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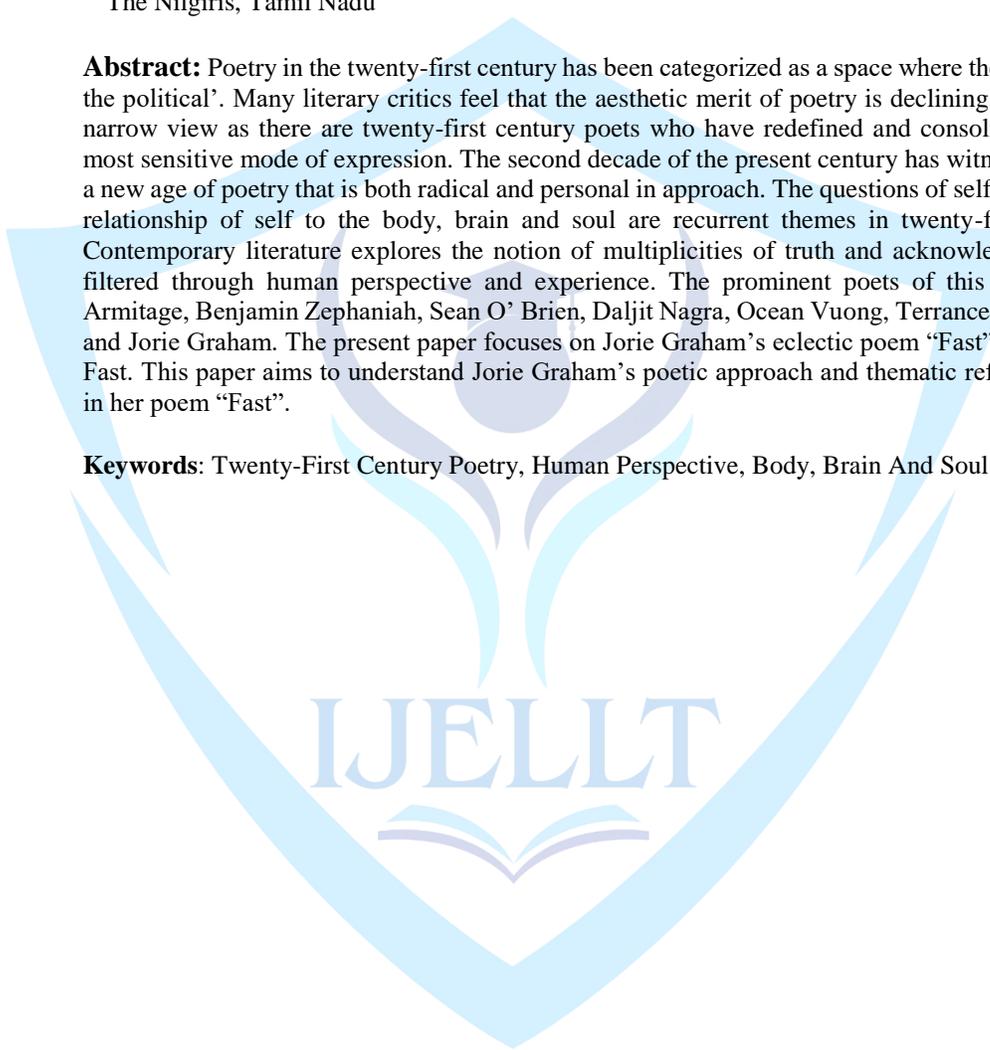
**Literary Theories**

## **Jorie Graham's "Fast": A Subjective Critique of Digital Interventions in the Space of the Self and the Humanity**

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**Abstract:** Poetry in the twenty-first century has been categorized as a space where the 'personal becomes the political'. Many literary critics feel that the aesthetic merit of poetry is declining. This seems to be a narrow view as there are twenty-first century poets who have redefined and consolidated poetry as the most sensitive mode of expression. The second decade of the present century has witnessed the coming of a new age of poetry that is both radical and personal in approach. The questions of self, the concept of self, relationship of self to the body, brain and soul are recurrent themes in twenty-first century poetry. Contemporary literature explores the notion of multiplicities of truth and acknowledges that history is filtered through human perspective and experience. The prominent poets of this century are Simon Armitage, Benjamin Zephaniah, Sean O' Brien, Daljit Nagra, Ocean Vuong, Terrance Hayes, Sarah Howe and Jorie Graham. The present paper focuses on Jorie Graham's eclectic poem "Fast" from the collection Fast. This paper aims to understand Jorie Graham's poetic approach and thematic reflections as revealed in her poem "Fast".

**Keywords:** Twenty-First Century Poetry, Human Perspective, Body, Brain And Soul



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## Introduction

Jorie Graham is a brilliant American poet and a Pulitzer Prize winner. Graham's poetry takes forward human race's mythical, historical, environmental and personal narratives and addresses both our personal as well as collective spaces. Her works unearth the nuances of fundamental desires to live, to love and to be. She explores both the known and unknown and her collections like *Fast*, *Sea Change*, *PLACE*, *From the New World* and *Runaway* focus on and insist on 'presence.' It would be unfair to read Jorie Graham or poets of her age from a twentieth century sensibility. Most critics of the twentieth century read twenty-first century poetry from a narrow lens thus negating it of its sensibility and aesthetic brilliance.

It is a very traditionalist view to consider contemporary poetry as culturally detrimental. As in the case of twenty-first century literature in general, poetry of the current decade focuses on contemporary issues such as international conflicts, marginalization, diverse sexual orientations and ecological issues. Poets of the present era take a very personal perspective to the larger issues of the world (Childs, 2008). They have been influenced by heterogeneous technological, scientific and introspective advancements.

Jorie Graham's most representative poem "Fast" from the collection *Fast*, distills the poet's ideology and her preoccupations- her death of her father, her mother's struggle with dementia, her own painful survival through cancer, ecological 'systemicide', the erosion of humanity by tools that mimic our curiosity and extend our reach beyond our care. The poet negotiates with ruin on its own impersonal terms in run – on sentences and fragmentary phrases. This implies the poet's anxious mind that finds it difficult to deal with these complex truths of life. The language and approach of the poem "Fast" with its abrupt start suggests the tension in the poet and how she prefers to hold on to the tension that life and the world credits her with. The recklessness of speech induces an idea that the poet lacks stability of peace but is seeking for it. ( Habermann, 2010) The poem speaks of the challenge of satiating our 'thirst' at the information era's 'fibre optic fire hose'. Technology, being an integrated part of human lives, has complicated human lives and has supposedly led to the 'demise of humanity'. The poet's attitude in the poem is not one of a conventional intimate study of losses. This poem is an elegy on absences, breaks, pauses and involuntary thoughts.

The poet foregrounds her loss as the basis for talking about various technologies- instrumental, algorithmic and grammatical. The poet is successful in making the 'unseen' virtual world 'visible'. Jorie Graham comes across as an earth bound 'perspectivist' who seeks to know the world by passionately seeking and probing into its myriad perspectives. (Brown,2008).

The poem "Fast" visualizes human voices joining the non human voices and intelligences- the sea floor, bots, chemicals, 3D printers. The poet talks about the un-monolithic digital forces dominating human existence and fears. Graham talks about human ignorance and humanity's well intentioned clumsiness. The poet laments on what the human race has done to a generation due to its digital obsession. This poem has been aptly termed the 'Wasteland of the digital age'.

The poet juxtaposes the 'smallness' of human beings' and the 'mandatory interconnectedness' that is expected from us. The poet unapologetically speaks about the hastening approach of climatic change where the 'human race would melt like glaciers'. She 'images' the apocalypse unthawing and 'a prehistoric frozen [...] finger about to touch". Time, space and consciousness fold in together in this elegy for plants, parents and the planet.

Graham's poetry is claustrophobic as she believes that life too is claustrophobic. Graham finds her 'self' and that of humanity ambushed by mortality; threatened by digital obsession. Yet, the poet is eager to investigate a world beyond the self. The poet seems tangled in her seemingly unrelated, fragmented thoughts.

The poem "Fast" is shaped through breathless long lines alternated with one- or two-word sentences. There is an interweaving of personal and collective history. She engages with history less as a poetic influence and more as an embodiment of global reality. Graham refuses to let her awareness and the readers forget that cancer, racial and class warfare, immigrant phobia and nationalism infect us all in dissimilar yet interconnected ways. "Fast" talks about the nature of social life in the 21st century. Past and future unfold in "every cell" across the vast space of her eccentric verse. Seemingly paranoid and random experiences seem absolutely related. Graham proves that a body can indeed tell the story of the world.

Graham explores the limits of the human and the uneasy seductions of the post human. She conjures up an array of voices and perspectives – from bots, to a holy shroud, to the ocean floor, to a medium of transmitting from beyond the grave. The verse gives from to the ever-increasing pace of transformation of our planet and the human existence. As Graham navigates through cyber life, 3 D printed life, life after death, biologically, chemically and electronically modified life, “Fast” lights up the borders of our new condition as individuals and as a species on the brink of extinction. The poet adopts a combination of density and stream of consciousness that is unsettling but real. (Harris, 2010) There is philosophical rumination too. Graham pairs mortality with the speed of information. The poet talks about ‘disclaimers’ proposing that human beings are becoming increasingly insensitive and ‘clever-bots’ have become better companions who ‘empathize’. The poet reminds that when we are in a digital space, we are an ‘open source’ susceptible to be tracked, hacked and targeted. The digital world is considered as a maples road that takes us into a maze of web-pages.

### **Conclusion**

Jorie Graham has defined the traditional definitions of poetry through this poem. She is convincing enough to echo the anxieties and tribulations of a ‘tech- obsessed’ world. The poem is a perfect example of twenty first century poetry as it defies the resistance towards pluralistic narratives. Graham encourages the readers to let go of ‘singular narratives’. The poet explores life through a fascinating mosaic of technology which has been redefining human existence. Graham constructs and deconstructs her core ideas through multilayered words and phrases to reveal what it feels to be a human in a ‘post human world’. The poet is both amazed and traumatized at the extent to which the digital resources are controlling human life. The poem talks about ‘downloads and updating’ as if they are as inevitable as breathing. She is skeptical towards privacy policies and passwords. The poet employs an extensive use of hyphens to imply ‘digital tapping’. She proposes that digital science is on a rise and is predicting ‘human actions’ Artificial Intelligence has become a permanent presence. In spite of all this, the poet reminds that human beings are vulnerable, mortal and susceptible to emotional imbalances.

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