
**Eros and Ontos: Exploring the Interdependence of Desire and Being in
Janice Pariat's *Seahorse***

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Abstract

This article interprets Janice Pariat's *Seahorse* as an in-depth exploration of the ontological facets of desire. This study spans from ancient Greek classical philosophy to contemporary theory. Centered on Eros, which embodies the pursuit of desire, and Ontos, which probes the fundamental nature of being, this study analyzes this novel and proposes that these two concepts mutually construct one another and coexist symbiotically within human experience. Furthermore, rather than classifying the text solely as a 'bildungsroman' story or a 'queer romance,' this analysis argues that the connection between the protagonist, Nehemiah, and his mentor, Nicholas Petrou, acts as the primary catalyst for a significant transformation in Nehemiah's sense of existence. Gradually, Nem's connection with many other people with whom he was romantically involved collectively served as a driving force for Nem to meet his true self. Thus, by establishing a conceptual link between desire and ontological existence, this study elucidates how the protagonist's romantic quest facilitates the realization of his core self. Additionally, this study offers a reinterpretation of the novel's eponymous seahorse motif. Diverging from conventional readings that associate the symbol with subverted masculinity, it instead reconceptualizes the seahorse as a vessel of memory rather than biological progeny. This assertion is substantiated by the narrative trajectory wherein Nehemiah assumes the profound psychological weight of memory and enduring romantic attachment following Nicholas's disappearance.

Keywords: Janice Pariat, Seahorse, Eros, Ontology, Memory, Love, Identity.

'Eros' and 'Ontos' are conceptualized as mutually constitutive paradigms. Eros signifies the dynamic movement toward meaning and teleological fulfillment,

whereas Ontos designates the objective reality and existential state toward which this movement is oriented. In synthesis, they bridge the domains of desire and existence. Etymologically rooted in the Greek verb denoting 'to be,' Ontos pertains to the fundamental nature of reality and existence, encompassing foundational ontological inquiries regarding what constitutes being and the inherent meaning of existence. Aristotelian thought further elucidates this concept; in his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle characterizes philosophy as the systematic inquiry into 'being qua being.' He rigorously examines substance, causality, and the elemental categories essential for the comprehension of reality. By exploring the experiential facets of Eros, this study endeavours to position the pursuit of desire and beauty at the core of human existence. Desire serves as a foundational element in the construction of an individual's identity, psychological disposition, and worldview. Within philosophical and psychological frameworks, desire is frequently theorized as a pivotal motivating catalyst that drives human agency, choices, and aspirations.

In his *Symposium*, Plato proposes that Eros transcends superficial physical attraction, and is a deep longing for beauty, wisdom, and self-cultivation. He defines Eros as "all desire for good things and happiness" (Plato 51, 149). Eros can drive individuals to break through their limitations and achieve intellectual and moral maturity. "Eros is love of the beautiful, so Eros is necessarily a philosopher, a lover of wisdom, and, being a philosopher, inter-mediate between wisdom and ignorance" (Plato 147). From a psychoanalytic perspective, Jacques Lacan argues that desire forms the foundation of the construction of the subject. Individuals shape their identity based on their own lack and pursuit, which ultimately governs the dynamics of self-cognition and interpersonal relationships. Sigmund Freud also reconceptualizes Eros as the fundamental life instinct. In direct opposition to destructive impulses, his conception of Eros embodies the principles of creativity, self-preservation, and interpersonal cohesion. Consequently, psychoanalytic theory successfully translated a traditional philosophical construct into a foundational psychological tenet.

Within sociocultural contexts, desire is shaped by family, society, education, and ideology, and it gives rise to an individual's ambition, career goals, interpersonal relationships, and beliefs to mold their character. Furthermore, positive desire fuels creativity, the drive to seek knowledge, and achievement, while excessive and misaligned desire triggers conflict and dissatisfaction. Desire is far from a simple emotion, but rather a core dynamic force that guides the actions and aspirations of individuals and their consciousness. In a way, human "existence is erotic... means that life is pushed by urgent desire, the longing of the soul, and an embodied ache in reaching toward another. In other words, we are communal beings set within a web

of wants and relationships. Humanity does not tend toward indifference and apathy but passion and affection” (Sosler).

But eros simply means a strong, passionate, physical desire— something like soul-aching or longing—like being in love for the first time. Eros is desire— and desire can be sexual and bodily, but it also exceeds the sensual. At the center of every human heart is an erotic desire: to be known and to know others. Humanity has an appetite for knowledge and love, which is to say, we want something we do not have. Desire leads to seeking fulfillment: to be intimate with what one does not yet know. (Sosler)

In contemporary context, Eros is frequently synonymous with sexual or erotic desire; however, within scholarly and philosophical contexts, the term denotes a deep-seated impetus or an ardent yearning for transcendence. Throughout the novel, Nem's affection for Nicholas serves as a prime illustration of Eros, revealing a deep yearning for love, knowledge, aesthetic beauty, and a wider comprehension of the world. This profound desire for affection and physical connection is also evident in Nem's attraction to Myra and a Nepalese artist. Primarily, Eros acts as the driving force that disrupts Nem's mundane routine in Delhi and eventually sparks his intellectual growth in London. His infatuation begins on the very first day he inadvertently sits in on Nicholas's lecture. Captivated, Nem admits to himself that he has never encountered anyone quite like Nicholas, noting, “He had a face I wanted to reach out and touch” (Pariat 10). From that moment onward, Nem longs to become a part of Nicholas's world. This desire soon breeds jealousy, particularly when he observes Nicholas's close relationship with Adheer. Much to Nem's frustration, their connection is a frequent topic of college gossip, with students even referring to Adheer as a “poo pusher” (27). Over time, Nem's craving for Nicholas intensifies, leading him to follow the man everywhere. Their dynamic finally shifts, and they grow closer after Nem falls from a dilapidated tower. Nicholas comes to his rescue, bringing Nem back to the bungalow where he is residing during his stay in Delhi. This evolving intimacy reflects the sentiment: “The strangeness of love is it tempts you to feel you haven't met a person at a particular moment in their life, a mere sliver of time, but somehow you've embraced it all” (39).

Furthermore, Ontology is the philosophical inquiry into the nature of being that fundamentally examines the parameters of existence and reality. Within the context of the novel, Nem's ‘Ontos’ functions as a manifestation of his dynamic ‘self-conception’. At the narrative's inception, his state of being is depicted as subdued and underdeveloped, characterized by a profound sense of inadequacy. This deficiency in self-worth is explicitly articulated: “I was in most ways

unremarkable...When I looked in the mirror, I always wished I occupied more space” (23). Throughout the narrative, Nem’s identity remains unclear, largely defined by absence and memories of the past. It can be said that when a person is trapped in past, the mere passage of time fails to provide clarity or an understanding of the present. This sentiment is evident when Nem remembers all his loved ones who have left him. He reflects, “When people leave unexpectedly.... Nicholas...Lenny...you are left only with unanswered questions; they travel long with you, looping their way into your thought, becoming your intimate companions” (40).

Thus, an individual’s memory acts as a crucial catalyst in forming an individual’s identity. This process, however, involves a complex dynamic: “the paradox of memory is that it gives you back what you had on condition that you know it has been lost. To regain it, you must remember it has gone; to remake the world, you need to first understand that it has ended” (66). Over time, life attempts to bridge the void left by someone’s absence, yet this emotional repair is merely “patch-worked, caulked and sealed” (67). This dynamic is illustrated by Nem’s romantic involvements with Maya and Nepali artist; despite engaging in these relationships, his psychological focus remains persistently anchored to the memory of Nicholas. In London, Nem could not resist himself from the charm of desire. His desire for love brought him closer to a Nepalese artist first and then to Myra. His inability to transcend his past attachment is further underscored when he encounters Nicholas in a dream, “a memory stirred, of standing before Nicholas. You’re my blank slate” (219), prompting the profound realization: “All we are not stares back at what we are” (110). Apparently, someone’s absence or their memory impacts an individual’s being, but more significantly, a person’s sense of self is profoundly impacted by the possibility of a return, because “it’s not what isn’t there that shapes us as much as what might return” (67). This return potential becomes a reality when Nicholas reappears after Nem relocates to London. To Nem, the city feels like a fresh start, described as “a completely new season. I felt self-congratulatory. It was a revelation. The world was ending, and also somehow being renewed” (68).

By the narrative’s conclusion, Nem’s essence is fundamentally shaped by his past, his enduring memories of Nicholas, and his resilience in the face of heartbreak. This concept is central to the work’s title, indicating that neither entity can exist in isolation. Love ultimately constructs the Self; the analysis asserts that Nem’s current identity is inextricably linked to his romantic experiences, and without them, he would not be the individual he has become. Furthermore, the profound impacts of death and loss define his reality, as they “left their absences, filled with oddly shaped emotions that didn’t quite fit, that pressed on this nerve and the other. Life chips away at flesh and

bone” (111). This internal fragmentation leaves him feeling profoundly hollow, encapsulated by his reflection: “I was just that—a mime. An act without words” (121). Pariat suggests that love does not merely exist between individuals but flows through them, constantly shifting in shape and significance over time. In *Seahorse*, the concept of love is largely defined by absence and longing. Following Nicholas’s abrupt disappearance, Nem’s affection shifts into a persistent, haunting preoccupation. Pariat illustrates this dynamic through two central concepts: Nem relies on memory to sustain his connection to Nicholas, effectively dwelling in the past, while the ghost of Nicholas—the void he leaves behind—exerts a more profound influence on Nem’s life than any subsequent relationship. Additionally, the title, *Seahorse*, also serves as a central metaphor for Pariat’s conception of love and identity. Just as the male seahorse subverts traditional gender roles by carrying its offspring, the love portrayed in the novel is inherently queer and fluid, resisting the rigid binary of ‘gay’ or ‘straight.’ Nehemiah explicitly draws a parallel between his relationship with Nicholas and that of a seahorse pair. He conceptualizes the bungalow inhabited by Nicholas as an aquarium, characterizing the two of them as peculiar yet magnificent beings: “Like us, I thought. Like us” (181). Ultimately, the novel posits that profound love necessitates an enduring engagement with the emptiness left in a person’s wake. The bond between Nem and Nicholas rests upon an intellectual and aesthetic framework, with their romance intrinsically tied to the realms of art, history, and mythology. Nehemiah’s profound attachment to his professor, Nicholas Petrou, transcends mere romantic pursuit, serving instead as a catalyst for self-discovery. Towards the end of the novel, Nem realizes his self-worth. He meets Nicholas near the sea but does not follow him intensely. He feels that although he has lived with heartbreak or mostly shaped by the absence of Nicholas, he does not crave him now. He realizes:

We paint a surface and leave no free spaces. Horror *vacui*. The fear of the empty. In the end, we are all cartographers, looking back at a map of our lives. Marking out the uneven course of our existence, hoping there will be no disappearances, of ourselves and the people we love. (186-87)

Even after the relationship has ended, Nem’s existence remains defined by it. He feels he exists because he is loved. He asserts, “Memory only gives us back what we had on condition we know it has been lost. To remake the world, we need first to understand that it has ended” (245).

Ultimately, this paper concludes that within Pariat’s work, love acts as an inescapable ontological force; the ‘self’ is not a static essence identified in solitude, but a dynamic entity continuously reconfigured by the echoes of past longings and the intellectual

heritage left by the beloved. Nevertheless, Pariat illustrates the nuanced challenges of this partnership, characterizing their love through intellectual inclination. Nem finds himself drawn to Nicholas primarily for his extensive wisdom. To impress Nicholas, Nem gradually allowed his identity to be moulded by Nicholas's perspective. By destabilizing traditional boundaries between the self and the other, Pariat illustrates that identity is not a static state but a precarious negotiation mediated by persistent affective yearning. Through this lens, the narrative maps the protagonist's transit across urban landscapes as a topographical manifestation of his own fractured ontological status. The metropolitan environment thus acts as a mirror for the protagonist, where his encounters with others reshape his sense of self, making his desires inseparable from the ongoing process of his own development. Therefore, desire acts as a transformative force, compelling the protagonist to continually reshape his sense of self in response to the fleeting nature of his personal relationships.

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