

Sarah Perry's *The Essex Serpent*: A Contemporary Remap of Women's Identity

Maram R. Alessa

King Abdulaziz University, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Nesreen Al-Harby (corresponding author)

King Abdulaziz University, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

naalharby@kau.edu.sa

How to cite:

Alessa, M.R. & Al-Harby, N. (2023). Sarah Perry's *The Essex Serpent*: A Contemporary Remap of Women's Identity. *International Journal of Linguistics and Translation Studies* 4(3).159-170.

<https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlts.v4i3.383>

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 04/06/2023

Accepted: 07/07/2023

KEYWORDS

historical fiction,
neo-Victorianism,
marginalization,
misogyny, The
Essex Serpent

Abstract

Sarah Perry's The Essex Serpent is a contemporary feminist text that sheds light on various perceptions, such as women's identity, trauma, and social misogyny, through the appropriation of historical fiction. This study investigates the text through the lenses of genre theory, feminism, and trauma theory. It demonstrates that the novel faithfully represents a Victorian setting while remaining relevant to post-postmodern readers. The study suggests that the novel appropriates subversive contemporary conventions and simultaneously expresses Victorian themes. It also argues that Perry's text provides a commentary on the present by integrating the past. Further, this study explores the misogynistic portrayal of women in the novel and concludes that such depiction emphasizes Victorian patriarchy and women's marginalization. This research highlights the novel's depiction of trauma as interrelated to identity and examines its influence on the representation of women's identity. It demonstrates that the novel's spatial setting evokes traumatic memory and illustrates various responses to trauma through its employment of features and elements of genre fiction

1. INTRODUCTION

Sarah Perry's (2016) *The Essex Serpent* is a historical fiction set in the late Victorian period. The text presents rich and unique unexplored areas and perceptions. It follows Cora Seaborne's coming-of-age story, the protagonist whom Charles (2017) from *The Washington Post* describes as "the most delightful heroine since Elizabeth Bennet in *pride and prejudice*" (para. 6). As the author's second novel, *The Essex Serpent* has gained Perry (2016) her reputation as a contemporary author with impeccable talent. Cain (2017) from *The Guardian*

describes it as a “word-of-mouth book-selling success story... selling more than 200,000 copies in hardback alone” (para. 1-2). The novel has won various awards, such as Waterstones’ Book of the Year and the British Book Award. Moreover, Apple TV recently produced a miniseries adaptation of Perry’s book, which underlines its ongoing success.

Perry (2016) grew up in Essex, which later became the setting of her novel. She had an unusual upbringing that affected her work. Growing up in a religious atmosphere, she was unfamiliar with popular art. In her interview with *The Guardian*, she declares that unlike kids watching television and listening to pop music, her family exposed her to a more traditional and conservative culture that included piano playing, stitching, reading, and painting. She further confirms that people have always considered her eccentric and awkward due to this dissimilarity. Perry’s (2016) old-fashioned childhood exposed her to canonic texts and the most distinguished literary writings in English (Williams, 2018). As a young novelist, Perry (2016) published three promising novels that contributed to the establishment of her sound writing career (*Waterstones*, 2019).

The Essex Serpent was published when many women had already gained their rights to education, financial independence, and social empowerment (Walters, 2005). Nevertheless, patriarchy and reevaluating women’s abilities and privileges were still valid social debates. Hence, the conflict between amended women’s conditions and the superiority of men was still relevant (Pearce & Riley). The text incorporates the ongoing discussions on women’s social status. According to Williams (2018), Perry is quite aware of two factors: the discrimination against women in literary domains. The second is that gender affects the evaluation of women’s writings. Hence, her highly acclaimed novel is a commentary on the misogynistic stereotyping of women and sexist social and cultural prejudices.

The novel’s plot centers around Cora, who is fortunate enough to be free from her wifely duties at a young age. Its plot develops when her husband dies, leaving her on a self-discovery quest. With her son, Francis, and his outspoken governess, Martha, she leaves London to search the Essex estuary for a living fossil. Simultaneously, tension grows in the village of Aldwinter, where rumors spread of a mythical creature roaming its marshes. Will, the village parson, dismisses the villagers’ fear by declaring that the rumors are mere superstitious trouble. Consequently, Cora uniquely bonds with Will, serving her character development. The novel is written in a Dickensian style, integrating many minor plots and characters. Additionally, it illustrates a set of dichotomies: men against women, science against religion, and the rich against the poor. Such polarities are the characteristics of its late Victorian setting; however, the text attempts to blur the lines between them, rendering a faithful portrait of the complex human nature.

This research argues that Perry's (2016) *The Essex Serpent* employs historical fiction as a sub-genre that remaps women’s conditions during the Victorian period. Additionally, this paper examines representations of women in the text and focuses on different types of misogyny, objectification, and bias in Victorian society. Accordingly, the work indicates that 19th-century women’s status is comparable to that of 21st-century women. Furthermore, the work proposes that there is an intersection between feminism and historical fiction in the novel, which provides a richly contextualized depiction of women's marginalization and makes use of historical fiction’s popularity, which draws attention and attains feminist privileges. Moreover, the paper suggests that the novel has elements of trauma. Hence, it studies the interrelation between trauma and the formation of identity. Finally, the work investigates the relationship between the traumatic experience and “place” and examines how “place” evokes traumatic memory.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1.Genre Theory: Historical Fiction

Precise classifications and chronological developments represent a grounding view of historical fiction as a genre. Scholars have clearly and consistently defined what adheres to the genre's standards. According to Baker (2015), "historical fiction is defined as novels (and sometimes short stories) with settings from a historical period at least fifty years before the work's publication or occurring before the author's memory" (p. 1). She also notes that historical fiction, unlike any other genre, has its well-structured set of "subgenres" (p.8) that can be divided by either subject, such as the Civil War, or period, such as the Victorian era (p. 9). Johnson (2009) categorizes the genre according to its historical context. He described *historical fiction* as "fictional works (mainly novels) set before the middle of the last century, ones in which the author is writing from research rather than personal experience" which plots—she further indicates—take place "before the author's life and time" (p.1). Johnson (2009) has additionally revealed that historical fiction is one of the ancient forms of narrative. Thinking about its beginnings, Baker (2015) declared that Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) was the earliest writer of historical fiction. Despite its early emergence, Johnson (2009) has emphasized that the genre has revived recently to reach what can be considered a rebirth. This can be illustrated by the commercial popularity that the genre gained during the majority of the twentieth century (Johnson, 2009). This fame had disadvantages as it resulted in considering the genre a source of low entertainment for the uneducated, lower classes. However, by the turn of the 21st century, critics started to allocate more importance to historical fiction, even though its popularity was still increasing (Johnson, 2009).

As a genre written in the present about the past, historical fiction is blatantly characterized by a "double temporal consciousness" (Kohlke & Gutleben, 2010, p. 2). In other words, the duality of the genre stems from the fact that its story is entirely set in the past, but it remains written in the present. Young (2011) has revealed that this sense of duality makes historical fiction relatable and guarantees the readers' interest in texts. Cooper and Short (2012) have confirmed that "this co-existence of two different historical moments that historical fictions reveal something crucial about each – the moment of production and the moment being (re) produced" (p. 7). This makes historical fiction belong to both the past and the present (Olk, 2017). Hence, the genre achieves duality and relatability, remaps the past, and reevaluates the present.

Neo-Victorian fiction is widely acknowledged as an emergent sub-genre of historical fiction with distinctive characteristics. The genre is not a mere narration of the 19th century. Instead, it revisits traditional perceptions and reinvents present ideologies through storytelling (Olk, 2017). Such novels are characterized by their adherence to Victorian conventions and styles and their simultaneous deviation from them. According to Kirchknopf (2008), such texts usually employ Victorian stylistics – such as a lengthy bildungsroman novel with a third-person narrative voice. However, these novels destabilize the order of age by introducing various narrators, meta-narratives, and vague endings (Olk, 2017). These added twists imply the vital relationship between past and present.

2.2.Feminism

Feminism is not a vintage term yet simple to define (Beasley, 1999). The term feminism was initially coined in 1837 by the French philosopher Charles Fourier. Delmar (1986) has stated that feminism aspires to empower women and improve their societal conditions. She has further described a feminist as one who comprehends women's suffering due to gender discrimination and that their conditions require profound change. Delmar (1986) also broadened feminism's scope by shedding light on the fact that it is not only a social movement but also a cultural and intellectual experience. Hence, she proposes that feminism is a concept that can combine different perceptions and ideologies. Jackson & Jones (1998) have emphasized this interdisciplinarity of feminism by asserting that feminism can further engender rich philosophies from permeating fields of knowledge. They add that feminist writers challenge the norms of many subjects, and in so doing, they spread feminist ideologies

everywhere. This illustrates that feminist thought does not reside in a single subject but rather spreads over all fields of knowledge to validate women's empowerment everywhere.

A part of feminism's interdisciplinarity reveals itself in the broad interest many feminist novelists have shown regarding historical fiction, particularly neo-Victorian novels. King (2005) has argued that Feminist writers give special significance to the Victorian era, and they tend to set their novels in this period to raise questions concerned with gender and injustices. Additionally, Johnson (2009) has revealed that one of the trends in historical fiction is to include a powerful heroine. By making a woman's experience radical and dominant in a text, the writer manages to reestablish women's status in history instead of portraying them as victims to be sympathized with (King, 2005). Hence, historical fiction illustrates feminists' rejection of women's marginalization, which has been long embedded in history and mainstream thought.

2.3. Trauma Theory

Trauma theory has witnessed a groundbreaking evolution in literary criticism and an abundance of publications since 1996 (Balaev, 2014). Thus, many broad definitions and characteristics of trauma and trauma fiction have emerged. Caruth (1996) has provided a general definition of trauma as the description of "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (p. 11). She has further indicated that trauma is a psychological rather than a physical injury. Balaev (2014) has suggested that although trauma causes a lot of mental disturbances to all people, the results of traumatic experiences vary according to the culture in which it occurs. Balaev (2008) has emphasized that trauma can cause great fear that can lead to an identity crisis. Caruth (1996) has highlighted a direct connection between traumatic experience and literature. Therefore, a traumatic novel expresses an experience of defeat and anxiety (Balaev, 2008). Research has disclosed a direct connection between place, trauma, and recovery (Balaev, 2008). Accordingly, he has stressed that trauma impacts the formation of personhood.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1. The *Essex Serpent*: A Neo-Victorian Context

The Essex Serpent can be relevant to modern readers while maintaining historical accuracy. It is considered historical fiction, particularly neo-Victorian literature. The choice of the Victorian setting is at the center of the narrative and significantly impacts the novel. Victorian society is usually stereotyped as one of the outdated traditions and mannerisms, and its culture is often contrasted with that of the modern age. However, the novel suggests a possibility that everything, including today's modernity, started in the Victorian period. In an interview with *Author Story*, Perry (2016) asserts that:

People today tend to think of the Victorian Age as being ancient and quaint, but in reality, by the 1890s, England was already modern, with the London Underground already having been in operation for thirty years, anesthesia was given for dental work, and to pregnant women for delivering babies, the Embankment in London was lit up with electric lights, and there was a lot of social and intellectual ideas that were coming into play, such as feminism and Marxism. (para. 3)

Namely, despite the general misconception of the era, Victorians are significant contributors to the latest evolution of modern society. In another interview with *The Guardian*, Perry reveals that she has wanted to "write a version of the 19th century that, if you blinked, looked a little like ours... The more I looked, the more I found that not a great deal has changed" (Saner, 2018, para. 5). This demonstrates that, while the text is relevant now, it remains faithful to its setting.

Thus, Perry's (2016) novel signifies that the innovativeness of the Victorian age has remapped and reconstructed what has become today's modern society.

The Essex Serpent's appropriation of neo-Victorianism as a sub-genre facilitates its portrayal of women's emancipation. Olk (2017) reveals that the heterogeneity of the Victorian age facilitates the rewriting of events in a Victorian novel to make it suitable for the ideology of the 20th and the 21st centuries. This increasing focus on the Victorian era implies a connection and relationship with the past because we desire to learn about our past as modern readers (Llewellyn, 2008). As a novel written in the twenty-first century thematizing different positions of Victorian women, *The Essex Serpent* provides a traceable link between women's conditions now and during the Victorian period. Thus, the novel implies that the acts toward women's liberation have taken baby steps since the Victorian period. In *A Living, Natural World Woven with the Uncanny*, Perry (2016) confirms that women did not "suddenly appear as cogent, independent beings in 1918; they have always been that way" (Campbell, 2016, para. 2). Additionally, the novel illustrates a truthful and humane representation of women whose nature is more complicated than the contradicting stereotypes, the headstrong, and the weak. In an interview in *The Independent*, Perry (2016) asserted that "women can be complicated and nuanced and, yes, also be frail and feeble" (Williams, 2018, para. 25). Thus, the novel's return to the past does not 'invent' independent solid female characters that are later "boxed in as historical fiction" (Williams, 2018, para. 19). Instead, it presents a credible voice to the account of women's past by shedding light on the complex nature of women and underlining their initial endeavors towards freedom.

Despite its external Victorian fictional frame, *The Essex Serpent's* internal features and details are subverted to 19th-century literary conventions. This can be illustrated in the novel's inconsistent adoption of Victorian fictional norms, which enhances the double temporality of the text. For instance, the novel is lengthy and follows a chronological order. Its narrative also uses a third-person voice to narrate the protagonist's coming-of-age story, which indicates the employment of bildungsroman, a popular Victorian genre. Additionally, the set of characters presented at the novel's beginning suggests a conventional Victorian romantic plot that could typically include marriage, catastrophes, and death (Buckley, 2018). However, the novel's employment of Victorian tropes and formulas is inconsistent (Olk, 2017, p. 36). For instance, the narrative voice is continually broken down by letters and diary entries written in the first person. Also, instead of having a closed ending that defines the characters' fates, the novel features "no happy ending, there is no death or marriage" (Buckley, 2018, p. 8). In her interview with *Waterstones*, Perry (2016) affirms that "Part of my desire to subvert the Victorian novel was to put in some of your usual hoary old tropes and then subvert them" (Campbell, 2016, *Themes of Victorian Literature Become Entirely New*, para. 3). This subversion reflects the unique doubleness of historical fiction which thematizes the past as a means of examining and commenting on the present.

The text's simultaneous integration and subversion of Victorian elements parallel the portrayal of women characters who turn out to be the opposite of their depicted stereotypes. The novel introduces a classic repertoire of Victorian female characters: a widow, a governess, and a housewife, and then 'subverts' the common connotations their social positions evoke. Cora is not the "lady of studied melancholy, who would peck at her food, and sometimes fall silent to turn her wedding ring, or open a locket to gaze on the face of the departed" (Perry, 2016, pp. 20-21). She is too young to be a widow and a happy one at that. Instead of the typical stereotype of the Victorian widow as an idle wanderer who looks out for gossip, Cora pursues her interest in scientific discovery following the steps of Mary Anning. Her scientific pursuits emphasize that the lives of Victorian women do not only revolve around marriage and domestic life.

Another example of the inconsistent portrayal of Victorian women is the governess of Cora's son, Martha, who is not a typical Victorian governess who would gladly marry up her class to be free of financial burdens and limited wages. She refuses Spencer's proposal for marriage to adopt the cause of the working class, devoting her life to supporting the cause of

the proletariat. Nevertheless, Martha does not consent to the norm of 'contenting herself with marriage' even when offered to her by a working-class man whom she would not despise for his fortune. When Eduard, a working-class man she has been caring for, proposes to her, she refuses him. She justifies her refusal by explaining that this marriage can cause her to lose her autonomy and grant him all the freedom he desires. She further claims that "it is a poor woman whose ambition is only to be loved. She has better things to be getting on with" (Perry, 2016, p. 411). This stresses her defiance of the current inequality of patriarchal authority, which will constrain her from carrying on with her ambitions to the marginal state of domesticity and reproduction.

Stella Ransome, the vicar's wife, is another example that demonstrates an outstanding individuality that is not commonly associated with "what one expects of a clergyman's wife" (Perry, 2016, p. 219). She does not lead a selfless life in which she obsesses over her children and sticks to the doctrine and views of her husband. Instead, Stella accumulates a collection of blue-colored objects with which she seems to "venerate a series of sensations" (Perry, 2016, p. 219). Additionally, the text features a series of diary entries in which she declares she is making her own "holy book with blue ink on the blue page and stitched up in threads of blue as blue-blooded veins" (Perry, 2016, p. 277). This quote underlines that by collecting and meditating on blue-colored objects, Stella forms her own identity that does not comply with her husband's status as a clergyman. Furthermore, she refers to her diary as her holy book, which implies her reference to an equal correlation between her status and her husband's. This underlines a version of women empowered by their ideology, identity, ambitions, and sense of self. Consequently, *The Essex Serpent* remaps and reconstructs the common perception of women in the past as passive and naïve by portraying women who possess agency and break down social norms.

3.2. Social Misogyny

The representation of female characters in *The Essex Serpent* illustrates misogyny during the Victorian period by depicting how 19th-century societies perceived women as subordinates who possessed second-rate traits and should best be restricted to the domestic sphere. Laycock (1860) claims that:

Woman's excellence over man is not, in truth, in the manifestation of force of intellect and energy of will, but in the sphere of wisdom, and love, and moral power. The natural history of man is in accordance with these scientific data. The less intellectual and physical energy of woman has determined her social position in all ages and all races. (as cited in King, 2005, p. 24)

This quote indicates that Victorians limited intellect to men. Accordingly, the text reflects society's rejection of women exhibiting intellectual energy.' Charles Ambrose, a friend of Cora's, writes a letter describing her as "an unusual woman" who has "an exceptional – really I might even say a masculine! – intelligence" (p.65). Describing her intelligence as 'masculine' demonstrates the male-centeredness of Victorian society and restricts intellectuality to men.

The novel also emphasizes how men disapprove of women's possessing any intellectual or political grind. Martha is a socialist who endeavors to change the situation of London's public housing. Despite that, she is obliged to use the help of an aristocrat who eventually falls in love with her, declaring her inability to manage independently. She declares: "I am a woman and a poor one – they might as well cut out my tongue" (Perry, 2016, p. 283). Martha plainly states, "I'm a woman," to justify her position as one falling under the control of a patriarchal society. She is also careful to hide her socialist enthusiasm lest he seizes the opportunity to help her: "Martha smiled as well as she could because Spencer had withdrawn a little, as if suddenly uncertain of his attachment to a woman who'd bellow at her betters" (p. 284). Indeed,

he thinks of her ‘interest’ as driven by her sentimental nature, “her tender heart, her good hard conscience” (p. 306). This verifies that the novel’s representation of Victorian society restricts women to emotional rather than intellectual power, which limits their social roles.

The Essex Serpent highlights how, according to Victorian conventions, women’s appropriateness correlates with a specific dress code that reinforces their feminine identity. They are restricted to a “prescribed female ideal” (King, 2005, p. 94). This constitutes a problematic social phenomenon. Perry’s (2016) novel reflects the misogynistic standards of women’s clothing to which they must comply or otherwise their social status is threatened. For example, Cora constantly rebels against the Victorian ideal dress code. She refuses to “wear anything that might restrict her waist,” “raked her hands through her hair and stuffed it into a hat,” and “hadn’t worn jewelry since she tugged the pearls from her ears a month before” (Perry, 2016, p. 46). By freeing herself from such an obligation, Cora begins to think of herself as a woman: “Sometimes I forget that I’m a woman at least – I forget to THINK OF MYSELF AS A WOMAN. All the obligations and comforts of womanhood seem to have nothing to do with me now” (Perry, 2016, p. 70). Hence, Cora loses her sense of womanhood because her society indicates that to be a woman means to dress following specific parameters. This emphasizes that the imperative compliance with the Victorian dress code is portrayed as a mesogenic notion that undermines the formation of women’s identity.

The novel sheds light on how Cora cannot escape the scrutiny and objectification of the male gaze by neglecting the standard dress code. Will, the village’s vicar, even when declaring his love for her, cannot set aside his biases against her unfeminine hair and clothes: “And there you were – and from your hair which is never tidy to your man’s clothes, I’ve never liked the look of you” (Perry, 2016, p. 259). He further criticizes her choice of clothes by exclaiming, “you think because you wear a man’s coat, I might forget what you are?” (Perry, 2016, p. 353). His confrontation shows that despite Cora’s disregard for feminine ideals, her desire “to be nothing but an intellect, disembodied, untroubled,” she remains the subject of the objectifying male gaze. According to Gilmour (1993), such conflicts have been the typical results of the “inner struggle of both men and women to cope with the demands of powerful but failing cultural stereotypes” (as cited in King, 2005, p. 32). Finally, this demonstrates Cora’s conflict between transcending social expectations of womanhood and maintaining her unique feminine identity.

Perry’s (2016) novel provides a richly contextualized account of women’s marginalization during the Victorian era. Part of women’s normalized subordination has resulted from being viewed “as partial beings” (Beasley, 1999, p. 7). This misogynistic view of women dominated much of nineteenth-century England’s mainstream of thought. Correspondingly, the text portrays women as ‘possessions’ belonging to men: “all the years of what ought to have been her youth she’d been in someone’s possession, and now, with hardly a few months’ freedom to her name, someone wanted to put their mark on her again” (Perry, 2016, p. 292). Furthermore, the social norm of being *owned* by men plays a significant role in increasing women’s marginalization, for it maintains a masculine hierarchy. Martha highlights her comradeship with Edward, who goes down to a lower rank of manhood when he is stabbed in the heart and keeps to his sick bed:

He’d never been much in the company of women: they’d been prized objects to be bickered over, and rarely more than that. Now, he sought no other company but hers, and could scarcely name the boys and men who’d once clustered round his Holborn desk. She seemed to him neither man nor woman, but some other sex entirely. (Perry, 2016, p. 292)

This quote further indicates women's dehumanizing marginalized status, which matches that of inanimate objects. Edward's comradeship with Martha has set them in equal positions, a rare situation in Victorian society. Thus, Edward fails to place her among the social hierarchy since women tend to maintain a lower rank.

The text critiques women's marginalization in Victorian England by emphasizing the resistance of female characters to such subordination. King (2005) reveals that "the stereotypical ideal Victorian woman" is one of a "relatively low intelligence, passive, innocent, intuitive and naïve" (p. 93). Accordingly, such a stereotype supports the notion of complementarity, which views women "as the necessary counterpart to masculinity" and was highly popular in the Victorian period (King, 2005, p. 29). The text exemplifies the marginal state that female characters face and defy. For instance, it reveals how viewing women as naïve guarantees men the privilege of acting on their behalf. When Stella is diagnosed with tuberculosis, doctors cast her away and console her husband to choose the nature of her treatment. She attempts to resist the force of this patriarchal authority by crying to her husband: "Aren't you going to ask me? Will – isn't this body mine? Isn't it my disease?" (Perry, 2016, p. 265). This quote shows Stella's awareness of being treated as inferior. Additionally, when the colleague of Cora's husband criticizes her scientific endeavors, she confronts him: "What do you expect me to do? Sit at home planning supper and waiting for a new pair of shoes to arrive?" (Perry, 2016, p. 50). This illustrates Cora's defiance of women's subordinating roles by exposing their rebellious nature.

3.3. Trauma and Identity

The Essex Serpent illustrates trauma and its effects on the portrayal of identity and the self by focusing on the outcomes of the abuse Cora is exposed to by her husband and the results of his death on her. The plot highlights her transformation by examining the disturbances she faces during her marriage, the changes imposed on her identity, and her sense of self. As Balaev (2008) has stated, "trauma creates speechless fright that divides or destroys the identity" (p. 149). Accordingly, such a division in the identity of the trauma victim is evident in the novel. For instance, Cora's sense of her identity is destroyed at the beginning as she believes her identity has been entirely formed by her husband: "Oh, he made me – yes," she said, and memory unfurled like smoke from a blown candle" (Perry, 2016, p. 17). Later, the novel draws attention to her diverging identities. For example, she is described as many Coras: "Whichever Cora you are" (Perry, 2016, p. 352) or one with multiple, often contradictory personalities: "Martha found that no sooner had she grown accustomed to one Cora, another would emerge" (Perry, 2016, p. 26). By providing an erratic representation of Cora's identity, the novel illustrates the impact trauma has on the minds of its victims.

Perry's (2016) novel portrays the chaotic consciousness of the trauma victim through the employment of paradoxes. Due to trauma's nature of being "a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (Caruth, 1996, p. 3), it results in "cognitive chaos and the possible division of consciousness" (Balaev, 2008, p. 150). This cognitive chaos manifests later in the novel when Cora tries to make sense of her attachment to another man. She declares that:

I've never found ways to explain to myself what it is that exists here in our letters or when we sit together in warm rooms or go walking out in the woods, and I am not sure it's necessary, not even now when I still feel your imprint in me ... but for now that word's the best that I can do ... We are cleaved together – we are cleaved apart – everything that draws me to you is everything that drives me away. (p. 395)

This quote features a set of paradoxes reflecting Cora's disordered mentality, resulting from her traumatizing attachment to her husband. Notably, her chaotic consciousness is apparent in the continuous employment of contradictions. For example, the novel's last lines provide a collection of contradictory statements: "I am torn, and I am mended – I want everything and need nothing – I love you and I am content without you" (Perry, 2016, p. 418). Thus, the text reflects the irremediable trauma inflicted on Cora's consciousness.

The Essex Serpent utilizes the element of place to reveal the protagonist's traumatic experience. It further relates place to traumatic memory and its workings. Gardiner and Musto (2015) define places as "spaces with an identity ascribed by human experience" (p.107). This definition illustrates the importance of connecting human experience to a place. Notably, the representation of place in the novel is similar to that of a person with an identity that constitutes personhood and awareness (Balaev, 2008). Consequently, highlighting place as a vital element stresses how identity is formed through its relation to a physical location. Trigg (2009) further proposes that place and its features are connected to events that occurred in it and caused the formation of its characteristics. This leads a person to seek an encounter with a place to revive or ignore trauma memories. Trigg's assertions further demonstrate the interconnected relationship between place and memory. Complying with the nature of trauma that is "only known through repetitive flashbacks that literally re-enact the event because the mind cannot represent it otherwise" (Balaev, 2008, p. 151), trauma requires a medium to evoke and elicit a traumatic response. Thus, the text provides 'place' as a means through which traumatic memory is produced.

The Essex Serpent reveals how Cora relates her suffering to her marriage house, as a spatial setting where she has been subjected to domestic abuse that resulted in her trauma. Balaev (2008) asserts that "contemporary trauma novel explores the effects of suffering on the individual and community in terms of the character's relation to place" (p. 160). The text complies with viewing traumatic experience as interconnected with the place of the character's victimization. For instance, Cora expresses feelings of freedom and liberation when she abandons her house to search for living fossils: "discovering that the unease that once accompanied the image of the high white house on Foulis Street had been left behind, dropped somewhere beneath the black pews of the church" (Perry, 2016, p.25), and "her years of marriage had so degraded her expectation of happiness that to sit cradling a teacup with no thought for what waited behind the curtains on Foulis Street seemed little short of miraculous" (Perry, 2016, p.55). Hence, her feelings demonstrate that her house symbolizes her traumatizing imprisonment, and its abandonment signifies her freedom.

Cora's spatial movements throughout the novel signify her perception of herself and her traumatic past. Besides, it illustrates her attempts to come to terms with her abusive marriage. Mainly, the novel uses the protagonist's current location to reveal her "process of coming to terms with the dynamics of memory that inform the new perceptions of the self" (Balaev, 2008, p. 150). At the novel's beginning, Cora leaves London and moves to rural Colchester. She "removed from London's gaze had abandoned her dutiful mourning and receded ten years to a merrier self" (Perry, 2016, p. 39). This demonstrates her happiness upon leaving her house. Her movement also represents a "selective deployment of attention (avoiding cues or situations liable to provide cues to remembering) and self-distraction" (Kirmayer, 1996, p. 12). She represses her painful memories by exploring "the oaky Essex fields" (Perry, 2016, p. 38). Later, when tension rises between her and Will, Cora writes him a letter describing "what it had been like – not just the death (see how easy it is to say!) but everything before" (Perry, 2016, p. 250). She concludes by going "back to London for a while," yet she does not return to Foulis St house, claiming that "it isn't home anymore" (Perry, 2016, p. 251). This vagary underlines the surfacing memories of Cora's past. According to Kirmayer (1996), such "'intrusions' of traumatic memory can make the self-alien until the quotidian self can be reasserted only by isolating the unbearable feeling" (p.20). Accordingly, Cora attempts to overshadow the painful memories of her

marriage by leaving Essex and residing back in London. Thus, Perry's (2016) text sheds light on how changes in the protagonist's location evoke various responses to traumatic memory.

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, this paper debates that *The Essex Serpent* is a text that preserves its representation of its Victorian setting and is still relevant to modern and post-modern readers. Accordingly, drawing on neo-Victorianism as a genre attracts attention to a vital point in women's history. The research argues that the novel provides a commentary on the present by thematizing the past. It appropriates subversive modern analysis to Victorian themes and perceptions. Thus, this study examines the novel's depiction of the misogynistic perception of women characters, such as associating them with sentimentality, restricting them to the domestic sphere, and limiting their dress code. The analysis concludes that such perceptions shed light on Victorian patriarchy that causes women's marginal status. Furthermore, the research analyses the representations of trauma in the novel and its relation to identity. Finally, this paper focuses on the interrelation between the spatial setting and trauma by demonstrating how *place* can provoke various responses by inducing traumatic memories. The novel wittily indicates that women in the past are more potent than we think, while women in the present are not as empowered as they may seem. It makes its reader live in the past, view its societies, and experience its norms, symbolizing a journey via a time machine. At the same time, the subversion of the novel destabilizes its trip to the past. The text is not only an expression of the writer's ability to rewrite the past but also an opportunity and an invitation to readers to step into history and participate in reinterpreting its features and reevaluating its norms. Mainly, the intertextuality and the duality of consciousness in historical fiction provide a chance to redefine our present, ourselves, and our identity against all these perceptions.

REFERENCES

- A. (n.d.). *Sarah Perry on Releasing the Essex Serpent Legend and Book*. <http://authorstoryinterviews.blogspot.com/2017/07/sarah-perry-on-releasing-essex-serpent.html>
- Baker, J. S. (2015). *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Historical Fiction (ALA Readers' Advisory Series)* (1st ed.). ALA Editions.
- Balaev, M. (2008). Trends in Literary Trauma Theory. *Mosaic (Winnipeg)*, 41(2), 149. <https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-235281138/trends-in-literary-trauma-theory>
- Balaev, M. (2014). Literary Trauma Theory Reconsidered. *Palgrave Macmillan UK EBooks*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137365941_1
- Beasley, C. (1999). *What is Feminism: An Introduction to Feminist Theory* (First). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Buckley, L. M. (2018). Toward a New Mythology of Eve: Women, Men and Friendship in Victorian Literature as Seen Through Sarah Perry's *The Essex Serpent*. *Georgetown University-Graduate School of Arts & Sciences*. <https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/1054961>
- Cain, S. (2018, February 22). *The Essex Serpent adds top British Book Award to prize haul*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/09/the-essex-serpent-adds-top-british-book-award-to-prize-haul>

- Caruth, C. (2016). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Amsterdam University Press.
- Charles, R., Charles, R., & Charles, R. (2017, June 5). *The most delightful heroine since Elizabeth Bennet*. Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/the-most-delightful-heroine-since-elizabeth-bennet/2017/06/05/64805410-4795-11e7-98cd-af64b4fe2dfc_story.html?noredirect=on
- Cooper, K., & Short, E. (2012). *The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Delmar, R. (2018). What Is Feminism? *Routledge EBooks*, 5–28. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429494277-2>
- Feminism and Women's Writing: An Introduction*. (2018). Edinburgh University Press.
- Gardiner, E., & Musto, R. G. (2015). *The Digital Humanities: A Primer for Students and Scholars*. Cambridge University Press.
- Jackson, S., & Jones, J. H. (1998). Chapter 1. Thinking for Ourselves: An Introduction to Feminist Theorising. *Edinburgh University Press EBooks*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474469500-001>
- Johnson, S. L. (2009). *Historical Fiction II: A Guide to the Genre*. Libraries Unlimited.
- Johnston, C. O. M. A. R. E. L. A. J., & Wiegandt, K. (2017). *The Return of the Historical Novel?: Thinking about Fiction and History After Historiographic Metafiction (Britannica Et Americana. 3. Folge)*. Universitätsverlag Winter.
- King, J. (2005). *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kirchknopf, A. (2008). (Re) workings of Nineteenth-Century Fiction: Definitions, Terminology, Contexts. *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1(1), 53–80.
- Kirmayer, L. J. (2016). Landscapes of memory: Trauma, narrative, and dissociation. In *Tense past* (pp. 173–198). Routledge.
- Kohlke, M., & Gutleben, C. (2010). Bearing After-Witness to the Nineteenth Century. *BRILL EBooks*, 1–34. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789042032316_002
- Llewellyn, M. (2008). What is Neo-Victorian Studies? *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1(1), 164–185. <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/107314/>
- Perry, S. (2018). *The Essex Serpent: A Novel*. HarperCollins.
- Saner, E. (2018, February 22). The Essex Serpent author Sarah Perry: 'Kids at School Found Me Strange. I Didn't Mind.' *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jul/31/the-essex-serpent-author-sarah-perry-kids-at-school-found-me-strange-i-didnt-mind>
- Trigg, D. (2009). The Place of Trauma: Memory, Hauntings, and the Temporality of Ruins. *Memory Studies*, 2(1), 87–101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698008097397>
- Walters, M. (2006). *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction* (Reprint). Oxford University Press.
- Waterstones*. (n.d.-a). <https://www.waterstones.com/blog/q-and-a-sarah-perry>

Sarah Perry's *The Essex Serpent*: A Contemporary Remap of Women's Identity

Waterstones. (n.d.-b). <https://www.waterstones.com/book/melmoth/sarah-perry/9781788160674>

Williams, H. (2018, May 24). Sarah Perry on Inventing her Own Gothic Monster for New Novel *Melmoth*. *The Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/sarah-perry-melmoth-essex-serpent-author-sexism-publishing-strong-female-characters-a8362006.html>

Young, S. (2011). Based on a True Story: Contemporary Historical Fiction and Historiographical Theory. *Otherness: Essays & Studies*, 2.1, 1–17.