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Son, Brother, Good Fellow: The Transmasculinity of Jo March

Sopavi Kao

“I can’t get over my disappointment in not being a boy,” Jo March laments in the first chapter of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (9). This statement is core to Jo’s character throughout the novel as she rejects her girlhood and instead aligns herself with masculinity. Jo’s masculine inclinations are often interpreted as yearning for the freedom provided by manhood, a product of the social rigidity required of women during the 1860s rather than the genuine wanting to be a man. However, her close identification with the male gender throughout the novel provides a more queer possibility, wherein she experiences gender dysphoria in being a woman. Here, Jo March’s rejection of womanhood stems from a transmasculine identity rather than mere tomboyishness.

The term “transgender” was coined in 1965 by John F. Oliven, nearly a century after *Little Women* was published (PFLAG). The term generally refers to a person whose gender identity does not align with their biological sex. “Transmasculine” is more specific, identifying people assigned female at birth who transition to a masculine-presenting gender. Although Alcott couldn’t have written Jo with this particular label in mind, many aspects of Jo’s identity resonate with a modern understanding of transmasculinity. Jo defies and rejects all conventions of her perceived female gender while revelling in the idea of inhabiting a body of the opposite masculine sex.

In the novel’s opening conversation, Jo’s sister admonishes her for whistling; she exclaims, “Don't, Jo. It's so boyish!”—to which Jo replies: “That’s why I do it” (8). The pleasure that Jo finds in acting as a boy is akin to gender euphoria, which is defined by PFLAG as the joy experienced “when one’s gender is recognized and respected by others, when one’s body aligns with one’s gender, or when one expresses themselves in accordance with their gender.” Although her boyish performances sometimes seem to be enjoyable merely for the reactions they provoke, Jo is eager, just as she is pleased, to step into the roles of men: she repeatedly asserts herself as a man in order to obtain this sense of euphoria. Jo proudly tells her sisters, “I'm the man of the family now Papa is away...for he told me to take special care of mother while he was gone” (10). She is able to “[play]

male parts to her heart's content" in their Christmas performance, taking "immense satisfaction in a pair of russet leather boots" as she acts in these male roles (20). Her performance emphasizes this idea of gender euphoria, as Jo delights in showing off being a boy in an acceptable manner while wearing her manly boots. Gender becomes a performance for Jo, where she must make certain that she is known as a boy. Already, Jo has a "gentlemanly demeanor" and forgets that she is a girl—she can only try to make everybody else forget as well (31).

Jo's longing to be a boy works in conjunction with her misery over being a girl, presenting similar to the experience of gender dysphoria. Gender dysphoria is defined by PFLAG as "the distress caused when a person's assigned sex at birth and assumed gender is not the same as the one with which they identify." Like many transgender people, Jo renounces her birth-given name, declaring "Josephine" as too "sentimental". In rejecting her womanhood, Jo refuses all notions of being "ladylike": "I hate to think I've got to grow up, and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China Aster! It's bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boy's games and work and manners!" (9). Conforming to polite society is the worst thing imaginable for Jo, who craves education and adventure and eternal childhood—all things impossible for a girl to grow into. Jo tells Laurie, "If I was a boy, we'd run away together, and have a capital time; but as I'm a miserable girl, I must be proper, and stop at home" (202). The prospect of the future looms heavy over Jo, who cannot imagine becoming a woman. She is heavily chained by her identity as a girl—both because of societal expectations and her want of being a boy. Beth attempts to comfort her: "you must try to be contented with making your name boyish, and playing brother to us girls" (9). Only, it is not enough for Jo to play pretend as she grows into herself.

Jo's "one beauty" and truly vain, feminine attribute is her hair; otherwise, she is tall, gangly, and awkward looking (10). When Jo cuts off her hair to raise money for her father, her initial expression has a "mixture of fun and fear, satisfaction and regret in it" as she proudly presents the twenty-five dollars she earned for it (158). However, when her sisters and mother begin to cry out over it ("Your hair! Your beautiful hair!" "Oh, Jo, how could you? Your one beauty."), she has to take on an "indifferent air" to stop herself from getting upset. Marmee remarks, "it was not necessary, and I'm afraid you will regret it one of these days" (159). Jo's only claim to femininity is explicitly told to her as ruined. Moreover, while she objects to Marmee's statement in regretting it, the words "not

necessary” invalidate her chivalrous efforts. It is more likely that these reactions, rather than the haircut itself, are why Jo ends up crying over her hair that night. Jo’s family, while dear to her, pressure her into a role of femininity that she can never succeed.

Jo’s occasional disappointment in her lack of femininity stems solely from expectations pushed onto her by her misunderstanding (albeit well-meaning) family members. In her book, *Making Girls into Women*, Kathryn R. Kent claims that “under the pressure of her mother’s pedagogical intensity, Jo often confesses herself to be an inadequate girl or woman” (54). Marmee is the matriarch of the March family, the perfect example of woman and of motherhood, which weighs on Jo as she comes of age. Kent continues, “Jo is Marmee’s problem child...Marmee inspires in Jo the desire to ‘be good’ and, in imitating her example, to submit to the dictates of bourgeois femininity” (49). Jo similarly hopes to live up to the expectations of her beloved father, claiming, “I’ll try and be what he loves to call me, ‘a little woman’ and not be rough and wild, but do my duty here instead of wanting to be somewhere else” (14). Her father later comments on this effort:

“In spite of the curly crop, I don’t see the ‘son Jo’ whom I left a year ago...I see a young lady who pins her collar straight, laces her boots neatly, and neither whistles, talks slang, nor lies on the rug as she used to do...She doesn’t bounce, but moves quietly, and takes care of a certain little person in a motherly way which delights me. I rather miss my wild girl, but if I get a strong, helpful, tenderhearted woman in her place, I shall feel quite satisfied.” (211)

At this moment, “Jo’s keen eyes were rather dim”, and she holds “an unusually mild expression” (211). Jo’s performance of femininity here is resigned—it is not her true self, instead it is crafted to please and comfort.

Jo is most herself, unabashed and boyish, in the bloomings of her friendship with Laurie. In their first meeting, Laurie is put at ease by Jo’s “gentlemanly demeanor”, and Jo enjoys Laurie’s kindness and sensitivity. As their families blend together, Jo’s jealousy of Laurie reaches beyond envying his social mobility as a wealthy bachelor; it is not resentment, but rather, envy for the whole being that he is. She closely identifies with Laurie himself in a way that is truly loving, though unromantic; their relationship is “one of sameness” (Kent 54). Here, Jo’s feelings towards Laurie become akin to gender envy, a term defined by PFLAG as “envy for an individual’s expression of gender”. Laurie and

Jo are frequently described as being similar; Laurie is what Jo could be if she had really been born a boy (as she so often wishes). He is able to become a part of the March sisterhood while still recognized by them as a boy. When given the nickname, “Dora”, at school, he fights his classmates to be called “Laurie”, just as Jo wishes to fight against the name “Josephine”. Unfortunately for Laurie, Jo wants to be him more than she wants to be with him. Through her relationship with Laurie, Jo is able to become a boy alongside another boy. She is not relegated to sister or daughter, but is instead “a good fellow,” by Laurie’s christening (222). When Jo meets Laurie’s college friends, she “[finds] it very difficult to refrain from imitating [their] gentlemanly attitudes, phrases, and feats, which [seem] more natural to her than the decorums prescribed for young ladies” (226). Laurie’s romantic affections for her shatter this illusion of mutual boyhood, proving heterosexual rather than homosocial in their relationship. The idea of their marriage demands that “Jo must become a woman and Laurie must be transformed into a man”, robbing both of boyhood (Kent 55).

Jo is popularly seen as a reflection (or “self-insert”) of her creator, Louisa May Alcott. In an article exploring Alcott’s complicated relationship with gender, author Peyton Thomas asserts that Alcott herself may have been transmasculine. In an 1880s interview, Alcott declared, “I am more than half-persuaded that I am a man’s soul, put by some freak of nature into a woman’s body.” Like Jo, Alcott went by a boyish nickname amongst friends and family (Lou or Louy instead of Louisa), and identified herself firmly with masculinity. Similar to Jo’s self-described position as “man of the house”, Alcott “wrote of herself as the ‘papa’ or ‘father’ of her young nephews.” Jo’s father recalls her as his son, and Alcott’s father called her his “only son”. In recognizing Alcott’s projections onto Jo, especially in expressions of her complex gender identity, Jo’s potential transgenderism becomes even more apparent.

Jo March is understood as one of the most beloved female characters in American literary fiction, and yet, she identifies so thoroughly with masculinity. She finds belonging in being a boy and rejects womanhood, only drawing towards femininity when it is expected of her. Recognizing Jo as a proto-transgender character through modern understandings of the transgender experience invites a broader understanding of the queerness within the character. As such, it allows us to continue to solidify the queerness as belonging within our literary history.

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V for Vendetta: Violence Versus Virtue

Jordan Goldberg

"He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster." This quotation by Friedrich Nietzsche encapsulates the struggle faced by the main character V in Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta*. In this novel, V faces the ultimate challenge of toppling the oppressive Norsefire regime while maintaining his moral superiority. However, as V's plot unfolds, he shows more similarities with the oppressor than with the freedom fighter, the primary one being their abandonment of morality. Both parties adopt a contextualist mentality in pursuing their goals and view the greater good as subjective, leading to widespread suffering. This method of justification does not hold up, and V's image as an altruistic rebel quickly crumbles when looking through a moral lens. In this way, V's methods are unjustified because justice is based on societal morals and ethics and cannot be bent to fit one's desires, such as revenge or oppression. Therefore, V's actions cannot be legitimized and actually mirror the corrupt Norsefire regime. Analyzing V's actions through this viewpoint begins to reveal what lies beneath the mask.

Many of V's early plots are formed upon a foundation of revenge rather than the betterment of the population. V, an escapee from the Larkhill concentration camp, has scores to settle with his former torturers and uses tying loose ends as justification. Dr. Delia Surridge knows this too well and states to V: "When I saw you that night... The night you escaped. You were standing against the flames. You turned, and you looked straight at me. I knew that one day you'd come looking for me, that you'd find me" (Moore 73). Dr. Delia knew that V had been scarred deeply enough to enact revenge at some point, that revenge being murder. This knowledge of V's mental state paints a picture of what V is willing to do in order to achieve his goals and the moral bankruptcy he harbors. Such a lack of morality is further exemplified in V's killing of Bishop Lilliman, in which he states: "I am the devil and I have come to do the devil's work. I do not have a name" (60). V reveals his rationale for his actions: he is an executioner, not a judge. This illustrates V's ability to justify his actions in his mind as punishment rather than petty revenge. Eduardo Pérez-Navarro, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, states in his paper "The Way Things Go: Moral Relativism and

Suspension of Judgement": "Objectivism makes people intolerant... contextualism does not make people intolerant; however, it makes them so tolerant that they are forced to suspend their judgement about issues that we take to be important." Contextualism encapsulates V's method of justification for his actions, in which he views morality in a more primitive way. V views revenge as a moral punishment for one's transgressions, which allows him to act in such heinous ways. Such actions call V's ethical framework and his view of his own agency into question.

Whether or not V views himself as an actor or simply as one carrying out orders originating from a firmer belief is constantly put into question. Many times, V will act and claim it is the will of anarchy, his ideology. Such a belief allows him to act as a messenger rather than someone with agency. A key example of this is when Evey confronts V about wanting to help in his ensuing plot. V tells Evey of a man, to Evey's confusion, that man being: "Nobody you'd have heard of. A German gentleman named Mr. John Faust. He made a deal too" (44). By referencing Faust, V reveals his view of Evey as Faust, someone who abandons their morals to achieve their desires. Simultaneously, V is removing his agency from the situation, framing himself as merely carrying out Evey's wishes. After their plot to kill the Bishop succeeds, Evey, horrified, asks V about the ethics of murder, to which he states: "Why are you asking me? And as for me involving you, I seem to remember that you were the one anxious to make a deal" (64). V pushes the blame to Evey for her involvement in the scheme, while removing his actions as the murderer from question. The moral consequence of V's actions need not be questioned since Evey spurred him to act. V contextualizes his actions in this way, which aligns with Pérez-Navarro's statement: "There is no privileged point of view in relativism... but contextualism fixes truth in a single viewpoint – the one that uses it." V's personal truth closes his eyes to the moral implications of his actions. V can act as a messenger of his ideology and commit atrocities as he pleases. These acts bear a striking resemblance to those of the Norsefire party, the group V is hell-bent on eradicating.

Hypocrisy is baked into V's identity from the very beginning. V's reverence for anarchy directly mirrors the destruction brought about by the Norsefire regime. Similarly, both parties justify their actions through a higher power, whether physical or ideological. Adam Susan, leader of Norsefire, shares such worship as V, except he worships the Fate supercomputer: "I would wait upon your every utterance and never ask the merest splinter of affection. Fate... Fate... I

love you" (39). V speaks in much the same way Adam does about anarchy, viewing it as a guiding light and a show of moral authority. Having a higher power allows V and Adam to act independently of their own emotions and morals, as said power trumps their reservations. Each party shares even more similarities in how they justify their cruelty, which Eric Finch reflects on: "He's become some sort of all-purpose symbol to them, hasn't he? People need symbols, Dominic. He understood that. We've forgotten it" (252). Understanding coercion and obedience is paramount to both parties' ideologies. V strives to appeal to the morality of the people he leads, despite his own lack of morality, much like the regime. In the excerpt "Justice" from *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Thomas Pogge, Professor of Philosophy, states: "Morally flawed judgements are unjust only if they involve an abuse of morality itself – that is, only if they appear with a moral pretension they do not live up to. Unjust is someone prepared to violate moral principles she herself likes to appeal to." This quote perfectly captures the moral flaws of both parties in the novel. Each party abuses its own personal definitions of morality to manipulate the public. V's hypocrisy and selfishness reveal the injustice of his efforts toward freedom, despite his positive beliefs in a better society. He is blind to the morality of his actions, which begs the question: What would moral justice look like in this context?

One must look to the oppressed in order to find true justice in the novel. The two most notable examples are Evey and Valerie. Both characters understand that true justice comes not from destruction but from resistance and being stalwart in one's beliefs. Valerie, a killed lesbian actress, is the prime example of justice through perseverance. Her letter to V states: "I shall die here. Every inch of me shall perish... Except one. An inch. It's small, and it's fragile, and it's the only thing in the world that's worth having" (160). Valerie's declaration of resistance as her final act shows justice in a way that V has not. Her spirit of kindness is preserved in her words, which inspire future generations to reflect and work toward a better world, which Evey takes to heart. However, her time with V allowed her to find a middle ground. Evey takes V's place after his death and continues his unfinished plots. Evey even takes the mantle of a messenger of anarchy and tells the public: "Tomorrow, Downing Street will be destroyed; the head reduced to ruins and in what has gone before. Tonight, you must choose what comes next: lives of our own, or a return to chains" (258). Evey demonstrates to the people their tenuous existence and informs the public of her plots, allowing as few human casualties as possible. Evey views the world more objectively, as John Gustafsson, Professor of Philosophy, states in his

journal Binary Act Consequentialism: "A voluntary act is right if and only if the outcome of x is not worse than the outcome of not-x." Evey understands this ideology well and knows from all the horrors being on the other side of terror that one must measure their actions and understand moral consequences in order to be an active arbiter of justice.

V's exploits throughout the novel paint him not as an altruistic freedom fighter, but as a sociopathic madman who fights for his own good, much like the regime he attempts to topple. He abandons moral and ethical principles to achieve his goals. The destruction and chaos V births provide a view into his deeply flawed ideology and morality, displaying hypocrisy, sociopathy, and a disregard for human life. V has had a rough life, but as such does not justify mass murder and abandonment of ethics. V's hypocrisy is placed front and center as the reader comes to understand that V is an unreliable narrator and protagonist. The mask he wears should remain in place, not to protect his identity but to prevent others from seeing what is truly underneath.

Embracing or Defying: The Consequences Mrs. Sen and Shoba Face From Their Reaction to Society's Gender Norms

Callie Stankovich

The socially constructed gender norms of society, which are perpetuated on individuals, outline specifically how they should respond to grief depending on their gender. Throughout Jhumpa Lahiri's book *Interpreter of Maladies*, the short stories "A Temporary Matter" and "Mrs. Sen's" demonstrate both a perfect embracement and defiance of these gender norms when grieving through the characters Shoba and Mrs. Sen, revealing the multitude of responses within individual grieving despite the pressure for a socially constructed response and the consequences that can occur from choosing to follow society's expectations or not. In "A Temporary Matter," Shoba's rejection of the traditional feminine way of grieving over the loss of her stillborn child defies society's gender norms and directly contrasts her husband, Shukumar's distinctly more feminine response to the death. Ultimately, Shoba's rejection of her gender role allows her a path of grieving that will likely lead to flourishing in the future, despite the blow her relationship takes following the death of their child. Conversely, in "Mrs. Sen's," Mrs. Sen, unlike Shoba, completely embraces feminine gender expectations after immigrating to the United States. While accepting this role allows Mrs. Sen to cope with the grief of losing her home country and identity, her ability to create a new identity in her new home diminishes significantly, ultimately revealing a negative consequence to embracing society's gender norms. Inside these two stories, Shoba and Mrs. Sen reveal drastically different reactions to grieving situations and how either adopting or defying society's gender norms can complicate one's life. Through their experiences, Lahiri demonstrates a multitude of responses to grief and the results that can occur when the individual adheres to, or not, society's expectations for their specific gender.

Throughout "A Temporary Matter," Shoba rejects society's expectations of how she, as both a woman and a mother, should grieve over the loss of her child, while her husband Shukumar demonstrates perfectly how society says Shoba

should be responding, which ultimately causes strain in their deteriorated relationship. After giving birth to a stillborn child, Shoba and Shukumar have drastically different reactions to the loss, reversing the gender roles society has expected them to enact. Shukumar, on one hand, is a stay at home student, spending his days cooking and cleaning the house while studying for his degree. After their child's death, he is severely depressed and cannot get out of bed, barely maintaining basic hygiene and finding solace by spending time in what was to be their baby's nursery. Conversely, Shoba is entirely the opposite: she cannot stay still and becomes the 'breadwinner' of the family, finding comfort in staying busy and working longer hours at her office job. Rather than seeking emotional support and taking time to grieve the death in a "feminine" way, Shoba rejects any sense of the womanly aspects that society's gender expectations rely on her to take part in. She immediately begins blocking out the loss, using her work and the gym to make her busy, seemingly moving on from her child's death. And yet, six months after the loss, Shukumar is still stuck in bed, depressed and mentally blank, unable to do little more than clean and cook. Shoba is the one who picks herself up and moves forward in her life, leaving Shukumar feeling left behind and their relationship's future looking bleak. While he lays in bed, unable to get up, Shoba is downtown "sipping her third cup of coffee already" searching "for typographical errors in textbooks" (Lahiri 4). Shukumar envies her ability to work, as he is only a "mediocre student" that now "lie[s] in their bed until he gr[ows] bored" (4). Shoba's ability to maintain a productive, orderly schedule instead of embracing society's gender norms, that she should be the one stuck in bed with no hope for her future, is what saves her. In their relationship, Shoba and Shukumar completely reverse their gender roles and while Shukumar is stuck paralyzed and falling apart, Shoba has not let this become her. Whether this is healthy or not may be debated, but it is clear that this ability of Shoba's, to move on and take on what society says is a more dominating "male" role in grieving, is what keeps her life productive and allows her a bright future.

Many critics have reflected on the nature of Shoba and Shukumar's relationship, studying their reversal of gender roles and how Shoba's defiance of hers gives her the strength to move on after a devastating blow. In a "Short Stories for Students" criticism on "A Temporary Matter," author Candyce Norvell states that in their relationship "Shoba [is] in the driver's seat," having "the strength and determination to restart her life" while Shukumar is a "passive victim of those same circumstances" (Norvell 216). While it is traditionally expected that women will be the "passive victim," emotionally distraught and

paralyzed inside grief, in Shukumar and Shoba's relationship it is quite the opposite. Shoba is the one who takes initiative to change and move on in her life, while Shukumar does not have the "strength and determination" necessary to "restart." Rather than take on a traditionally male role in his grieving, Shukumar acts in the way that Shoba is expected to act, defying societal gender norms. In all, it is Shoba's rejection of these norms that have allowed her to move on in her life, whether it is with Shukumar or not. If she were to embrace these norms, she very well could have a different lifestyle, one similar to Shukumar and characterized by intense, suffocating grief. Instead, while taking on a more masculine way of grieving, Shoba is all the better for it and shows real hope for her future as she navigates a world post bereavement.

However, Lahiri also exemplifies another way of grieving by illustrating the effects of conforming to gender expectations through her character Mrs. Sen. In "Mrs. Sen's," Mrs. Sen reveals herself to be someone who leans into traditional female roles while dealing with the grief of leaving her home country. An Indian immigrant who has relocated to the United States with her husband, Mrs. Sen is very culturally involved and chooses to actively embrace her Indian heritage as a coping method for grief. She is plagued by intense longing for India and for much of the story, recounts the things she misses about it. When she moves to the United States, rather than taking on a new identity and growing with this new experience, Mrs. Sen heavily commits into performing the traditional womanly roles and responsibilities in order to hide from her grief. She becomes the ultimate homemaker, becoming known solely for her cooking. "Each afternoon" the story says, "she took whole vegetables between her hands and hacked them apart: cauliflower, cabbage, butternut squash", creating elaborate dishes that was "merely dinner for herself and Mr. Sen" (Lahiri 112, 115). After moving to the United States, Mrs. Sen's identity becomes her cooking, her homemaking. She physically hacks through her grief by cutting her vegetables, burying her emotions inside her cooking. Like Shoba, Mrs. Sen blocks out this grief by finding something else to keep her busy, though it is in a drastically different way: with Mrs. Sen embracing gender norms and Shoba defying them. When she moves to America, Mrs. Sen continues to relish in her cooking and lets it consume her. She has no desire to add to her new identity in America, being completely content with cooking as her sole identity. In addition, whenever Mrs. Sen is in trouble or needs to affirm her stature to anyone, she consistently responds to anyone that "Mr. Sen teaches mathematics at the university" (110). Saying this multiple times, it is clear that Mrs. Sen does not value herself as a complete person, relying

majorly on her husband for guidance and assurance. Her husband is the “breadwinner,” much like Shoba is in her family. Mrs. Sen becomes much like Shukumar does, paralyzed by her longing for the past and concerned only with her work in cooking and homemaking, traditional roles that society expects her to fulfill. She is mentally left behind, just like Shukumar, unable to cope with her reality and using her homemaking duties to give her some type of meaning in life. As such, while it does keep her culturally connected to her Indian heritage, it also prevents her from creating a new identity in her new home.

In Y.V. Sudha Devi’s criticism of “Mrs. Sen’s,” she explores how Mrs. Sen’s embracement of society’s gender expectations serves as a coping mechanism for the grief she feels at losing her home country and identity. Rather than lean against these norms like Shoba does, Mrs. Sen chooses to align with traditional expectations, something that gives a negative consequence. Devi emphasizes Mrs. Sen’s grieving process by stating that “Mrs. Sen’s steadfast dedication to maintaining her cultural heritage,” most notably the way she dresses traditionally feminine and maintains a homemaking way of life, is “a coping mechanism to provide her with a sense of continuity and belonging in a foreign place during the unsettling experience of migration” (Devi 256). Mrs. Sen “adheres to traditional female roles, such as being a homemaker and carer” in order to cope with the grief of immigrating, using this to block out her sadness and loss instead of adjusting to her new life in the United States. Rather than simply embracing these traditional gender norms, Mrs. Sen allows them to become her entire person, allowing her a “sense of continuity” but preventing her from creating a new identity, separate from her one when she was living in India. As such, embracing these gender norms gives Mrs. Sen a disastrous consequence, leaving her with no identity anymore outside of her homemaking duties.

Through Shoba and Mrs. Sen’s experiences, Lahiri reveals two reactions to grief in very different ways, one that embraces the socially constructed gender norms of society, and the other openly defying them. While Shoba rejects traditional feminine ways of grieving and aligns more with a male gendered expectation, she is able to move on from the death of her child and show true hope for her future. This way she does not remain paralyzed from the loss like her husband, Shukumar does. In “Mrs. Sen’s,” Mrs. Sen uses traditional feminine roles to hide from her grief, paralyzed from adjusting to change. She relies heavily on cooking and homemaking to fill the void in her life that has happened as a result of leaving and losing her home country. In this way, she embraces society’s expectations of women, resulting in her inability to form a new identity

after her immigration. She remains stuck and uses the cooking to connect to her past identity, leaving little hope for making a new identity after she immigrates. As such, Lahiri wonderfully illustrates two responses to grief that either align with society's expectations or not. Shoba's refusal to align with the gender norms society demands she occupy bring a positive consequence to her life while Mrs. Sen's embracement of these norms leaves her, like Shukumar, paralyzed without hope of adjusting to her new identity. Together, this reveals the consequences of grieving in accordance with society's expectations or not and emphasizes that in order to grow and prosper in one's life, one cannot seek comfort in cultural expectations of how one should act. After all, these are merely social constructs designed to dictate one's life depending on their gender.

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How Helicopter Parenting Harms Children and What We Can Do to Change

Mikey Fink

Section I: Introduction

Imagine you are a teenager in high school with parents persistently micro-managing and pushing you to exceed in every aspect. As a young child, they've put you through countless extracurriculars and activities, constantly pressuring you to do your best. They never let you make mistakes or fall short of success. They are always watching your grades, interactions with peers, and every decision you make ensuring you are doing it their way, "the right way". From the outside looking in, your friends say that you have it good, wishing that their parents gave them the same attention and support in their lives. But something is still wrong. You feel isolated, scared, burnt-out, and unloved, like your parents' love is anything but unconditional. As if their love is governed by grades, performance in sports, and the extent of your childhood resume. Irrationally, they act as if every test, grade, and activity you participate in will make or break whether or not you will find success in life. All of this with the hope that you are to get into the most prestigious college that only accepts a mere 3% of those who apply. They tell you that they do it because they love you, only wishing the best, and for you to succeed in life. But is it from something more? Perhaps it is their own anxieties manifesting into their style of parenting, or that they want to give you what they never had and always wished for. Or maybe it is their own selfish desires to have a child that they can brag about to all of their friends. This may seem like a good life compared to those who have absent or uninvolved parents, but the effects of this childhood will detrimentally affect an entire lifetime by damaging problem-solving and coping skills.

This style of parenting is increasingly common with new gen parents, and we are starting to see the consequences it has on children and young adults. In fact, this scenario mirrors that of a close friend I had in highschool, and I was the one with less involved parents, wondering how having parents who are too involved can be a bad thing. This style of parenting became popular recently, as the new generation of parents were raised and live in an increasingly stressful

environment. Additionally, technology has made communication fast and accessible, making it easier to oversee their kids anywhere at any time. Helicopter parenting is depicted by excessive involvement in a child's life, shielding them from any hardships or failures. The term helicopter describes how parents hover over their children, unnecessarily inserting themselves into their children's lives as a means to protect and control them. This research aims to identify the short-term and long-term effects helicopter parenting has on children's mental health. Overparenting is linked to an increase in anxiety and depression in kids and young people. In CNN Wire's article written by Sirisha Dinavahi, writer for the Los Angeles Post, "Helicopter Parenting vs. Hummingbird Parenting: Finding the right balance." shared data from the National Survey of Children's Health, which states that kids (6-12 year old) being shielded by helicopter parents had a 20% increase in diagnosed anxiety from 2007 to 2012. Additionally, there was a 63% increase in depression in young adults 18-25 from 2009-2017 (Dinavahi). This statistic is indicative of how this parenting style contributes to dependence and a lack of coping skills. By depriving adolescents of opportunities to make mistakes that they can learn and grow from, parents effectively raise humans with fear of failure and lack of self-confidence.

In this essay, we will identify how the helicopter style of parenting is a major issue in our society. Overparenting is caused by parents imposing excessive control on their children which leads to negative effects like internalized behaviors like anxiety, externalized behaviors like rule-breaking, and a damaged child-parent relationship. In order to stop this issue from continuing, innovative solutions must be adopted. The best solutions that will be explored here are promoting self-awareness of when parents are being helicopters, a change in how parents view their children's mistakes, and a new category of parenting known as lifeguard parenting.

Section II: Causes, Behaviors, and Impact on the Parent-Child Relationship

The cause for why overparenting arises is wanting protection and control over the child. This excessive control and protection commonly stems from anxiety and social pressure. Kocsis, Zsófia, and others, members of the MTA-DE-Parent-Teachers Cooperation Research Group, at the University of Debrecen, specialize in researching the development of children and how educators teach. Their meta-analysis, "Wings or Handcuffs? The Dilemmas of Helicopter Parenting Based on a Systematic Literature Review," found that the amount of research papers focused on helicopter parenting increased significantly between 2020

and 2023 (Zsófia Kocsis et al). This increase can be linked to how new parents are raising their kids in an increasingly stressful environment. The COVID-19 pandemic, political unease, and the increase in bad news bias are all catalysts for this rise in parental anxiety. Former Stanford University dean Julie Lythcott-Haim's TED Talk "How to Raise Successful Kids – Without Over-parenting," identifies how a great deal of parents who micromanage their kids and lead them through a "check-listed childhood", do so for college. Desperately wanting their kids to get into the best college comes from anxiety, and worry that if their kids don't, they will have no future. Additionally, Lythcott-Haim points out that some parents act out of social pressure because they want their kids to have a future they can brag about (Lythcott-Haim). Don't get me wrong, setting your kids up for a bright future is a good thing. However, helicopter parents bring this to an extreme, by turning every activity to a make or break moment and constantly pushing for more.

This ultimately leads to a kid that is burnt out by the end of high school from the anxiety and depression that come with this unyielding lifestyle. Internalized and externalized behaviors are two categories of behavioral issues that juveniles express when parenting is unbalanced, from either too little or too much involvement in their child's life. Helicopter parents are overprotective and controlling. However, they commonly focus on achievement and proper conduct often leaving a gap in emotional support. Professor of educational and health psychology Bacikova-Sleskova, and doctor in behavioral psychology, Kapetanovic's "Exploring the Role of Basic Psychological Needs in the Relationship Between Overparenting and Adolescent Psychological Outcomes", states that inadequate needs satisfaction and need frustration are associated with negative developmental outcomes. Insufficient need satisfaction is when needs are not met, but the child isn't frustrated. Need frustration on the other hand, occurs when the parents actively interfere and excessively control the child's life. Both of these flaws contribute to children internalizing(emotional distress) or externalizing(acting out) behaviors that negatively impact the child's life, emphasizing the importance of balanced parenting (Kapetanovic and Bacikova-Sleskova). The key takeaway from this claim is that parents that are overcontrolling lead to the child having need frustration, which leads to them engaging in risky behaviors like drug use, rule breaking, and aggression. Alternatively, parents who are absent or uninvolved put their kids at risk of internalizing behaviors like anxiety, depression, and loneliness from feeling unloved. In "Wings or Handcuffs?" by Zsófia Kocsis and others, they analyze "Relationships between positive parenting, overparenting, grit, and academic

success.” by Howard and others which discusses “the relationship between helicopter parenting and courage, showing that appropriate parental involvement positively, while helicopter parenting negatively, affects grit levels, i.e., perseverance, commitment to long-term goals, and is associated with courage” (Zsófia Kocsis et al). Insufficient perseverance and courage will result in difficulty handling adversity in their daily life, school, careers, and relationships. Consequently, this will have a cascade effect on their mental health causing problems like loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Bacikova-Sleskova and Kapetanovic’s peer reviewed article on the basic psychological needs relation between overparenting adolescent outcomes found that “a systematic review (Vigdal and Brønnick 2022) of 38 cross-sectional and longitudinal studies showed that overparenting is related to both anxiety and depression among adolescents and emerging adults”. Additionally, girls are at a higher risk to internalize, because it's less socially accepted for them to act out externally. Overall, helicopter parenting is related to social anxiety, loneliness, depression, and feeling of failure and helplessness to name a few internalized behaviors (Kapetanovic and Bacikova-Sleskova). All of these internalized behaviors are consequences of helicopter parenting. That style of parenting pays too much attention to how their kids act and perform, and not enough regard to their emotional state. Externalized behaviors occur when children have needs frustration which results from feeling overcontrolled. Researchers at Bursa Uludağ University, Graduate School of Health Sciences, Psychiatry department, Almaz Bannayeva and Ash Sarandöl’s “Helicopter Parenting: A Review”, mentions a multitude of externalized behaviors. Their research observes how individuals who have helicopter parents have poor coping and problem solving skills. The studies they analyzed found that increased helicopter parenting was linked to greater levels of alcohol consumption, a high rate of painkiller abuse, low self worth, and high levels of risk-taking behavior. Furthermore, those who were raised by helicopter parents reported low levels of maternal affection and compassion (Bannayeva and Sarandöl). This directly shows how helicopter parenting inflicts life-long damage to a person on an emotional and physical level.

The last negative effect we will discuss is damage to the child-parent relationship. Kapetanovic and Bacikova-Sleskova’s research expresses that overparented children feel controlled, judged and unloved. Their “needs are actively undermined or thwarted” (Kapetanovic and Bacikova-Sleskova). Helicopter parents tend to see their kids for who they want them to be rather than who they truly are. For example, labeling children as smart, athletic, or artistic can make it easy to overlook their individual quirks and personality.

Siegel, professor of psychiatry at UCLA med school and Tina Bryson, Ph.D in psychology, stated in their article, "Do You Really 'See' Your Child?", that when a child is misunderstood, they feel alone. This feeling of loneliness affects their relationships with friends, teachers and parents, leading them to believe that no one truly understands them (Bryson and Siegel). When parents make assumptions and generalizations that are inaccurate, it makes them feel misunderstood. A misunderstood child is a child that feels invisible to the world. To better understand your child, it's important to have an open mindset, take the time to understand them, and give them the necessary freedom to be themselves.

Section III: My Solution- Building Independence With Healthy Parenting Approaches

To avoid overparenting is to become self aware of your own parenting techniques and identify if that is a trait of a helicopter parent. One way we can help parents to understand how they inadvertently put their children at a disadvantage is by allowing educators and school staff to step in if a student shows indications of being affected by helicopter parenting. In Zsófia Fink 7 Kocsis and other's "Wings or Handcuffs?", they call attention to how teachers and schools are equipped to detect overparenting and have a productive conversation with parents. Developing parenting strategies that encourage participation without hindering a child's independence would be an immense benefit to educational institutions. By training educators how to effectively communicate these issues to parents constructive dialogues can be had. The parent-school relationship needs to be strong for proper social and academic development of children (Zsófia Kocsis et al). More work needs to be done in identifying overparenting and having meaningful conversations with parents. Essentially, filling the gap between educators and parents excessively involved in their children's lives. Another important aspect to be aware of is how a child's gender relates to their behavior. In Kapetanovic and Bacikova-Sleskova's empirical study, "Basic Psychological Needs in the Relationship Between Overparenting", they conclude that girls exhibit internalizing problems whereas boys exhibit externalizing problems when being overparented. By understanding this difference it is possible to address these issues specifically in regards to the adolescents behavior (Kapetanovic and Bacikova-Sleskova). Balanced parenting is the key, but by knowing how boys and girls react differently to being helicopter, it is much easier to recognize these behaviors. This is most significant for girls as it is harder to identify behavior that is internalized like anxiety and depression.

After becoming aware of helicopter parenting and the behaviors it elicits in adolescents, the next step is to change your mindset. It is important to not fall into the category of parents that think a child's struggles and mistakes are flaws. Rather than seeing them as flaws, see it as problem solving. In Bryson and Siegel's article, "Do You Really 'See' Your Child?", they highlight the power of looking beyond initial assumptions and interpretations. Instead of immediately correcting manners, one should observe with an attitude of curiosity so you can understand the feelings behind the behavior. Doing so will make it so your kids feel like you're there for and truly understand them. For example, toddlers that play the game of pushing food off of their highchair might make you think they are intentionally trying to push your buttons. Instead of responding with frustration, pause and ask why from a point of genuine curiosity. This will lead to seeing them as young researchers gathering data as they explore a world that is so new to them. In the end, it will allow you to respond with intention and patience, rather than reacting with aggravation (Bryson and Siegel). This simple change will not only make it easier to deal with undesirable behaviors, but it will also bring a sense of understanding that strengthens the relationship you share with your kid. Another important mindset change is understanding that being able to struggle, hope, cope, and work through trial and error is an essential part of growing up. Lythcott-Haim's TED Talk on "How to Raise Successful Kids" preaches that many parents fall into the misconception that grades are the purpose of childhood. Lythcott-Haim points out that a strong foundation for success comes from genuine love of things and doing chores. Many helicopter parents eliminate chores for their kids in place of school or extracurriculars, but chores teach a necessary skill for success. That skill is being able to do what isn't fun, but what needs to be done. She finishes by reminding parents that college does not equate to success in life, and that happiness comes from love of humans. To be able to love humans, you must teach them to love themselves, something that isn't possible unless you show them unconditional love (Lythcott-Haim). This is an issue that many helicopter parents impose on their kids, that their love is not unconditional. It is very conditional on their performance in school, the activities they participate in, and their grades. Teaching self-efficacy and confidence is immeasurably more beneficial than any short-term benefit they might receive from better grades or building a strong childhood resume. Fink 9 The last piece of advice for having a healthy parenting approach is to strike a balance between giving your kid independence and being involved. To do so, parents should take inspiration from lifeguard and hummingbird parenting styles. Dinavahi's CNN article, "Helicopter Parenting vs.

Hummingbird Parenting” says hummingbird parenting is keeping a close watch on children, but allowing them freedom to explore and make mistakes. Hummingbird parents flutter in and out of their children's lives, being careful to only provide support when needed. However, it's not about choosing one method over the other, there are rare times in a child's life when hovering is appropriate. For example, being a helicopter parent during a difficult transition like starting a new school can be beneficial. A hummingbird parent understands the differences between these styles and switches between them depending on the situation (Dinavahi). It is important to take a step back so that resilience and self-confidence can be built, without putting your kid in danger. It is during these moments that they learn and grow the most. Finally, lifeguard parenting is another beneficial parenting style that is less known. According to “Move over, helicopter parents. Try being a lifeguard parent instead” by Katherine Martinko, a writer and senior editor known for her work on parenting topics expresses that, “kids flourish when supervised only as much as necessary not as much as possible”. That statement defines what it means to be a lifeguard parent. There are three states of a lifeguard parent; open attention, focused attention, and active intervention. Open attention is the default state, being physically distant and non-intrusive. Focus attention is when warning signs of danger are detected. When using focused attention, the best way to communicate danger to a child is to casually remind them to think about their actions. For example, rather than yelling at them, “Stay off that branch!”, ask them, “Do you think that branch will support you?”. This allows them to practice risk management skills. Lastly, active intervention should be rare (Katherine Martinko). Using lifeguard and hummingbird parenting techniques are healthy ways to raise kids to be confident and teach them valuable skills that only come with freedom.

Section IV: Conclusion

By returning to the introduction, it is clear that refraining from being a helicopter parent will save your child from a lifetime of hardship. Although it sacrifices some short term security and support by immediately ensuring their comfort, it sets them up for a lifetime of anxiety and fear of failure. Additionally, by holding their hand through every step not only robs them of the opportunity to learn from their own mistakes, but it sends the message that they cannot accomplish anything without you. Recognizing the traits of a helicopter parent and consciously avoiding them in place of hummingbird and lifeguard parenting techniques are perfect solutions to overparenting. These two techniques show that it is possible to change how you think and respond to your child's actions so

that you can empower them to think for themselves. By doing so, they build powerful abilities like confidence, self-efficacy, problem-solving, and coping skills that will guide them to a successful future. Now, let's reimagine my hypothetical scenario from the introduction. If the parents would adopt these solutions, they could help their child become happier, strengthen their relationship with them, and build the resilience needed to face future hardships. Looking back at the claims argued in this essay, will you be a helicopter parent to your current or future children? Or will you be a hummingbird or lifeguard parent?

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