

Literature for building an inclusive society: Ungendered narrative and its impact on the daily life of queer individuals

KHUMAN BHAGIRATH JETUBHAI, MADHUMITA GHOSAL

Visvesvaraya National Institute of Technology, Nagpur, India

Abstract

When a reader encounters a character, fictional or not, in any medium (print or electronic), that reader will mentally add the character to the scene by first cataloguing gender, and gradually adding appearance, attire and mannerisms. But what if the author were to keep the character's gender secret? The result would certainly be a more disorienting reading experience than usual, in which the reader would be barred from a complete image of the character. Even if the author chose to use inventive gender-neutral pronouns (which the reader may or may not know) to introduce the character, it would likely only further complicate the matter. We are conditioned to think of gender as of utmost importance in learning about a person in any situation. Gender non-conforming and queer individuals face stigma, discrimination and rejection, owing to their ambiguous gender expression. Hence, once the reader overcomes the initial confusion, reading ungendered narrative can help to generate a gender-inclusive environment by forcing the reader to ask, "Does gender really matter?" If readers were able to come to terms with ungendered characters and familiarity with gender-neutral pronouns in fictional narratives, perhaps it would not matter whether the person sitting next to them on a bus were transgender or a gender-fluid person. The person would be simply a human being, deserving of the same respect and care as any other. We might then become sufficiently comfortable using gender-neutral pronouns in our daily conversation. Thus, ungendered narrative holds significant promise for queer individuals, and its popularity and wide reach among readers could bring greater acceptance in real life of individuals with non-normative gender.

Key words: pronouns, identity, readers, queer, gender, language, narrative, character, stereotypes

(This research paper uses "they" pronouns for a singular person of unknown or non-normative gender)

1 Introduction

Ungendered narrative is writing with one or more characters depicted without revealing their gender identity. The writer uses gender-neutral pronouns (e.g., ze, nan, xe), unisex names, or the first-person point of view, since "I" is not gendered in the English language. The present paper considers ungendered narratives such as June Arnold's *The Cook and the Carpenter* (1973); Gene Kemp's *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler* (1977); Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* (1993); David Levithan's *The Lover's Dictionary* (2011); Steve Brezenoff's *Brooklyn, Burning* (2011); and Anne Garréta's *Sphinx* (1986, Trans. 2015). The experience of reading these fictional works is uneasy, baffling, and confusing, all of which acts as a catalyst for changing the reader's mindset. Kauer has observed that ungendered narrative "successful[ly] attempt[s] to change readers' habits" by "challenge[ing] readerly expectations" owing to "the narrator's lack of gender" (quoted in Makinen & Tredell 2005:129).

Possible changes of similar importance, which the narrative may precipitate, are discussed hereafter.

2 Readers forced to question gender roles and stereotypes

Sandra Alters and Wendy Schiff define *gender roles* as “patterns of behaviour, attitude, and personality attributes that are traditionally considered in a particular culture to be feminine or masculine” (Alters & Schiff 2013:176); and *stereotype* as a “widespread association of certain perceptions with one gender” (Alters & Schiff 2013:176). It is no exaggeration to state that gender roles and stereotypes ring the death knell for queer and gender-nonconforming individuals. For instance, a genderqueer person, assigned the male sex at birth, may prefer to wear skirts and high heels, out of sync with socially expected gender roles. As a result, left with no choice but to conform to gender roles associated with the sex assigned at birth, the individual suffers the consequences of defying that assignment, namely, strong disapproval and taunting from society.

India has its own gender category closely connected with transwoman, rooted in its ancient culture of gender identity and commonly known as *hijra*. With male sex assigned at birth, and displaying feminine traits as they grow up, these young people are a source of shame to their family due to their effeminacy in a society that follows gender roles to death. Their families force or encourage them to leave the parental home at a young age. With nowhere else to go, these young people find refuge in the hierarchical community of *hijra* that has a *guru* as its head. There they work as if in bonded labour, forced to give a certain amount to their *guru* at the end of the day or face negative consequences. For that daily earning, the *hijra* often resorts to begging, extortion, dancing, and sex work.¹

The cause of this problem—*hijra* leaving home and joining a group under the control of a *guru*—is gender dysphoria, having difficulty following masculine roles and stereotypes, while embracing feminine traits for relief and comfort. A rigid system does not allow them to take up feminine traits; if they do, the system turns their world upside down by casting them out.

Freeing a society of gender roles and stereotypes is a monumental task. Literature and other visual media have always been at the forefront of bringing change to society. Saying that ungendered narrative can be the catalyst to eradicate gender-based violence and mistreatment would not be an understatement. In ungendered narrative, the author deconstructs gender roles, calling the very concept of male and female roles into question. Why do we attach certain roles to a certain gender? Is it really required for a person to follow gender roles to live a successful life? Ungendered narrative attempts to find answers.

¹ You can read about India’s *hijra* community that acquired the polar-opposite statuses of deity and societal discard at the same time in Indian society, in *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (1990) by Serena Nanda. Other notable works carried out on *hijra* are *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (2015) by Gayatri Reddy; and *The Invisibles: A Tale of the Eunuchs of India* (1996) by Zia Jaffrey.

Kemp’s children’s book *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler* has a central character named Tyke (whose gender Kemp discloses on the last page of the book), who exhibits all the traits expected of a boy. Tyke’s notoriety, fights, protection of a male friend named Danny, and climbing the highest part of the school bell tower to ring the bell—a feat achieved only once in the history of the Cricklepit School, by a boy—all point to the ungendered Tyke being a male. By not disclosing Tyke’s gender, Kemp leads the reader to believe that Tyke is a boy by aligning the character sketch with the male gender role. However, with the unexpected revelation at the end—“Get down at once, Theodora Tiler, you naughty, disobedient girl”! (2015:145)—a shout by Mrs Somers leaves the reader shocked to learn that Tyke is a girl.

Kery Mallan remarks, “Tyke is messy, reckless, smart, quick-thinking, agile, fearless, and always in trouble at school. It is little wonder then that when readers discover at the end of the book that Tyke is a girl they feel they have fallen subject to a narrative deceit” (2009:1). More than a narrative deceit, it calls into question readers’ deeply rooted gender stereotypes about boys being adventurous and notorious, while girls are meek and submissive. We have fallen prey to our own false beliefs about gender roles (i.e., our inability to imagine a girl being adventurous and holding the entire school hostage), which society has forced upon us. The following words said in reference to *Written on the Body* ring true for the other ungendered narratives as well: “The text plays with the reader; in relation to gender, the reader is supposed to struggle with the stereotypes as the narrator lays a series of red herrings and gender stereotypes to confuse them” (Makinen & Tredell 2005:121).

In *The Cook and the Carpenter*, Arnold does not reveal the eponymous characters’ gender until chapter 14. Going by the name of the characters, readers would guess that the cook is a woman and the carpenter is a man. A close reading of the text makes it obvious that “the cook is little, poetic, imprecise, creative, flexible, a nurturer and feeder—in other words, ‘feminine’ [—and] the carpenter is big, hard, intellectual, unyielding, detached, a shaper of wood—hence, ‘masculine’” (Zimmerman 1995:xxvii). However, in chapter 14, readers find their assumptions based on stereotypes are incorrect, as both characters turn out to be women. Arnold’s ironic reason for not gendering the characters, written in the introduction to her novel’s 1973 edition, reveals how narrow-minded we have become when it comes to gender:

Since the differences between men and women are so obvious to all, so impossible to confuse whether we are speaking of learned behaviour or inherent characteristics, ordinary conversation or furious passion, work or intimate relationships, the author understands that it is no longer necessary to distinguish between men and women in this novel. I have therefore used one pronoun for both, trusting the reader to know which is which. (Quoted in Henley 1987:14)

She aims her sarcastic comment at the people who follow social convention and take gender roles seriously. Arnold “trusts” readers to make out the gender of the

characters easily. But it was not so; readers with stereotyped and fixed gender roles in mind miserably fail, highlighting their narrow perspective. Such readers find it difficult to imagine that a carpenter displaying so-called masculine characteristics could ever be female, and thus they “misgender” her. Arnold reminds readers that we are likely to get confused and make a mistake if we do indeed “trust” traditional gender roles. Arnold’s characterisation is a wake-up call for readers to whom Arnold offers the opportunity to learn that the gender roles that individuals play are not always true reflections of the gender with which they identify.

Unlike Kemp and Arnold, Garréta never reveals her characters’ gender in her novel, *Sphinx*. The reader is tempted to attach gender to the characters based on their characteristics—e.g., the narrator is a theology student, thus male; and A*** is a club dancer, hence, female. In Ryan Ruby’s opinion, the readers fill in the gap that Garréta has painstakingly kept blank: “the book is a Rorschach test for each reader’s assumptions about gender and the writing of gender. These assumptions are as likely to be conditioned by clues within the text as by the knowledge of paratextual facts about it” (2016). Our reading reflects our true self, and how “loyal” our belief system is to gender roles. On the contrary, if we were to stop caring about the gender of characters, it would prove that we see each human as a distinct individual with unique qualities (now incorrectly labelled as masculine, feminine, androgynous or otherwise), which cannot be divided into the watertight compartments of a binary gender system. One can be emotional and intelligent as well as nurturing and strong—and that is how we *really* are.

Stephanie Hayes, while interviewing Emma Ramadan, mentions how Garréta blends masculine and feminine stereotypes in one character, making it difficult for readers to pigeonhole the character in one gender box. “Reading *Sphinx*, I found myself constantly searching for clues as to the lovers’ gender. A*** was described as having hips ‘narrow and broad at the same time’, and a ‘cat-like or divine body’ with ‘musculature seemingly sculpted by Michelangelo’” (2016). Gill Rye agreed: “Je [narrator] and A*** each display attributes which are traditionally ascribed to both masculine and feminine stereotypes. The reader is invited to categorise the protagonists, but s/he is never allowed the certainty with which to do so” (2000:533).

The assumptions readers make about gender, based on the writer’s character sketch, convey a great deal about the readers’ attitude toward gender. Feelings of discomfort (as evident in above quoted statements by Rye and Hyes) while reading surely point to how important it is for readers to identify a character’s gender and the significance the reader gives to gender. If readers start filling in the ungendered blank left by authors, based on the gender stereotypes they have in mind, it is a clear sign that those readers should unlearn the stereotypes. They should aim for a process of reading in which they realise the needlessness of identifying a character’s gender and still feel involved in the story, finding the reading pleasurable. A reader of an ungendered narrative ideally reads a love story involving ungendered characters as a story about two human individuals; thus the reader moves beyond

the false and toxic gender binary. The author’s process is to engineer how the text will work as a test to evaluate readers.

What if the reader identifies an ungendered character with either gender? Referring to Winterson’s *Written on the Body*, Kwang Soon Kim answers the question by noting that “those readings of the narrator as one of either sex/gender demonstrate how (academic as well as general) readers have been accustomed to the gender-based reading habits in which textual meanings are dichotomously arranged along the lines of sex and gender of characters” (2010:1282). The aftereffects of reading ungendered narrative are best captured in the words of Daniel Levin Becker: “the arbitrariness of our assumptions; the flimsiness of our institutions; the difficulties of knowing another person, oneself, anything” (2015:vi).

3 Popularising non-binary pronouns through ungendered narrative

Gender is revealed in the fiction mainly through pronouns that the authors use for the characters. There are two ways to write ungendered narrative: the author can either use gender-neutral pronouns or avoid using pronouns at all. In *Sphinx*, Garréta avoids using pronouns for either the narrator or A***. Brezenoff in *Brooklyn, Burning*, Winterson in *Written on the Body*, David Levithan in *The Lover’s Dictionary* and Kemp in *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler* follow the same strategy of avoiding pronouns for ungendered characters. However, Arnold in *The Cook and the Carpenter* coins the gender-neutral pronouns “na” and “nan”.

Why don’t we have a gender-neutral pronoun that is as popular and accepted as other pronouns like “he” and “she”? The problem that persistently haunts us is our inability to choose a pronoun that is used and agreed upon by all. Presently, the convention is that a group of non-binary people goes by the pronoun “they”, while others prefer “ze”. Other pronouns currently in use or invented in the past but no longer in use are “ne”, “ve”, “ey”, “xe”, “jee”, “thon”, “per”, and many more. It confuses and hurts the cause. Baron remarks that “after more than 100 attempts to coin a gender-neutral pronoun over the course of more than 150 years, ‘thon’ and its competitors will remain what they always have been, the words that failed”. (2010)

The long history of pronoun inventions with none finding a permanent place in the English language is certainly a worrisome one. The main reason for it is that people find it uncomfortable to use these new pronouns in daily conversation. We have been taught “I”, “we”, “you”, “he”, “she”, “it” and “they”. The mere appearance of pronouns other than these in writing or speech troubles people. In a way, it also suggests that people have not yet recognised the non-binary as a standalone gender in need of an identity in language, as well as in society. It points to the limitation of language when it comes to a correct and accepted pronoun for genderqueer individuals. Historically, queer people have always been part of civilisation, from ancient times to present day, so it cannot be said that they are a new phenomenon and that is why the language does not have a pronoun for them. The question arises of why grammarians, linguists, and lexicographers have never

approved of their existence by assigning them a suitable pronoun, the way their male and female counterparts have. It justifies the arbitrary nature of language and rules that are framed by a privileged few. Anagori has rightly observed:

In linguistics there’s no such thing as “grammatical correctness”. The only thing that makes a sentence “good” is whether your listeners or readers understand what you are saying. “Proper grammar” isn’t intrinsically better—it’s just the grammar that is promoted by tradition, habit, and people in power. In practice, the main functions of “proper grammar” are to stigmatize the languages of oppressed groups, reduce their social mobility, and promote negative stereotypes about their intelligence. (2015)

To get recognition of their identity, using language is of utmost significance for queer people. In one way or the other, language reflects society and its attitudes. Having appropriate and suitable pronouns for genderqueer people will make a world of difference. It will sanction their distinctiveness. In the opinion of transgender person Hanniel Sindelar, “People get down on labels, but finding out there’s a word and people identify that way changed my life. It made me feel validated” (quoted in Larsen 2015).

The inability of language to describe queer people aptly also adversely affects the literary representation of the community. The writer would be in a quandary as to which pronouns to use to offer queer characters a truthful representation, so that queer readers can identify with them. There are fictional works in which invented pronouns are used, e.g., Arnold’s *The Cook and the Carpenter*. One positive aspect of the English language is that first- and second-person pronouns are gender-neutral and can be used for one and all, regardless of their gender identity. English writers have taken advantage of it. *Written on the Body* has an unnamed central character and in the entire novel, the pronoun “I” is used; while in *The Lover’s Dictionary*, the narrator addresses his love interest as simply “you”.

The introduction of non-binary pronouns in language through literature can bring hitherto marginalised folk into the mainstream. Language is undoubtedly a powerful tool to bring about transformation in the world. The acceptance of the gender-neutral pronouns and expressions will confirm that society has become gender inclusive with equal and fair treatment given to sexual minorities. The fame and visibility of ungendered narrative that uses gender-neutral pronouns can make singular ‘they’ and other non-binary pronouns a part of the day-to-day conversation and increase its usage in media.

4 Validating identity and lifestyle of queer individuals through ungendered narrative

It is very important that queer people mirror themselves in literature and other media. Stephanie Corrigan explains the importance of the representation of queer individuals:

With more exposure to same-sex couplings, the public can have more of an accepting view of LGBT couples. But not only that, any child who identifies as a member of the LGBT community would be able to finally see themselves in a character they love and to feel okay that they like the same sex, are transgender or don't like anyone at all because asexuality is a valid sexuality. By telling these children that they are okay and not broken for being different, we are creating a new generation that is more accepting of others' differences and accepts one another. (2016)

Ungendered narrative does not directly state that the character is queer or has a gender identity. Gender is not disclosed. And it works to the advantage of the narrative, because “if a character's gender is left unnamed, we, as readers, are forced to figure out what that means. The space, then, is left open for multiple readings” (Purich 2010:8). In an interview, Emma Ramadan narrates her happiest moment, highlighting what literature can achieve with the support of talented authors.

The day I felt the book was successful was the day a transgender critic wrote a review about it. This person had heard about *Sphinx* on Twitter, and she/he/they wrote that for the first time in literature, this book was a mirror for them; they were able to project themselves onto the characters because there is no gender, and they could put themselves into the characters because the character was in that in-between space. There aren't many books written like that. (“Crotches Crossed and Sexes Mixed” 2015)

Brooklyn, Burning features ungendered characters Kid and Scout, who also happen to be in a romantic relationship:

Depending on the reader's own background and cultural assumptions of gender based on upbringing, Kid can be constructed a unique way by each individual reader. Kid could be male, female, or transgender (though, based on many textual clues, most likely genderqueer) depending on how each reader chooses to read the actions and personality traits. (Bittner 2016:210)

It is likely that a person identifying with non-binary gender would mirror themselves in the ungendered characters of *Brooklyn, Burning*. The dominance of cisgender (refers to “individuals who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity” [Schilt & Westbrook 2009:461].) characters at times can be intimidating for non-cisgender people. Feelings of alienation, being different or mentally sick, or an aberration are notions that develop when queer individuals do not find themselves in media. One problem is that the number of genders and sexual identities is huge. Facebook offers seventy-one gender options to choose from for its users (Williams 2014), but not all of them will find representation in literature. Ungendered narrative is an answer to that problem. The reader can fill the space left by the author with any identity to which the reader can relate. (It certainly contradicts the assertion made by a set of critics discussed earlier in this paper that readers should get used to the uncertainty of character gender.)

Their identity is different; so is their way of living. They may or may not have a family with blood ties. Brezenoff narrated how Kid’s created family, not the family with blood ties, supported Kid in their difficult time. Kid finding comfort, love and care in them could act as an assurance to homeless queer people whose family has abandoned them due to their non-normative gender and sexual identity. We can pick and choose a family of our own, consisting of people who care about us, rather than going with people with whom we share blood ties but who may be ashamed of us, with no acceptance and respect.

Queer people may not always prefer marriage, a phenomenon commonly associated with heterosexual couples. They may not choose or may be unable to procreate. There may not be any legal way for queer people to get married. Winterson exposed the hypocrisy of marriage in *Written on the Body*—to quote one of the examples from the text “Marriage is the flimsiest weapon against desire. You may as well take a pop-gun to a python” (2014:78)—taking away the exalted status that has been given to marriage by our heteronormative society. If one’s state supports queer marriage and legalises such a union, it is fine. If not, their union and way of living in no way become debased and immoral without legal approval by the state. Thus, ungendered narrative breaks away from the run-of-the-mill heterosexual narrative that normalises heterosexual lifestyle regardless of one’s ability or inability to lead such a life.

The heterosexual narrative creates turmoil in the minds of people with alternative sexualities, since that narrative is what they see around them and in media. Here, authors of ungendered narrative like Winterson alleviate the issue of non-representation of gendered minority in literature by using “fantasy and eroticism [works] to open up a space for alternative lifestyles (alternatives to family, to heterosexuality, to society, to post-modern media)” (Burns 1996:304). The narrative acts as validation for non-binary people that deconstructs what is called the normal and desirable way of living, and suggests that the queer can live happily and peacefully like heterosexual counterparts, in their own way. The narrative is an attempt in that direction.

5 Gender is performance, not innate

Judith Butler first compared gender to performance in 1990, in her seminal work *Gender Trouble*. Simone de Beauvoir also declared, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (1973:301). The works of Butler and Beauvoir point to the socially constructed nature of gender rather than to the presumptive biological one. There is a marked difference between how a man expresses himself and the expression of his counterpart, a woman; be it in how clothes inform physique or behaviour prompts body language, there is a strong binary division between male and female. We perform gender in relation to the sex assigned at birth. Thus, a man has particular attire, as does a woman; crying and expressing emotions are qualities detested in men; men keep short hair, and women wear theirs long; the ways that they walk differ. This all is learned from family, society and media. A soft, gentle voice is abhorred in a man and desired in a woman. Kemp’s

work exemplifies “gender as performance” by portraying masculine performance in a schoolgirl named Theodora, whom readers interpret to be a male child but who at the end turns out to be a female. We really need to write more such books for children, because they are impressionable and need to know that we cannot guess one’s gender by how one “performs” in text and in real life. Children will learn from Tyke’s character that it is okay for girls to be adventurous, mischievousness, aggressive, and protective of their male friends. As Blackburn explained:

The ingenious contribution of Kemp stands in, aside for providing a fine piece of literature, pervaded by wit and irony, in the fact that he manages in a very clever, not intellectually arrogant way, to make the reader aware of the existence of “pre- programming”, the “software” while in the same time providing the young readers with a refreshing example of “way of being”, and “examples to live by”: the courage to be “oneself” regardless of what society and family expect one to be, or what kind of moral conduct code they force one into. (n.d.:46)

What bigger service could non-gendered narrative perform than to provide queer people “courage to be oneself”? In contrast to Kemp, whose protagonist’s gender she discloses at the end of the book to prove the point regarding gender as a social construct and its performative nature, Winterson never reveals the identity of the narrator who effortlessly performs both genders, thus confusing readers about narrator’s gender identity. The narrator reacts aggressively when ex-lover Jacqueline, who did not take the break-up in stride, damages the narrator’s apartment. The same violent streak in the narrator is evident when the narrator comes to know that Elgin, Louise’s doctor-husband, has fooled them by declaring that Louise’s condition is life-threatening—a hoax to ruin the narrator’s blissful relationship with Louise. Here, it would be an error on the reader’s part to conclude that the narrator’s gender is male, based on the narrator’s angry outbursts. Barnett explains the intricate workings of Winterson’s narrative:

Using the theoretical concept of gender as performance being developed in the late eighties and early nineties, Winterson interrogates the notions behind the construction of gender and sexual identity and the assumptions readers make regarding those identities. This is achieved through the lack of any gender signifier for the narrator of her novel. (2003:43)

In Winterson’s novel, irrespective of the narrator’s gender, the narrator performs masculine and feminine roles in accordance with the situation or any behaviour pattern. If a mother starts earning and becomes a sole breadwinner of the family, it does not make her a man, nor does a man performing all household duties become a woman. What Winterson intends to convey by the portrayal of the narrator of undisclosed gender is: “Gender . . . is a place, one which can be entered or left, not an identity . . . Every time we act, we act gender. Thus, gender is like a character; it can be changed at will” (Allen 1995:8). If gender is such a fragile, unreliable and trouble-making social construct, why do we bother dividing people binarily?

6 Signifying the futility of our habit of gendering people and object

As the previous section shows, if gender is performance, it need not be understood as permanent. We can do away with binarising people. Reading the initial chapters of *The Cook and the Carpenter* makes us believe it is a story involving heterosexual characters. Unlike *Sphinx* or *Written on the Body*, wherein the authors intentionally mix masculine and feminine gender roles into one character in attempts to confuse the readers, in *The Cook and the Carpenter*, right from the beginning the cook displays feminine qualities and the carpenter plays the role of a typical male. However, the moment Arnold begins to genderise the characters from chapter 14, revealing them all as women, our assumption about gender must give way.

Julie Allen explains what readers undergo while reading such narratives. “As a reader, one embarrassedly has to admit that one has spent the entire novel trying to identify and place the characters . . . on the one hand, one has failed to identify, definitively, the gender of the protagonist; on the other hand, because of his intense desire for identification, one had to disrupt and unravel one’s own notion of gender in the first place” (1995:7-8). The reader fails at trying to put characters into a gender binary. With her writing, Arnold attempts to highlight to the readers the needlessness and futility of gendering humans any more than objects, as we will never get to know the gender of the characters by their “performance”. It is possible and normal to have a male gender expression, but identify as a female, and therein lies the insignificance of gender.

In the context of *Sphinx*, Terry Pitts writes:

Her refusal to assign gender to the two main characters in her book forcibly changes the traditional relationship between reader and text. As a tactic, it calls into question time-honoured assumptions about how readers might internalize, visualize, and identify with fictional characters. Every page of *Sphinx* becomes a reminder of our insistent desire to genderize people and objects. (2015)

Ramadan sums up the point nicely:

I think that’s kind of the point, that we live in a world where there are just so many distinctions between people, and we are constantly drawing distinctions, but gender doesn’t have to be one of them. Perhaps Garréta’s point is reminding us what we’re facing everyday boundaries between us. There are always walls between us, but gender shouldn’t have to be something that has so much control over our lives. I think there needs to be that contrast, or the simultaneous reminder, that these boundaries do exist, and that gender does have an influence in our lives, but that it doesn’t need to. In this way, these two characters are the embodiment of escaping it. (“A*** And I” 2016)

7 It is all right to be confused about gender

In *Written on the Body*, the author mentions the ungendered narrator’s past affairs, but provides no details regarding other background information about the narrator. We do not know about the narrator’s family, religion, physical appearance or

educational background, any more than gender. As readers, we put so much effort into defining the narrator’s gender that we forget to appreciate the narrator’s unwavering love toward Louise. Despite being separated from each other, the narrator ignores advances made by Gail and clarifies, “I have to tell you now Gail that there’s someone else . . . Louise, dipterous girl born in flames, 35. 34 22 36. 10 years married. 5 months with me. Doctorate in Art History. First class mind. 1 miscarriage (or 2?) 0 children. 2 arms, 2 legs, too many white T-cells. 97 months to live” (Winterson 2014:142,143). The scene ends with the narrator crying.

There is no denying the fact that Gail is overweight by the narrator’s standard, but the narrator has been faithful and crazily in love with Louise from the very beginning of their relationship. The narrator’s extreme concern for her well-being and the frantic search for her later in the novel speaks volumes about the narrator’s undying love for Louise. In such a scenario, why should we care whether theirs is a homosexual or heterosexual union, or something else? Love is above such labels that we give to relationships.

In *Sphinx*, the way the narrator takes care of lover A***’s mother halts the reader, who is otherwise busy solving the puzzle of the narrator’s and A***’s gender. It forces them to take notice of how good a human the narrator is, instead of wondering to what gender the narrator belongs. A***’s sick and dying mother is not attended by any of the family members but the narrator. In the words of the narrator:

She [Nurse] asked me how I was connected to this woman, whom I was taking such good care of and with whom I seemed to share neither race, ancestry, nor even age. I didn’t know how to respond and briefly explained that this woman was the mother of a person who had been very dear to me, who had died nearly seven years ago. (Garréta 2015:104)

This quote makes it clear that the narrator’s gender deserves no attention. It makes no difference whether trans, gay or non-binary, only that the narrator is working to ensure that A***’s mother receives a dignified death. The narrator’s motherly concern for A***’s mother forces readers to think beyond the narrator’s genitalia and gender identity. The lesson readers learn is that it is perfectly normal not to know a character’s gender in fiction. The same is applicable in real life. We meet people whom we cannot binarise into man-woman categories. It makes us uncomfortable if we do not decide one’s gender based on physical appearance. There are instances in which a person is asked about gender, or to be specific about what they have between their legs.² It is downright offensive, and the reading of the ungendered narrative helps in understanding the sensitivity of the matter. It asks the reader to look at other aspects of personality, rather focusing on the person’s gender. What matters is being a good, law-abiding citizen of the country.³

² Sam Escobar, who identifies as non-binary, requests that readers “don’t ask me about my junk” in the article.

³ Here we are not referring to section 377 that criminalises any sexual practice that is against the law of nature in many Commonwealth countries, or any other such laws that violate the basic human right of queer people.

Gender and sexuality are private matters, and asking uncomfortable questions about them to the person concerned is unwarranted. Levithan explains how ungendered narrative helps in understanding others and oneself: “There is nothing so powerful as recognizing yourself within a character or understanding someone in your life more because of a character. And that happens all the time with YA [Young Adult]” (“Interview with David Levithan” 2013).

Though the author says this in the context of the genre of Young Adult literature, the power of literature in promoting the acceptance of queer individuals rings true in other literary genres as well. The reading of ungendered narrative makes us more accommodating toward queer people and their ways of expression and life. However, to reach this goal will take time, as is evident in Smith’s observation of the reaction to Winterson’s work and the reason behind it:

Written on the Body . . . caused an immediate stir. Winterson had created an unnamed and apparently ungendered first-person narrator who sustained his/her story of lost love for almost two-hundred pages without definitively revealing his/her gendered identity. Critics and reviewers alike became detectives as they sifted through the text, looking for any and every clue to the narrator’s “real” gender and plucking those clues from the text to support their own presumption of the narrator’s “true” identity. This guessing game became a central appeal of the book and numerous articles and reviews were written in the service of disclosing this supposedly crucial piece of the narrative puzzle. (2011:412-413)

It is certainly shocking to read that. Our obsession to know someone’s gender is apparent in Smith’s comment, and it certainly must be changed. Simply replace the ungendered characters with genderqueer or gender-nonconforming real people. Would they like to be closely scrutinised to enable others to draw conclusions about their gender? The answer is an emphatic NO. Rubinsond asks, “What motivates the desire to know the narrator’s [or any other person’s] sex?” (2001:220), and we probably do not have an answer for that. Desire to know gender is detrimental because readers determine the gender by characters’ behaviours, reactions and expressions. They look for commonly misplaced gender stereotypes, and by that means they label the characters with a particular gender. This stereotypical reading gives the impression that we can determine one’s gender based on outer appearance and expression, and that an individual must follow the roles and stereotypes linked with one’s sex assigned at birth, or the condition would be considered an abnormal anomaly.

India’s trans activist Akkai Padmashali declared, “I am a woman without vagina, I am a woman without uterus, I am a woman without breasts, I am a woman without periods, I challenge the patriarchal made societal norms, rules and regulation and do claim with proud and dignity I am a woman with this identity (sic)”. (2017) The statement establishes that external appearance or presence of a certain body part is not a sure way to know one’s gender. The lesson we learn from this is that the ungendered characters we meet during our readings should be read as the author intended, rather than gendering them and missing the whole point of ungendered

narrative, which is to transcend gender binary and highlight the triviality of gender in life and literature. In a similar vein, Rubinsond confirms:

Any attempt to determine the narrator’s sex is necessarily dependent on essentialized or stereotypical readings of gender, or both. The fact is, there is no information about the narrator’s body that can lead us to determine whether the narrator is male, female, transsexual, intersexed or XXY. And that is exactly the point: it implies that such information is or should be irrelevant. Confirmation of the narrator’s sex would merely reinforce gender stereotypes rooted in male-constructed, “scientific” knowledge about sexed bodies. (2001:220)

Thus, the narrative attempts to break the concept of gender essentialism—which has been widely employed to discriminate against women and other minority gender and sexual identities. Essentialism is the reason why aggressiveness in men (however unnecessary and unrequired in the situation at hand) and timidity in women are appreciated—because that is how people are, biologically and psychosocially. In addition, societies use gender essentialism to spread fear of sexual minorities. Feminine expressions by a man are attributed to a fault in his mind or body and believed to require treatment. Homosexuality was listed as a curable disease in the United States, and is still criminalised in seventy-four countries (Fenton 2016). This disease mindset is one of the contributing factors of gender essentialism. Ungendered narrative plays a significant part in erasing essentialism. “The narrator’s sexual ambiguity teaches us to become aware of how we view the world in polar, sexualized, and essentialized terms: the ambiguity implicitly challenges the ‘naturalized’ status of positivist-influenced biological essentialism” (Rubinsond 2001:220).

8 Conclusion

Ungendered narrative is capable of bringing change because it comprises “texts which seduce us or provoke us into asking questions of ourselves, of others, of society, of language, of thought” (Rye 2000:538), and thus

show us the way towards change. If the reader’s (self-) interrogation and creativity do not necessarily end with the end of the reading of the text, if uncertain sexual identities in texts provoke ongoing questions about sexual identity in life, then the (uncertain) experience of reading is surely a meaningful dialogue – and it is one which can perhaps open up the way towards change. (Rye 2000:538)

Similarly, Grahn equates Winterson’s writing with Stein’s, noting that the story “diffus[es] into little electron arrows seeking whatever is rigid and prejudiced in me, the reader, of whatever gender or other names I might go by in daily life” (1989:268).

However, we cannot overlook our age-old habit of filling space with “he” whenever we are unsure about a subject’s gender. As a result, despite authors’ attempts to create an ungendered world with the intention of bringing change, critics’ and readers’ reservations may cause the attempt to misfire. Since the characters never

openly identify with any gender (except in *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler* and *The Cook and The Carpenter*), authors run the risk of ungendered characters being gendered as male. Francesca Maioli explains that “the novel shows that there can be no such a thing as ‘genderless’ narrator, since ‘ungendered’ ends up coinciding with ‘universal’, and, in western culture, it stands for ‘male’” (2019:144).

References

- Allen, Julie (1995), “Pronominal outlaws”, *Conference on College Composition and Communication*, Washington Institute of Education Sciences, 23-25 March. Washington: Educational Resources Information Center. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED385842.pdf>
- Alters, Sandra & Wendy Schiff (2013), *Essential concepts for healthy living*. Burlington: Jones & Bartlett Learning.
- Anagnori (2015), “A Non-binary person’s guide to invented pronouns”, *Anagnori*. Retrieved from <http://anagnori.tumblr.com/post/75752291700/a-non-binary-persons-guide-to-invented-pronouns>
- Arnold, June (1995), *The cook and the carpenter: A novel by the carpenter*. New York: New York University Press.
- Barnett, Tully (2003), “The cyborg and the garden: Aspects of Jeanette Winterson’s techno-curiosity”, *Counterpoints*, 3(1):42-49.
- Baron, Dennis (2010), “The gender-neutral pronoun: After 150 years still an epic fail”, *The Web of Language*. Retrieved from <https://illinois.edu/blog/view/25/31097>.
- Becker, Daniel Levin (2015), “Introduction”, in Garréta, Anne, *Sphinx*. Texas: Deep Vellum Publishing, iii-vi.
- Beauvoir, Simone de (1973), *The second sex*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Bittner, Robert (2016), “(Im) possibility and (In) visibility: Arguing against ‘just happens to be’ in young adult literature”, *Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture*, 1(2):199-214.
- Blackburn, Patrick (n.d.), *Delusions of gender project*, N.p.
- Burns, Christy L. (1996), “Fantastic language: Jeanette Winterson’s recovery of the postmodern word”, *Contemporary Literature*, 37(2):278-306.
- Corrigan, Stephanie (2016), “Why LGBT representation is important in media”, *The Odyssey Online*. Retrieved from <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/why-lgbt-representation-is-important-in-media>.
- Escobar, Sam (2016), “I’m not male. I’m not female. Please don’t ask me about my junk”, *Esquire*. Retrieved from <https://www.esquire.com/lifestyle/sex/news/a43461/what-is-non-binary-gender/>.
- Fenton, Siobhan (2016), “LGBT relationships are illegal in 74 countries, Research finds”, *The Independent*. Retrieved from <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/gay-lesbian-bisexual-relationships-illegal-in-74-countries-a7033666.html>.

- Garréta, Anne (2015), *Sphinx*, Translated by Emma Ramadan. Texas: Deep Vellum Publishing.
- Grahn, Judy (1989), *Really reading Gertrude Stein*. Freedom, CA: Crossing Press.
- Hayes, Stephanie (2016), “The challenge of genderless characters”, *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/05/the-challenge-of-genderless-characters/482109/.
- Henley, Nancy M. (1987), “This new species that seeks a new language: On sexism in language and language change”, in Penfield, Joyce (ed.), *Women and language in transition*. Albany, NY: State University of New York, 3-27.
- Kemp, Gene (2015), *The turbulent term of Tyke Tiler*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Kim, Kwang Soon (2010), “Queering narrative, desire, and body: Reading of Jeanette Winterson’s written on the body as a queer text”, *영어영문학*, 56(6):1281-1294.
- Larsen, Kari (2015), “What are non-binary pronouns?”, *Penn Live*. Retrieved from http://www.pennlive.com/midstate/index.ssf/2015/03/what_are_non-binary_pronouns.html
- Levithan, David (2013), “Interview with David Levithan”, Interview by Tolly Wright, *12th Street*. Retrieved from www.12thstreetonline.com/2013/11/20/interview-with-david-levithan/
- Levithan, David (2012), *The lover's dictionary*. New York: Picador.
- Maioli, Francesca (2009), “Palimpsests: The female body as a text in Jeanette Winterson's written on the body”, *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 16(2):143-158.
- Makinen, Merja & Nicolas Tredell (2005), *The novels of Jeanette Winterson*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mallan, Kery (2009), *Gender dilemmas in children's fiction*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Padmashali, Akkai (2017), “An indian transgender asks an uncomfortable question”, *Josh Talks*. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/6t9gFH5tJAw>.
- Pitts, Terry (2015), “Anne Garréta’s Sphinx”, *Vertigo*. Retrieved from seald.wordpress.com/2015/04/24/anne-garréas-sphinx/.
- Purich, Monica Lynn (2010), *Writing, translating, and dismembering: Fallon, Winterson, and Wittig's representations of the lesbian body*. Dissertation. Ohio: Youngstown State University.
- Ramadan, Emma (2016), “A*** And I: In conversation with Emma Ramadan”, Interview by Megan Bradshaw. *Asymptote*. Retrieved from <http://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/2016/02/15/a-and-i-in-conversation-with-emma-ramadan/>.
- Ramadan, Emma (2015), “Crotches crossed and sexes mixed”, Interview by Mirene Arsanios, *Makhzin*. Retrieved from www.makhzin.org/issues/feminisms/crotches-crossed-and-sexes-mixed.
- Rubinsond, Gregory J. (2001), “Body languages: Scientific and aesthetic discourses in Jeanette Winterson’s written on the Body”, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 42(2):218-232.

- Ruby, Ryan (2016), “Know Thyself: The riddles of Anne Garréta's *Sphinx*”, 3 *Quarks Daily*. Retrieved from <http://www.3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2016/06/know-thyself.html>.
- Rye, Gill (2000), “Uncertain readings and meaningful dialogue: Language and sexual identity in Anne Garréta's *Sphinx* and Tahar Ben Jelloun's *l'enfant de sable* and *la nuit sacrée*”, *Neophilologus*, 84(4):531-540.
- Schilt, Kristen, & Laurel Westbrook (2009), “Doing gender, doing heteronormativity: ‘Gender normals,’ transgender people, and the social maintenance of heterosexuality”, *Gender & Society*, 23(4):440–464.
- Smith, Jennifer A. (2011), “‘We shall pass imperceptibly through every barrier’: Reading Jeanette Winterson’s trans-formative Romance”, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 52(4):412-433.
- Williams, Rhiannon (2014), “Facebook’s 71 gender options come to UK users”, *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/facebook/10930654/Facebooks-71-gender-options-come-to-UK-users.html>
- Winterson, Jeanette (2014), *Written on the body*. London:Vintage.
- Zimmerman, Bonnie (1995), “Introduction”, in Arnold, June, *The cook and the carpenter: A novel by the carpenter*. New York:New York University Press, xv-xxxiii.