



Rewriting Gender: Feminism and Body Politics in the Posthuman Era in *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin and *He, She and It* by Marge Piercy

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Abstract: The aim of this research is to explore and understand the intersection of feminism, gender and body politics in Posthuman literature through *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin and Marge Piercy's *He, She and It*. Both the texts interrogate and challenge the binaries of gender and reconstruct the idea of identity and embodiment while also exploring the intermingling of the contemporary feminist and posthuman theories. Through the examination and understanding of both the texts, this research aims to discuss how both the writings aid the evolving framework of feminist theories and the idea of identity and self in a posthuman world.

Index Terms - Posthumanism, Posthuman Identity, Body Politics, Gender Binaries, Androgyny, Speculative Fiction, Feminist Theory.

I. INTRODUCTION

Posthuman literatures examine and view identity and self as a fragmented and fluid being in spaces where the idea of 'human' is bound by limitations and is blurred or redefined. Posthumanist literatures venture into narratives that talk about agency and embodiment through the lens of biotechnological, technological, and artificial intelligence and question what it means to be a human. It explores the metamorphosis from human to something technological, the transference of consciousness into digital spaces, or integration with machines that help explore the questions about whether identity is a function of the mind or the body or both.

The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. Le Guin is set on the fictional planet of Gethen also known as Winter for its harsh, cold and icy climate. The planet is home to androgynous beings, the inhabitants of the planet are "ambisexual" adopting male or female characteristics, sexual traits the period of fertility known as Kemmer. Their diverse biology plays a crucial role in how the society is structured dismissing gender norms and binaries and the inequality caused by gender. The protagonist of the novel, Genly Ai is an envoy from Ekumen, a

collective of planets. He travels to Gethen to persuade them for the interstellar collective of the planets. However, the politics, culture and the divergence of the Gethenian society obstructs his efforts. Genly navigates and explores the complex politics of the nations, the bureaucratic authoritarian state of Orgoreyn and the monarchy of the Karhide. The book serves a unique perspective on mankind and how it is strange yet relatable. It makes the reader challenge the notion of gender binaries, identity and self.

Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* is a dystopian novel set in the year 2059. With the help of Jewish folklore along with cyberpunk elements, Piercy explores identity, technology and resistance. The dystopia Piercy illustrates is divided into corporate controlled enclaves and independent "free towns". The protagonist of the novel, Shira Shipman moves back to her hometown Tikva, a free Jewish community after she loses the custody of her son to her ex husband and the corporation she works for. The novel shows her rekindling her relationship with her grandmother Malkah, signifying the importance of connections and the idea of community. Along with her grandmother, she joins a clandestine project to protect the town, the development of an advanced cyborg, Yod.

II. OBJECTIVES

The objective of my research is to investigate the postmodern and how it aims at critiquing and challenging the withstanding societal, human-centric and hierarchical ideas of gender and identity. Posthuman feminism challenges the anthropocentric notions of male/female, nature/culture through its acknowledgement of the interdependence and the connection between humans and non-humans. Through this research I aim to understand and explore how posthumanism provides a divergent take of gender as fluid and flexible. With reference to the primary texts for my research *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K Le. Guin and *He, She and It* by Marge Piercy I aim to explore how these novels break the rigid norms and structures and shatter the conventional barriers that shape identity.

Le Guin's representation of androgynous Gethenians examines the notion of gender as fluid, questioning the binary systems. Whereas *He, She and It* by Marge Piercy investigates the connection between humans and machinery exploring the hybridity in posthuman contexts, parting from the conventions of society. Through the outlines laid by posthuman feminism, the research aims at understanding how writers innovate imaginative spaces for reimagining a self, an identity defying the conventions of society. Speculative fiction caters to understanding and giving a glimpse into a world that is inclusive, flexible and prioritises a non hierarchical structure.

III. SCOPE OF RESEARCH

The scope of this research is to explore the redefinition of gender as non-binary and beyond societal norms, through speculative fiction. It engages with hybrid and interconnectedness of identities in spaces where humans, non-humans and technology co-exist and rely on each other. Ursula K. Le Guin's portrayal of androgynous Gethenians in the novel *The Left of Darkness* explores gender neutrality and how it disbands the traditional hierarchies and structures. Whereas Marge Piercy's, *He, She and It* depicts the possibility and a perspective on the amalgamation of human and machine disbanding the rigid ideas of self and identity.

Through this research, I also aim to understand how literature paves way for imagining and creating spaces that are free of notions and regulation of society, posthumanism offers a world that is free of rigidity, the limitation of boundaries and prejudices. Reconstructing gender and identity being one of the major aims of posthuman feminism. It offers a space that is inclusive and fluid.

IV. METHODOLOGY

For the research I use qualitative and interpretive methodology to understand the intersectionality between literature and posthuman feminism. The methodology is based on literary analysis and supported by the theoretical works from posthumanism, feminism and critical theory. The goal of my research is to critically look at *The Left of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin and *He, She and It* by Marge Piercy and how they challenge the idea of traditional norms while giving an insight into alternate and diverse possibilities.

I commenced the research with a thorough review of critical works on posthumanism, posthuman feminism, feminist theories, queer theories and gender studies with the works of Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti forming the outline of concepts and perspectives used in the study. The research also employs theoretical framework application as it applies posthuman and feminist theories to understand and evaluate the primary texts. The study will be supported by concepts like hybridity, fluidity, inclusivity and interconnectedness between human and non-human entities.

The research will reflect upon how posthumanism, posthuman feminism and literature together shatter the conventional boundaries and explore a diverse, new world built of non-rigid and inclusive ways of functioning. Through this methodology, I will be able to provide a nuanced criticism of the primary texts while engaging with the theories and literature that add on to understanding gender, identity and self in a posthuman world.

V. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. Le Guin and *He, She and It* by Marge Piercy explore the themes of feminism, gender and body politics and challenge the definition of gender and identity that are present in conventional narratives. The texts present a reimagining of identity, the idea of self, how the rigid definition of self often upheld hierarchies of power, the authors breakthrough the conventional idea of gender and self.

Deconstruction of the boundaries between human and machines, technology in the texts offer the reader an experience to understand how our ideas of self, identity, gender, etc are often formed by the influence of technology and culture.

Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* is a seminal work in feminist speculative fiction. The novel is set in a androgynous planet called Gethen, the people of the planet are hermaphroditic neuters i.e they do not exist in gender binaries and can adopt male or female characteristics, desires during a specific period, "Kemmer". Academics like *Donna Haraway* have pointed out how Le Guin's depiction of androgyny foreshadows posthumanist criticisms of essentialist gender roles and stable identities whereas *Judith Butler* talks about how the fluidity of Gethenians exposes the artificiality of binary gender categories and challenges performative gender standards. *He, She and It* (1991) by Marge Piercy is a cyberpunk novel, The text features a human heroine, Shira navigating identity and technology, another pivotal character being Yod, a cyborg, built to protect the city and the community. Through the relationship of the novel's central characters, Piercy offers a feminist take on the concept of agency and embodiment.

Tihana Bertek in her thesis, 'Beyond Gender? Imagining Utopia in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*' talks about how androgyny is portrayed in Le Guin's work. The critic mentions how instead of focusing on androgyny, Le Guin puts emphasis on the complexity of breaking the conventional gender binaries. According to Bertek, the Gethenian body is dynamic and relational, defying the conventional concept of gender and sex. Bertek mentions how Le Guin's writing highlights the interdependence of opposites i.e light and dark or male and female, she imagines a balanced dualism without the hierarchy.

Nicole Falkenhayner in '*The Ship Who Sang: Feminism, the Posthuman and Similarity*' talks about how Posthumanism examines the traditional notions of identity and subjectivity, pondering upon what it really means to be a human. Developments like genetic engineering, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, etc add on to the idea of what is considered human. Falkenhayner mentions how the concept of "otherness" makes the reader rethink the system of exclusion and inclusion which also extends to gendered practices. This can be used to understand the role of binaries and gender in post-human studies.

'Bodies of the Now: Feminist Values in Posthuman Times' by Cecilia Åsberg and Astrida Neimanis argues how the single concept of "the good" or adhering to a Foucaultian concern for the self are not the goals of feminist posthuman ethics. Instead, it focuses on acknowledging and honouring the other, whether human or inhuman. Feminist posthuman ethics, which draws inspiration from theorists such as Luce Irigaray, Franz Fanon, and Emmanuel Levinas, opposes the totalising aspects of humanism and promotes an ethics of care that places an emphasis on acknowledging alterity (otherness) before selfhood.

Kayla B Stephenson in her work 'One's a Crowd: Gendered Language in Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*' emphasises on the language and linguistics of the novel and the limitations of language. The novel

aims to understand and construct a world without gender; however, owing to the limitations of language, the novel's language is gendered. Stephenson adds how this limitation is restricted just to fiction but has implications in the real world as well for gender fluidity, androgyny, and transgender identities. She also adds how science fiction provides an insight into what could or could not be in the future while offering a plethora of narratives either about utopias that provide a glimpse into an aspiring future or dystopias that act as warnings. Le Guin's work too puts forward an insight into the future.

The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. Le Guin and *He, She and It* by Marge Piercy explore and question the conventional notions of gender, identity and one's idea of self is often driven and influenced by the culture and technology surrounding them. Through their works, both the authors deconstruct the concept of binaries and the rigid boundaries surrounding the idea of one's identity and self and put forward an account of work that challenges the conventional narratives. Viewing the texts from a feminist and posthuman lens, also contributes to the critique of hierarchical notions and boundaries that constructed the social structure. While Le Guin and Piercy put forward the ideas of gender and identity in a world that is free from the structures and shackles of a rigid society, they also give the readers and insight into a future that does not restrain one or confine one to its conventional idea of a binary or an identity.

VI. Reprogramming the Body: Gender, Autonomy, and Resistance in Posthuman Texts

Body Politics in post-human literature examines how bodies and identities are altered, reconstructed and erased in a world that is being challenged by technological and artificial intelligence. Through its critique of the power structures that govern bodies, it challenges the idea of control and regulation over bodies in a posthuman world. It raises questions about the idea of agency, regulations and autonomy as it blurs the boundaries between humans and machines i.e cyborgs, virtual identities, artificial beings. Posthuman literature challenges the notion of the human body being a fixed entity through its understanding and questioning of gender, racism and disability also reflecting upon how power structures continue to exist in a world where the idea of body is no longer biological.

Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* through body politics challenge the conventional idea of gender, identity and the idea of agency and autonomy in futuristic spaces. Piercy through the character of Yod challenges the concept of having autonomy and agency over one's body. Through Shira and Malkah, she navigates gendered oppression as they challenge power hierarchies and establish autonomy. Similarly, Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* depicts androgynous Gethenians and how they subvert the conventional idea as well as the gendered roles through their ability to reverse binaries of sex and identity during the "kemmer" period. The novel makes the reader challenge how bodies are policed through the criticism of how hierarchies and structures influence gender and how gender is also used as a tool to bifurcate and create stringent hierarchies.

In Piercy's work, a cyborg built for the protection of the free town, Yod, is one of the major characters whose narratives offer arguments on body politics. Built as a machine, a conventional understanding of a cyborg would assume him to be a technical entity; however, Yod possesses emotions, desires, intelligence and feelings which argues the meaning of being 'human'. While his creator, Avram views him as a tool rather than a sentient being, Yod yearns to be more than just a tool, just a machine as he opposes this objectification. *"I want to be more than a weapon. I want to choose."* His narrative raises questions on what it truly means to be human, the desire for physical autonomy especially for marginalised populations.

In the novel, corporate enclaves supervise and control corporal existence. Tikva, the free town in the novel, prioritises human connection and individual agency, over technological control. It challenges surveillance and how gender is often used as a way to control individuals. Piercy questions the authorities and structures that try to control bodies and also critiques the commercialisation of artificial and human bodies.

Similarly, Ursula K. Le Guin in her work *The Left Hand of Darkness* questions the norms of gender identity and gender based division of labour. The Gethenians ability to switch between the sexual traits of either male or female during the reproductive cycle, Kemmer, rejecting binary concepts of gender and sexuality. This also shatters the conventional norms of gender in most societies. The protagonist, Genly Ai, is an ambassador from a binary gendered society, he finds it strange to understand the biology and structure of the place. His inability to see past this comments on how deep seated gender prejudices are influenced by power and perceptions. *"The king was pregnant."*

Le Guin also explores how there is no systematic oppression of one sex over another as the binary structures do not exist, also critiquing the gendered dynamics in a patriarchy. As Estravan mentions, *"We are all androgynous ... I suppose the most important thing, the heaviest single factor in one's life, is whether one's born male or female. Well, here that doesn't matter a bit. It's not a factor."* However, for Genly Ai coming from a place where binary structures are followed, he views the Gethenians' absence of gender aggression and oppression as a sign of weakness as he's witnessed a world where men dominate politics and power structures.

Both the novels, *He, She, and It* and *The Left Hand of Darkness* adopt body politics to challenge how gender, identity and autonomy are formed and supervised. The authors through their characters confront the objectification and commodification of bodies in a technological world. They challenge the hierarchies and the need for autonomy and agency in a world composed of rigid structures.

VII. Transcendent Identities: Posthuman Feminism and the Reimagining of Gender in Speculative Fiction

Speculative fiction has always been significant in presenting feminist critique and reimagining the conventional norms that support the arguments of gender and body politics in a post-human world. Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* both challenge the conventional ideas of gender, identity and the self. While Piercy's criticism expands onto cybernetics and artificial intelligence, navigating and challenging the limits of human embodiment and autonomy, Le Guin challenges the rigid binaries of gender by creating a society that rejects gender binaries. Both the texts contribute to the contemporary discussions on resistance to patriarchal structures, gender fluidity and the amalgamation of bodies with technology.

He, She and It adds on to the arguments of posthuman feminist discourse through its use of posthuman and artificial bodies. Yod in Piercy's writing aids discussions about the body's role in determining gender as he lives in a transitional state between machine and human. It interrogates whether gender still holds the same meaning when a non-biological entity is capable of consciousness and emotional intelligence. While *The Left Hand of Darkness* does not feature cybernetic enhancement or artificial intelligence, its exploration of characters devoid of gender binaries transcend the biological human boundaries cater to the posthumanist idea of feminism. Similar to Piercy's cyborg, The Gethenians challenge the concepts of power, social interactions and reproduction being influenced by gender. Both the texts interact with the idea of how gender is not a rigid biological aspect but a fluid and artificial construct.

Marge Piercy and Ursula K. Le Guin both challenge the patriarchal structures that govern over bodies and autonomy by presenting posthuman and artificial intelligence as means of resistance. While the creation of Yod is an act of rebellion against political and corporate structures, the Gethenians' gender neutral bodies challenge the conventions and roles of gender. Both the authors present a world where the traditional power and authority structures are uprooted, offering feminist narratives and alternatives to the already existing social hierarchies.

Both the texts through feminist and queer theory challenge the inflexibility of identity bifurcations. Le Guin's portrayal of a world where individuals exist outside of the binary oppositions of male and female adds to the discussions of queer theory's dismissal of gender binaries. While Le Guin uses masculine pronouns to introduce the Gethenians, future criticisms and adaptations of the book elaborate upon the limitations of linguistic and cultural gender assumptions. Similarly, in *He, She and It*, Yod's non-normative identity interacts with the queer theory. Yod's existence deals with the complicated questions of how gender is viewed in traditional concepts, with it being a non-human entity capable of intelligence, making Yod a queer figure both figuratively and literally as he defies gender norms, becoming an antithesis of human characters who are bound by societal and biological limitations.

Apart from critiquing gender stereotypes, Marge Piercy and Ursula K. Le Guin both through the use of speculative fiction to critique and challenge social and political structures. Both the authors create an alternate world where civilization flourishes without patriarchal and heteronormative ideas about gender and power. Both the texts depict how societal issues and structures are often intermingled with gender and body politics. Le Guin and Piercy's portrayal of an alternate space also promotes the reader to understand how gender, power and technology intertwine in a world that dismantles them.

Through speculative fiction, both the authors question the essentialist notions of identity in their work *He, She and It* and *The Left Hand of Darkness* reimagine and reconstruct gender and body politics in the posthuman world. The cyborg, Yod in Piercy's novel, challenges the limitations of the human body and the idea of identity, whereas Le Guin's interrogation of a gender fluid society questions the binary distinctions of gender and sex. They present worlds where the oppressive structures that aim to curtail the agency and autonomy cease to exist and give a glimpse into an alternative world that is fluid and inclusive adding on to the posthuman feminist and queer theories.

VIII. Transgressing Flesh: Non-Binary Selves and Posthuman Echoes in Myth

The posthuman and non binary identity share similar concepts and notions, they challenge the essentialist and rigid ideas of who we are. Posthumanism questions the idea of human identity as stable and dismantling the distinctions between the physical and technological life between humans, machines and animals. Posthumanism criticizes the humanist ideal that views humans as the fixed subject that the universe revolves around. Through the use of cyborgs, artificial intelligence, technology, etc , posthumanism raises the question of what it really means to be "human". Theorists like Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti talk about how human identity is always fluctuating and is influenced by networks and technology rather than the intrinsic qualities.

Similarly, non-binary identity rejects the nations of strict gender binaries and viewing gender as a product of rigid societal norms and something flexible and fluid rather than something defined by biology. Through its rejection of gender binaries, the non-binary identity aligns with the philosophy and notion of the posthuman identity as both advocate a fluid, transformative and diverse identities. The non binary identity moves away from the dichotomy of male and female and acknowledges gender as performative and unfixed, similarly, the posthuman identity blurs the distinction between humans and machines.

There have been many characters, narratives that cater to the nonbinary, posthuman identity, defying the social constructs of gender and the rigid notions of the society, one of them being Tiresias from the Greek mythology, his ambiguous identity makes him an example of the posthuman identity owing to his fluid identity, his metamorphosis. After his encounter with two mating snakes, hitting them with his staff, tiresias is transformed from male to female. His metamorphosis caters to the posthumanist criticism to essentialist, rigid identities and is compared with the experience of the non binaries. Tiresias is an embodiment of a fluid, changing

identity, representing the early mythological existence of posthuman identities and the posthuman discourse that opposes the boundaries of the human experience.

Another example of this can be seen in Aristophanes' speech in Plato's *Symposium*, one of the early examples of the posthuman identity in mythology narrating the emergence of human desire and love. In the myth by Aristophane, it is mentioned how humans were androgynous beings and spherical creatures featuring two faces, four legs and four arms. As an expression for love and human desire, Zeus broke these people into two halves, having them yearn for their other half. The myth's depiction of the idea of the human body rejects gender binaries and foreshadows the existence of identities in the future and aligns with the posthuman rejection of binaries. Similarly, the navigation of changing connections and the idea of being human by the posthuman philosophy through the ways of bioengineering, cybernetic enhancement or artificial intelligence is compared to Aristophane's notion of love as a way to bring back split beings together. This narrative foreshadows a future where identities are transformational and fluid with constant reintegration surpassing biological limitations.

The Sphinx, a hybrid creature from Greek mythology can be seen as another example of these identities, it defies the categorization of knowledge and species, it embodies both human and animal characteristics and personifies the post-human identity. Its existence as neither a complete human entity nor a beastly entity, rejects the anthropocentric notion of superiority aligning with the posthumanist concept of decentralising humans. Its knowledge and role as the gatekeeper of knowledge, depict the posthuman idea of knowledge not being static while also portraying knowledge and intelligence as a characteristic in a creature that is not entirely human.

Posthuman and non-binary identities reject the notion of strict, essentialist way of life; they advocate for fluid, transformative and changing identities. Some characters in the mythology align with these notions and challenge the conventional norms of gender, species and humanity. The existence of such narratives and characters foreshadows a future that is inclusive and fluid. Posthumanism dismantles the boundaries between humans, machines, animals and technology, promoting a future where identity defies the rigid structures and norms of societal expectations.

IX. CONCLUSION

Posthumanism constantly challenges the belief of identity being defined by the human body, the physiological adaptability of the Gethenians furthers into their ability of being able to transform into either male or female owing to the environmental factors suggesting a more fluid and relaxed identity rather than rigid and fixed identities adding on to the idea that identity is beyond biology. It also navigates the idea of adaptability in the novel's setting of a harsh world. It also undermines the humanist notions of independent individuals through the friendship of Genly and Estraven as they are interdependent and survive through cooperation rather than independent strength.

He, She and It however is set in a cyberpunk society guarded by the sentient cyborg, Yod, the central figure of the novel. His existence subverts the boundaries between human and non-human existence owing to him having feelings, desires and morality. His conversations and relationship with Shira, challenges the concept of whether identity is a biologically determined factor or is it determined by consciousness and experience, dismantling the boundaries between organic and artificial existence. Yod represents the idea of a posthumanist view that identity is beyond human identity and core, decentralizing humans. He is not just a war machine, he is a self aware being, with the ability and desire for love also depicting his need for independence. His desire and fight for autonomy also highlights that posthuman entities too can be existentially and ethically upright similar to those standing up against oppression.

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