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

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study applies a Žižekian framework to Sarah Ruhl's The Clean House, examining how the play represents identity not as a stable essence but as a process of continuous negotiation within the confines of domestic life. Drawing on Slavoj Žižek's psychoanalytic concepts—particularly the Big Other, the Real, and jouissance—the article explores how Ruhl's characters navigate between social expectations and personal desires. These tensions reveal the fragility of identity as it is sustained through fantasies that are constantly threatened by collapse.

Methods: The analysis employs close reading and psychoanalytic interpretation, situating Ruhl's dramaturgy within Žižek's theory of ideology and subject formation. Humor and grief are examined as key dramaturgical devices that expose ideological contradictions within the domestic sphere.

Results: The study finds that Ruhl uses humor and mourning not as emotional tones but as mechanisms that destabilize fixed meanings and reveal the limits of social identity. Jokes and moments of loss open glimpses into the unspeakable aspects of subjectivity, where the boundaries between pain and pleasure, self and other, begin to blur.

Conclusions: By bringing Žižek's ideas into dialogue with Ruhl's poetic dramaturgy, the article argues that The Clean House transforms the domestic sphere into a politically charged site of ideological struggle. The play demonstrates how modern theatre can stage the instability of identity and expose the contradictions that shape contemporary subjectivity.

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Introduction

Sarah Ruhl has become one of those playwrights you can't really ignore if you care about what's happening in American theatre. Her plays keep circling around questions of which we are and how much of that "who" is shaped or trapped, by the culture we live in. *The Clean House (2004)*, captures that tension perfectly. The story unfolds in a house that's anything but order, not just it is messy with objects but it is also tangled with feelings that refuse to be neatly arranged. Lane, a doctor with a near-clinical obsession for control, keeps polishing her world as if that could stop it from falling apart. Meanwhile, her sister Virginia, who finds comfort in dusting and folding, slips into the mess with a kind of quiet desperation, as though tidying up might somehow make her own life make sense. Matilde, their Brazilian maid, dreams of telling the world's perfect joke instead of scrubbing its floors. And then there's Ana, who meets death with what could be called a reckless kind of grace, brave, maybe, but also unsettling. She seems to radiate a strange vitality that both frightens and fascinates the people around her, as if she's teaching them how to live by the way she's preparing to die. The article circles around a deceptively simple question: how does *The Clean House* use Žižek's ideas to show the chaotic process of building, losing, and rebuilding identity in a world that keeps promising order but rarely delivers it? The discussion leans on some of Žižek's most intriguing notions—the Big Other, fantasy, the Real, and jouissance, but not in a strictly theoretical way. They become tools for seeing why Ruhl's characters cling to certain comforting fictions: the belief that love can redeem chaos, or that control can protect them from loss. Yet the more they tighten their grip, the more those beliefs slip through their fingers. It's hard not to see a kind of quiet tragedy in that, one that feels less about philosophy and more about what it means to be human. Now, why bother with another reading of Ruhl? Well, that's where things get interesting. A lot of critics like Al-Shamma (2011), Muse (2018), and Schmidt (2010) have already done solid work on her poetic style, her feminism, her treatment of gender. But oddly, no one has really put her in conversation with Žižek. And that's a missed opportunity, because his framework helps reveal the political and philosophical edges hidden under Ruhl's playful tone. Once you look at *The Clean House* through that point of view, the living room stops being just a domestic space, it turns into a battleground where identity itself is negotiated, sometimes with laughter, sometimes with heartbreak.

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2. Literature Review

2.1. Scholarship on Sarah Ruhl

Most of the existing scholarship on Sarah Ruhl tends to cluster around three main themes: her lyrical style, her feminist sensibilities, and her use of myth and surrealism. James Al-Shamma's Sarah Ruhl: A Critical Study of the Plays (2011) is still the go to reference for many scholars. He places Ruhl solidly within the field of contemporary drama, noting her playful sense of whimsy and surrealism, and her rare gift for blending those qualities with a deep, thoughtful engagement with human experience (p. 15).

Amy Muse, in The Drama and Theatre of Sarah Ruhl (2018), takes a slightly different angle, focusing on intimacy and transcendence, how Ruhl's way of crafting plays quietly pushes against the limits of traditional storytelling. Recent scholarship has also emphasized how Ruhl's dramaturgy negotiates the tension between personal memory and cultural structure in performance contexts (Hernando-Real, 2017; Durham, 2006).

2.2. Žižekian Literary and Cultural Criticism

Žižek's influence on cultural and literary studies is difficult to pin down, it's everywhere and yet oddly elusive. His reinterpretation of Lacanian psychoanalysis as a way of reading ideology has, in many ways, changed how scholars talk about power, subjectivity, and belief. You can feel his fingerprints on discussions of film, literature, and even political rhetoric, basically, anywhere people are trying to make sense of how identities take shape within the symbolic frameworks that govern us (Kapoor, 2018; De Vera, 2021). Still, his impact isn't always easy to summarize; it stretches across disciplines and moods, from dense theoretical debates to the more personal, uneasy questions about why we believe the things we do. Writers like Jodi Dean (2006) and Sarah Kay (2003) have done much to translate Žižek's dense, often playful theory into frameworks that others can actually use to read cultural texts. In theatre studies, Žižek has not been a heavy hitter. While his ideas are starting to attract more attention, they have not yet been explored in film or cultural studies at the same level of detail (Bar-El 2021; Lee 2024). It is hoped that this article will add to that growing conversation by showing how Žižek's triad, the Big Other, fantasy and the Real can provide us with insight into the nature of dramatic conflict and character psychologies. *The Clean House* is especially resonant in this regard, how people struggle so precariously to maintain the

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social contract and tabooed wishes, the chanciness of establishing a border between how it should be and how it can't help but become.

2.3. Theoretical Framework: The Žižekian Apparatus

The analysis draws on three of Žižek's central ideas, concepts that, when starting to connect them, shed light on how identity both holds together and falls apart in Ruhl's *The Clean House*. Calling this a "framework" feels almost ironic, since Žižek himself resists neat systems or tidy categories. Still, it works as a kind of roadmap for tracing the psychological tensions and ideological undercurrents that exist within the play.

2.3.1. The Big Other and Ideological Interpellation

When Žižek talks about the "Big Other," he's not referring to a godlike figure who is watching subjects from above, but to the web of social expectations that silently tells them how to live. It's the invisible structure, laws, manners, professional codes, even tone of voice that makes the world feel coherent. We don't really choose to believe in it; we just sort of act "as if" it exists, because everyone else does. And through that shared performance, ideology does its work—it "hails" us, to borrow Althusser's word, into the roles we end up playing (Žižek, 1989, p. 43).

In *The Clean House*, the Big Other doesn't appear as a character, but it's everywhere. It hides in the spotless white walls of Lane's living room, in the polite silences, in the way grief is quietly tidied away. The house itself becomes a symbol of the social order which Lane is desperate to maintain: professional competence, emotional restraint, the illusion that everything can be sterilized into calm. But of course, the cracks show. The jokes Matilde refuses to tell, the chaos Virginia tries to scrub away, Ana's defiant vitality, all of these moments chip at the edges of the symbolic order. The Big Other demands composure. Ruhl's characters, in their own odd ways, keep disobeying it. And maybe that's the point, the mess, not the cleanliness, is where something like truth begins to show through.

2.3.2. Ideological Fantasy and the Real

For Žižek, ideology is not a false consciousness to be dispelled but a lived fantasy that structures the reality. Actually, fantasy provides a coherent narrative that allows subjects to change the social world and masks its inherent contradictions (Žižek, 1997, p. 7). However, the symbolic reality is perpetually threatened by the Real the traumatic, unsymbolizable kernel of existence such as death, unruly desire, or traumatic loss that resists integration and disrupts the smooth functioning of

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ideology (Žižek, 1989, p. 69). Matilde's traumatic family history and Ana's terminal illness are manifestations of this disruptive Real.

2.3.3. Jouissance and Transgressive Enjoyment

Žižek borrows the Lacanian idea of jouissance to describe a kind of enjoyment that isn't exactly pleasure; it's more complicated and almost self-destructive. It's that strange satisfaction which people get from something that also hurts them. We might not admit it, but there's often a small, secret comfort in our own misery. Žižek suggests that we cling to these patterns, the symptoms that cause our pain, because they give our desires a recognizable shape, a kind of inner rhythm we can live with (Žižek, 1992, p. 48).In *The Clean House*, this shows up everywhere. Lane's need for control, Virginia's compulsive cleaning and even Matilde's relentless joke telling are caused by that paradoxical mix of suffering and satisfaction. Their routines keep them tethered to the very ideologies that limit them such as order, duty, repression, decorum. And yet, hidden in those same compulsions is the possibility of rebellion. Žižek might say their jouissance ties them down, but it also cracks something open, a tiny space where resistance can begin, disguised as obsession.

Material and Methods

The study is qualitative and focuses on the close textual reading informed by critical theory. The focused text, Sarah Ruhl's *The Clean House*, is approached as such a complex cultural artifact inscribing ideological struggles. The discussion follows a systematic deployment on the Žižekian analytic perspective as are mentioned above.

The analytical process involves:

1. Locating Interpellation Sites: dialogue analysis, stage directions, and character relationships identifies instances where the Big Other operates through domestic customs and socially prescribed roles.
2. Mapping Fantasy Structures: Examining the personal narratives so (e.g., "the perfect joke," compulsive cleaning) by which characters strive for symbolic coherence.
3. Finding Encounters with the Real: Isolating scenes of trauma, including death and sickness and desire that reveal their characters' ideological fictions.

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4. Analyzing Jouissance: Making sense of scenes of emotional overflow and behavior that is transgressive in relation to liberal "Jouissance -- The Slip of Psychoanalysis, Media, and Gender allows enjoyment to support some but not all ideological constructs.

This is selected for the latter's ability to expose the hidden psycho social dynamics of play, transcending coverage and entering diagnostic criticism. One limitation would be a single play because we engage the selected play in substantial depth and because it is exemplary of Ruhl's entire body of work.

Results

The Domestic Sphere as an Ideological State Apparatus

The white, sterile living room in *The Clean House* is a powerful manifestation of the Big Other. It is what Louis Althusser would refer to as an “Ideological State Apparatus”: a space in which people are disciplined into particular subjectivities through architecture and social planning. This order is Lane's identity fully interpellate. When, for example, she says that this room “should feel like nothing bad had ever happened in it” (Ruhl, 2006, p. 7) she is manifestly verbalizing the dictates of the Big Other to control and stem disorder. Her emotional collapse that follows is not just a personal breakdown, but also one of Žižek’s typical "short-circuits" showing how flimsy an identity exclusively relying on symbolic injunctions can be. As recent critics have observed, the domestic interior often functions as a psychosocial anchor point where ideological fantasies are materially contested (Arns & Sasse, 2013; Abanin & Oleshkova, 2024).

Virginia, in contrast, gives her life to the labor that maintains this order. Her ritual of cleaning is her performance of her interpellation. To “clean” via Ishiguro is to feel the house's pain (Ruhl 2006, p. 22), offers an instance of a profound psychological investment, one that is exemplary of the manner in which ideology functions through embodied practice and affective attachment. Her jouissance is at the level of the very act of surrendering to, acceding to Big Other’s demand for order.

Matilde the Brazilian housekeeper offers a key complication to the dynamic of interpellation. As a migrant domestic worker, she is caught on the edge of the symbolic realm, situated at once within and outside the cultural framework of this kind of household. Her refusal to do the labor of expected domesticity is a crucial site for resistance to being hailed as well. As the original

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dissertation notes, "Matilde's levity and minor rebellions of folding laundry in the 'incorrect' manner or throwing apples carelessly threaten to dislodge Lane's carefully constructed domestic universe." Yet the resistance here is not merely a negation; it is, rather, organized by a different fantasy frame whose focus is her search for the perfect joke.

Fantasy Structures and the Intrusion of the Real

The characters rely on elaborate fantasy structures to guide the contradictions of their lives. Matilde's quest for the perfect joke is a profound example. It is a fantasy that mediates her traumatic loss her mother died laughing, and her father subsequently killed himself. This foundational story is the play's primary encounter with the uncanny and the Real. The joke, a symbol of levity, becomes an agent of death, blurring the line between comedy and catastrophe. As Žižek notes, the uncanny emerges when the familiar reveals its repressed, traumatic underside (1991, p. 132). Matilde's search is a form of jouissance a painful, persistent attachment to the object of her grief that structures her entire being. Fantasy structure allows Matilde to transform personal trauma into a meaningful life project, organizing her identity around what Žižek would call an "impossible, unsymbolizable loss". Her search is not an escapist fantasy but a way of repeatedly traversing her fundamental trauma. As she reflects in the play: “I want the perfect joke, one that will make my mother laugh until she dies" (Ruhl, 2006, p. 15). It seems to capture that Žižekian double bind of desire: you can never satisfy, but it’s the way in which its emptiness is structured that keeps the subject alive.

Ana’s illness was the most immediately Real of all. As an event her sickness and coming death are deeply traumatic, impossible to assimilate into the symbolic economies of either medicine (Lane), domestic hospitality (Virginia), or comedy (Matilde). The encounter with death precipitates a crisis that shakes the characters' daydream structures and renders their selves fragile, and ethical imperative of change takes over .

Humor, Grief, and Transgressive Enjoyment

Humor in *The Clean House* is a potent but slippery thing. It is an expression of trauma and a means to its resolution. It is a transgressive fragment, this moment when Matilde gets the dying Ana to laugh. It is a brush with the Real that suspends decided customs concerning death and illness. This mutual laughter establishes a momentary community founded on an identical, surplus-affect

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(jouissance) that is exterior to social normativity. It doesn't solve the tragedy; it recognizes this essential impossibility, which ideology attempts to hide (Kapoor, 2018; De Vera, 2021).

This moment encapsulates what Lauren Berlant might call "cruel optimism," in the sense that their attachment to humor makes life worth living even under its constant threat of extinction, playfully wedging the characters between continued life and a still deeper connection to sorrow. Chasing the perfect joke is less a narrative resolution, then, than an ethical discipline that keeps Matilde moving ahead without suggesting that closure is in any way possible. Recent theatre theorists suggest that such moments of intradiegetic laughter enact a temporary suspension of ideological mastery (Bar-El, 2021; Arns & Sasse, 2013). In the same way, the secret about Virginia cleaning her sister's house is enjoyable precisely because it is transgressive. Though her subordination is further commodified, it enables a consciousness and ironic pleasure beyond its practical purpose. What all this illustrates is Žižek's claim that jouissance is the "stuff" of ideology, the libidinal investment which ties us to systems that are oppressive of us, and yet at the same time also somehow harbors within it the seeds of our resistance to those systems.

Ethical Reconfiguration and the Collective Confrontation with the Real

The play reaches its breaking point with Ana's death, a moment that feels less like a plot twist and more like something tearing open. It's as if the whole story has been holding its breath, pretending that life is orderly, sensible, manageable, and then suddenly reality slips through the cracks. What happens after that isn't simply grief, its disorientation. The characters, each in their own way, have to face the raw fact that no amount of reason, control, or humor can make death less real.

Lane, the rational doctor, suddenly finds her medical knowledge useless in the face of something she can't diagnose or fix. Virginia, who once tried to scrub away her anxieties through cleaning, finds that there's no way to tidy up the chaos of loss. And Matilde, who hides behind laughter and wordplay, is forced to face the one thing she can't turn into a joke. Their masks slip. What's left isn't polished or heroic, it's human, uncertain, sometimes even absurd.

Yet something quietly remarkable happens. In caring for Ana together, washing her body, tending to her absence, they build a kind of community that doesn't fit into any conventional mold. It's not a family, not a workplace, not friendship as we usually define it. It sounds like the fragile alliance of shared frailty. Žižek would call this the encounter with the real, times when all the symbolic structure of our lives collapses and we are faced with something which is both unsayable, and

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unavoidable. In that space, the idea of identity begins to shift. It's no longer about who they're supposed to be—the doctor, the housewife, the comic relief—but about how they respond to each other when the usual scripts fail. Their selves become fluid, relational, unfinished. And maybe that's the point. Identity, seen this way, isn't something we have; it's something that keeps being rewritten each time the world doesn't make sense. The play leaves us there, in that uneasy in-between—between meaning and its breakdown, between the symbolic and the real—where, oddly enough, we might be closest to being alive.

Conclusion

What stands out, after tracing the Žižekian thread through The Clean House, is how deliberately Sarah Ruhl turns the ordinary—domestic spaces, emotional labor, even humor—into a stage for the politics of identity. The play doesn't treat the self as something whole or given; it shows it as something fragile, constantly built and unbuilt in the push and pull between what society expects and what reality refuses to smooth over. The characters live inside those tensions. They perform their assigned roles—the doctor, the housewife, the comic—but each performance wobbles under the weight of the Real, that intrusive moment when life refuses to stay within language or order. Ruhl's genius, as the analysis makes clear, lies in how she stages ideology not through speeches but through cleaning, caregiving, and the awkward silences that follow a joke. The home becomes a microcosm of larger cultural scripts—where obedience to norms is rehearsed daily and, sometimes, quietly resisted. Humor and grief, far from being opposites, work together as tools of disruption: laughter exposes what shouldn't be funny, mourning lingers where meaning collapses. Both reveal the cracks in the ideological façade.

The study's contribution isn't just theoretical, it's diagnostic. It shows how Ruhl's domestic world is political precisely because it's intimate, and how identity itself is less a stable possession than an ongoing improvisation. In Žižek's terms, coherence is the fantasy we cling to; the truth of being human might lie in acknowledging the fractures we can't seal.

There's also more to explore. The same psychoanalytic framework could open up In the Next Room or Eurydice in fascinating ways—both plays circle around desire, loss, and the limits of language. A comparison with playwrights like Tony Kushner or Caryl Churchill could also widen the map, showing how contemporary drama keeps wrestling with the same question: how do we

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live with contradictions that won't resolve? In the end, *The Clean House* doesn't offer a solution, it offers a way of seeing. A coherent identity, Ruhl suggests, is a comforting illusion. What's real, and perhaps more ethical, is learning to live inside the mess—to keep negotiating with the gaps, the misunderstandings, and the unfinished stories that make us who we are.

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 ethics committee of Islamic Azad University.

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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