to literature. Stecker (1997) focused more on 'the representational content', such as mood or form of poetry.

Aestheticians agree that literary works have aesthetic values, i.e., they provide the readers with experiences, and the experiences are the outcomes of various aesthetic values, mostly found in enjoyment (Beardsley, 1981). Aesthetics drew the connection between literary works and aesthetics, focusing on the aesthetic value of literature.

Contrary to the above discussion, toxicity is commonly defined in the medical field as the adverse effect a substance produces on a living organism. Several variables, such as nature and time of exposure, are used to measure the toxicity of a substance (Sullivan et al., 2005). By toxicity, a broad spectrum of effects is dealt with various protective strategies (Tee et al. 2007). Toxicity is synonymous with poison.

Marran (2017) discussed a significant aspect of contemporary ecocriticism, highlighting major dichotomies between the human and non-human world, focusing on the 'rift between culture and nature' (18). Nature is always at the backdrop of culture, ethnicity, ideology, and humanity. The 'material' world is in conversation with the 'Semiotic' world. Marran (2017) deconstructs the conventional romantic legacy of nature. Nature in the contemporary era is seen as 'a problematic cultural construct' (Marran, 2007).

The contemporary postmodern era aestheticizes toxicity by making such disruptions more palpable (Kaminski, 2022; Brauer, 2020; Rosenfeld et al., 2018; Welsch, 1996). The contemporary world also faces a challenge to address the normalcy of toxicity in artistic and cultural representation, as art and literature serve as the best tools to address ethical concerns and confront the 'toxic' for exploring healing pathways.

Postmodern literature reflects disillusionment through disjointed and fragmented narratives. This leads further to the moral ambiguity, referred to a 'fall from ecological grace' by Gerard (2012). The ethical dimensions of toxicity and aesthetics in postmodern literature offer a deep insight into understanding the construction of toxic systems and their practices. The word 'aesthetics' therefore, imply a novel logic as compared to its the conventional definitions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study focuses on the aesthetics and ethics of toxicity in postmodern American literature. It contemplates the intersection of representation, aesthetics, and ethics to explore the idea of toxicity. It also considers the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of postmodern literature using the theoretical support of Gare's book *Postmodernism and Environment* (1995).

This theoretical support is sought mainly because of its focus on finding the roots of global ecological crises and the cultural intervention to control them (Gare, 1995). This study attempts to

unravel the toxic environments, ideologies, and behaviours portrayed in postmodern literature. It also aims to reflect on how such representations challenge aesthetic forms and ethical values. Gare (1995) drew on the concept of postmodernity and the environmental crises. He referred to the Romans for creating moral and ethical codes for humanity and their participation 'towards a final state of perfection' (Gare, 1995, p.13). Modernity was a response to secularizing Western societies, and as a result, Christian eschatology (moral premises) lost its credibility because modernism challenged all the grand narratives. The ages-old moral eccentricities with a promise of future and progress turned into "Nothing has meaning' exposing the hollowness of Western civilization and its triumphs. The concept of progress based on the notion of Europe at the top and Australia at the bottom was threatened by globalization. Integration posed a threat to European dominance. Gare (1995) also postulates on the philosophies of Hegel, Nietzsche, Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard moving forward to the concept of 'a new international bourgeoisie' (p.10), who is equipped to overpower the 'system in the name of power for the sake of power' (p.11). He points out the deterioration of living standards as well as ecological stability. He (1995) recommends 'a new grand narrative... a polyphonic, dialogical narrative in which a multiplicity of perspectives is represented' (p.140). He proposes the solidarity of humanity with nature.

The present study uses close reading as a tool to thematically analysis the postmodern American literature. Thematic analysis is flexible and offers an in-depth exploration of various themes. This method is potent for studying toxicity in connection to aesthetics as it enables the researcher to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns of themes in postmodern texts. The approach is appropriate to unravel how various postmodern literary pieces engage with complex concepts such as toxicity, ethics, and power. Literary pieces are read and re-read for initial understanding, and relevant texts reflecting toxicity implicitly or explicitly are highlighted. The analysis section discusses corruption, destructive ideologies, ethical concerns, power, and ideology to establish a close connection between aesthetics (e.g., language, narrative style, and narrative structure) and ethics (such as social criticism, morality, and character development).

The framework offers critical insight into the intersection of aesthetics and ethics in the literary portrayal to unravel toxicity in almost all the facets of human life that affect nature. It contributes to a wide understanding of postmodern literature engaged with social norms and nature.

Post Modern American Literature and Aesthetics

This study explores the physical and behavioural concept of toxicity. It illuminates the dual status of aesthetics when apparent beauty conceals impairment. It debates how postmodern literature blurs the boundaries between toxicity and aesthetics.

Postmodern American literature usually depicts characters grappling with fragmented identities. This is caused by the rejection of unified truths and the acceptance of the multiplicity of perspectives. The human relationship with the constructed world is a fascinating insight regularly portrayed in literature. American fiction, for example, *House of Leaves* by Danieleweski, reflects an intersection between ecological concerns and human interventions. The mystery of the labyrinthine house as a living organism shows the constantly changing space within, for example, its shifting corridors and dimensions. It implies a resistance to human control and limitations of

architecture. The architecture of the house conflicts with the larger forces of the external world. The relational, psychological, and environmental dimensions of the novel reverberate toxicity in the sense that the physical realm affects the mental health of the characters. The house is a manifestation of unnatural force, maliciously unsettling the lives of its tenants. A disproportionately larger interior of the house implies a distorted connection with the space outside. This symbolizes human intervention as a threat to the purity and beauty of nature. Moreover, the psychological toxicity causes mental instability in the major characters in the novel, namely, Johnny Truant and Will Navidson. Johnny's obsession with the house and his weak perception of reality leading to madness is a crucial sign of the toxicity the house creates on his psyche. The disjointed form of the text reflects the message of the title, which questions the proximity between the house and its occupants. Generally understood as a symbol of affection and close relations, this house presents a fragmented picture where 'aesthetics' becomes a nasty web of tensions and a slow but insidious mental destruction. A toxic undercurrent can be seen in the relationship between the Navidsons—Will and Karen. As a third party, the toxic house creates misunderstanding and mistrust between the couple. The obsession to understand the house mystery is also read as a type of toxicity with far-reaching and dangerous consequences. Will and Johnny destroy their relationship by pursuing the mystery of the house. Hence, passion and quest become fatal rather than adding beauty to the circumstances. Characters are trapped, losing their sense of self due to extended exposure to information.

Another postmodern work by Margaret Atwood, *Murder in the Dark* (an anthology of poems), presents female identity as chaotic and multi-layered. It leads to a sense of anxiety regarding self-definition and societal roles. This anxiety is a reflection of a broader cultural predicament whereby traditional narratives are no longer the authentic source to guide identity formation (Javaid, 2022). The anthology presents a commentary on the relationship between toxicity and aesthetic choices. It represents the ideas of darkness, alienation, isolation, and violence. The interplay of toxicity and aesthetics in Atwood's work through a minimalistic technique produces a sense of desolation and tension. The poems present an emotional and psychological toxicity with implied meaning to be extracted from the fragmented thoughts.

Another critical theme in postmodern fiction that transforms aesthetics into toxicity is the anxiety of authenticity. Characters in the literary domain struggle with the idea of being "real" in a world saturated with imitations. This is more evident in works like *Remainder* by Tom McCarthy. This quest for authentic identity is also a source of existential dreariness, where individuals find themselves entangled in a desire for genuine self-expression and the influence of cultural imitation (Lea, 2012). Toxicity as an underlying theme runs through the narrative to show the protagonist's psychological and social experiences in an abstract yet subtle form. Memory, reality, and identity provide a rich ground to understand toxicity in external environments or objects and the psychological landscapes of the protagonist. The novel does not explicitly engage with conventional ecocritical themes, but it can be read through the lens of ecocriticism to explore the relationships between humans and their constructed environments. The aesthetic choices of the fictional characters in terms of objects, spaces, and reality replicate the toxic entanglements with the contemporary world. The protagonist's obsession with rebuilding and re-enacting spaces depicts the erected environment and alienation of human beings as these spaces are mere reproductions, reflecting a profound detachment of humans from the natural world. Moreover, these spaces are controlled and lack a real connection to the external world and the living, organic

environment. Such sterility or excessive materiality of the objects and spaces represents the toxicity of the commodified spaces, replacing the genuine experiences with the physical world. Individuals' desire to control and reproduce has reduced the world to a consumable object. The protagonist converts nature into a commodity to be controlled and used for an individual's own physical and psychological needs. In terms of aesthetics, McCarthy's novel is a deliberately fragmented text, reflecting the fractured psychological state of the protagonist. Therefore, it can be concluded that the aesthetic experience of *Remainder* is fundamentally tied to the environmental disruption, which indicates artificiality challenging authenticity. The protagonist's struggle can be seen as a metaphor for understanding the toxic consequences of the manipulation resulting from the human desire to overcome external forces of the natural world.

Postmodern aesthetics through pastiche and parody reflect the cataclysmic events in the contemporary world. These methods have dual purposes: to critique societal norms and to highlight the anxieties that arise from a life devoid of clear meaning. The aesthetic choices made by authors often replicate the internal struggles of characters, which are reflective of external forces instilling existential questioning (Sharqi, 2021).

Postmodern fiction often portrays aesthetics within the arena of toxicity. It reflects social anxieties and the crises. It often implies critique of the toxic effects of capitalism, specifically in the wake of financial crises. William Gibson's *Neuromancer* exemplifies how the space of narrative constricts under the burden of economic disintegration as a precursor to capitalist ideals (Noys,2024). Moreover, Noys (2024) opines that the representation of money as toxic emphasizes the scattering of values and the moral insinuations of financial crises, indicating that aesthetic forms are deeply entangled into economic realities. Furthermore, the aesthetics of postmodern fiction also present an answer to environmental crises, whereby a world is portrayed as ecological collapse in a narrative form. Authors like Margaret Atwood in *Oryx and Crake* and Don DeLillo in *White Noise* use fragmented narratives to highlight the chaos of environmental collapse, implying that human actions have insulted the very fabric of reality (Hering, 2011).

This conception of post-natural aesthetic, according to (Lombard 2020) sheds light on how ecological toxicity permeates both physical landscapes and literary creations. Furthermore, the discussion of aesthetics and toxicity is also grounded in cultural appropriation within the postmodern fiction. The combination of diverse elements of culture can lead to a dilution of authenticity, thereby creating a toxic environment of genuine expression. This is discovered in Bollywood cinematic productions, where postmodern traits are critiqued for their capability to misrepresent cultural identities (Wright , 2009).

In pursuit of this, postmodern fiction often reflects thematic concerns such as hyperreality, which leads to alienation. Wallace critiques this phenomenon and argues for a return to authentic narrative forms, resisting ironic detachment. In this contextual sense, aesthetics becomes toxic, contributing to a disconnect from genuine emotions and expressions (Hering, 2011).

Sylvia Plath's poetry often exhibits a strong object fixation, inculcating everyday objects with emotional significance. Though not recognized as postmodern poet, her poems echo a postmodernist voice. Plath's *Tale of a Tub and Black Rook in Rainy Weather,* reflect that objects

have transitioned into an extension of her desires, emotions, and feelings. Her emphasis on the beauty of objects implies a yearning for connection and a mode to escape her emotional isolation (Nemeth-Loomis, 2010). Her poem *Edge* unravels the aestheticization of death. She portrays it as both beautiful and repulsive at the same time. It suggests the societal expectation of finding meaning in death, with a struggle between beauty and ugliness, life and death. The poem portrays the notion that even in death, there is a desire for importance, which blurs the line between existence and non-existence (Ciobanu, 2023). Furthermore, Plath's exploration of toxic relationships is a pivotal theme in her work. Her personal experiences reflect her inner despair, hopelessness, and gloominess. Her obsession with material objects is a defence mechanism for her turbulent relationship with her partner, Ted Hughes. Plath's personal life portrays how her aesthetic experience is manifested in the toxicity of her personal life. (DeShong, 1998)

Another Postmodern writer, August Wilson, has also explored the themes of aesthetics and toxicity. Wilson's aesthetics are deeply ingrained in the African American experience, drawing from the historical narrative and cultural expressions. His employment of a "creolized" aesthetic blends African cultural elements with Western values, creating a unique dramatic structure that resonates with white and black audiences. This approach allows Wilson to present intricate characters who navigate their identities in a radically and racially divided society. In addition, the theme of toxicity manifests in Wilson's exploration of systemic racism and its drastic effects on individuals and communities. His characters often confront and fight back against the toxic legacy of slavery and racial segregation, which is a defining aspect of their identity. A case in point is his drama *Fences,* whereby the character Troy Maxson portrays the struggles between his personal life and societal toxins – his unhealed anger towards the system leads to conflicts with his family members. Furthermore, Wilson's narratives reveal how toxic elements are dangerous for personal identities and community dynamics (Green, 2022).

August Wilson's dramas often feature middle-aged black men grappling with their past experiences and future aspirations, illustrating a delicate portrayal of Black masculinity and identity. His characters grapple with the weight of historical legacies, including slavery, racism, and prejudice. They reflect the limitations imposed on Black people due to the structured violence perpetuated by White supremacy. Moreover, his characters reflect a chasm between their vulnerable self and the social phenomena of survival. Race is everything in America, this thought resonates throughout his narratives (Murphy, 2009).

Wilson's works show how aesthetics can serve as a means to confront toxicity. His plays are not merely reflections of painful agonies but also a celebration of resilience and cultural richness. By presenting the struggles against toxic societal structures, he has created a space for healing and understanding within the African American community. The intersectional nature of beauty in storytelling and the harsh realities of life underpin the belief that art can provoke and stimulate thoughtful discourse (Mitra, 2021).

Following this, the works of Maya Angelou in postmodern fiction also represent the nexus of aesthetics and toxicity. Angelou's work is notable for her rich imagery and metaphorical language, which she uses to articulate deep emotional truths. Her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* reflects her struggles with identity and self-worth. Moreover, she writes about feeling black and ugly as her self-image, which is further intensified by a lack of affection in her

childhood and the traumatic experience of being violated. Her aesthetic depiction through words, images, and sounds replicates not only her inner turmoil but also critiques the societal norms of beauty and worthiness (Plessis, 2021). This underlines the theme of toxicity embedded in her narratives, especially through her experiences of trauma and abuse. After being raped at a young age, she felt that her voice was *deadly and poisonous.* She sketched this incident as a parallel to the destruction of nature at the hands of humans, implying anger and helplessness. Though her tragic experience enriched her writings, it also portrayed her understanding of literary aesthetics wrapped in the toxicity of such incidents.

Maya Angelou's work also addresses toxic relationships and the societal structures that cause damage. Her poetry reflects a dialogue of racism, sexism, and personal betrayal, which illustrates her pain of living in a world that isolates her as a Black woman. Through her art, she desires to educate and empower others, transforming personal pain into a collective voice for resistance against systemic injustices (Frantzi, 2024).

Tennessee Williams' works also explore the intricate interplay between aesthetics and toxicity. He often employs *symbolism* and poetic language to create a vivid aesthetic experience reflecting the inner condition of characters. For instance, in *A Streetcar Named Desire,* the opposite use of colour symbolizes the clash between the idealized past and the harsh realities of the present. Blanche's delicate attire contrasts with the vibrant colours of Stanley, illustrating her vulnerability against a backdrop of toxic masculinity. The theme of toxicity is instilled in his portrayal of relationships, specifically through characters like Stanley Kowalski and Blanche DuBois. The former embodies a brutal, animalistic masculinity that suppresses Blanche, whose fragility is exacerbated by her illusions of grandeur and escape from reality. The power dynamics in their interactions highlight the destructive nature of toxic masculinity and societal expectations placed on women (Troth, 2018).

Accordingly, Subashi (2020) states that Williams's work critiques societal norms that perpetuate these toxic relationships. His characters often deal with their identities within a world, which demands conformity and denies non-conformity, leading to profound loneliness and despair. It is evident in Blanche's tragic attempts to create a new identity while being incessantly judged by those around her. Williams skilfully intertwines aesthetics and toxicity in the play to comment on the human condition. His use of symbolism, colour, and music not only enhances the emotional effect of his work but also criticizes the societal structures that foster toxic relationships.

One of the major poets of postmodern era, Charles Olson, has significantly woven aesthetics and toxicity in a thread. His works reflect a profound engagement of human experiences with the natural world. Olson's concept of *Projective Verse* posits that poetry should be a "high energy construct" where form is an extension of content. This method allows for a dynamic interaction between the poet and the world, highlighting movement and breath as central to poetic creation (Johnson 2016). His poetry reflects an Eco critical perspective, critiquing anthropocentrism and advocating a recognition of the interconnectedness of all living beings. In poems like *The Kingfisher,* he illustrates how human experiences are deeply intertwined with the natural world, suggesting that understanding this dynamic is crucial for identity formation (Mulazimoglu 2021).

Furthermore, Olson's work also addresses themes of toxicity, both cultural and ecological. His engagement with contemporary issues, such as the insinuations of nuclear energy and environmental degradation, highlights how modernity's excesses can lead to a disconnection from nature. His poetry critiques the destructive tendencies inherent in human progress, motivating readers to confront the consequences of their actions on both personal and planetary scales (Hughes, 2023). Additionally, he frames his poetry within a historical context. He connects the past events with ecological changes and present realities. It is not merely nostalgic; it serves as an incitement to action against the continuing ecological violence and cultural disintegration. This idea reinforces that understanding our past is fundamentally important to navigate future challenges. Olson's poetry reflects a complex interplay of aesthetics and toxicity, advocating for a holistic understanding of existence that embraces human creativity and ecological responsibility. It considers an analysis of the environment and the effects of toxicity (John, 2010).

The toxic aesthetics in American literature stimulate feelings of isolation and dissolution, thereby changing the standpoints of the readers. Continuous exposure to such ideals initiates unhealthy comparisons, setting unattainable goals for physical appearance and relationships. Representation of toxicity normalizes these ideals even when they are damaging. John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* presents another image where the landscape is toxic because the Great Economic Depression in America (1929) kept the individuals away from economic independence and prosperity. The shift is caused particularly by human activity, industrialization, and exploitation of the environment. The novel promotes a stance of Nature's cruelty and harshness to humans in the form of storms and Dust Bowls. Environmental changes and unsustainable human practices have transformed the beautiful image of Nature into a toxic one. Steinbeck's novel portrays the life realities through visual imagery and descriptions of the landscape, looking at nature as a source of adversity and nourishment. Sensuous imagery in the description of 'cracked earth and dust clouds' produces the effect of desolation. Joad family's struggle depicts the cost paid by ecological system to human actions. The novel not only deplores the erosion of land but also mourns the decay of morality with great economic repercussions. It also critiques the indifference of the landowners and factory owners; for example, large tractors, which destroy the land, signify the dehumanizing forces of industrial capitalism. The aesthetics of these machines and corporate entities offer a sharp contrast to the environment and human suffering. 'Rewilding' described as a return to Mother Nature (Mortali, 2019) may cure and prevent the 'Fall of human beings from the ecological grace'(Gerard, 2012).

Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* aesthetically depicts the characters and events, adding visual and emotional effects through descriptions. However, the themes of hysteria, ideological rigidity, and societal pressures construct an atmosphere of fear and toxicity. The dynamics of Salem, particularly the witch trials, moral corruptions, and injustices, manifest aesthetics and toxicity in *The Crucible,* and the aesthetic of fear permeates almost every page of the drama, highlighting the mob mentality. The novel indicates that fear and oppression shroud the individuals, compelling them to abandon morality and logic. The drama demonstrates that societal and individual actions become toxic. For example, the hysterical dance of Abigail in the forest when the general perception of the woods being calm and serene is transformed into horror and psychological degradation. The description of the scene detaches the readers from finding beauty in Nature as described by Robert Frost in his poetry; rather, the trees add to the horror of the action. The death of John Proctor also suggests the destruction of honour and personal integrity under a toxic system.

The Crucible is overall, an illustration of a system symbolically presented through toxic visual imagery of executions, the ruined reputations of innocent people, and the collapse of the moral edifice of Salem.

Catch-22 by Joseph Heller is filled with absurdity and dark humour, illustrating how bureaucratic systems perpetuate wars. The absurd rules of war signify the paradoxical aspects of human lives. Individuals are dehumanized by social and political structures, which exhibit the futility of human struggle and develop existentialist crises. Similarly, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* is a complex work demonstrating dense and pessimistic imagery. Paranoia and uncertainty are the aesthetics of this novel. The themes revolve around the toxic systems of power and war. The style and form of the narrative are disjointed, mirroring the disoriented nature of human life. Multifarious storylines intersect with one another, producing disorder and unpredictability. The novel portrays war and technology as the root causes of human suffering, equally destructive for ecological system. The toxicity of modern institutions is reflected in Pynchon's aesthetic choice of describing various secret organizations and their surveillance techniques in the novel. The portrayal of many surreal moments in the narrative, for example, the psychological states of minds, makes the aesthetics of the narrative disoriented and hallucinatory.

The above discussion holds that though the concepts of aesthetics and toxicity are conflicting; the American postmodern literature presents aesthetics, which might conceal toxicity. Apparently, aesthetics is focused on beauty, peace, and harmony, whereas toxicity centres on human attitudes to environmental well-being.

CONCLUSION

American literary traditions celebrate the exploitation and destruction of nature, which marks a shift from the aesthetics and reverence of Nature. This unravels how industrialization and capitalism stimulate a toxic connection of humanity with the environment. Aesthetics traditionally encompasses notions of beauty, nature, and art, offering a lens through which individuals can express identity and creativity. However, the above discussion reveals that aesthetics in art and literature have become toxic, specifically in the contemporary digital age. It also highlights how aesthetics can convert into a restrictive mould from a source of inspiration that pressurizes individuals to compromise their identities.

Furthermore, toxicity extends beyond individual experiences to encompass broader cultural critiques. Toxicity shapes our understanding of ecology and identity. This notion challenges the idea that even materials traditionally viewed as beautiful carry toxic histories that must be acknowledged. Precisely, the exploration of aesthetics and toxicity reveals a duality: while aesthetics can inspire and elevate human experience, they also possess the potential to alienate and harm. The challenge lies in navigating these complexities, recognizing the beauty in diversity while critiquing the toxic standards imposed by society. Aesthetics and toxicity are interconnected. The above analysis highlighted that natural beauty standards or idealized depictions of environmental exquisiteness in art and literature foster toxic societal pressures in the contemporary world. Literary works may reflect an aesthetic appeal to darkness, rebellion, or destructiveness. Toxicity is romanticised in writings, where themes of nihilism, dissolution, or moral ambiguity are celebrated.

Such attitudes lead to the normalization of toxic behaviours or ideas in the contemporary era. The individuals' toxic treatment of nature has distorted the concept of aesthetics. Literary texts invite the readers to contemplate their position within a polluted world. The challenge is recognizing and addressing the toxic aspects and reviving more positive and supportive aesthetic expressions through literary writings.

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