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Politics of Identity in Its Cultural Context: A Žižekian Study on Sarah Ruhl's Eurydice

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to analyze Sarah Ruhl's Eurydice through Žižek's psychoanalytic framework, focusing on how the play destabilizes conventional notions of identity, memory, and desire. The objective is to explore how Ruhl's reimagining of Eurydice illuminates the interplay between the conscious and the repressed, and how this dynamic reframes the myth from a modern, gendered perspective.

Methods: A qualitative, interpretive textual analysis was conducted, drawing on Žižek's concepts—particularly the death drive and the instability of subjectivity—to examine key scenes, character transformations, and symbolic structures within the play. Attention was given to narrative shifts, spatial motifs, and the reconfiguration of mythic elements within contemporary emotional and cultural contexts.

Results: The analysis reveals that Eurydice presents identity as fluid and fractured rather than fixed. Eurydice's descent into the underworld symbolizes a loss not only of memory but of the foundational coordinates of selfhood and desire. The underworld functions as a liminal, semi-familiar space where repressed impulses surface, aligning with Žižek's notion of the death drive. Ruhl's domestic, humanized rendering of the myth exposes cultural patterns surrounding memory, agency, and whose experiences are legitimized. Through Eurydice's fragmented subjectivity, the play challenges traditional narratives centered on closure, coherence, and male-dominated perspectives.

Conclusions: The study concludes that Ruhl's Eurydice, interpreted through Žižek's psychoanalytic lens, reconfigures the myth to emphasize fragmentation, repression, and the incomplete nature of identity. By foregrounding a modern female voice, the play reveals the emotional and cultural gaps embedded in the myth and reframes them as spaces of possibility rather than deficiency.

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Introduction

Sarah Ruhl's *Eurydice* retells the old Greek myth in a way that feels startlingly intimate. Instead of following Orpheus on his heroic descent, Ruhl hands the story back to Eurydice and asks what it might mean to see the underworld through her eyes. What she creates is something dreamlike, a place that's both strange and strangely familiar, where elevators rain and stones talk, and where memory itself begins to unravel. Down there, Eurydice doesn't just lose her husband; she loses the coordinates of her identity. The play turns that loss into a kind of quiet experiment in how memory, love, and language hold us together and how easily they fall apart (Rowe, 2003; Schmidt, 2010).

Eurydice can be read through Žižek's psychoanalytic ideas, not as a neat interpretive formula, but more as a way to track how identity keeps slipping and reforming. Žižek, borrowing from Lacan, suggests that who we are isn't solid at all, it's stitched together through the tension between what we repress, what we say, and what the world expects of us (Žižek, 1989; 1997). Ruhl's underworld feels like that collision made visible: a place where memory, desire, and language fall out of sync. Eurydice keeps trying to make herself whole again, but the self-she's reaching for is already fractured.

Memory, here, isn't some tidy record of the past. It behaves more like a ghost, slippery, intrusive, and sometimes merciful. When Eurydice forgets her name, it's not just a plot device; it's what Žižek might call the death drive in action, the compulsion to return to what's been erased (Žižek, 1991). Her father's tender attempts to help her remember—to rebuild her identity word by word—echo that uneasy process of repression and return that psychoanalysis is obsessed with (Kay, 2003).

And then there's language. Ruhl treats it like a character in its own right, fragile, imperfect, constantly failing. Eurydice can't speak the language of the living anymore, and her father can't quite teach her how. It's as if every word they reach for slips through their hands. Lacan would say that language gives us form, but Ruhl seems to ask what happens when that scaffolding collapses (Lacan, 1992). When Eurydice finally begins to speak again, it's not fluency, it's survival.

Even the underworld itself feels like a mind turned inside out. The odd, whimsical details, the raining elevator, the River of Forgetfulness, those watchful Stones, aren't just stage effects; they're fragments of fantasy. Žižek might argue they reveal how desire makes its own landscapes, how the psyche externalizes what it can't face directly (Sharpe, 2006). In the end, Eurydice doesn't try

to resolve anything. It lingers instead in that uneasy space where memory, language, and loss keep colliding. Identity, as Ruhl presents it, isn't something one "has" but something one keeps piecing together, clumsily, tenderly, again and again. The fragments never quite fit, but maybe that's the point. Maybe wholeness is just another myth (Dean, 2006; Rowe, 2003).

Literature Review

Scholarly Readings of *Eurydice*

Sarah Ruhl's *Eurydice* has drawn a remarkable amount of attention from scholars for how it quietly shifts the emotional center of the myth. Instead of tracing Orpheus's famous descent into grief, Ruhl lingers on Eurydice's own passage through the underworld, what it means, psychologically and emotionally, to lose not only a loved one but also memory itself. James Al-Shamma (2011) points out how Ruhl's mix of surreal imagery and grounded emotion lets the underworld act as a mirror for a divided self, always caught between remembering and forgetting (Sarah Ruhl: A Critical Study of the Plays, p. 135).

Amy Muse (2018) suggests that Ruhl deliberately breaks with linear storytelling. Rather than driving the narrative toward resolution, the play meanders through passing, intimate experiences—glances, hesitations, missteps—particularly involving Eurydice and her father and Orpheus. Other critics, such as Rowe (2003), have looked closely at how Ruhl uses language to probe the link between memory and selfhood. When Eurydice forgets names and must piece her memories back together, Rowe reads it as a reminder of how fragile identity really is—how much it depends on the words and narratives used to hold it in place (Modern Drama, p. 240).

For Hernando-Real (2017), the underworld is less a mythic space than a psychological one, a landscape of repression and return. It becomes a theatre of the unconscious, where what has been buried resurfaces in distorted form, reshaping Eurydice's sense of who she is (The Transatlantic Politics of Meta-theatre in Sarah Ruhl's Work, p. 103). Taken together, these readings suggest that *Eurydice* isn't just about love or mythic loss—it's about how identity keeps remaking itself under the pressure of memory, trauma, and connection. Ruhl's surreal stage devices—the raining elevator, the murmuring Stones, the constant slippage of language—aren't decorative; they're how the play thinks about being human.

Žižekian Psychoanalytic Criticism

In Žižek's version of psychoanalysis, informed by a reading of Lacan "against the grain," there is no stable psychological category that people fit into. His idea of the death drive, defined as a tendency toward repetition and return—codified for Freudians by the resurgence of repressed material—explains why Ruhl's characters are in stasis. They circle back again and again to what has been lost. Žižek describes how this return unsettles the ego and exposes cracks in the symbolic order that normally keeps identity coherent (The Sublime Object of Ideology, p. 73).

In *Eurydice*, the underworld is a metaphor with flesh on its bones: a place where pieces of memory and desire rise up in rebellion against their entombment. Every one of Eurydice's attempts to recall names and stories comes up against the limits of language, resting within what Žižek (1991) calls the Real—what can never quite be put into words (For They Know Not What They Do, p. 65). Fantasy, for Žižek (1997), isn't escape but structure; it's how the mind organizes what it can't bear directly. The surreal imagery of Eurydice, the River of Forgetfulness, the raining elevator, the whispering Stones, is not random but the imagination's way of mapping trauma, physical traces of repressed desire (The Plague of Fantasies, p. 108).

As Žižek (1992) reminds us, the return of the repressed is never gentle. Memory in *Eurydice* doesn't restore harmony; it throws everything into disorder, destabilizing not just Eurydice's self but the very logic of the world she inhabits (Enjoy Your Symptom!, p. 42). Seen through the ideas of the Big Other, the Real, and the death drive, Ruhl's play treats identity not as something fixed but as something always coming apart and being stitched back together. Her underworld isn't a place of mythic judgment but a psychological workshop where the mind confronts what it has buried. Down there, language stops behaving, desire mutates, and the self is forced, slowly and painfully, to learn how to exist in pieces rather than wait for an impossible wholeness.

Theoretical Framework: The Žižekian Apparatus

The present article utilizes three of Žižek's most fundamental concepts, the Big Other, fantasy and the Real , to read Sarah Ruhl's Eurydice. These terms offer a psychoanalytical framework through which the play's treatment of memory, identity and trauma are played out in its negotiation between symbolic and real dimensions. Using Žižek's theories, we learn more about how the underworld of Eurydice functions as such a space where these forces come together and serve to shape character psychology, including Eurydice's process of rebuilding herself.

The Big Other

According to Žižekian psychoanalysis, the symbolic order is the network of social norms, cultural codes and institutionalized expectations that regulate individual subjectivity and behavior. The Big Other as Monstrous To explain further the amusing ideology of jouissance, we can turn to a figure surfaced in Žižek (1989): that of the Big Others, an invisible presence within language, law and social norms which brings coherence to the world in order for human beings to know who they are and can treat others. The Big Other prescribes the symbolic edifice that governs what is real and constrains the desires and identity of the subject.

In *Eurydice,* the Big Other is ruptured as Eurydice goes into the underworld, an area where none of the rules of the world above apply. The underworld represents a place where social and cultural edifices of the Big Other break down. Eurydice's entrance into this realm marks a disconnect with the recognizable symbolic system which provides her no referential structures according to which she could identify herself. In other words, as Žižek (1991) argues, the breakdown of the Big Other is a revelation of the basic contradictions regarding subjectivity's identity—that identity is not only a function of social roles, but also a consequence of an encounter with both the symbolic and Real. In the underworld, Eurydice becomes broken up in memory and identity as the Big Other loses its stabilizing role.

Eurydice's descent models the traversing of life sans lecher lmguistique: fleeing from assaults on identity as it frees itself from the paradigm and its corollary, familial expectations. Žižek (1997) maintains that in the confrontation with what Heidegger would call Das Ding, namely the void left behind by the discrediting of symbolic order, subjects face an absence at the very center of their being. In the case of Eurydice, this absence is represented in the lost memories that Eurydice must struggle to reconstruct without recourse to a Big Other.

Fantasy

In Žižek's view, fantasy isn't a soft escape from reality, but it's the very structure that lets survive it. He argues that fantasy is how the mind organizes what it can't face directly, such as buried desires, unresolved grief and the things we carry but can't admit even to ourselves (Žižek, 1992). It works almost like a filter, maybe even a kind of emotional buffer, reshaping raw experience into something the mind can survive. The Big Other may lay down the rules of social order, but fantasy

is where those rules get bent, sneaking in what isn't supposed to be spoken—secret desires and buried hurts—dressed in forms the psyche can safely touch without falling apart. Seen this way, the underworld in *Eurydice* isn't just a mythic setting, but it's the architecture of Eurydice's own unconscious. Everything strange and dreamlike down there feels purposeful such as the River of Forgetfulness, the talking Stones and the letters raining from the sky. None of it is random; these elements rise from the depths of Eurydice's inner life, where forgotten pieces of memory and emotion are still alive. They are the shapes her trauma takes when it finally demands to be seen. As Žižek (1991) puts it, fantasy is what lets us come close to the Real—that raw, unprocessed truth—without being shattered by it.

Fantasy also becomes the method through which Eurydice begins to rebuild herself. When her father patiently helps her remember her name, it's not just a sweet emotional moment—it's an act of imaginative reconstruction. Memory in this play isn't retrieval; it's creation. Eurydice must reinvent her past in order to have any future at all. Žižek (1997) suggests fantasy is how we make meaning when meaning has collapsed, and that's precisely what Ruhl shows. Eurydice doesn't "solve" her trauma; she learns to live inside it, using imagination to stitch together a broken self. Fantasy, then, isn't an escape from reality in this play—it's the only way back to it.

The Real

Of Žižek's ideas, the Real is perhaps the most haunting and elusive. It doesn't reflect quotidian reality but that which eludes meaning altogether and that's what resists language, memory, and culture. It is the cutting edge of experience that thought cannot capture. Žižek (1989) claims that the Real breaks the surface when the symbolic order, the network of language and social norms that normally stitches reality together, disintegrates. It appears in trauma and loss—what cannot be described but remains present. In Eurydice, the Real arrives with death, not the poetic version but the hollow silence it leaves behind. Eurydice encounters death through forgetting, such as words vanish, familiar names dissolve and her story collapses. Trauma here is disorienting, exposing, as Žižek (1997) notes, the limits of meaning itself.

Her effort to rebuild memory with her father is not a return to wholeness but a way of surviving fragmentation. The Real never goes away, Žižek (1991) reminds us; it can only be circled, never resolved. Eurydice doesn't recover a fixed identity—she invents one from what remains. She

writes letters that will never reach anyone and still reaches outward. The Real destroys her former self but also forces her to make a new one—unfinished, fragile, and painfully human.

Material and Methods

In response to the identified gap, the present article conducts a close textual analysis of Sarah Ruhl's *Eurydice*, utilizing Žižekian psychoanalysis to illuminate the play's exploration of identity, memory, and trauma. Drawing on Žižek's concepts of the Big Other, fantasy, and the Real, the analysis attends to the psychological depth of the drama and investigates how memory, language, and repression shape the characters' shifting sense of self. This qualitative approach is well suited to tracing the emotional undercurrents of the text and examining identity formation under conditions of loss and dislocation. The analytical procedure proceeds in four stages:

1. Interpreting the Breakdown of the Symbolic Order: The first stage analyses the functioning of the Big Other, the symbolic order that regulates social meaning, in Eurydice. In life is it is expressed in gender's cultural taboos, how they determine identity, but as Eurydice follows Orpheus into the underworld these conventions disintegrate. Without the crutch of a stable rule set or agreed-upon meanings, her identity is threatened and especially in her exchanges with her father there's a deep sense of disorientation. In the end, what we're witnessing is both social scaffolding and the way in which that's her definition of herself breaking down.

2. Mapping Fantasies and Unconscious Desire: The second section of the paper looks at how fantasy in Eurydice works as a medium for repressed desire and memory. For Žižek, fantasy is not simply a refuge; it is also an apparatus that protects the subject from trauma. (And speaking of maps: The bizarre underworld — the River of Forgetfulness, the talking Stones and the string room — serves as a map of Eurydice's subconscious.) By these symbols she journeys through her grief and starts to rebuild a fragile self.

3. Facing the Real: Trauma and Identity Reconstruction: The third level looks at when the play encounters the Real—Žižek's name for what escapes language and sense. In "Eurydice," the Real wakes us up to the dream of being, and it confronts us as trauma: death, amnesia and irreparable loss. Eurydice's incapacity to recall or speak of what has happened to her represents a loss of self. Her attempt to reconstruct memory becomes a direct stand-off with that which is inexplicable but must be faced.

4. Exploring Transgressive Desire and Jouissance: Final stages investigates points of jouissance—ruptures as painful surplus affect, what Žižek refers to as transgressive desire. Jouissance in Eurydice appears as deep grief and longing, as Eurydice laments endlessly inebriated with her falling over emotions. These episodes shake off the grip of repression, revealing latent desires that sit beneath conscious reasoning. Both her melancholy and her emotional bond resist or hold on to the symbolic order. Desire dominates even in defeat, and this unslaked pining for loss lays bare the paradoxes which inform subjectivity.

Results

Memory, Mourning, and Repression

Memory in *Eurydice* is neither a stable archive nor a sentimental force; it behaves more like a haunted terrain, full of absences that demand to be negotiated. As soon as Eurydice enters the underworld, she passes through the River of Forgetfulness and becomes estranged from her own history. She forgets her wedding, her love for Orpheus, even the word father. This is not simple narrative amnesia but what Freud would call a traumatic repression, a psychic defense mechanism that buries unbearable experience only for it to return displaced and fragmented (Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, 1920).

Žižek argues that repression does not eliminate desire or memory; rather, "the return of the repressed is the return of a gap—something missed in the symbolic" (Žižek, For They Know Not What They Do, 1991, p. 75). Eurydice's fragmented recollections illustrate this structure: she does not remember her past linearly, but in emotional shock, a faint familiarity with her name, a sudden recognition of her father's voice. These broken returns of memory enact what Cathy Caruth calls traumatic latency — the idea that trauma returns belatedly, "not as memory, but as re-experience" (Caruth, Unclaimed Experience, 1996, p. 11).

Her father's patient work of memory restoration — teaching her her name, constructing a room from string, narrating her lost life — is an act of symbolic mourning, an attempt to repair the rupture between Eurydice and her past. But mourning here is not restorative; it is a negotiation with loss. As Judith Butler suggests, "the boundaries of the self are undone in grief," and identity becomes contingent on what and whom we lose (Butler, Precarious Life, 2004, p. 22). Eurydice's

identity is not recovered — it is reconstituted through mourning, showing precisely what Žižek insists: that the subject is always in pieces, structured by lack.

Language and Identity: Communication and Self-Reconstruction

In Ruhl's underworld, language is unstable — the most fragile material of identity. Eurydice's initial muteness signals more than confusion; it demonstrates her expulsion from the symbolic order, the realm of language and social structure that Lacan argues constitutes subjectivity (Lacan, Écrits, 1977). Without speech, Eurydice becomes unanchored from the symbolic network that once held her in place. Her question, "What are people made of?" is a linguistic crisis and a metaphysical one.

Her father's bittersweet letters function as linguistic lifelines, drawing her back into subjectivity. He names things — "door," "string," "daughter" — and naming in Lacanian terms is an act of symbolic re-entry. But language in the underworld is not stable; it flickers. Eurydice writes letters to Orpheus he cannot receive, and in the end, language collapses into silence again. This repeated collapse shows what Žižek means when he writes that "language never fully captures the Real; it circles around it, anxiously" (The Sublime Object of Ideology, 1989, p. 135). Language in *Eurydice* is less a tool and more a wound: it allows love to reach out, but never to arrive.

The Underworld as a Space of Fantasy and Desire

The underworld Ruhl imagines is not simply mythic but psychoanalytic, a dream architecture constructed from Eurydice's unconscious. The raining elevator, the Stones who speak in deadpan tones, the River of Forgetfulness, these are fantasy constructions, not decorative surrealism. As Elizabeth Grosz reminds us, fantasy is the stage upon which the unconscious writes itself (Grosz, Sexual Subversions, 1989, p. 87).

Fantasy in Žižek's terms serves a dual purpose: it screens the subject from the unbearable truth of the Real while also giving form to repressed desire. In Eurydice's case, fantasy allows her to stage her grief indirectly: she never says "I am afraid of being forgotten," but she swims in a river that erases names. She never says "I want to return to my father," but she builds a house of string—her father's house—inside a land of the dead. Fantasy does not hide truth; it reveals it slant.

Here, fantasy becomes Eurydice's survival strategy. The underworld allows her to confront what she could not face in life: separation, grief, the fragility of love, the unbearable impermanence of connection. Fantasy, as Žižek notes, is not a prison but "a map of desire" (The Plague of Fantasies,

1997, p. 9). Eurydice does not escape reality—she rewrites it until she can bear to live inside it, even if only temporarily.

Jouissance and the Ache of Desire

If desire in Eurydice moves quietly beneath language, then jouissance is the moment when it ruptures the surface—when feeling becomes too large to be contained by speech or structure. In Žižekian psychoanalysis, jouissance is not ordinary pleasure, but it is a kind of excess, an intensity that borders on pain. It is the desire that persists even when fulfillment is impossible, the emotional surplus that leaks beyond reason. As Žižek puts it, jouissance is "enjoyment in excess", a "strange satisfaction taken in pain itself" (The Sublime Object of Ideology, 1989, p. 53).

In Eurydice, jouissance takes shape not in erotic excess but in emotional excess, grief, longing, and the unbearable pull of memory. Eurydice's sorrow over being separated from Orpheus, her desperate attachment to her father, and her refusal to fully abandon the world of the living all reveal a structure of desire that hurts. She does not simply mourn; she circles her pain, returns to it, repeats it, and clings to it. This repetition is not weakness—it is the structure of jouissance: a compulsion to return to what wounds, precisely because it also constitutes identity. Roland Barthes writing on grief in A Lover's Discourse, notes that mourning is not a passive state but a practice of repeated return (Barthes, 1977, p. 65). Eurydice's behavior echoes this, She writes letters that will never be delivered. She tries to speak to Orpheus across worlds. She stands, suspended, between two loves and two deaths: the literal one and the symbolic death of forgetting. She refuses release. There is pain in this persistence—but also a fierce aliveness. That tension is jouissance.

Her father also dwells in jouissance. He builds her a home out of string even though structures don't last in the underworld. He teaches her language even though he knows she will ultimately forget again. And he performs the most transgressive act in the play: he chooses to dip himself into the River of Forgetfulness, choosing oblivion over continued grief. That choice is not surrender; it is, paradoxically, a final act of desire. It is what Lacan would call "the tragic core of love"—that it seeks union even at the price of self-erasure (Lacan, Seminar XX, 1998). Jouissance in *Eurydice* is not loud or melodramatic—it is intimate and unbearable. It emerges in whispered letters, hesitant gestures, moments when characters know they are losing each other but hold on anyway. It lives in the contradiction Žižek describes: "desire begins only where satisfaction ends" (The Metastases of Enjoyment, 1994, p. 23). Eurydice's longing does not resolve; it combusts quietly into tragic

illumination. Through jouissance, the play suggests that identity is not only formed through memory but through what the subject is willing to suffer for, what it refuses to let go.

Synthesis: Identity as Fracture, Return, and Reconstruction

Across Eurydice, identity does not appear as a stable essence but as something precarious, constantly broken, rewritten, and negotiated through loss. What begins as a myth about love becomes, through Ruhl's rearrangement, a study of subjectivity under psychic strain. Through Žižek's conceptual triad, the Big Other, fantasy, and the Real, a deeper structure emerges beneath Ruhl's lyrical surface: Eurydice's journey is not just a descent into the land of the dead but into the mechanics of the self.

The collapse of the Big Other in the underworld, its erasure of language, social rules, and life's familiar coordinates, strips Eurydice to a state before identity can exist. Fantasy then becomes the tool through which she resists disintegration; it is her means of stitching meaning back together, a survival mechanism disguised as imagination. But fantasy does not fully protect her. The Real erupts in moments when loss becomes inescapable, e.g. the fact of her death, the impossibility of reunion with Orpheus, and the final disappearance of her father. These are not narrative twists, but they are ontological fractures. They reveal, as Žižek argues, that the subject is structured by what it lacks, shaped by what cannot be symbolized (Žižek, The Sublime Object of Ideology, 1989).

Jouissance closes the circle through grief and attachment, Eurydice experiences desire at its most painful and most human. Mourning does not weaken her, but it defines her. Every attempt to hold on becomes a quiet act of rebellion against oblivion. What Ruhl ultimately stages, then, is not the triumph of love but the persistence of subjectivity in the face of erasure. Identity survives not because it is whole, but because it refuses to stop remaking itself. In this sense, Eurydice's story is less a tragedy than a psychoanalytic truth: the self is born not from certainty but from struggle. Memory fails, language falters, fantasy fractures, and grief overwhelms, yet something of Eurydice remains. In Žižek's terms, she is not restored; she is rewritten.

Discussion

Sarah Ruhl's Eurydice offers a powerful exploration of memory, identity, and desire through the Žižekian psychoanalytic lens. By setting the play in the underworld, Ruhl creates a liminal space where the usual cultural and social frameworks of the living world are suspended, allowing identity

to be reconfigured. The play dramatizes the tension between memory and forgetting, mourning and self-reconstruction, using surreal and symbolic elements to illustrate how desire, identity, and the unconscious forces of repression shape subjectivity. Through Žižek's concepts of the Big Other, fantasy, and the Real, this article shows how Eurydice challenges the notion of a stable, coherent identity. Instead, Ruhl presents identity as something that is always in flux, negotiated between memory and loss, language and trauma, desire and repression. The underworld serves as a space where identity is fluid and performative, shaped by the interaction of unconscious drives, symbolic mediation, and relational dynamics. Ultimately, Eurydice underscores the ethical and psychic work of constructing the self, offering a profound meditation on the fragility and resilience of identity.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Islamic Azad University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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