

***Miniature Worlds, Material Power:
Objects and Agency in Jessie Burton’s “The Miniaturist”***

Rasha Osman Abdel Haliem, Higher Technological Institute, Egypt

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Abstract

Jessie Burton’s *The Miniaturist* invites readers into a world where the miniature serves as a microcosm of societal complexities. Through the intricate dollhouses and their inhabitants, the novel delves into the blurred lines between objects and subjects in 17th century Netherlands. This paper employs a close reading approach to analyze the symbolic significance of the miniature figures within the narrative. By examining the tension between the human and the doll, the authentic and the artificial, and the interior and exterior spaces, this study enforces the impact of materialism on characters’ decisions. The analysis reveals that the miniature figures are not merely passive objects but active participants in the narrative. They negotiate key dichotomies, challenging the rigid boundaries between the real and the imagined, the living and the inanimate. Burton shows the pervasive influence of consumer culture, where material possessions can both satisfy and enslave. The meticulous craftsmanship of the miniature figures symbolizes the allure of materialism, while the characters’ struggles with their desires highlight the dangers of being consumed by material possessions. The paper contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions about the relationship between material culture and identity, offering a fresh perspective on the ways in which objects can shape readers’ perspectives. By exploring the tension between individual desires and societal expectations, the novel invites readers to consider how one can choose to live a meaningful life that is not governed by materialism and consumerist values.

Keywords: Dolls, Puppets, Cabinet House, Sugar, Miniature, *Sapient Agency*, Object, Commodification, Capitalism, Calvinist Ethics, Human Subjectivity

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Introduction

The allure of miniature worlds has long captivated human imagination, offering a lens through which to examine the complexities of life on a smaller, more manageable scale. In Jessie Burton's *The Miniaturist* (2014), this fascination takes center stage, as a meticulously crafted dollhouse becomes a mirror of 17th century Dutch society, reflecting its values, tensions, and contradictions. Through the interplay of objects—miniature dolls, sugar, and other commodities—the novel explores how material possessions transcend their physical forms to influence identity, power, and morality. By blurring the lines between the animate and inanimate, Burton challenges conventional distinctions, revealing the profound ways in which objects shape human experiences and societal structures. This paper analyzes the symbolic significance of the miniature figures, arguing that they serve as active agents within the narrative, interrogating themes of consumerism, colonialism, and the fragile boundaries between reality and illusion. In doing so, the study underscores Burton's critique of materialism and invites readers to reconsider the ethical and emotional dimensions of their relationship with the material world.

Dolls and Human Materiality

The fascination with human-like constructs—dolls, puppets, wax effigies, and sculptures—is a perennial and multifaceted phenomenon. Rooted in ancient funerary practices, these artifacts served as vessels for the deceased, maintaining their spiritual presence within the realm of the living. From Neolithic skulls to Egyptian mummies and Roman effigies, these cultural touchstones reveal the enduring power of art to bridge the living and the departed. Across cultures and eras, these figures exerted profound influence on both the physical and spiritual realms. As material engagements with mortality, they fostered social memory while prompting philosophical inquiry into embodiment and disembodiment.

Masks, dolls, and puppets in early death cults functioned as mnemonic devices, visually representing and, in a sense, resurrecting the deceased. Across cultures and eras, these arcane figures—whether doubles, stand-ins, or equivalents—exerted profound influence on both the physical and spiritual realms. As material engagements with mortality, they fostered social memory while prompting philosophical inquiry into embodiment and disembodiment (Belting, 2011, p. 93). In this context, eidolons, precursors to modern dolls, emerge as “sapient objects” bridging the mind-body divide (Miller, 2005, p. 34). As liminal entities, they connected the tangible and intangible worlds, demonstrating the grounding of the immaterial in the material (Miller, 2005, p. 6).

Contemporary discourse on materiality and transcendence is shaped by Plato's idealism, which prioritized ideas over matter, separating body from soul and life from imitation. This marked a shift from ancient traditions, such as Egyptian practices that infused materiality with divine significance through mummification (Belting, 2011, p. 108). For Plato, eternity resided in the immaterial realm, reducing eidolons to metaphors for death—mere artistic imitations divorced from spiritual or metaphysical certainty (Belting, 2011, p. 111). As Victoria Nelson (2001) argues, modern “postreligious” culture continues this legacy, marginalizing and aestheticizing artificial beings like puppets and robots as symbols of repressed spiritual impulses (p. 20). Plato's influence thus endures, shaping how we navigate the tension between materiality and transcendence.

Ancient cultures, far from being solely spiritual, embraced a vibrant culture of play. Clay toys were often used as wedding offerings to goddesses in ancient times (Miller, 2005, p. 7). The Latin root of “puppet,” meaning “newborn child,” reflects the multifaceted role of dolls in society (Belting, 2011, p. 100). Today, dolls and puppets provoke discussions on life, death, creation, and consciousness, tying into debates on artificial intelligence, sentience, and the fusion of biology and technology (O’Connell, 2017, p. 77; Riskin, 2016, p. 55). Anthropomorphic machines, rooted in ancient and medieval automata like moving toys and clockwork mechanisms, served as early models for understanding life, influenced by atomism and mechanistic philosophies (Riskin, 2016, p. 38; Truitt, 2015, p. 34).

During the medieval period, automata were used to explore the relationship between representation and divinity, often dramatizing spiritual themes (Riskin, 2016, p. 22). With the Reformation, however, their role shifted into the secular realm, reflecting broader societal changes (Riskin, 2016, p. 28). This transition marked the decline of the divine monopoly on agency, as lifelike machines, such as mechanical dolls, began to challenge traditional notions of creation and autonomy. The Reformation’s hostility toward such objects reflected its discomfort with mechanistic interpretations of life, a perspective further intensified during events like the witch hunts of 17th century New England (Kuznets, 1994, p. 14). By the 17th century, atomism and a mechanistic view of the body gained prominence, championed by Descartes, who described the body as a machine governed by material forces, distinct from the mind (Riskin, 2016, p. 45). Descartes popularized the clockwork metaphor to explain natural phenomena, while automata were used as tools to model the “hidden corpuscular mechanisms of natural bodies” (Tiffany, 2000, p. 53). Mechanism evolved into a state of passivity, controlled by external forces, and paradoxically led to the argument from design, where mechanical order in nature was seen as evidence of divine creation (Riskin, 2016, p. 47).

Despite their practical and symbolic uses, atomism and mechanism faced contradictions. Atomism grappled with the mind-body problem, while mechanism struggled with the agency-passivity dichotomy. Automata, as products of atomistic metaphysics, embodied the paradox of “materiality founded on immateriality” (Tiffany, 2000, p. 49). Mechanical dolls, representing invisible matter, symbolized science’s quest to uncover hidden structures while echoing the mythical origins of this pursuit. They acted as tools of inquiry and symbols of mystery, reflecting the dual nature of scientific exploration (Tiffany, 2000, p. 52).

The Cartesian view of the human subject as a disembodied mind has been challenged by New Materialist thought, which emphasizes the interplay between subject and object in shaping power, social structures, and material practices. Scholars such as Arjun Appadurai, Bill Brown, Steven Connor, Bruno Latour, and Daniel Miller highlight the interconnectedness of human subjectivity and the agency of material objects. Latour’s actor-network theory (1993) argues that humans and nonhumans are co-constitutive, dissolving the ontological divide between them. This perspective critiques modernity’s marginalization of nonhuman actors and proposes a collective network of humans and things that shapes our world beyond anthropocentric frameworks. This interconnected perspective is crucial in the globalized market, where the movement of goods and ideas underscores human-nonhuman interdependence (Appadurai, 1986, p. 55). Brown and Connor expand on Latour’s ideas, with Brown’s (2001) ‘Thing Theory’ distinguishing objects, which function transparently, from things, which reveal hidden dimensions when disrupted. Similarly, Miller (2005) notes the unconscious influence of objects in daily life, further illustrating the agency of material entities often overlooked in human-centered narratives.

The concept of “things” is multifaceted, reflecting the interplay of subjectivity and materiality. Brown highlights the shared vulnerability between humans and things, with their interactions shaping relationships of creation, kinship, and consumption (Brown, 2001, p. 20). Connor (2010) reinterprets mind-body dualism, viewing thinking as a material process rooted in embodied experience. Thoughts emerge through material objects, creating a reciprocal relationship between mind and matter and framing thinking as a form of self-reflection (p. 45). Humans and things share a paradoxical relationship, with “thinking things” embodying both abstraction and concreteness, presence and absence (Connor, 2010, p. 56; Miller, 2005, p. 58). Aligned with New Materialism, this perspective supports Miller’s “sapient materiality” and Latour’s hybrid agency, bridging the gap between organic and artificial life. It fosters a relational ontology where material and immaterial forces shape ethical and intellectual frameworks, prompting a reevaluation of objects like dolls and puppets as intelligent agents within networks of meaning and value.

Miniature Worlds, Moral Economies: Dolls and Power in *The Miniaturist*

The preceding overview establishes a theoretical framework for examining the role of dolls in Jessie Burton’s *The Miniaturist*. Brown’s distinction between objects and things proves particularly relevant as the novel’s miniature dolls transcend their materiality to become agents of social change within the intricate web of 17th century Dutch society. These dolls, deeply intertwined with the novel’s miniature house, reflect the power dynamics and social hierarchies of the Brandt household, mirroring tensions between public and private, visible and hidden, and the authentic and the constructed. While grounded in a historical setting, Burton’s narrative also serves as a reflection on present-day life, exploring themes of identity, control, and the fragile boundaries between appearance and reality. *The Miniaturist* navigates the complex interplay of material and immaterial realms, suggesting that human existence is inherently marked by limitations and exchanges.

Dolls, once primarily associated with children’s literature, have emerged as complex figures in adult fiction. Novels such as Keith Donohue’s *The Motion of Puppets* (2016), Robert Dinsdale’s *The Toymakers* (2018), Nina Allan’s *The Doll Maker* (2019), Elizabeth Macneal’s *The Doll Factory* (2019), and Ian McEwan’s *Machines Like Me* (2019) challenge anthropocentric narratives by attributing agency and consciousness to dolls. Kenneth Gross (2011) observes that puppets act as intermediaries between humans and objects (pp. 13, 23). These inanimate objects, brought to life through human imagination, question the boundaries between creator and creation, exposing the provisional nature of identity and existence. Positioned between the animate and inanimate realms, dolls and puppets serve as emissaries of the material world and moral companions. Unlike statues, puppets actively engage audiences through play, emphasizing shared agency between humans and objects. As societal allegories, puppets reflect contemporary fascination with technology and the increasingly blurred boundaries between humans and machines (Gross, 2011, p. 88).

Originating in children’s folklore and evolving into mechanized representations, puppets encapsulate the complexities of life and artifice. Burton’s *The Miniaturist* provides a compelling context for exploring these themes, situating dolls within the emerging capitalist marketplace and challenging traditional distinctions between animate and inanimate existence. The novel begins with a visual replica of Petronella Oortman’s cabinet house, inviting readers to interact with the text as though it were a museum exhibit. This interplay between image and narrative fosters a dynamic relationship between the physical and the fictional. The cabinet house, filled with miniature dolls, embodies the spirit of play, a concept

central to both puppetry and art. As Gadamer (2012) observes, “All presentation is potentially a representation for someone,” inviting readers to actively participate in the narrative (p. 108). Like Petronella, readers become participants in a 17th century world. The novel mirrors the cabinet house, serving as a fictional counterpart to a historical artifact and emphasizing the ethical implications of representation and duplication.

Burton’s critique of consumerism in *The Miniaturist* is intricately woven into the narrative, with the dollhouse serving as a central metaphor for the obsession with material possessions. This meticulously crafted miniature replica of the Brandt household reflects the desire for control, perfection, and ownership. Through Nella’s growing fascination with the dollhouse and her eventual obsession with its contents, Burton illustrates how consumerism can seduce individuals, consuming their lives and distancing them from authenticity, ultimately leading to a sense of emptiness. This critique gains depth through the dollhouse’s role as a microcosm of the Brandt household, mirroring the complexities of domestic life. Nella Oortman, a young bride entering her new home with anxiety, symbolizes this disconnection as her hesitant knock at the door reflects her uncertainty about the future. Her hopes for intimacy are soon dashed when her husband, Johannes, retreats into his study, leaving her isolated (Burton, 2014, p. 21). Instead of emotional closeness, Johannes offers her the dollhouse, a substitute for their absent marital relationship. Stewart (1993) argues that dollhouses exist outside the realm of bodily experience (p.63). This underscores the emotional distance between Nella and Johannes. This miniature replica of their home becomes a poignant symbol of their isolated existence, emphasizing both the loneliness within marriage and the broader societal consequences of prioritizing material perfection over genuine human connection (Burton, 2014, pp. 39, 88, 112).

Johannes’s marriage to Nella, undertaken to conceal his homosexuality and conform to societal expectations, further complicates their relationship. The dollhouse becomes a metonym for Johannes himself, reflecting his hidden complexities and the tension between public and private identities (Sedgwick, 2008, p. 98). The wooden cabinet, traditionally associated with mortality, foreshadows deeper secrets and mysteries within the Brandt household. Through this gift, Nella enters a world of appearances and hidden truths, mirroring the duality of their lives. The dollhouse also serves as a catalyst for Nella’s imagination, allowing her to construct narratives within its miniature world (Bachelard, 2014, p. 170). This underscores a symbiotic relationship between the human mind and material objects, echoing Connor’s concept of the “thinking thing” (2010, p. 3).

While Johannes presents the dollhouse as an educational tool “for her education,” Nella perceives its deeper significance (Burton, 2014, p. 45). As she becomes increasingly captivated by the cabinet’s interior, the dollhouse begins to assert its own agency, creating a sense of unease. Initially a symbol of innocence and domesticity, it transforms into a haunting presence, revealing the hidden truths of the Brandt household (Stewart, 1993, p. 62). Its stark emptiness contrasts with the opulent surroundings of the Brandt home, highlighting the disparity between outward appearances and internal realities. Nella’s and Marin’s rooms further explore these contrasts. Nella’s room, adorned with luxury, reflects societal expectations of wealth and respectability, while Marin’s room is a sensory overload, filled with exotic objects symbolizing her intellectual and personal longings. Marin’s maps and eclectic collection reflect her desire for knowledge and adventure, restrained by societal constraints (Burton, 2014, pp. 12, 14-15, 51). Marin’s room becomes a private sanctuary, a space where she can explore her passions in a symbolic and restricted manner.

The Brandts' material possessions are inextricably linked to the colonial exploitation underpinning 17th century Dutch prosperity. As a sugar trader for the East India Company (VOC), Johannes profits from a system that connects European wealth to the suffering of African slaves (Trentmann, 2016, p. 128). Marin cynically observes her brother's ability to transform "mud to gold," highlighting the exploitative nature of their wealth (Burton, 2014, p. 42). The opulence of their lifestyle, tied to the Dutch mercantile empire, masks moral complexities (Israel, 1998, 55). As Nella notes, Amsterdam is consumed by commerce: "...all things here have one purpose – the raw end of commerce, the storing of supplies, the repair of ships, the sustenance of sailors and captains alike" (Burton, 2014, p. 295). The novel reveals how this system dehumanizes all involved, with Johannes becoming a victim of the very enterprise that sustains his wealth and status.

The Brandt household's wealth is deeply intertwined with the Dutch colonial enterprise, which profited from the exploitation of people and resources alike. Sugar, a key commodity, epitomizes this connection, symbolizing both economic prosperity and the human cost of colonialism. Through the character of Otto, Johannes' Black manservant, the novel underscores the racial hierarchies and prejudices of the time, as seen in Marin's contemptuous remark: "'They've brought the savage,' she whispers in earshot to her husband, her eyes riveted on Otto" (Burton, 2014, p. 120). Otto's presence in 17th century Amsterdam draws attention to the dehumanization embedded in colonial practices and its intersections with wealth accumulation. Burton's narrative extends beyond historical critique to comment on contemporary consumerism and its parallels with modern forms of colonialism and exploitation. The global supply chains of the modern era, much like the mercantile networks of the Dutch Republic, rely on the exploitation of labor and resources in the Global South to fuel the consumer desires of the Global North (Smil, 2022, p. 45). The novel draws subtle connections between the commodification of sugar and the commodification of goods today, critiquing how economic systems prioritize profit over human dignity.

The exploration of objects in *The Miniaturist*—from sugar to dolls and games like verkeerspel—reveals the intricate interplay of economic, social, and sexual dynamics. As Frank Trentmann (2016) observes, "Things [...] recruit us into politics as much as we recruit them," underscoring the agency and power of objects in shaping human relations. Burton highlights how the circulation of goods and people forms identities, power structures, and social hierarchies, both in the 17th century and in the present day (p. 300). By drawing these parallels, the novel critiques the persistent cycles of exploitation that underpin consumer culture and global economic systems.

Building on the critique of consumerism and colonial exploitation, the Brandts' collection of life paintings further reflects the tension between material success and spiritual fulfillment. These artworks, symbols of abundance and reminders of mortality, align with the Calvinist work ethic while exposing the ambiguous relationship between wealth and moral values (Davenport, 1998, p. 9; Weber, 2005, p. 64). The juxtaposition of sugar with other luxury goods—such as "Delft plates, casks of wine branded Espanã and Jerez, boxes of vermilion and cochineal, mercury for mirrors and the syphilis, Persian trinkets cast in gold and silver"—highlights the moral complexities of wealth (Burton, 2014, p. 296). Johannes' eventual downfall underscores Simon Schama's (1987) observation that Dutch society's prosperity ultimately sowed the seeds of its own demise (p. 47).

Within this context, *The Miniaturist* delves into the intricate interplay between public morality and private desire, with sugar serving as a recurring motif. While not depicted as gluttonous, the characters navigate the tensions between Calvinist restraint and the allure of indulgence. Sugar, often associated with luxury and transgression, transcends geographical and symbolic boundaries, mirroring the characters' internal conflicts. Both Johannes and Marin are drawn to the pleasures and consequences tied to this substance, sugar, becoming a metaphor for their transgressions. Marin's unexpected pregnancy and Johannes' exposure as a "sodomite" (a 17th century contemporary term for homosexual men) reveal the chasm between public image and private reality. This dynamic between societal expectations and personal desires reflects the broader themes of *The Miniaturist*. The Brandt household's tensions, framed by the materiality of objects like sugar, highlight the interplay of power, desire, and social conformity, further critiquing the cycles of exploitation and the moral ambiguities of consumer culture. The novel suggests that these tensions—whether in the 17th century or today—continue to shape individual lives and societal structures.

Burton demonstrates that even in a consumerist society, individuals possess the agency to shape their own destinies. While consumerism can strongly influence choices and values, it does not ultimately dictate outcomes (Stearns, 2023, p. 34). Decisions, actions, and attitudes remain pivotal in charting one's life path. Burton shows that by cultivating self-awareness, developing resilience, and making intentional choices, individuals can navigate the complexities of consumer culture and build lives that reflect their personal values and aspirations. However, agency exists alongside the role of fate, as unforeseen events and external circumstances can significantly shape one's trajectory. Even in the face of these uncertainties, individuals retain the ability to adapt, seize opportunities, and make choices that align with long-term goals. This is evident in Nella's reflections and her decision to work, to care for the newborn, and to adapt to her new situation (Burton, 2014, pp. 296-297).

Recognizing the interplay between agency and external forces enables a more resilient and purposeful approach to life. Burton's *The Miniaturist* reflects this theme as it examines the Brandts' material prosperity and the pervasive influence of Calvinist morality. Beneath the façade of piety, the characters grapple with hidden desires. Marin, for example, engages in acts of quiet rebellion, including a secret love affair and indulgence in forbidden sweets. Similarly, Johannes defies societal norms through his romantic relationship with Jack Philips. These transgressions underscore the tension between societal expectations and personal agency, highlighting the characters' struggles to reconcile their public lives with their private desires.

The dollhouse becomes a metaphorical space where themes of desire, secrecy, transgression, fate, and personal choice converge enforcing the intricate interplay between material possessions, social status, and personal desires. The Brandts' outward respectability conceals a private world of hidden passions and moral complexities. This duality underscores the tension between the material and spiritual, revealing their interconnected and mutually influential nature. Nella's initial request for specific items evolves into a series of unexpected deliveries, including a cradle, chairs, and miniature dogs resembling the family pets. Among these is a defiant, all-capitalized message: "EVERY WOMAN IS THE ARCHITECT OF HER OWN FORTUNE" (Burton, 2014, p. 76).

The arrival of miniature figures representing the Brandt household deepens the intrigue and subversion. These dolls, "so life-like, so delicate," provide a distorted reflection of reality (Burton, 2014, p. 78). Johannes' miniature figure is particularly haunting, embodying both

his power and vulnerability: “Johannes lies in her palm, a cloak of dark indigo slung over his broad shoulders, one hand balled into a fist. The other hand is open, palm offered and welcoming” (Burton, 2014, p. 78). The doll’s physical characteristics, including the heavy coin bag that “weighs him crookedly to one side,” symbolize the immense pressures and burdens he carries (Burton, 2014, p. 78). Through these vivid details, the novel highlights the complex relationships between identity, material objects, and the hidden dimensions of human experience.

The dolls in *The Miniaturist* not only reflect the characters’ internal struggles and external circumstances but also symbolize the dynamic interplay between agency and fate. The miniature Nella doll, with her escaped hair and surprised expression, mirrors the protagonist’s own sense of disorientation. Holding an empty birdcage, the doll hints at both change and the possibility of freedom. The accompanying note, written in bold capital letters—“THINGS CAN CHANGE”—underscores this theme of potential transformation. The dollhouse, as a microcosm of the Brandt household, blurs the boundaries between public and private life. Susan Stewart’s concept of the dollhouse as a metonym for broader property relations is particularly relevant here (Stewart, 1993, p. 67). By situating the dolls as both objects of consumption and agents of social learning, the novel suggests that material objects can influence personal and societal understanding (Bachelard, 2014, p. 66; Burton, 2014, 88). Nella’s interaction with her miniature becomes a vehicle for self-exploration, enabling her to reflect on her identity and position within the social order. This process ultimately underscores the ways in which individuals can actively shape their destinies, even while navigating societal expectations and external constraints.

Nella’s dollhouse functions as both a tool for cultural education and a vehicle for social commentary. It introduces her to societal norms, prepares her for the role of household matriarch, exposes hidden truths about human nature, and critiques the novel’s Calvinist framework. These lessons parallel Nella’s personal journey of self-discovery and her deepening understanding of social complexities. The dolls within the cabinet embody both idealized and transgressive facets of human nature. Their creation and delivery by Jack Philips, a figure associated with criminality and violence, further underscore the dollhouse’s role in unmasking hidden truths. This subversion of societal expectations reflects the novel’s broader themes of agency, fate, and personal choice. The miniature gingerbread people, perfect replicas of real cookies, challenge Calvinist ideals by evoking idolatry, a subtle act of rebellion that mirrors Nella’s defiance against societal constraints and her pursuit of personal freedom. The miniaturist’s work underscores the subversive power of art and the porous boundary between reality and representation.

Nella’s doppelganger within the dollhouse mirrors her own transformative journey. Historically, objects like tamburi were used as repositories for anonymous reports of societal transgressions (Terry-Fritsch, as cited in McCall et al., 2013, p. 162). Similarly, the dollhouse becomes a vessel of hidden truths. Nella’s evolution from passive observer to empowered individual parallels the dollhouse’s role in containing and revealing secrets. This interplay between the dollhouse and Nella’s journey aligns with the novel’s exploration of blurred boundaries between humans and objects. Kenneth Gross’s (2011) concept of the puppet as a medium for unspoken truths applies to the dolls in the cabinet (p. 18). These “sapient objects” offer profound insights into the characters’ lives (Miller, 2005, p. 34). For example, the doll representing Marin, described as a “nub, a walnut, a nothing-yet, but soon-to-be,” foreshadows her pregnancy (Burton, 2014, p. 286). The subsequent birth of the child further blurs the lines between human and object, as the newborn is described as “neither fish nor

fowl, nor godly nor human, and yet strangely all these things at once” (Burton, 2014, p. 352). Ultimately, the dollhouse serves as a microcosm of the novel’s central themes, illustrating the interconnectedness of humans and objects. Both are imbued with agency, capable of revealing hidden truths, and central to the exploration of identity, power, and the limits of societal constructs.

The contrast between the dollhouse and verkeerspel in *The Miniaturist* highlights two distinct approaches to social engagement. While the board game reflects a strategic, outward-facing approach to navigating societal codes, the dollhouse explores the interiority of human experience. As a microcosm of domestic life, the dollhouse foreshadows the 18th century emphasis on subjectivity and emotion, which Charles Taylor described as the “cherishing of sentiment” (2004, p. 104). By representing personal relationships and hidden desires, it anticipates this later focus on emotional authenticity and individual introspection. The dollhouse’s ability to reveal hidden truths mirrors the characters’ struggles to reconcile public personas with private selves. Johannes and Marin, for instance, conceal their true identities—marked by intimacy and transgression—behind façades shaped by commerce and Calvinist morality. This tension between authenticity and societal expectations underscores the novel’s exploration of modern subjectivity. By juxtaposing the outward-facing strategy of verkeerspel with the introspective focus of the dollhouse, Burton emphasizes the importance of understanding the complexities of identity and the interplay between the individual and society.

Sugar, as a commodity, epitomizes the dynamic forces of the marketplace. Johannes is expected to maximize its potential as capital; however, its association with personal indulgence and transgression elevates it beyond a mere object to something more intricate (Plakias, 2019, p. 23). Its eventual decay parallels Johannes’s own downfall. Conversely, dolls, initially perceived as static objects, reveal a surprising agency. Their mysterious appearances and disappearances defy their classification as simple commodities. Through their interactions with Nella, the dolls become instruments of personal growth and empowerment. As Nella gains a nuanced understanding of the relationship between objects and their social significance, she learns to navigate her complex world and assert her agency. The dolls in *The Miniaturist* serve as a cautionary tale against reducing material objects to mere commodities. Trentmann (2016)’s claim that “Modernity gave Western man the delusion that he controlled matter” aligns with the novel’s critique of consumerist attitudes (p. 95). *The Miniaturist* posits that objects hold intrinsic value beyond their economic worth, encapsulated in the enigmatic message: “THINGS CAN CHANGE” (Burton, 2014, p. 181).

Conclusion

Jessie Burton’s *The Miniaturist* challenges traditional distinctions between humans and objects, demonstrating how possessions shape individuals while granting agency to material things. This interplay underscores a precarious balance in a consumerist world, where autonomy and dependence often blur. The novel critiques the dominance of material forces, illustrating how infinite consumption arises from systems that treat objects as subjects and humans as commodities. Central to this critique, the dolls transcend their static nature, orchestrating lives while reflecting the economic and political tensions of their time. Similarly, the fusion of commercialism and colonialism reduces individuals to instruments within a larger mechanism. Burton’s narrative critiques this relentless cycle of consumption, revealing how it erodes distinctions between life and death, autonomy and subjugation. Through Nella’s personal growth, the novel suggests the possibility of reclaiming agency.

Ultimately, *The Miniaturist* invites readers to critically examine their relationship with material culture, urging a reconsideration of the ethical and emotional impacts of consumption. By doing so, Burton critiques consumerist modernity, offering a timeless message of resilience and transformation.

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Contact emails: rashaosman7777@gmail.com
rasha.abdelhaleem@hti.edu.eg