

# REPRESENTAÇÕES DO MITO NA HISTÓRIA E NA LITERATURA

Organização

ANA LUÍSA VILELA

ELISA NUNES ESTEVES

FABIO MARIO DA SILVA

MARGARIDA REFFÓIOS

COLEÇÃO LITERATURA 6



UNIVERSIDADE DE ÉVORA



ÉVORA • MMXIV

## **Ficha técnica**

Título

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Coleção

**LITERATURA 6**

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Edição

**Universidade de Évora  
Centro de Estudos em Letras da Universidade de Évora  
Instituto de Investigação e Formação Avançada da Universidade de Évora**

ISBN

**978-989-96532-4-5**

Depósito Legal

**375706/14**

Data de publicação

**Maio de 2014**

Tiragem

**200 exemplares**

Execução Gráfica

**PUBLITO - Estúdio de Artes Gráficas**  
Rua do Penedo, 19 - Parque Industrial de Pitancinhos  
Tel. 253 283 843  
email: [publito@publito.pt](mailto:publito@publito.pt)  
4700-727 Palmeira - BRAGA

# In the footsteps of contemporary British and Portuguese women authors: myth and short fiction in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

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In his essay “Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths”, Northrop Frye starts by drawing a parallel between the art of painting and literature. He affirms: ‘In literature, as in painting, the traditional emphasis in both practice and theory has been on representation or “lifelikeness”’ (Frye, 134).<sup>1</sup> But, as in painting, in which the structural principles are to be derived from “the internal analogy of the art itself” (from geometrical shapes), so too the structural principles of literature are to be traced from “archetypal and anagogic criticism”. According to Frye:

It follows that the mythical mode, the stories about gods, in which characters have the greatest possible power of action, is the most abstract and conventionalized of all literary modes, just as the corresponding modes in other arts – religious Byzantine painting, for example – show the highest degree of stylization in their structure. Hence the structural principles of literature are as closely related to mythology and comparative religion as those of painting are to geometry. (Frye, 134-135)

Although Frye focuses predominantly on the symbolism of the Bible and less on Classical mythology his essay suggests that myth and literature are intrinsically related. Mythical episodes in stories give them “an abstractly literary quality” and “a certain degree of stylization” (Frye, 135). Moreover, because they deal with the actions of gods, myths give a wide range of freedom to story-tellers. Thus, the return of irony to myth nowadays can be

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<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, he explains: ‘The illusive painter however cannot escape from pictorial conventions, and non-objective painting is still an imitative art in Aristotle’s sense, [...] the whole art of painting lies within a combination of pictorial “form” or structure and pictorial “content” or subject’ (Frye, 131).

associated with the hero's power of action within the story. According to Frye in his first essay, entitled "Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes":

If inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity, the hero belongs to the *ironic* mode. This is still true when the reader feels that he is or might be in the same situation, as the situation is being judged by the norms of a greater freedom. (Frye, 34)

Always bearing in mind the initial comparison between the art of painting and literature, Frye eventually affirms: "[t]he return of irony to myth [...] is contemporary with, and parallel to, abstraction, expressionism, cubism, and similar efforts in painting to emphasize the self-contained pictorial structure" (Frye, 135). What this scholar and critic further suggests is that in realistic fiction mythical structure poses problems concerning plausibility. Displacement, then, becomes crucial to solve the problem of plausibility in fiction: "[...] to make it a plausible, symmetrical, and morally acceptable story" – Frye explains – "a good deal of displacement is necessary, and it is only after a comparative study of the story type has been made that the metaphorical structure within it begins to emerge" (Frye, 137).

I have chosen to start by focusing on Frye's essay because I believe displacement – understood as the replacement of abstract fictional designs by realistic structures – is a crucial technical device used in the short fictions I want to discuss here: A. S. Byatt's "Medusa's Ankles," Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy*, Isabel Barreno's "As três amigas" and Lídia Jorge's "As três mulheres sagradas". Just as the painter's response to his/her art is to seek the geometrical shapes, these authors' affinity with myth and its "abstractly literary quality" is key to understanding their narratives.

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In "Medusa's Ankles", the story that opens the collection *The Matisse Stories* (1993) by A. S. Byatt, the reference to Medusa constitutes the link with myth. This mythical figure is indirectly invoked in the reproduction of a Matisse drawing, *La chevelure* (1931-32), reminding the reader, through a process of association with the short story's title, of the serpents on Medusa's head. As Jack Stuart explains: '*The Matisse Stories* is visibly engaged with the arts: below the sky-blue title of each story is a black-and-white Matisse drawing with its own sky-blue title underneath. Matisse's *La chevelure* (*The Hair*, 1931-32) aptly introduces "Medusa's Ankles," a story of hairdressing [...]' (236).

In "Medusa's Ankles" Byatt is being subversive on different levels. She plays with a classical myth on beauty and jealousy, the myth of Medusa as told by Perseus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Book 4):

Medusa was once an exceedingly beautiful maiden, whose hand in marriage was jealously sought by an army of suitors. According to someone who told me he'd seen it, her marvellous hair was her crowning glory. The story goes that Neptune the sea god raped this glorious creature inside the shrine of Minerva. Jove's daughter screened her virginal eyes with her aegis in horror, and punished the sin, by transforming the Gorgon's beautiful hair into horrible snakes. (170-171)

And she fuses Medusa's story with the myth of Achilles' heel<sup>2</sup>, introducing the theme of vulnerability. As Jack Stuart further suggests:

Byatt's title conflates mythological references to the Medusa [...] and to Achilles' heel, the vulnerable part of the hero's body that could not be preserved from harm, because it had not been dipped in the magic water. In Byatt's tale, Susannah, a middle-aged classicist, finds that a trendy hairdo reveals her age all the more clearly [...] leaving her defenceless [...] Susannah's distress over the "hideous" hairdo feeds into her anger over Lucian's [her hairdresser's] rejection of his aging wife, whose swollen ankles repel him. (237)

Furthermore, Byatt plays with the verbal representation of Matisse's art work, *Le nu rose* (*The Rosy Nude*, 1935)<sup>3</sup>. Byatt's ekphrastic description opens the narrative and remains a crucial element until the end of the narrative:

She had walked in one day because she had seen the Rosy Nude through the plate glass. That was odd, she thought, to have that lavish and complex creature stretched voluptuously above the coat rack, where one might have expected the stare, silver and supercilious or jetty and frenzied, of the model girl. They were all girls now, not women. The rosy nude was pure flat colour, but suggested mass. (3)

Indeed, Matisse's treatment of a woman transformed by age may be associated with the radical transformation of Medusa, from beauty into beast, into a Gorgon, eventually punished by a sin that was not her own. In Byatt's short story age is also depicted as something unnatural in a society in which reality is substituted by its representation or image.<sup>4</sup> In her second visit to the hairdresser's salon, *The Rosy Nude* had been taken down and

<sup>2</sup> See Ovid (Book 12) 492-494.

<sup>3</sup> A reproduction of the painting *Le nu rose* appears on the top back cover of the volume. For an enlightening discussion of the semiotic elements of Byatt's book (graphic and peritextual features of front and back covers, as well as its internal structure) and the narratives at a textual level see: Isabel Fernandes, "Matisse and Women: Portraits by A. S. Byatt", *Critical Dialogues: Slow Readings of English Literary Texts* (Lisboa: Author's Edition, 2011) 149-166.

<sup>4</sup> See Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995). See also Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (1994, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006) 1-42. Cf.: Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981) 9-68.

replaced by photos of model girls. Susannah explains: “I need to look particularly good this time. I’ve won a prize. A Translator’s Medal. I have to make a speech. On television” (17). The reference to TV – “which had come too late, when she [Susannah] had lost the desire to be seen or looked at” (19-20) – and the replacement of Lucien by his assistant Deirdre lead to the story’s climax: the moment of *anagnorisis*, the main character’s recognition that she is getting old, a moment of epiphany followed by the destruction of the salon, depicted as a battle field:

‘It’s horrible,’ said Susannah. ‘I look like a middle-aged woman with a hair-do.’ [...] Susannah picked up a bottle, full of gel. She brought it down, heavily, on the grey glass shelf which cracked. [...] Susannah seized a small cylindrical pot and threw it at one of his emanations. It burst with a satisfying crash and one whole mirror became a spider-web of cracks, from which fell, tinkling, a little heap of crystal nuggets. In front of Susannah was a whole row of such bombs or grenades. [...] When she had finished [...] [h]er own hands were bleeding. (24-26)

Thus the link between drawing and title is further enhanced by the narrative itself. The reader would have to be unusually inattentive to miss the point that the heroine *is* Medusa. However in a gesture of total subversion Susannah is not killed but rather rescued by a figure that could be interpreted as the opposite of Perseus, her own husband:

Her husband came in, unexpected – she had long given up expecting or not expecting him, his movements were unpredictable and unexplained. He came in tentatively, a large, alert, ostentatiously work-wearied man. She looked up at him speechless. He saw her. (Usually he did not.)

‘You look different. You’ve had your hair done. I like it. You look lovely. It takes twenty years off you. You should have it done more often.’

And he came over and kissed her on the shorn nape of her neck, quite as he used to do. (28)

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From the very beginning of Ali Smith’s *Girl Meets Boy* the main theme of the narrative is disclosed to the reader. “Let me tell you about when I was a girl” (Smith 3) is the opening sentence of the short novel.<sup>5</sup> What is significant about this first line is that it is uttered by the Scottish grandfather of the two female characters central to the narrative, Midge and Anthea Gunn.

<sup>5</sup> This analysis on Ali Smith’s *Girl Meets Boy* was first developed in “Forging New Identities: Recasting Myths in Contemporary British and Portuguese Women’s Writing”, published in *Expanding the Frontiers of Comparative Literature: Toward an Age of Tolerance*. Volume II. Edited by Sung-Won Cho. Seoul, Korea: CAU – Chung-Ang University Press, 2013: 101-113.

From the very beginning then, a normative notion of gender is questioned: Robert, clearly a male character, tells a story about when he was a girl.

From his first statement, the grandfather goes on in order to imagine his own personal story linked to a young woman known as Burning Lily, a reminiscence of the second suffragette movement, which took place at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Although there seems to be no clear link to an historical figure, the reader can easily connect the character described to real people such as the Pankhursts or any of their followers, or even the first martyr of the suffragette's cause, Emily Davidson.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the character of the grandfather acts as the storyteller, whose function is to perpetuate myths, legends and folktales in an increasingly scientific and technological era. Rob is the bard who helps to introduce the story about to be narrated by both Anthea and Midge in turn.<sup>8</sup>

Besides the emphasis on the very act of story-telling, the reader is made aware of the significance of the female names in the story: Anthea, Midge, Burning Lily and Imogen. Curiously enough, Anthea and Lily are connected to flowers,<sup>9</sup> while Midge is an insect name. Imogen, however, is a rather meaningful name, linked with the virtuous heroine of *Cymbaline* by Shakespeare. Gender becomes a quintessential issue since Anthea, the narrator of the first chapter depicts her sister (Midge/Imogen) both as a girl and a boy, as the personal pronouns printed in the first part of the text prove: "You're being ridiculous, Anthea, Midge says shrugging *her* eyes at me" (Smith, 5; my emphasis) and "Not very ladylike, Midge says from the other side of *his* head" (Smith, 8; my emphasis).

The reader is thus not taken by complete surprise when Anthea falls in love for a boy, who is actually a girl: "He was the most beautiful boy I had ever seen in my life. / But he looked really like a girl. / She was the most beautiful boy I had ever seen in my life" (Smith, 45). Although the recasting of the myth of Iphis will have both Anthea and her lover for protagonists, the myth is only told when the narrative is already far advanced. Nevertheless,

<sup>6</sup> Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928) was the leader of the suffragette movement. Together with her daughters and other women who fought for the cause, she founded the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), claiming women's right to vote.

<sup>7</sup> On Derby day (4 June 1913) the activist Emily Davidson (1872-1913) ran in front of the King's horse and was severely injured. She died a few days later at the Epsom Cottage Hospital.

<sup>8</sup> Anthea and Midge will be the two alternating narrators of *Girl Meets Boy*. Starting with Anthea there will be five sections altogether: "I", "you", "us", "them" and "all together now".

<sup>9</sup> Anthea, however, only realizes the meaning of her name rather late in the novel. It is Robert, her lover, who explains to her: "It means flowers, or a coming-up of flowers, a blooming of flowers [...]" (Smith 82). Nevertheless, if her name is linked with flowers, her surname Gunn is rather more belligerent.

the actual telling of this ancient Cretan myth<sup>10</sup> only makes sense when understood in the light of all that has been previously narrated.

It is as if the myth had already been re-enacted and now only needed corroboration. The myth becomes a metaphor of the role of women in society and of women's emancipation. On a smaller scale, it also becomes representative of the relationship between Anthea Gunn and Robin Goodman. As Anthea explains: "Girl meets boy [...]. In so many more ways than one" (Smith, 100). Thus, the expression Anthea employs ("Girl meets boy") not only throws the reader back to the title of the short novel but it also gains a depth concealed until that moment.

Towards the end the narrative drifts into a fairy-tale-like story, and the reader is summoned to the text. In a parodical echo of *Jane Eyre*, Anthea explains, "Reader, I married him/her. / It's the happy ending. Lo and behold" (Smith, 149). As the title of the last chapter suggests – "all together now" – all the characters mentioned in the short novel are reunited – all except, significantly, for Imogen's sexist co-workers and Keith.<sup>11</sup> But there are other figures called upon. The end of the narrative also pertains to the domain of the mythical: Artemis, Dionysus, Cupid, Juno, Isis, Iphis and Ianthe join the celebrations.

In order to complete the allegorical description, Robert and Helen Gunn, the adventurous grandparents who were lost at sea, come back, "in time for a party" (Smith, 159), bringing the narrative to a close and recovering its mythical dimension. "Midge, my sweet fierce cynical heart, our grandfather says. You're going to have to learn the kind of hope that makes things history" (Smith, 16), Robert's words at the beginning of the narrative are now echoed by Anthea, who concludes: "[a]nd it was always the stories that needed the telling that gave us the rope we could cross any river with" (Smith, 160).

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In Portugal, at the dawn of the Carnation Revolution, the friendship of three women, Maria Velho da Costa, Maria Isabel Barreno and Maria Teresa Horta, triggered the literary creation of the *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* (*New Portuguese Letters*, 1972). Undoubtedly, these three authors and their work

<sup>10</sup> The myth tells us about the transformation of Iphis into a boy by the goddess Isis and her/his marriage to the beautiful Ianthe. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses: A New Verse Translation*, trans. David Raeburn, introd. Denis Feeney (London: Penguin Books, 2004): Book 9, verses 668-797; pp. 372-379.

<sup>11</sup> Imogen's co-workers and Keith are representative of the power multinational corporations have in society nowadays. They are also remnants of a patriarchal society and thus they remain excluded from the fairy-tale-like ending of the story.

had a major impact in the development of contemporary Portuguese women's writing. According to Isabel Allegro de Magalhães:

[T]he *New Portuguese Letters* display a trait rarely found in the fabric of other feminist literary texts: the association of an indictment against the oppression of women's bodies in the private sphere and the oppression discernible in women's relationships in the public sphere. (Magalhães, 202)

Maria Isabel Barreno (1939-) became world-wide known for her co-authorship in *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*, a landmark work that denounced, among other aspects, women's social situation in Portugal in the sixties. Indeed, Barreno's early literary work and up to the eighties presents as one of her main interests the search for identity, particularly, the search for female identity (*De Noite as Árvores São Negras*, 1968; *Os Outros Legítimos Superiores*, 1970; *A Morte da Mãe*, 1972; *O Inventário de Ana*, 1982; *Célia e Celina*, 1985). However, the collection of short stories entitled *Os Sentos Incomuns* (1993),<sup>12</sup> which contains fourteen short stories portraying common characters and everyday situations, is representative of a shift in Barreno's depiction and questioning of female identity. I will focus on the short story entitled "As amigas" in order to discuss how the narration of the most unexceptional circumstances is sprinkled with subversive elements.

As the title, "As amigas", suggests, the short story is about friendship among women. Three women named after their particular traits "Pestanejante" (blinking-eyed), "Autofágica" (autophagic) and "Biface" (two-faced) are presented by the narrator as friends. However, from the very beginning the language employed is ambiguous: "Eram três mulheres feias, amigas relativamente íntimas" (Barreno, 17). The pejorative adjective, which can be associated both with physical and psychological traits, describes the women as ugly and the adverb qualifies the depth of their friendship, thus undermining the expectations created in the title of the short story. Indeed, the language employed in the narrative is both comic and ironic. Take for example the description of each friend:

Uma, via o mundo com os olhos pequenos. Conjugavam-se nesse olhar dois factores: primeiro, ela tinha os olhos pequenos; segundo, tinha uma visão estreita do mundo. Seria difícil dizer o quê a causa, o quê o efeito: se os olhos se haviam tornado pequenos pela visão estreita, se a visão se adaptara à dimensão abarcável pelos olhos. [...]

Outra olhava o horizonte intensamente, de sobrolho franzido, enquanto roía as unhas. Não era esta uma postura ocasional, uma atitude numa tarde depressiva: era a sua natural postura. [...]

<sup>12</sup> The collection won two awards: Grande Prémio do Conto Camilo Castelo Branco, APE; and Prémio Pen Clube.

A terceira tinha as sobrancelhas estupidamente arqueadas – depiladas para fornecer esse efeito arqueado e erguidas em perpétuo espanto. (Barreno, 17-19)

The description of these three middle-class women, wrapped in their certainties and morals, is accurate and full of small details. However, their friendship is based in a misconception, each one believing herself to be superior to the others: “E assim conviviam as três, com muitos enganos. Cada uma se julgando superior, mais bem apetrechada ou menos desvalida do que as outras no quotidiano diálogo com o mundo [...]” (Barreno, 23).

It is therefore not surprising that their friendship collapses after a brief episode in which they witness, unexpectedly, a young man having a seizure in the street. Their attitudes reveal their own insecurity, selfishness and indecision when it comes to acting: “A partir daqui a amizade delas, ou o convívio, foi esfriando. Pestanejante não podia suportar a ideia de que Autofágica a vira voltar as costas à dor alheia e que Biface fora a única que agira em boa samaritana” (Barreno, 23).

“As amigas” is apparently an uncomplicated short story, in which tension is built and sustained by language. The friendship of these three women is not destroyed by the significant episode they witness together towards the end of the narrative, and which constitutes its climax, but has been undermined from the very beginning of the short story. However, there are other unsettling elements that deserve further examination. The descriptions of the three women may be interpreted as traces of mythical figures that haunted literature since Antiquity. “Pestanejante,” Auto Autofágica” and “Biface” complement each other and remind the reader of the three Graie. As Nina Auerbach explains:

The Graie are three mythical sisters who are isolated from time: Hesiod's *Theogony* states baldly that they were born old. In the “now” of the myth, they have a single eye between them, which is passed unflinching from sister to sister. They spend their lives endowing each other with vision: apparently it has never occurred to any other sister to keep the eye and run away. That is the hero's job. Perseus steals the eye, forcing them to reveal the whereabouts of their other triad of sisters, the irresistibly hideous Gorgons. (Auerbach, 3)

The three female main characters in Barreno's short story share traits with the mythical Graie. They form a sisterhood of outcasts, imprisoned in their own narrowed vision of the world. Barreno's narrative may therefore be interpreted as a postmodern parody of ancient myths of sisterhood.

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The short story “As três mulheres sagradas” by Lídia Jorge (1946-) presents striking similarities with “As amigas” by Maria Isabel Barreno. Jorge's

narrative language is also embedded in irony. The plot is set in the present day, although the time is not exactly specified, and the main action takes place on the south coast of Portugal.

The narrative opens with the description of a woman, Vera Brandão, victim of a random malicious act: she has been tied naked to a column at an unnamed beach and left there defenceless overnight. Apparently, her two female friends were also tied to separate columns, constituting the triad of sacred women suggested by the title of the short story. However, when liberated the main character realizes that the friends have escaped and abandoned her. Thus, the intimate relation of the three women is undermined from the very start of the narrative:

Na verdade, ainda que Julinha Moreira e Dinah de Sousa, suas companheiras inseparáveis, se tivessem desprendido e abalado durante a madrugada, sem se aproximarem dela sequer, ainda admitindo esse absurdo, sempre haveria um sentido. (Jorge, 86)

Furthermore, the religious connotations of the title and the depiction of the main character as a martyr are gradually weakened by the displaced elements that come to the surface in the narrative: the allusion to her “lingerie”, suggesting a certain refined taste, and the mention to the woman’s feet with red painted nails resting on the sand. As the story unfolds in flash-back, there are other elements that undermine not only the reliability of the main character but also of her two friends and the project in which they participate:

Afinal ela [Vera Brandão] apenas havia sido líder dum projecto destinado a manter a harmonia do Mundo, não passava duma criatura vulgar. Como muitas outras pessoas com as quais se cruzava na rua, ela apenas tinha sonhado com uma associação *de defesa intransigente* da vida humana [...]. (Jorge, 87; my emphasis)

The sacred women of the title of the short story, the martyrs of the beginning of the narrative appear to be three conservative middle-aged, middle-class women, trapped in their own sense of righteousness, which as it turns out in the short story is synonymous with their own self-interests. In search of funds for their cause, the three friends are willing to use a young pregnant woman, ironically named *Margarida* (Daisy) – since she is not as innocent as the three women pretend her to be. There are small discrepancies between the idea behind the pro-life campaign “Salvação da Vida” (Life’s Salvation) and the comfortable social position in society the three friends hold, the allusions to the hotels in which they stay, the hairdresser they all go to, and Vera Brandão’s BMW.

It is therefore not surprising that the perpetrators of such a humiliating act described at the beginning of the short story are friends with the young pregnant woman. Similarly, it is not surprising that the main character suffers the most and is left abandoned by the two friends. Towards the end of the narrative, however, the violence of the events seems to be obliterated by the narrator's last remarks:

O sentido existe. Cuidadosamente, a líder arrumou no dossier vários exemplares do prospecto que dizia – «*Chamo-me Margarida. Salve com o seu apoio muitas outras margaridas...*» Nunca se sabe quando o prospecto voltará a ser necessário. (Jorge, 127)

Published for the first time in 2004, "As três mulheres sagradas" tackles the issue of the right to abortion in Portuguese society. Indeed the short story comes to light after the referendum held in 1998 and the multiple abortion trials held in Maia in 2002 and in Aveiro in 2003. It also anticipates the result of the 2007 referendum, which ended with one of the most restrictive abortion laws in the European Union, only allowing abortion on demand in the first ten weeks of pregnancy in Portugal.

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The reference to powerful myths and notable figures of Classical mythology in the short fiction discussed exemplifies to what extent myth lives on in contemporary literature. A. S. Byatt's use of Medusa's story, Ali Smith's recasting of Iphis' myth, Isabel Barreno's and Lídia Jorge's allusions to the three Graie prove that these mythical creatures can become powerful metaphors to tackle specific issues in our society. It is significant to notice that in all the above mentioned authors' works mythological female figures are constantly recurring. Similarly, themes linked to these same figures, such as: the representation of womanhood as well as sisterhood, old age versus youth, and gender politics come up again and again for consideration. Thus, myths become important devices in literature nowadays to address effectively challenging subjects.

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