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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**A Critical Stylistic Study of Emily St. John Mandel's Sea of Tranquility**

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**| ABSTRACT**

The current study endeavors to scrutinize the bestseller *Sea of Tranquility* by Emily St. John Mandel from a critical stylistics perspective. More precisely, two important tools, namely naming and describing and representing actions/events are implemented in the study. Accordingly, the current paper sets itself the task of answering the following questions: (1) how do the naming and describing strategies build and naturalize the experiences of crisis and vulnerability; (2) how do linguistic decisions influence the representation of agency, responsibility, and power relations in the novel. As such, it is hypothesized that (1) the use of abstract nouns, nominalization, and generalized categorization is prevalent in the novel to help put the phenomena of pandemics and societal collapse in the context of an imminent and depersonalized one; (2) material processes are quite often represented in passive or agentless forms, which leads to systematic backgrounding of human agency and foregrounding of systems, technologies, and historical forces as the main actors. To answer the above questions and test the hypotheses, the study adopts the critical stylistic model presented by Jeffries (2010) to analyze extracts from the novel. Findings of the analysis validate the two hypotheses showing a coherent ideological orientation where crises are being introduced as inevitable circumstances and not as something produced socially and where the power is also diffused and inaccessible.

**| KEYWORDS**

Ideology, naming and describing, power, nominalization, sea of tranquility, transitivity

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**Introduction**

Language has a key role in the social reality construction, the distribution of responsibility, and encoding ideology through literary texts. In her work, Jeffries (2010) introduced Critical Stylistics, which is a systematic framework of revealing ideological meanings embedded in the linguistic choices of individuals combining the knowledge on stylistics and on critical discourse analysis. In contrast to traditional stylistics, which tends to address aesthetic impacts, Critical Stylistics is more concerned with the manner in which the textual structures (e.g. naming strategies, transitivity, and agency) dispose the reader in terms of ideologies and influence the meaning of power, responsibility and social relations (Jeffries, 2010). It is an especially useful method when studying contemporary fiction, in which institutional pressures and general crises are often articulated indirectly or naturalized.

Emily St. John Mandel is a significant modern novelist whose novels are a constant exploration of the issues of disruption, temporality and the vulnerability of humans in the interconnected global systems. Her fiction frequently explores how people can learn how to maneuver through historical discontinuity, whether it is pandemics, environmental and technological changes. *Sea of Tranquility* is a blend of two or more stories of various centuries and places, creating the connection between individual experience and the crisis of the whole world, between outbreaks and environmental disasters, technological dominance. The reserved narrational style of the novel and the focus on the usual human reaction to the unusual situations have become the subject of considerable critical interest (James, 2022).

This paper deploys a Critical Stylistics model to the novel *Sea of Tranquility* to discuss how language decisions help to build up crisis, displacement and human vulnerability. The analysis explores the naturalization of crises and distribution of agency and responsibility between human and non-human actors by focusing on the tools of *naming and describing* and *transitivity*. In such a manner, the paper shows how the stylistic patterns used by Mandel mirror and support modern ideological suppositions of inevitability, systemic force and perceptions of boundaries to human action in the midst of global interference.

## **1. Theoretical Underpinnings**

### **1.1 Critical Stylistics**

Critical stylistics is a term used to denote a domain of stylistic study that examines how social meanings are made, expressed and negotiated using language. Critical linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) are the main theoretical foundations of this approach as they offer the theoretical framework (Norgaard et al., 2010: 11). Lesley Jeffries is credited with the most influential role in the development of the critical stylistics approach, which is based on the approaches of CDA to a significant extent to explain the frequently hidden connections between language, power, and ideology (Evans and Schuller, 2015: 132).

Critical stylistics aims at answering the question of what a text is doing by applying to a highly systematic collection of linguistic analytical instruments in order to reveal the ideological assumptions of both literary and non-literary texts. It is theorized on the notion of grammar as a social semiotic developed by Halliday and on the principles of critical linguistics on which the very concept of CDA is built. Jeffries (2007) has coined the term critical stylistics in one of her explorations of dominant discourses about females, which includes ways in which linguistic practices may regulate and construct the lived experiences of women in the society (Ulrike, 2013: 75).

Among the most significant objectives of critical stylistics is to incorporate the strengths of analysis of stylistics and CDA by means of which authors incorporate ideological stances and more general social meanings in their texts, canonical and non-canonical. Although CDA mainly focuses on the uncovering of the opaque manner in which language is involved in social relations of power and domination it has been used mostly on the factual texts, especially on the political and media discourse (Coffey, 2013: 30).

In comparison, stylistics has conventionally been concerned with the study of the literary language, the study of the connection between the linguistic selections and the aesthetic manifestation, and the ideological repercussions can also arise as a result of such studies. Critical stylistics responds to the conceptual divide in the approach to stylistics as a study of textual form and CDA as a study of ideology by offering a comprehensive approach. The method was developed at the University of Huddersfield but initially issued when Jeffries published *Critical Stylistics: The Power of English* (2010), which is the main model used in the current paper.

According to Jeffries, the main role of critical stylistics is to package the main mechanisms that texts constitute a representation of reality (Jeffries, 2010: 14). The model presents a system of analytical instruments which are expected to be more systematic and comprehensive than the ones commonly used in CDA, but not purported to be exhaustive (Jeffries, 2010: 1). Simpson in his writings like *Language, Ideology and Point of View* (1993) had already examined the issue of style and the linkage of style with linguistics and ideology, and suggest analytical methods to deal critically with the text before Jeffries wrote about it. Nevertheless, one of the contributions made by Jeffries is her synthesis of CDA and stylistics, where specific focus is made on the linguistic construction of social meaning and the establishment of explicitly defined analytical equipment (Dorpar, 2015: 1).

These tools have been described as textual conceptual functions (TCFs) which are designed to reveal the implicit ideologies which the text producers produce by way of the linguistic options which they make. They provide a more organized and elaborated methodological framework as compared to the ones that have existed traditionally in CDA (Jeffries, 2010: 1-2). In line with the principles of stylistics, critical stylistics relies on the knowledge of formal linguistics both as the starting point of textual analysis and as a continuation of the descriptive analysis of the text as well as the canonical literature (Alaghbary, 2014: 156).

### **1.2 Ideology**

Critical stylistics believes that ideology influences all texts either knowingly or unknowingly; therefore, it is concerned with prying out the hidden and usually hidden ideological implications behind discourse and texts. To this effect, it provides a systemic collection of analytical instruments where analysts can detect and elucidate implicit ideologies in texts in a principled and methodical way. Among the most important contributions of critical stylistics is the fact that it provides a more detailed and structured analysis framework as compared to the one traditionally provided by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Olaluwoye, 2015: 88).

It is imperative to point out that both discourse analysts and linguists, not to mention stylisticians, tend to view all discourse as ideological in nature. This stance can thus be regarded as a kind of fundamental assumption and not a controversial argument.

Nevertheless, the given understanding does not mean that the concept of ideology should be reduced to a strictly politically motivated agenda or self-serving motive (Jeffries, 2010: 8).

Instead, ideology is a wide concept of belief systems, values and assumptions that provide meaning-making processes. Besides, it should be noted that not all ideologies are alike in their nature or impact. Some of them can be abusive or destructive whereas others can be moral, positive, or culturally based. The main fact is that no discourse can exist without ideas and assumptions; on this basis, all discourse is ideological. Ideologies are therefore mediated by way of language and can be expressed openly or silently in texts (ibid.).

## 2. Model of Analysis

Jeffries suggests a group of analytical instruments, the set of which covers issues akin to those of Fairclough model of Critical Discourse Analysis only with more accent on the stylistic and linguistic elements. Jeffries (2010: 15) claims that these tools will provide answers to the main question of what a text is doing. The framework contains but is not restricted to the following tools:

- **Naming and Describing:** It is the linguistic processes by which individuals, places, and objects are referred to and described in a discourse.
- **Representing Actions and Events:** how texts articulate what is done (actions), what happens (events) or what exists (states).
- **Equating and Contrasting:** the building of perceived equivalences and opposition according to the text or the producer of the text.
- **Exemplifying and Enumerating:** the ideological impacts that are accomplished by giving examples or lists.
- **Prioritizing:** the mechanisms of foregrounding, backgrounding or commenting on particular information.
- **Negating:** the statement of realities in terms of what does not happen.
- **Hypothesizing:** the application of modality to make hypothetical or non-factual situations.
- **Representation of the Speech and thoughts of Others:** the realization of the voices and perspective of other participants with the narratorial voice of the text.

According to Jeffries (2010), these functions create a perception of the world (or text world) which mirrors the sense of the producer (or narrator). The textual-conceptual functions explain the way entities are named and described, the way of how actions and states are ideationally represented, the way of how relations of equivalence and contrast are encoded, the contributions of presuppositions and implicatures to meaning constructions.

## 3. Data and Analysis

### 3.1 Data Description

A Canadian novelist and a Canadian essayist, Emily St. John Mandel was born in 1979 in Merville, British Columbia, Canada. Her work has six novels, as well as a number of essays. Her most recognized works include *Station Eleven* (2014), which was awarded with the National Book Award and PEN/Faulkner Award and received the 2015 Arthur C. Clarke Award and was translated into thirty-three languages. Her novel *The Glass Hotel* (2020) was picked by the former U.S. President Barack Obama as one of his favorite books of 2020, and shortlisted in the Scotiabank Giller Prize, and published in twenty-one languages. *Sea of Tranquility* (2022) has recently been called by Mandel a semi-autobiographical story, based on her personal experience in the COVID-19 pandemic. It is worth mentioning that Mandel started working with the pandemic narratives as early as 2014 in *Station Eleven*, which describes the consequences of a widespread influenza pandemic and found new significance and criticism amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Canadian Encyclopedia, 2023).

*Sea of Tranquility* is a complex story made of interwoven narratives developing in various timelines offering human experience in repetitive times of crisis. This novel revolves around the lives of four main characters including Edwin St. Andrew, Mirella Kessler, Olive Llewellyn, and Gaspéry-Jacques Roberts, who may be living in different historical times, but have strong thematic similarities in their lives. The novel, in these characters, has captured the lived realities or instances, and existential issues that resonate with modern man. As the reader moves along the story, he or she is exposed to some speculative details like lunar colonies which are put in domes that simulate the atmosphere of the earth as well as the unexpected technological developments (Theroux, 2022).

The novel is filled with the feeling of tragedy as people have to deal with pandemics, overpopulation and existential threats. Every generation believes that their historical moment is potentially apocalyptic, and each generation has to deal and compromise with its own set of challenges. Probably one of the most interesting aspects of the novel is its seemingly prophetic nature, which is typical of the rest of the literature Mandel uses. The way she writes is always in anticipation of how the events that appear inconsequential to us in daily life are interconnected: the intersecting of remote characters, the repetition of artistic motifs in daily life, the historical repetition of events that happen to us over different periods of time. The fact that *Sea of Tranquility* foresaw a

global crisis in the present days may therefore be interpreted as an expansion of the Mandel narrative technique as opposed to randomness. The novel is animated by an interest in more intricate patterns and relationships and, like *Station Eleven*, the novel begins with a naturalistic and rather accurate beginning, slowly sacrificing all-naturalistic measures to more and more unnatural ones. Finally, the idea that crisis is always a state of being of a human being is reinforced in *Sea of Tranquility*; this is the reason why this world is ever ending to someone. The echoes and repetitions of the novel can be compared to the ways people are trying to find sense and order in their own lives (Ibid.).

### **3.2 Method of Analysis**

In this paper, the Critical Stylistics framework by Jeffries (2010) is utilized to explore how linguistic options in *naming and describing*, as well as *transitivity*, may be used to construct an ideological narrative of crisis, agency, and temporality in the work *Sea of Tranquility* by Emily St. John Mandel.

### **3.3 Data Analysis**

#### **1. Naming and Describing**

Psychologically created and naturalized in *Sea of Tranquility*, crisis, displacement, and human vulnerability are stylistically achieved with the help of abstract nouns, nominalization, generalized categorization, and evaluative description. The novel also shows crises as diffuse conditions/states of being as opposed to presenting them as a consequence of given human/institutional action. The word panic, randomness, distance, chaos, all abstract nouns, turn the concrete experiences; the psychological breakdown, pandemic illness, spatial separation, into seemingly general and unavoidable phenomena. Nominalization also masks the agency, such as in phrases such as "had been made uninhabitable" or the cost of repair was considered prohibitive, where the processes are put into the foreground and the decision-makers are verbally left out.

By making mentions of groups like people, colonists, or the population, generalized categorization eliminates specificity and represents suffering as a collective, near-natural state of being. Descriptions based on evaluation, like that which describes illness as being chaotic or distance as being too much to bear, elicit emotional identification with vulnerability and at the same time deter critical questioning of its reasons. These stylistic devices, combined, create a culture of crisis and displacement as a fact of life to be accepted and thus, downplay the issues of responsibility and strengthen a culture of existential despair instead of social or political accountability.

Throughout *Sea of Tranquility*, the experiences of crisis and vulnerability are always called abstractly but not personalized. Crises are not events that are brought about by identifiable agents but rather aspects of conditions. In the Extract (1) below, the psychological breakdown of Edwin is not expressed in terms of what triggers the state, but in the terms of bodily conditions and abstract events:

*"When he returns to his senses he's on the beach, kneeling on hard stones, vomiting. He has a vague memory of having fought his way out of the forest in a blind panic, a nightmare of shadow and blurred green, branches lashing his face. He rises shakily, and walks to the water's edge."*

In this case, the abstract nouns of *panic* and *nightmare* are causally obscure. The forest is presented as too big element instead of a human-made environment. The crisis experience is internalized, naturalized, and made in line with the vulnerability of human fragility in contrast to social or institutional failure.

Likewise in Extract (2) environmental catastrophe is linguistically impersonalized:

*"There was substantial interest in immigration to the colony. Earth was so crowded by then, and such swaths of it had been rendered uninhabitable by flooding or heat. The colony's architects had set aside space for substantial residential development, which sold out quickly."*

The nominalized '*had been rendered uninhabitable*' eliminates agents. There are no governments, corporations and policies mentioned. Climate crisis has been packaged as a natural condition and not a resultant effect of human choice. This linguistic decision strengthens a fatalist ideology according to which the destruction seems inevitable. The abstraction is also used to construct pandemics as demonstrated in Extract (3), Olive states that disease scares us as it is unorganized and haphazard:

*"The truth is," Olive said, behind a lectern in Paris, "even now, all these centuries later, for all our technological advances, all our scientific knowledge of illness, we still don't always know why one person gets sick and another doesn't, or why one patient survives and another dies. Illness frightens us because it's chaotic. There's an awful randomness about it."*

The word 'chaotic' naturalizes the state of suffering as something uncontrollable and accidental. The concept of disease is presented in a rather metaphysical manner, which supports the notion that accountability does not matter. This demonstrates how the novel downplays the role of the institutions by using lexical abstraction.

In Extract (4), Olive reflects: The distance can be too much in case you allow yourself to contemplate it:

*"The distance is unbearable if you let yourself dwell on it." Her father's gaze was fixed on the road. "Here we are," he said. They were turning onto her parents' street, and there, so close, her mother stood in the doorway. Olive leaped down from the hovercraft the moment it stopped, and ran into her mother's arms"*

'Distance' is a noun in an abstract position which hides the political and technological systems that create an effect of distance between the planet Earth and the colonies. Suffering in the emotions is personalized and systemic ones are nameless.

Concerning the Underlying ideology behind these linguistic means, the net effect of these naming means is to create an ideology of existential inevitability, where the crisis is modeled as an elemental and unavoidable part of human existence. The novel may portray this as the problem of crisis being universal in that it cuts across the historical, social, and geographical delineations, argues that suffering is present to all people, no matter the context. Its impersonal representation, which is attained by means of abstraction, nominalization, eliminates obvious causes of action, and it introduces crises, including pandemics, displacement, and environmental collapse, as self-producing conditions, not the effects of human actions. Furthermore, keeping the political and institutional actors at bay, the narrative being in the detached nature systematically overwhelms the issues of responsibility, governance and power. This ideological positioning is highly successful in encouraging the reader to empathize, as it focuses on vulnerability and emotional appeal, making the reader relate to the experiences of the characters as they lose their identities and feel uncertain. Simultaneously, though, it implicitly discourages critical attention to structural inequalities and systems malfunctions, since suffering is not revealed as a social and avoidable injustice but is normalized as a human condition.

## 2. Representation of Actions and Events

The transitivity patterns are paramount in the construction of representations of agency, responsibility and power relations in the sense that they are used in the establishment of material processes, passive and agentless constructions and systematic backgrounding of human actors in *Sea of Tranquility*.

Material processes often attribute agency to non-human beings like technologies, systems or abstract forces as in descriptions of infrastructure that had failed or environments that had been made uninhabitable, and processes happen without recognizable human subjects. The passive and agentless forms also blur responsibility by not orienting it around decision-making but event outcomes and make it look like an event that is self-contained and inevitable as opposed to the event being a product of political or institutional actions. Through this, the human agency is always downplayed and individuals are placed in the role of being a reactive agent who suffers the repercussions instead of being the agent of change.

On the other hand, systems, technological networks, historical trajectories, and bureaucratic structures are predetermined as dominant forces which determine lived experience. This transitivity pattern forms an ideology where power is not centralized, and is largely unavailable, and serves to support a worldview of massive forces controlling reality and human intervention being restricted, thus naturalizing the domination of systems and discouraging critical questioning of the structures in power.

Mandel transitivity patterns often background systems, technologies or abstract forces as dominant agents of human actors. Technological failure, according to Extract (5), is as follows: the lighting system on the main dome had broken down. It is a material process that includes a non-human object (the lighting system).

*"The lighting system was meant to mimic the appearance of the sky as viewed from Earth—it was nice to look up and see blue, as opposed to looking up into the void—and when it failed there was no more false atmosphere, no more shifting pixelations to give the impression of clouds, no more carefully calibrated preprogrammed sunrises and sunsets, no more blue."*

There are no human designers, administrators, and governing bodies mentioned. The blame of the collapsing colony infrastructure is culturally washed away, and a technocratic philosophy of systems operating without human intervention is solidified as in Extract (6):

*"More seriously, the failure of the dome lighting removed the illusion of the twenty-four-hour day. Now the sun rose rapidly and spent two weeks crossing the sky, after which there were two straight weeks of night"*

Later in extract (7) the expense of repairing it was considered as prohibitive:

*"The cost of repair was deemed prohibitive. There was a degree of adaptation bedroom windows were outfitted with shutters, so people could sleep during the nights when the sun was out, and street lighting was improved for the days without sunlight—but property values declined"*

The passive construction leaves the decision-makers out. Who found the price excessively high? Governments? Corporations? The exclusion veils power relations and sets the economic decision as the neutral fact instead of ideological choices. Pandemics are framed in the same way as well. Olive recounts the outbreaks of the past

In Extract (8), Roman soldiers coming back to the capital after their siege took a new sickness home.

*"When the Antonine Plague raged through the Roman Empire," Olive told the audience, "the army was decimated. There were parts of the empire where one in three people died. Here's something interesting: the Romans wondered if they'd brought this calamity upon themselves, by their actions in the city of Seleucia."*

Though soldiers seem to be agents, the responsibility is instantly spread with historical distance and inevitability. The disease itself becomes the leading actor, which is supported in the future by: "the army was decimated" The clause in the passive form, decimated, takes away the agency and also highlights the effect rather than the cause.

Gasperi in Extract (9) below cogitates about the pre-pandemic society:

*"They were shaking hands, which even after all of his cultural-sensitivity training seemed like a bizarre thing to do in flu season, and kissing one another on the cheek. These people have no direct experience of pandemics, he reminded himself. None of them were old enough to remember the winter of 1918– 1919"*

In this case, pandemics are regarded as occurrences that are inflicted upon individuals, rather than products of governance, globalization and negligence. The transitivity pattern has human beings as responsive, rather than accountable.

In Extract (10), there is oblique description of violence: they heard the gunshots... but they could hear them clearly only in retrospect :

*"It was a bad half-mile. They had to walk under an overpass. The overpass scared Mirella, but in all the years she lived there, from when she was five until she dropped out of school and took a bus to New York City at sixteen, there was only one truly terrible incident. Mirella was nine, which made Susanna eleven, and they did hear the gunshots as the school bus pulled away, but the sounds were clear only in retrospect. In the moment, they looked at each other in the winter twilight and Susanna shrugged."*

The gunshots as an action are present without an actor. Violence has been made into an ambient event, which supports a worldview that danger is everywhere but causally opaque.

The ideology underlying transitivity in *Sea of Tranquility* is that of systemic inevitability and a loss of human agency where things seem to be done by forces outside the power of either an individual or a group of people. Focusing on passive structures, the narrative does not focus on actions or decision-makers, but on the results and consequences of the developments, social, environmental, and technological. This opinion is also supported by the regular foregrounding of technology and historical forces, where infrastructures, systems, and time paths are placed on the center of change and human characters are pushed to the periphery of effected change. Meanwhile, the repression of institutional actors, e.g., governments, corporations, or control agencies, removes loci of power and responsibility out of the text. These stylistic decisions combine to naturalize a world in which power spreads out, accountability is obscured and human agency is much limited and invites the readers to perceive crisis and change as the natural state of things instead of something that can be challenged or interceded.

### **3.4 Results and Discussion**

The findings indicate that Mandel *Sea of Tranquility* has strong dependency on the use of abstract noun, nominalization and generalization to describe crisis and vulnerability. The presence of pandemics, environmental destruction, psychological and spatial isolation, and other experiences are over and over again presented as circumstances instead of behaviors. Causal agents are systematically hidden by abstract lexicalization (e.g. chaos, randomness, panic, distance) and nominalization (e.g. the cost of repair has been rendered prohibitive, the distance had been made inhabitable). Consequently, linguistic naturalization of crisis makes crises appear to be universal and fateful, and not socially or politically constructed.

The analysis shows that there is a prevailing trend of material processes being rendered by passive or agentless constructions. Supplementary human actors are often backgrounded and systems, technologies, and historical forces foregrounded as the seeming driving forces of the action. These buildings collapse, the expenses are considered to be too high, populations are destroyed, and environments become inhabitable without direct mentioning of decision-makers or authorities.

The results indicate that *Sea of Tranquility* propagates an ideology about a systemic and existential inevitability whereby the crises are viewed as inevitable aspects of human life and not as outcomes of the power relations and the policy choice. Through the process of nominalization and passive transitivity of suffering and agents, the novel places readers in the same emotional state of character vulnerability and also restricts the chances of political commentary.

From a critical stylistic angle, these findings provide an important insight as to how linguistic options are highly ideological. The act of silencing institutional actors by the use of transitivity and nominalization indicates a wider cultural text that is related to the post-pandemic and the late-capitalist discourse in which the inability of the system is accepted as the norm and resignation is used instead of resistance. The stylistic arrangement of the novel is a strong expression of the modern state of confusion and instability but it can be easily abused as a tool of instilling contribution to the passive nature of crisis as something unalterable by social change instead of something with social potential.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper has shown that *Sea of Tranquility* creates its images of crisis, displacement and human vulnerability by using extremely patterned stylistic techniques which have distinct ideological connotations. Using the critical stylistic instruments of naming and describing and transitivity, the analysis reveals that the novel sets crises within a systematic framework as abstract, universal, and depersonalized states instead of an eventualization of identifiable human or institutional acts. The combination of abstract nouns, nominalization, and generalized categorization exists to naturalize suffering and display it as a necessary part of existence to reduce concerns of responsibility. The transitivity analysis demonstrates how agency is invariably backgrounded in passive and agentless structures by systems and technologies and historical forces as dominant agents. Such language structure creates an ideology of structural inevitability, where force is diffusive and unreachable and human intervention is made narrow and powerless. This leads to the fact that large-scale crises, including pandemics, environmental degradation, and technological failure, are shifted onto it, perpetuating a sense of resignation instead of resistance over the world. All in all, the results validate the two hypotheses set at the beginning and prove the explanatory power of critical stylistics in revealing the ideological work underlying linguistic choices in modern fiction writing.

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