Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences

Department of English Language and Literature

British Cultural Studies Programme

POSTHUMAN FEMINISM IN MICHEL FABER'S *UNDER THE SKIN* AND NAOMI ALDERMAN'S *THE POWER*

Semih KARADAYI

Master's Thesis

Ankara, 2024

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ABSTRACT

KARADAYI, Semih. *Posthuman Feminism in Michel Faber's Under the Skin and Naomi Alderman's The Power*, Master's Thesis, Ankara, 2024.

This thesis examines *Under the Skin* (2000) by Michel Faber and *The Power* (2016) by Naomi Alderman through the lens of Posthuman Feminism. Featuring non-human female protagonists, these narratives challenge traditional gender roles, speciesism and related power dynamics. By interrogating the limitations of hierarchical frameworks, both novels underscore how binary thinking perpetuates stigma and crisis, underscoring their incompatibility with the embracive, contingent and relational paradigm set forth by Posthuman Feminist theory. Through dystopian narratives that foreground both personal tragedies and global calamities, they demonstrate that reversing these binaries or mapping them onto fluid identities proves equally destructive, as such inversions remain entrenched within the same binaries and hierarchical structures of power. *Under the Skin* narrates the story of Isserley, an alien who abducts men for consumption, unravelling interactions that question disempowerment and identity across gender and species. Meanwhile, *The Power* portrays women who gain the ability to emit electrical shocks, overturning global gender dynamics and redefining societal structures. These works disrupt the conventional binaries underpinning Western thought and advocate for a more inclusive understanding of identity, power, and agency in an increasingly convoluted posthuman era by problematising the dualistic understanding of reality. This intersectional approach resonates with contemporary feminist theorists like Rosi Braidotti (1956–), Donna Haraway (1944–), Karen Barad (1956–), whose notions of feminism converge with posthuman theories that emphasise the inclusion of other othered identities. The speculative elements in the novels serve as tools within Posthuman Feminist rhetoric, providing groundwork for such critique. Using this perspective, the novels demonstrate how fiction can serve as a medium for social scrutiny, offering insights into identity and power dynamics within binary structures in a constantly changing reality. The textual analyses reveal how *Under the Skin* and *The Power* propose reimaginings of societal roles, prompting a re-evaluation of longstanding dynamics of oppression and empowerment regarding gender and human/non-human dichotomies in light of Posthuman Feminist thought.

Key Words

Posthuman Feminism, Speculative Fiction, Michel Faber, *Under the Skin*. Naomi Alderman, *The Power*

ÖZET

KARADAYI, *Semih.Michel Faber'in Under the Skin ve Naomi Alderman'ın The Power Romanlarında İnsansonrası Feminizm*.Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Ankara, 2024.

Bu tez, Michel Faber'ın (1960–) *Under the Skin* (2000) ve Naomi Alderman'ın (1974–) *The Power* (2016) adlı spekülatif kurgu romanlarını insansonrası feminizm perspektifinden incelemektedir. Bu anlatılar, insan olmayan kadın karakterler aracılığıyla geleneksel toplumsal cinsiyet rollerini ve edimliliğini eleştirmeyle birlikte cinsiyet kimliği ile tür kavramlarının İnsansonrası düşünce bağlamındaki kesişimlerini yeniden tasavvur etmektedir. Her iki roman da, yüzyıllar boyunca Batı düşüncesine temel oluşturan ikiliklere dayalı geleneksel retorikleri bozmaktadır. *Under the Skin*, türü için insan erkeklerini kaçıran bir uzaylı olan Isserley'i merkeze almakta ve toplumsal cinsiyet ve tür kimliklerinin güçsüzleştirilmesi ile sömürülmesini sorgulayan çok katmanlı etkileşimleri ortaya koymaktadır. *The Power* ise elektrik şoku oluşturma yetisine erişen kadınlara odaklanarak küresel toplumsal cinsiyet dinamiklerini altüst eden ve toplumsal yapıları yeniden tanımlayan bir anlatı sunmaktadır. Tezin temel argümanı, romanların geleneksel feminist eleştirilerin ötesine geçerek ataerkil yapıları elme almaları dışında insansonrası feminist çerçeveyle de ilgilenmeleri, çoklu eksenlerde marjinalleştirilmiş kimlikleri kapsayan bir eleştiri sunmaları yoluyla ikili düşünce sistemlerinin günümüz gerçekliğini tanımlamadaki eksikliğini eleştiriyor olmalarıdır. Bu kesişimsel ve kapsayıcı yaklaşım, Rosi Braidotti (1954–), Donna Haraway (1944–), Karen Barad (1956–) ve diğer düşünürlerin feminizm ile insansonrası teorileri birleştiren düşünceleriyle uyumludur. Romanların spekülatif yapısı, Braidotti'nin spekülatif feminizm olarak adlandırdığı kavramla örtüşmekte ve insansonrası feminist retorik içinde analize katkıda bulunmaktadır. Romanlardaki spekülatif unsurlar, bu tezin uyguladığı insansonrası feminist eleştiriye bir temel sağlamakta, karakterlerin özneleşme, kimlik ve güç bağlamında geleneksel ikili sınırları sorguladığı bir edebi tuval sunmaktadır. İnsansonrası Feminist perspektifle, romanlar sosyal eleştiri için etkili bir araç olarak hizmet etmekte ve değişen bir gerçeklikte ikili toplumsal yapılardaki kimlik ve güç dinamiklerine dair içgörüler sunmaktadır. Dolayısıyla bu çalışma, *Under the Skin* ve *The Power*'ın toplumsal ve varoluşsal rollerin radikal bir şekilde yeniden tasavvur edilmesini önerdiğini ve toplumsal cinsiyet ile insan/insan olmayan ikiliklerine dair baskı ve güç dinamiklerini insansonrası feminist düşünce ışığında yeniden değerlendirmeyi teşvik ettiğini göstermektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler

İnsansonrası Feminizm, Spekülatif Kurgu, Michel Faber, *Under the Skin*, Naomi Alderman, *The Power*

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INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving landscape of contemporary cultural and literary theory, the intersection of feminist and posthuman thought has gained significant traction, offering fresh perspectives on the complexities of identity, gender, and species. In this light, this thesis analyses the novels *The Power* and *Under the Skin* through a Posthuman Feminist lens, arguing that these novels critically expose the constraints and perils of binary categorisations of gender and human/non-human identities. Through the narratives of female and non-human protagonists, the novels demonstrate how static binary frameworks of identity contribute to stigma and crises, thereby highlighting the insufficiency of traditional anthropocentric and patriarchal dualisms in defining and understanding contemporary reality. The analysis contends that both novels advocate for a paradigm shift toward a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of identity, power and agency in an increasingly convoluted posthuman era as per Posthuman Feminism's argumentations. The speculative nature of the novels establishes a solid foundation for such an analysis as it propels the novels to transcend conventional narratives bound by realistic settings to explore fluid dynamics of gender and species in a posthuman reality and surmise novel means by which traditional, binate conceptions of identity and social roles regarding genders and species can be reconfigured.

In this aspect, and in line with Posthuman Feminist Theory's emphasis on speculative fictional works that narrativise non-human stories, these novels can be situated among the exemplary works within the Posthuman Feminist context in British literature by virtue of thematising relevant contemporary subjects as per the rapid advancements in technology that keep blurring the line between the axis of human/non-human. Female posthuman protagonists in the novels, in this vein, provide a solid case for a Posthuman Feminist analysis, whose main tenet is equality and inclusion across all living beings. The compounded otherness of the protagonists, as they are both female and posthuman, exemplifies the potential of speculative fiction to be a powerful tool in fuelling a paradigm

shift and forging more inclusive perspectives on gender and the posthuman condition as posited by Posthuman Feminism.

Following the Second World War and the havoc it wrought, both society as a whole and the intellectual sphere became subject to disillusionment regarding enlightenment humanistic ideals that permeated Western thought based on the superiority of reason (Crosthwaite 15). This, along with unprecedented technological advancements, resulted in a paradigm shift within philosophy, linguistics, literature and cultural theory up until the twenty-first century, inciting a transformational era in humanities marked by postmodernism and post-structuralism as a response to logo-centric teleological epistemology (Torgovnick xv). As Vaillancourt maintains: "The post-structuralists argue that structuralist analysis is "logocentric" in that it makes reference to an external point of reference (such as philosophy, or science). They propose instead reality is discursively constructed" (90). Notions of post-anthropocentrism seeking to decentralise reasonable man and movements of new schools of feminism branched out correspondingly in the latter half of the century (Gannon and Davies 36). Thereupon, the once rigid dichotomies of human/non-human, male/female and reason/emotion that permeated Western thought and social order began to unravel wherefore Posthumanism surfaced as a critique of the enduring humanist ideals of autonomous, rational 'man' at the centre of philosophical inquiries, which appeared increasingly antiquated in a world where technology blurred the boundaries between fixed identities. Concurrently, Feminist theory's penetrating critique of male-centred means of power and prescribed socio-cultural identities provided complementary tools to further deconstruct these dualisms, as maintained by Gannon and Davies in "Feminism/Poststructuralism":

> Feminist post-structuralism makes visible, analysable and revisable, in particular, the male/female and straight/lesbian binaries, which are, in turn, mapped on to other binaries such as adult/child, normal/ abnormal, rational/irrational. Through analysis of texts and talk, it shows how relations of power are constructed and maintained by granting normality, rationality and naturalness to the dominant term in any binary, and in contrast, how the subordinated term is marked as other, as lacking, as not rational. (36)

Correspondingly, in the latter part of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century, feminist scholars such as Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad along with multiple other scholars argued that identity, societal roles and agency are not inert

phenomena as per humanist teleology. Rather than being stagnant, Braidotti claims that these concepts are dynamic, contextually and continuously co-influential; they collectively and mutually shape the understanding of reality and social order. Accordingly, she asserts that "changes and transformation are currently on the way … [and we] live in permanent states of transition, hybridisation" ("Yes, There Is No Crisis. Working Towards the Posthumanities" 9-10). In this conjunction, the advent of the 'posthuman turn' across the cultural or literary theory resulted in the embracement of marginalised non-human others within the domains of technology, bioethics, and environmentalism, especially within the later feminist discourse.

To further contextualise, in this era, cultural theory witnessed a shift from viewing posthumanism solely as a technological enhancement to scrutinising man as the universal subject, as well as recognising complex interactions between humans and technologically/anatomically different identities. Posthuman Feminism, in this light, emerged as a relatively new theoretical framework that integrated established feminist principles like gender roles, inequality and oppression embedded in patriarchal systems with posthuman ideals. Earlier feminist theories — namely the first and the second waves — until the late twentieth century, focused on achieving gender equality, dismantling patriarchal exclusionism, and advocating for women's rights within the humanist framework that often emphasised the centrality of human experiences (Faust 15-16). That is to say, their promotion of equality focused on addressing and toppling the marginalisation of human female bodies as argued by Braidotti in *The Posthuman* (2013): "Humanistic universalism, coupled with the social constructivist emphasis on the man-made and historically variable nature of social inequalities, lays the grounds for a robust political ontology … de Beauvoir's emancipatory feminism builds on the Humanist principle that 'Woman is the measure of all things female'" (21).Posthuman Feminism, meanwhile, diverged from human-centred feminism by interrogating the conception of the very human itself. It is influenced by post-structuralist thought in its attempts to decentralise human within the context of cultural theory and philosophy, trying to dismantle anthropocentrism and structuralism-based tendencies of understanding reality through binaries, as maintained by Stormhoj, who states that "during the 1980s, these canons within feminist theory have been influenced by a set of poststructuralist discourses

radically questioning inherent epistemological rationalism and universalism as well as its unlogical essentialism" (8). Instead, it advocates for a more inclusive and fluid understanding of identity that encompasses the technological, biological, and ecological interconnectedness and agency of all beings, espousing the fluidity and intersectionality in favour of hierarchical binate characterisations that have traditionally characterised Western thought since antiquity. As Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) puts it, "in a classical philosophical opposition, we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically etc.), or has the upper hand" (*Positions* 41). Entailing this post-structuralist approach, the third and fourth wave Feminist theorists have exemplified the convergence of the concerns put forth by posthumanism and feminism pertaining to equality, inclusion and binary-based pretences, aiming to deconstruct the self-imposed notion of human centrality rooted in the superiority of reason. Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985), for example, proposed the cyborg as a symbolic myth, catalysing the transgression of boundaries and formulating an all-encompassing identity unbound from gender roles, logocentrism and anthropocentrism. Instead, she suggests a post-gender and anti-anthropocentric world wherein identities are not fixed but fluid, enmeshed and hybridised, stating that "we are all chimeras, theorised and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism — in short, cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology" (*Manifestly Haraway* 7). Similarly, Braidotti's "Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism" (2016) advocated for a critical posthumanism that resists the homogenising forces of Eurocentric Western discourses, asserting that the "primary task for posthumanist feminist theory … is to steer Europe toward a posthumanist project of … resistance against nationalism, xenophobia, and racism" (25). Contemporarily speaking, in this conjunction, Posthuman Feminism holds increasing significance in cultural theory as it addresses the challenges and paradigm shifts entailed by biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and ecological crises pertinent to ongoing discussions in literary, sociological and cultural spheres (Singh 195). It also incorporates the main tenet of early feminist movements, namely the exclusion and disempowerment of women within the patriarchally structured Humanist principles, as articulated by Braidotti, who claims that the

> abstract ideal of Man as a symbol of classical Humanity is very much a male of the species: it is a he. Moreover, he is white, European, handsome and able-bodied… Feminist critiques of patriarchal posturing through abstract masculinity (Hartsock, 1987) and triumphant

> whiteness (hooks, 1981; Ware, 1992) argued that this Humanist universalism is objectionable not only on epistemological, but also on ethical and political grounds. (*The Posthuman* 24)

Likewise, Posthuman Feminism's significance surfaces as it also subsumes a critique of humanism and human essentialism to encompass other others, proposing a broader, networked understanding of agency and identity that incorporates both human and non-human actors bereft of hierarchical suppositions. This framework is suited for analysing literature that explores futuristic and alternative realities. It dissects and scrutinises power dynamics and prescribed roles in contemporary society from the perspectives of disempowered, marginalised and othered identities on the axes of –along with others– human/non-human and male/female. Speculative Fiction, in this vein, serves as a space wherein Posthuman Feminism can articulate its arguments. As Singh notes,

> science fiction (SF) allows for novel ways of reimagining existence, and posthumanism contributes towards a destabilising of anthropocentric discourses. This decentering echoes the desired displacement of patriarchy, and thereby, posthuman SF can become a potent tool for feminist thought. Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway, while questioning the centrality of 'man' in their works, have challenged the structurality of discourses that homogenise such category markers with respect to gender. (195)

Bearing this in mind, a broader contextualisation of Contemporary British Literature from the end of the Second World War until twenty-first-century speculative narratives is required at this point to outline the historicity of speculative fiction. The trajectory of British fiction following The Second World War is reflective of a shift in thematic concerns and narrative styles, influenced by the socio-political upheavals and cultural transformations of the time. Initially, post-war British literature was characterised by an exploration of existential angst, alienation, and a quest for identity, mirroring the disillusionment and instability of the era. Modernist writers like George Orwell (1903-1950) and Graham Greene (1904-1991) depicted the bleakness of human existence and morality in their works from both sociological and individual perspectives respectively, addressing pre-existing issues like totalitarian regimes, moral decay, and societal fragmentation, mirroring the anxieties rooted in the geo-political realities of the period.

In the decades that followed, the literary landscape kept evolving. The fifties and the sixties saw the rise of the Angry Young Men Movement: a group of writers including Kingsley Amis (1922-1995) and John Osborne (1929-1994), who, in their works *Lucky*

Jim (1954) and *Look Back in Anger* (1956) articulated the frustrations of the lower classes (Bradford et al. 4-5). Their works often employed realistic depictions of everyday lives and struggles of everyday people, focusing on the socio-political conditions of post-war Britain. By the eighties and the nineties, British fiction began to embrace postmodernism, characterised by fragmented narratives, metafiction, and a playful use of language. Authors such as Salman Rushdie (1947–) and Julian Barnes (1946–), in their works like *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *History of the World and Ten and a Half Chapters* (1989) exemplified this trend, blending historical narratives with magical realism and challenging conventional storytelling methods. The turn of the twenty-first century marked a further diversification of British literature, with the advancements in science and technology starting to be thematised in addition to themes of multiculturalism and the post-colonial experience. Concurrently, writers like Zadie Smith (1975–) and Monica Ali (1967–) explored themes of identity, ethnicity, and migration, reflecting the multicultural reality of contemporary Britain in novels like *White Teeth* (2000) and *Brick Lane* (2003). Their narratives often grappled with the legacies of colonialism and the complexities of hybrid identities in post-colonial Britain.

Speculative Fiction –which can be briefly defined as a broad literary genre that encompasses works characterised by the inclusion of fantastical, supernatural, and futuristic elements to probe potential cultural or philosophical quandaries– evolved within this literary historical continuity, emerging as a platform to ponder societal norms and envisage alternative visions towards possible realities. The core of speculative fiction lies in its foundation of 'what if?' scenarios, which challenge the boundaries of existing reality and extend into the realms of possibility and wonder. Unlike many preceding fictional narratives that reflect the already-existing problems within the social whole and its contemporary problems or possible dystopian futures — such as Orwell's *1984* (1949) which embodies the anxieties towards totalitarian regimes and potential catastrophes such systems may entail — speculative fiction proposes alternative but probable realities and explores the implications of alterations in the laws of nature, society, culture and technology that are yet to transpire. Speculative Fiction's inherent flexibility makes it an ideal medium for theoretical exploration, particularly in fields like emerging schools like Posthuman Feminism. By transcending the limitations of the real world, it enables authors

to construct narratives that question the fundamental aspects of human existence and societal constructs like gendered roles and anthropocentrism. The speculative realm, in this sense, can plausibly serve as a complementary medium to Posthuman Feminism, effectively conveying its rhetoric through imaginative yet increasingly probable narratives. As Pascoe articulates, SF fabulations facilitate

> a liminal sphere … [that] provides a threshold for scientific possibilities, ambiguity and hybridity… [and] explores uncanny alien territory with the capacity to produce new meanings, social relations and identities through interactions with the Other, the Numinous, creating the potential for subversion, disruption and change. (2)

Their settings employ radical alterations in the fabric of society or the human body itself to discuss and explore issues such as identity, agency, and power structures. The speculative framework thus serves both as a backdrop for entertainment and an effective activist tool for philosophical inquiry and social critique, as explicated by Braidotti: "Speculative Feminism is a posthuman form of activism of the imagination and a way of styling the political will for change beyond humanism and anthropocentrism" (*Posthuman Feminism* 216).

As for Speculative Fiction's significance within Posthuman Feminist framework, its integration with Posthuman Feminism is particularly suitable because it allows for the examination of gender and human identity in contexts unfettered by the constraints of realistic settings. Posthuman Feminism, with its focus on transcending traditional notions of human essentialism, finds resonance in speculative fiction, which features cyborgs, enhanced humans, and other hybrid entities seen in the novels. These elements challenge the binary distinctions of gender and species that Posthuman Feminism seeks to deconstruct. This challenge is facilitated by creating obscure hypothetical scenarios and characters created or transformed through technology — like Isserley — or evolutionary change — like the female populace in *The Power* — who embody fluid identities that disrupt conventional gender roles, human essentialism, and hierarchical suppositions entailing them.

Michel Faber and Naomi Alderman are among the frontier figures in twenty-first-century British literature in this aspect, particularly in their use of speculative fiction to explore exceedingly probable scenarios that resonate with the concerns of Posthuman Feminist thought. Their distinct narrative strategies set their works apart from other contemporary British authors, positioning them as prolific contributors to the discourse on the implications of technological advancements and the evolving human condition. Faber and Alderman's focus on these themes is particularly significant given the current cultural and social issues arising from rapid technological progress, making their works pertinent to the field of Posthuman Feminism.

In comparison to other prominent contemporary speculative fiction or sci-fi[1] writers, Michel Faber's *Under the Skin* and Naomi Alderman's *The Power* exemplify speculative fiction's potential to explore themes central to Posthuman Feminism, particularly those of othered identity, marginalisation, and the fluidity of power structures. Faber's narrative merges the familiar with the alien through Isserley, a posthuman entity grappling with identity within two patriarchal systems, thereby extending his critique to anthropocentrism and gender norms. This approach aligns with Kazuo Ishiguro's (1954–) *Never Let Me Go* (2005), which also blurs human and non-human boundaries, albeit through a subtler, more introspective lens that evokes a quiet horror or/and angst before rapid advancements in biotechnology. In contrast, Faber's visceral narrative style is explicitly confrontational with the stark realities of exploitation and dehumanisation. Similarly, Alderman's *The Power* resonates with Posthuman Feminism by speculatively reversing traditional gender hierarchies, offering a direct scrutiny and dismantling of patriarchal and anthropocentric[2] power dynamics. Unlike Ian McEwan (1948–) — another prominent author threaded the speculative realm — who, in *Machines Like Me* (2019) focuses on the ethical implications of artificial intelligence within a broader posthuman framework, *The Power* specifically interrogates gendered power structures,

[1] The abbreviation 'SF', traditionally associated with 'science fiction', has been reappropriated and redefined by later feminist movements, reflecting a broader conceptual scope (Hollinger 129). Scholars such as Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti have expanded SF to stand for 'speculative feminism', 'situated feminisms', and 'science fact' among others. This redefinition underscores the fluidity and multiplicity inherent in feminist theories that engage with the speculative to challenge and reimagine dominant socio-political paradigms.

[2] Phallogocentrism will be expanded on.

aligning more closely with Posthuman Feminist objectives of deconstructing societal constructs and reimagining gendered identities in a posthuman context.

When comparing Faber and Alderman to other prominent British authors like Zadie Smith (1975–), Hilary Mantel (1952-2022), and Ali Smith (1962–) their use of speculative fiction distinguishes them in both style and thematic focus. While Zadie Smith and Ali Smith explore themes of identity, race, and social change within contemporary urban settings, often through a lens of social realism, Faber and Alderman push the boundaries of these themes by interrogating the nature of humanity, gender, and power through speculative and dystopian narratives, particularly within the context of the selected novels. For instance, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) and *On Beauty* (2005) delve into multiculturalism and post-colonial identity through a realist approach that contrasts with Faber's and Alderman's speculative worlds, where identity and power dynamics are reimagined in more radical ways on multiple axes. Similarly, while Hilary Mantel's (1952–2022) *Wolf Hall* (2009) and its sequels explore power dynamics and gender politics within the historical context of the Tudor court, Alderman's and Faber's futuristic reversal of these dynamics offers a stark contrast, using speculative fiction to project these issues into a potential future.

Faber and Alderman are, within the context of this thesis, thus positioned as distinctive voices within the broader landscape of twenty-first-century British literature. Their speculative narratives engage readers in contemplating possible futures that challenge conventional understandings of identity, agency and power. Their works stand out for their engagement with the sociological and cultural challenges deemed possible by the posthuman condition which situates them as significant figures in the speculative reimaginings of social order in British literature in the twenty-first century; particularly in terms of how they tackle the quandaries kindled in the contemporary world. Faber's and Alderman's narratives differ from broader socio-cultural analysis — namely race and class — that characterises much of contemporary British literature, as articulated by scholars like Nick Bentley, who observes that contemporary British fiction often grapples with the legacies of colonialism and the multicultural nature of British society (20).

Instead, Faber and Alderman extend their critique into the realm of posthuman discourse, utilizing speculative fiction as a tool to explore the complexities of identity, power, and the human condition in ways that are provocative and transformative. As Haraway states in *Manifestly Haraway* (2016), "social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction" (5)[3]. As such, their works contribute to ongoing conversations within British literature while pushing the boundaries of these discussions, offering new insights into the intersections of gender, technology, and otherness.

Having briefly contextualised the novels' premise, and the literary, philosophical and cultural movements they are born into, methodologically, the discussion hereafter until the first chapter outlines the intellectual and historical foundations of Posthuman Feminism. It aims to highlight the convergence of feminist critiques of patriarchal systems with posthuman challenges to anthropocentrism and the rigid human/non-human binary. By tracing the development of these ideas from ancient mythologies to contemporary theory, the chapter establishes the relevance of Posthuman Feminism in reconfiguring traditional gender roles and advocating for a more inclusive and fluid understanding of identity that moves beyond the limitations of Western humanism to encompass the non-human others.

The first chapter analyses *Under the Skin* through the lens of Posthuman Feminist theory, focusing on how the novel destabilises anthropocentric and gendered hierarchies by presenting a female protagonist who embodies the intersection of human and non-human identities. The analysis explores the ways in which the novel challenges conventional notions of identity in favour of relationality and subjectivity in a posthuman world, showcasing how coercing rigid, binary roles and identities onto fluid, hybrid entities yield catastrophic results and identity crises, as suffered by its protagonist, Isserley.

[3] Haraway uses the term 'science fact' instead of 'science fiction' as a redefinition of the abbreviation 'SF' in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene (2).*

The second chapter analyses *The Power* by Naomi Alderman, who, by imbuing women with extraordinary abilities and rendering them non-human, challenges the notion of human essentialism and patriarchy, exposing the inherent biases ingrained within societal structures on multiple axes. The emergence of women's electric power disrupts established hierarchies and prompts not only a re-evaluation of what constitutes a 'human', but also facilitates a ground on which to ponder the limitations of anthropocentric perspectives in understanding and addressing the embedded speciesism in how human and non-human identities and experiences are defined and situated within binate power relations.

Now that the brief explanations of the cultural and philosophical backgrounds of the novels and the theories are provided, the discussion requires further contextualisation of posthumanism, feminism and how contemporary feminism's adoption of posthuman philosophy culminates in Posthuman Feminism. Posthuman Feminism lies at the intersection of said theories, embodying and converging the arguments of both schools of thought. As argued by Asberg and Braidotti, "the fields of feminist posthumanities draws on multiple sources of thought, creative practice, art, science, and various minoritarian areas of study" (*A Feminist Companion to Posthumanities* 2).

To elaborate, Posthuman Feminism cannot be fully understood without contextualising it within the historical development of both posthumanism and feminism. Posthuman Feminism builds on the critiques and theories developed within traditional feminist movements, especially those challenging gender roles and patriarchy, and intersects these with the ideas of posthumanism, which challenges anthropocentrism and the human/non-human binary. Understanding how these two fields evolved — feminism from its focus on gender equality and posthumanism from its objection of human-centred thought — is of importance in order to comprehensively grasp the complexities of Posthuman Feminism. This historical continuity is essential for recognising how Posthuman Feminism, surfacing at the culmination of these theories, transcends and redefines these earlier frameworks. As such, it is pertinent to expand on the intellectual roots and evolution of these two theories to better understand the tenets of Posthuman Feminism.

As a cultural and philosophical movement, Posthumanism is rooted in diverse intellectual traditions spanning centuries of human thought, with the "discussions of both transhumanism and posthumanism [being] populated with references to the classical Greek Promethean myth" (Umbrello and Lombard 1). Thus, a historical overview and an in-depth conceptualisation of posthuman thought — including its roots — becomes vital, necessitating a journey back in time to shed light on its evolution across millennia.

The intellectual trajectory of posthuman thought traces its origins to the foundational narratives of ancient mythologies, where early human aspirations for transcendence began to take shape. The Epic of Gilgamesh, one of the earliest literary works known to humankind, encapsulates this primordial quest for immortality (Bostrom, "History of Transhuman Thought" 1). Gilgamesh, the mythical Sumerian king, embarks on a perilous journey to unravel the secrets of eternal life, a motif that has echoed for millennia with respect to human craving for transcending the biological restraints of the body. Accordingly, Nick Bostrom (1973), in his article regarding the evolution of transhumanist thought, points out the importance of "the human desire to acquire new capacities is as ancient as our species itself" (1). By commencing his article with this epic, Bostrom highlights its embeddedness in subsequent cultural narratives that grapple with human limitations, the centrality of human reason and the allure of transcending human limitations.

This ancient narrative complements the myth of Prometheus, the Titan in Greek mythology who defied the gods to bestow upon humanity the gift of fire — an act of technological empowerment that symbolises the human aspiration to harness the forces of nature and thereby reshape the human condition, corresponding with enlightenment philosophy's emphasis on reason's superiority over nature and nature/culture dichotomy. Ihab Hassan, in "Prometheus as Performer", draws upon this figure to frame posthumanism as a metaphysical insurgent against the ordained order, challenging the static humanist conceptions of identity and agency, stating that "Prometheus may prove

himself to be a figure of flawed and evolving consciousness, an emblem of human destiny" (831). Prometheus' punishment by Zeus — eternal torment for his transgression — serves as a sombre allegory for the potential consequences of self-imposed superiority that permeates human essentialism. The Promethean narrative, with its themes of rebellion, enlightenment, and retribution, is complementary to posthumanism, as well as the thesis itself, providing a mythic precursor to the dialogue on the ethical and existential dimensions of transcending human boundaries with its cautionary approach. In juxtaposition, the Epic of Gilgamesh offers a more introspective exploration of the quest for immortality, presenting not only the yearning for transcendence but also its inherent futility and the eventual reconciliation with human mortality. As Bostrom elucidates, "[Gilgamesh] retrieves the plant, but a snake steals it from him before he can eat it" ("History of Transhuman Thought" 1). Gilgamesh's eventual acceptance of his mortal nature underscores a critical tension within posthuman thought: the dichotomy between the desire to overcome human limitations and the profound existential and ethical questions such undertakings evoke. This tension is echoed in Bostrom's discourse as well as the novels in terms of how an androcentric society handles posthuman developments, navigating the optimistic aspirations of posthumanism against the backdrop of historical cautionary tales.

These aspirations regarding transcending human limits are carried from the myths onto the philosophers of antiquity, namely Plato and Aristotle. The Allegory of the Cave, Plato's exploration of ignorance and enlightenment corresponds with posthuman thought much like other ancient myths mentioned above, serving as a philosophical archetype for aspirations towards transcending limitations and achieving a higher form of existence — accomplished via posthuman meliorations in the novels — juxtaposed with potentially adverse consequences when confronted with social conformity. In the allegory, –in a posthuman reading– the chained prisoners, constrained by their simplistic perceptions of existence and experiences, represent humanity bound by biological and cognitive chains of their current form (Pascoe 6). The escape of one prisoner, who emerges from the cave and encounters the full breadth of reality beyond the shadows, mirrors the posthuman aspiration to break free from one's natural limitations through surpassing the boundaries via augmentations and enhancements, attaining a superior form existing that exceeds the

experiences of those left behind. This metaphor encapsulates two of the main tenets of posthuman philosophy: the desire to evolve beyond conventional human nature and achieve a more expansive state of being through an elevated level of perception and performativity, and the moral or philosophical quandaries instigated by this drastic alteration. Like Prometheus' defiance or Gilgamesh's quest for immortality, the Cave Allegory evokes the drive to transcend the confines of our current existence. More importantly, however, it also deals with how entrenched normative perceptions — embodied in prisoners — can be dismissive and alienating towards the othered, 'abnormal' identities and experiences. It problematises the ethical responsibilities and societal implications of the escapee prisoner's novel understanding of reality, as well as the stigmatisation and alienation he is subjected to upon rejoining society due to his 'distorted' character.[4]

On the same line, Aristotle's concept of Entelechy, which refers to the intrinsic potential of an organism to realise its ultimate purpose or end, also aligns with posthuman thought in its vision of maximising human potential. As the culmination of an entity's inherent purpose, Entelechy resonates with posthumanism's pursuit of evolving the human condition to its fullest capacity, transcending natural limits to unlock unprecedented forms of intelligence, cognition, and even physicality. This philosophy is ingrained in humanist philosophy that permeated Western thought from the Renaissance up until the twentieth century, particularly in terms of its emphasis on logocentric teleology. However, Aristotle saw entelechy as an organic process of actualisation rooted in nature, whereas posthumanism extends this concept beyond the biological to embrace synthetic enhancements like artificial intelligence, genetic modifications, and cybernetics. These technologies act as catalysts that propel humanity toward a new telos, redefining the boundaries of human nature and achievement. Thus, within posthumanism, entelechy can be reframed as the inherent drive of humanity not merely to adapt and survive but to actively transform itself into a higher, more integrated form of existence capable of realising a broader spectrum of purposes than previously imaginable.

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[4] This theme is resonant in the stigma faced by women following their empowerment in *The Power*, a topic that will be explored in greater detail in the second chapter.

The interplay between the Epic of Gilgamesh and the myth of Prometheus, along with classical notions of elevating human experience to new echelons furnish a foundational narrative framework for understanding the complex interrelations between human aspirations, technological empowerment, and the philosophical inquiries that animate posthuman thought. These ancient myths and philosophical enquiries prefigure the technological ambitions of contemporary posthumanism and foreshadow the perennial debates about the moral and metaphysical implications of altering the human essence.

Fast-forwarding through millennia of mythological undercurrents and classical concepts, it is observed that the Renaissance heralded a promotion of humanist ideals, with thinkers like Pico Della Mirandola (1463-1494) proclaiming humanity's limitless potential in *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1496). Della Mirandola extolled the exceptional capacity of humans to shape their destinies: "God…put *man*[5] at the centre of the world so that he could see what is there and [gave] him the ability to choose his place and thus determine his own destiny" (qtd. in Edelheit 2). This intellectual climate prefaced the foundations for the Enlightenment, a period where rationalism and empiricism fused to galvanise a paradigm shift toward anthropocentrism, mastery over nature and consequent man/nature binary. Figures such as Francis Bacon (1561-1626), with his advocacy for the scientific method, and the Marquis de Condorcet (1743-1794), who envisaged the indefinite progress of the human mind, envisioned a future where scientific progress would emancipate humanity from its intrinsic fragility and constraints.

Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1626) imagined a utopian vision of a society guided by scientific inquiry, a "technological society that seemingly knows neither death nor disorder" (Whitney 3). Likewise, Condorcet emphasised rational thinking in *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795), where he predicted humanity's eventual triumph over ignorance and disease:

[5] Emphasis added.

> Progress in medical care, healthier nutrition and accommodation, a mode of life developing strength through exercise … will inevitably extend the average lifespan … It seems clear that advances in preventive medicine, rendered more efficacious by the progress of reason and of the social order, will in the long run extinguish transmissible and contagious … [and] common illnesses caused by climate, foodstuffs, and working conditions … Would it be absurd at this point to imagine that this amelioration of the human species must be regarded as susceptible of indefinite progress, that a time will come when death will be only a result of unusual accidents or the slower and slower deterioration of vital forces, even that the average interval between birth and this deterioration will have no assignable limit? (80)

This increasing emphasis on rationality and logical prowess culminated in the burgeoning belief that reason and scientific mastery could radically improve the human condition. Concurrent teleological optimism — as it is based on a belief in the inherent purpose or directionality of human history and human agency athwart to deterministic natural and ecclesiastic laws toward greater enlightenment and improvement — rebirthed[6] the humanist philosophical scaffold on which the posthuman movements would later build. Influences of the emphasis on science and reason continued across the nineteenth century with Charles Darwin (1809-1882), who, in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), exemplified the positivist ethos in terms of methodology[7], supporting his theories with tangible data rather than metaphysical speculation. Subsequent thinkers like Auguste Comte (1779-1857), who, in *The Philosophy of Mathematics* (1851), posited that the ultimate mode of acquiring knowledge was positive sciences and empirical observations (25), and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), who, in "The Principles of Sociology" (1873), laid the groundwork for the application of Darwinian principles to social structures: "[Darwin's] use of metaphorical concepts from … Spencer made possible the social interpretation of what Darwin intended … to be a biological theory of evolution" (Rogers 269). In this aspect, the nineteenth century is marked by anthropocentric, positivist and evolutionary frameworks for the continual advancement of society through the beacon of mind and reason. As Nick Bostrom elucidates in "The History of Transhumanist Thought", this Enlightenment ethos reverberated through subsequent decades until the twentieth century, fostering a lineage of thought that advocated for the use of technology to enhance and transcend human limitations; or, in Bostrom's words, "if human beings are constituted of

[6] Literal translation of Renaissance.

[7] Darwin's findings, however, can be argued to be antithetical to the enlightenment philosophy in that they implicate nature's mastery over man, rather than the other way around, "plac[ing] the human species within a natural history that includes and exceeds it" (Krtolica 1).

matter obeying the same laws of physics that operate outside us, then it should in principle be possible to learn to manipulate human nature in the same way that we manipulate external objects" (4).

The twentieth century, however, witnessed a seismic rupture in this trajectory with the cataclysms of global conflicts and the spectre of nuclear annihilation (Ferrando 28). Philosophical reflections on human fragility and existential risk emerged, tempering the Enlightenment's unchecked optimism with a sobering recognition of humanity's destructive potential. The devastation of the First and the Second World Wars, coupled with the existential dread of the Cold War's nuclear standoff, shattered the faith in progress and reason as an unerring force for good, revealing instead the dual-edged nature of scientific advancement, echoing ancient myths in term of the risk and punishment of attempting to transcend human limits. Philosophers and intellectuals began scrutinising humanity's inherent fragility in the face of global catastrophe, leading to existentialist contemplations by thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), who, in *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology* (1972), by maintaining that "we are *condemned* to *freedom*, as we said earlier, thrown into freedom ... and we can see that this abandonment has no other origin than the very existence of freedom" (485), underscored the responsibility that accompanies human freedom. Similarly, Albert Camus (1913–1960), grappled with the absurdity and obscurity of existence in his works, expressing that "at any streetcorner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face ... it is probably true that a man remains forever unknown to us and that there is in him something irreducible that escapes us" (*The Myth Of Sisyphus And Other Essays* 9).

This period of existentialism, pessimism and disillusionment is relevant to posthuman thought on the grounds that it eventuated in a fertile intellectual landscape for post-structuralist anti-humanist critiques of identity, knowledge, and power that "entail[ed] a denunciation both of foundationalism and of an Enlightenment-inspired, progressivist view of history" (Han-Pile 119). Michel Foucault (1926-1984) dismantled the essentialist concept of man as a universal category, stating that "the human sciences are not, then, an analysis of what man is by nature; but rather an analysis that extends from what *man is*

in his positivity[8]" (*The Order of Things* 385), revealing how exterior systems of power shape human subjectivity and knowledge. Jacques Derrida's (1930-2004) deconstruction unravelled the binary oppositions underpinning Western thought, revealing a fluid conception of identity that would later crystallise in posthuman and feminist discourses. Their works, along with those of their contemporaries, challenged the assumptions of humanist narratives, opening the door to a new framework that embraces the plurality, fluidity, inclusion, and contingency of identities, signalling a significant shift toward a more dynamic understanding of the human subject.

Amidst this intellectual ferment, rapid technological advances rekindled dreams of transcendence while simultaneously amplifying anxieties over the burgeoning autonomy of human creations. Developments in genetics, cybernetics, and artificial intelligence prompted fresh aspirations to overcome biological and cognitive limitations and aspirations of transcendence were reignited with the exponential rate at which science and technology started marching forward in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Posthumanism, as a reactionary critique within this cultural and scientific context, took it upon itself to dismantle the humanistic lens through which 'man' perceives and enacts on the world and the potential ramifications of deconstructing and altering this perception. It challenged humanism by positing that humanity's worldview puts the biological human at the centre, situating the rest at the periphery (Förster 58). As such, posthumanism became a means by which the millennia-spanning notions of human essentialism and self-imposed superiority that dates back farther than even the classics and could be re-analysed and remodulated. As Braidotti explains:

> The idea of the "Human" implied in the Humanities, that is to say the implicit assumptions about what constitutes the basic unit of reference for the knowing subject, is the image of Man as a rational animal endowed with language. This is the humanist core of the classical vision of "Man", which includes both an ideal of bodily perfection and a set of mental, discursive, and spiritual values. This vision combines belief in human

[8] Emphasis added. Foucault challenges the assumption that human beings can be fully known and mastered through scientific inquiry alone here, contrasting with nineteenth-century positivist ethos. He suggests that this viewpoint is itself a product of historical developments — hence the term 'positivity'.

> uniqueness with faith in a teleologically ordained view of rational progress through scientific development. (Posthuman Humanities 1)

As a critical response to the self-empowering humanist vision, as articulated in the quotation, posthumanism strives to question and deconstruct the boundaries and hierarchical binaries between human and non-human, active object and the passive subject, the self and the other.

Posthumanism, in this context, promotes a reconceptualisation of the human condition, emphasising the need to do away with traditional Western dualisms, as pointed out by Remshardt: "As a term of cultural criticism, posthuman aims at dismantling the many binaries endorsed by Western dualism: body/mind, self/other, culture/nature, global/local, and so forth" (135). Instead, it is advocative of embracing a more comprehensive, all-encompassing notion of agency and identity. It promotes a sway towards more inclusive modes of existence and understanding, recognising and appreciating the agency of non-human entities, "emphasis[ing] multiplicity and articulat[ing] center-less networks as the paradigm for human and nonhuman activities and structures" (Mays et al. 63). Hence, it fosters possibilities for reimagining human identity through reconfiguration of subjectivity and agency, with this reconfiguration laying at the forefront of both novels. Merzlyakov, in conjunction with this reconfiguration, argues that "Posthumanism, in turn, expands the very space of agency by including nonhuman objects and rejecting the binary oppositions human–nonhuman, culture–nature, or humanism–antihumanism" (475). With this clarification in mind, how *Under the Skin* and *The Power* is tangled with posthumanism can be better comprehended. The genetic and/or technological enhancement of the protagonists aligns with posthuman aspirations insofar as they lead to improvements or alterations in biology beyond what is considered natural or normal. While the specific circumstances of the enhancement may differ from deliberate posthuman interventions, such as genetic engineering or cybernetic enhancements, the underlying principle of enhanced human capabilities remains consistent. Additionally, the unintended, unwanted or obscure nature of the genetic enhancement in the novel does not necessarily preclude Isserley from being categorised as a posthuman entity. Instead, this blurring of the boundaries between the human and non-human further deepens the narrative's exploration of posthuman themes, where the merging of biology and

technology invites epistemological and ontological questions about gender and human identity, agency and prevalent social structures perpetuating them. This notion accentuates "the significance of non-human stories [which] are now entangled in the ethical, political, scientific and theoretical complexities of the Anthropocene" (Opperman, "New Materialism and the Nonhuman Story" 258).

The complexities Opperman refers to are thematised in *Under the Skin* within the context of posthumanism through an individual scope and focusing on only a single posthuman entity and her post-human experiences and conditions. Isserley's nuanced position within hierarchical binaries intricately navigates the intersections of gendered and xenophobic power dynamics. Her multi-layered perspective extends beyond mere placement within the hierarchical human/non-human, male/female binaries as she grapples with internalised speciesism, viewing her own transhuman vodsel[9] body with disdain while simultaneously occupying a position of superiority over vodsels. Despite her own victimisation due to her transformational surgery, which renders her a liminal non-human entity regarded as sub-human by her peers, Isserley adopts the same discriminatory attitudes towards vodsels. This self-perpetuated cycle of prejudice underscores the pervasive nature of hierarchical structures stemming from a human-centred worldview and the ways in which individuals internalise and perpetuate said structures, even when they themselves are marginalised within them. Through Isserley's internal struggles and external interactions, the novel offers an elaborate exploration of the complexities of identity, power, and prejudice within the context of posthumanism and feminism.

Meanwhile, in *The Power,* the biological and genetic enhancements become the core element of the story that occurs within and thematises the involutions of the posthuman condition on a global scale. This biological change facilitates a posthuman analysis, regardless of the exact nature of its origin, for posthumanism also deals with the philosophical aspect and causal effects of such alterations (Pastourmatzi 280). Even the unintended enhancements, like women gaining superpowers, resulting from ambiguous

[9] The term used by Isserley's species to refer to humans.

reasons can be examined within the framework of posthumanism if they lead to the augmentation or alteration of human biology in ways that transcend traditional limitations and entail an incentive to re-modulate the anthropocentric perspectives. The societal upheaval caused by the emergence of individuals with unexpected powers initially appears counterintuitive to the posthuman notion of transcendence, as it results in global mayhem that suggests regression rather than progression and improvement of the human condition. However, it underscores the complex interplay between technology, sociocultural norms on gender and human identity within the framework of Posthuman Feminism by presenting a speculative but probable scenario in which traditional binary hierarchies are dismantled, and the imposition and continuation of rigid, opposing categorisations yields catastrophic results.

Before moving forward to Feminism, it would also seem reasonable to expand on the term posthuman condition and the relevancy of the journey of characters located within the posthuman condition. The posthuman condition, emerging from the culmination of posthuman endeavours, signifies a fundamental shift in human identity and existence (Toffoletti 13). It challenges conventional notions of what it means to be human, emphasising the fluidity and malleability of the human form and consciousness. In this paradigm, individuals inhabit a world where distinctions between human and non-human entities become increasingly blurred, — Isserley is an apt example of this complexity and obscurity — leading to novel forms of agency, subjectivity, and interactions. Within this context, the protagonists in *The Power* and *Under the Skin* navigate multi-layered landscapes of gender and human identity, embodying the tensions and possibilities inherent in the posthuman condition. Their experiences reflect the transformative nature of posthumanism — transformative in terms of not only bodily configurations but also resulting modes of being and experiences — as they grapple with newfound abilities, confront societal norms, and negotiate their place in a rapidly evolving world. Through their narratives, these characters operate as vantage points by which the convolution of the posthuman existence is probed and the enduring quest for meaning and belonging in an ever-changing reality is explored. They function as signifiers of the necessity of a paradigm shift in human understanding and shed light upon potential novel modes of existence and interactions. In that, *Under the Skin* explores the posthuman condition

through Isserley's transformation into a hybrid, liminal entity. As she navigates her altered identity and experiences, she confronts questions of agency, individual autonomy and belonging, highlighting the fluidity of existence and power relations in a posthuman world. Isserley's journey underscores the complications of the posthuman condition, where individuals may grapple with the dissolution of traditional boundaries, the emergence of new modes of being, and potential crises of identities when classical notions of social and ontological roles are imposed on hybridised and fluid othered entities that flout binary categorisations. In *The Power*, meanwhile, women gaining electric abilities disrupt traditional power structures and gender norms, thereby reflecting a posthuman condition where entrenched conceptions stemming from the way in which male or female human/non-human bodies are configured/defined no longer dictate social reality. This transformation challenges the humanist and patriarchal notion of innate superiority based on sex, ushering in a reimagined social order where power is de-centralised, redefined and re-centralised through a societal cataclysm.

Both novels, at their core, utilise the posthuman condition embodied in both on a personal scale and a macro scale –Isserley and female protagonists respectively– to provide a lens through which to examine the evolving nature of identity, agency, and power in a world shaped by technological innovation and social change. The protagonists within these tales struggle to navigate labyrinthine posthuman landscapes that host the clash of hierarchical binaries with fluid, hybrid and nonbinary modes of existence and relations.

As the discussion shifts from the broader context of posthumanism, it becomes essential to explore the historical trajectory of feminism, tracing its evolution from early efforts for gender equality to its current intersection with posthuman thought. Understanding the development of feminist theory provides necessary insights into how it has continually adapted to address the changing landscape of social, political, and technological challenges and entailing marginalised identities. This background serves as a foundation for a deeper examination of how posthumanism and feminism converge, particularly in their shared aim to dismantle hierarchical binaries and reimagine possibilities for identity, agency, and power. By contextualising the history of feminism, the significance of its

intersection with posthumanism can be more clearly appreciated, thereby offering a transformative lens for critiquing and reconstructing the understanding of gender and non-human in the twenty-first century

Genders and gender roles, to provide a preparatory and brief instigation, can be broadly defined as pervasive social constructs deeply ingrained within societies worldwide that dictate the expected behaviours, attributes, and responsibilities associated with individuals based on their sexual identities. These roles, often steeped in tradition and cultural norms, prescribe distinct roles and expectations for men and women, shaping their identities, opportunities, and interactions within society.

The historical narrative of gender roles is a long journey through epochs and civilisations, and it is intricately intertwined with the construction and perpetuation of binary oppositions. From ancient civilisations to medieval societies, the dichotomy between masculinity and femininity served as a cornerstone of social organisation, delineating rigid boundaries between the roles, responsibilities, and attributes ascribed to men and women (Lovibond 88). That is to say, societal expectations have assigned men such roles as providers, protectors, and leaders, while women have been relegated to domestic duties, caretaking roles, and subordinate positions (Budgeon 317-318). These traditional gender roles have been perpetuated through socialisation processes, institutional practices, and media representations, reinforcing narrow definitions of masculinity and femininity. However, contemporary understandings of gender challenge the notion of innate biological determinism and recognise gender as a social construct that is subjected to cultural, political, and economic influences. These binary constructs were not merely descriptive but prescriptive, dictating normative behaviours and expectations that were forced by and reinforced patriarchal power structures. Within this binary framework, masculinity was valorised as strong, rational, and dominant, while femininity was relegated to the realm of weakness, emotionality, subservience, “weak elegancy of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners” (Wollstonecraft 31). The perpetuation of these binaries was sustained through various mechanisms, including

religious doctrines, legal codes, and cultural norms, which codified and enforced gender hierarchies.

However, beneath the veneer of stability and coherence lay a complex web of contradictions and tensions as individuals and communities negotiated the boundaries and fluidity of gender identities and expressions. While the binary oppositions of male-female, masculine-feminine seemingly provided a semblance of order and predictability, they were also partial to men and oppressive to women, obscuring the diversity and multiplicity of human experiences. Individual experiences and subjective occurrences, however, often defy simplistic, rigid categorisations, therefore challenging the rigidity of binary frameworks.

In this context, as societies evolved and cultures intermingled, the historical narrative of gender roles transformed, reflecting the complexities of human experience and social dynamics. During the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, advancements in philosophy, science, and the arts ushered in new perspectives on gender and identity, challenging traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. Philosophers such as John Locke (1632 — 1704) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759 — 1797), through their works—the latter of whom being "celebrated as the mother of English-language feminism" — espoused ideas of individual autonomy and equality, advocating for the rights and freedoms of women in society, consequentially and directly, respectively (Ford 189).

To begin with, John Locke made significant contributions to political philosophy and the concept of individual rights, which have had lasting significant effects on various liberal movements, including feminism. Locke's work primarily focused on topics such as natural rights, government legitimacy, and the social contract. The philosophical underpinnings of his ideas, however, particularly his assertion that

> I readily grant that indifferent things, and perhaps none but such, are subjected to the legislative power. *But* it does not therefore follow, that the magistrate may ordain whatsoever he pleases concerning any thing that is indifferent. The public good is the

> rule and measure of all law-making (*Two Treatises of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 233)

is of significance. In that, it helped laying the groundwork for the development of gender equality and feminist thought, albeit indirectly (Butler 136)[10]. Locke's proclamation that political power is derived from acts of consent by free-born individuals marked a departure from traditional doctrines that justified authority through birthright or divine will. As Melissa Butler notes, in Locke's philosophy, "contract and individual choice supplanted birth and divine designation as crucial factors in social and political analysis" (135-136). This shift in the foundation of political authority inevitably raised questions about the status of women within this new order, as it challenged the established social and political hierarchies that had long justified the systemic disempowerment of individual members of the social whole.

The idea of natural human rights was central to Locke's political philosophy, including the rights to life, liberty, and property, which he believed were inherent to all individuals by virtue of their humanity (Meany 2). Locke's emphasis on individual autonomy and the right for self-determination formed a crucial basis for later arguments advocating for gender equality. By positing that all individuals, regardless of birth status or social standing, possessed these fundamental rights, Locke indirectly questioned the legitimacy of gender-based inequalities. His ideas contributed to a broader discourse that eventually led to the recognition of women's rights as an integral aspect of human rights. Feminist thinkers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly those involved in the liberal feminist movement, drew upon Locke's notions of equality and autonomy to argue for women's suffrage, property rights, and access to education. These movements sought to extend the Lockean principles of liberty and equality to include women, who had long been excluded from the political and social privileges afforded to men.

Locke's concept of the social contract, which posited that "legitimate political rule can come about only by human artifice, when people with equal natural rights to self-government agree to establish a government amongst themselves," further influenced the

[10] Refers to Melissa Butler.

development of feminist thought by challenging the hierarchical structures that perpetuated the subjugation of each and every member of the social whole (Locke 291). By advocating for a sociopolitical system based on mutual consent rather than coercion, Locke provided a framework for critiquing not only political despotism but also the domestic inequalities that women faced within the patriarchal family structure. Locke's emphasis on reason and rationality as the basis for knowledge and decision-making — although later critiqued by posthuman thinkers for their anthropocentric assumptions — offered a means for women to challenge the gendered stereotypes that had long justified their exclusion from public, political, intellectual and spiritual aspects of life. His promotion of education and the cultivation of critical thinking skills were particularly influential — encouraging not just men but also women — to assert their intellectual capabilities and question societal norms that restricted their opportunities, as evidenced by his correspondence with a friend, Mrs. Clarke:

> Wootton comments, 'It would be difficult to find a more straightforwardly feminist sentiment written by seventeenth-century male.' In a letter to Mrs. Clarke concerning the education of her daughters dated January 7, 1684, Locke wrote that, since he saw 'no difference of sex in your mind relating to truth, virtue and obedience,' his educational advice concerning her son could be applied to her daughters as well. (Grant 304)

Locke himself may not have addressed gender equality as often as he has done with equality and freedom in general in his writings. Notwithstanding, his philosophical principles laid the groundwork for subsequent feminist thinkers to advance the cause of gender equality, providing a robust framework for challenging traditional gender hierarchies and advocating for the rights and autonomy of all individuals, regardless of gender.

Mary Wollstonecraft's influential work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792), unlike Locke's more generalised liberal rhetoric, directly problematised the inequality towards women embedded in the patriarchal hierarchy and stands as a foundational text in the history of feminist thought, laying the groundwork for subsequent waves of feminism. Published in 1792, amidst the fervour of the Enlightenment era, Wollstonecraft's manifesto challenged the prevailing notions of women's inferiority and pre-established roles, stating that

> women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness or temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, every thing else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives. (Wollstonecraft 45)

She advocated for women's equal rights and opportunities in society and criticised the patriarchal structures that governed both public and private life. Her ideas dismantle the prevailing stereotypes and misconceptions about women, arguing that their supposed intellectual and moral inferiority was not inherent but rather a product of their limited education and socialisation, and women's identity is similarly but a product of institutionalised patriarchal oppression. Wollstonecraft passionately calls for women's access to education and employment, asserting that they possess the same capacity for reason and virtue as men.

Wollstonecraft's work was essentially concerned with the idea of women's autonomy and self-determination, emphasising the image of "woman as a whole … instead of a part of man" (Wollstonecraft 80). She rejects the concept of women as mere ornaments or objects of male desire, criticising the notion "that women are formed for softness and sweet attractive grace," advocating instead for their active participation in education, public life and decision-making processes (qtd. in Ford 193).

Furthermore, her work anticipates many of the key themes and concerns of later feminist movements by including the intersections of gender with other forms of oppression, such as class and race (Ford 193). She acknowledges the limitations of her own privileged position as a white, middle-class female while also recognising the shared struggle for liberation among women of all backgrounds. This is evident in her critical stance against the partiality of Eurocentric patriarchy's hegemony over what is regarded as civilisation, noting that "the civilisation of the bulk of the people of Europe is very partial—both in that it does not extend to all members of society, and in that it benefits some members of society at the expense of others" (Ford 193). In extending her criticism to encompass multiple marginalised others, Wollstonecraft lays the groundwork for an intersectional approach to contemporary feminism that seeks to address the interconnected systems of

power and inequality. This intersectional approach she adopts is crucial to this thesis, as incorporating other disempowered and oppressed identities in her argumentations, her inclusiveness can be argued to be echoing in contemporary of feminist theories' convergence with posthumanism, as well its implications over and agency and identity of posthuman or nonhuman agents in the posthuman era.

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were pivotal in reshaping societal views on gender roles. This period bolstered the intellectual shifts incited by thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft and John Locke, whose works challenged the conventional notions of women's roles in society. These philosophical debates were further complicated by scientific discoveries and empirical inquiry, which spurred discussions on the biological basis of gender differences. As society moved into the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution catalysed these shifts, transforming labour structures and family dynamics.

Initially, men migrated to urban centres to work in factories, leaving women in rural areas or confined to domestic roles. However, as industrialisation progressed, women also began to move to urban areas, taking on 'feminine' jobs such as domestic service or working in textile factories. These shifts exposed women to new forms of economic participation but simultaneously reinforced their association with low-wage labour. Consequently, as Marianna Valverde highlights, "ruling-class males led the attack on the 'virtue' of the working classes and especially of working women," with male workers testifying before Commissions and Parliament, often condemning the perceived immorality of women in the workforce (620). Women, however, did not remain passive in the face of these changes. First Wave Feminists, recognising the importance of political and economic agency, began to reactively resist institutionalised patriarchal power structures. Through movements like Women's Suffrage, they sought to gain access to the political sphere as a means of dismantling broader systems of oppression. As Scott and Tilly emphasise:

> The economic changes leading to high employment of women included the early industrialisation of textiles and the nineteenth-century pattern of urbanisation, with cities acting as producers of and markets for consumer goods and as places of employment for domestic servants ... In Great Britain, the civil status of women was reformed through

> the married women's property acts of the late nineteenth century, and political emancipation in the form of suffrage came in 1918. (39)

These economic shifts and political movements opened up new opportunities for women, contributing to the transformation of gender norms and societal expectations.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this paradigm shift continued with waves of feminism emerging as a powerful force for social change, challenging entrenched patriarchal structures and advocating for the recognition of women's agency and autonomy (Mohajan 4). At the heart of this Second Wave Feminism was the criticism of traditional gender roles, which, similar to the first wave, relegated women to domestic spheres and denied them access to novel prospects in economic, political and social spheres. Feminist thinkers such as Simon de Beauvoir (1908 – 1986) and Betty Friedan (1921 – 2006) articulated the ways in which patriarchal structures constrained women's lives and limited their possibilities for self-fulfilment. Simone De Beauvoir, in her seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949) famously asserted that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (273), highlighting the constructed nature of gender roles and how said roles perpetuated entrenched inequality. Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) similarly critiqued the idealised image of the housewife and mother:

> This magazine, published for over 5,000,000 American women, almost all of whom have been through high school and nearly half to college, contained almost no mention of the world beyond home. In the second half of the twentieth century in America, woman's world was confined to her own body and beauty, the charming of man, the bearing of babies, and the physical care and serving of husband, children, and home. And this was no anomaly of a single issue of a single women's magazine. (Freidan 31)

As such, it can be inferred that one of the most pivotal aspects of the late nineteenth to middle twentieth-century feminist discourse — First and the Second Waves — was the recognition of power dynamics and constructed roles inherent in patriarchal societies. Patriarchy, as a system of male dominance and privilege, not only prescribed rigid gender roles but also reinforced hierarchies that disadvantaged women in terms of political representation, economic opportunities, and social status. Moving onwards to the latter half of the century, the Third and the Fourth Wave feminists emphasised the

intersectionality[11] of gender and other axes pertaining to disempowerment, such as race, class, sexuality, environment, and most significantly within the scope of this paper — species and non-human entities (Hird et al. 110-111). They drew attention to how systems of oppression intersected and compounded, resulting in intersectional theories –such as Posthuman Feminism – that emphasise the diverse or different experiences of inequality not only for women but other forms of marginalised identities.

Posthuman Feminism, as suggested by the title, is the pivotal framework in the analysis of the novels explored in this thesis and forms the backbone of the thesis itself. The complexities inherent in Posthuman Feminism necessitate a thorough and detailed exploration. Hence, these complexities are contextualised in the following discussion.

In her seminal work, which shares its title with the theoretical framework, Rosi Braidotti defines Posthuman Feminism as "an intergenerational and transversal exercise in constructing a discursive community that cares for the state of the world and seeks to intervene productively in it" (15)[12]. This definition captures the collaborative and cross-generational nature of Posthuman Feminism and highlights its commitment to engaging with and transforming the world through collective intellectual and activist efforts. Braidotti emphasises the convergence between posthumanism and feminism, advocating for a framework that reflects the intricate realities of the contemporary world, as it "offers a more adequate analysis of contemporary relations of power" (12). The emphasis on power relations is crucial, as it underscores the need for a feminist theory that addresses the complex, interconnected systems of oppression shaping modern society. Braidotti argues that Posthuman Feminism, by integrating insights from ecofeminism, feminist studies of technoscience, LGBTQ+ theories, and other critical perspectives, provides a broad understanding of power relations that transcend traditional frameworks of identity politics. This approach responds to the socio-economic forces driven by technological

[11] The term Intersectionality was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in her article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" in 1989 (140).

[12] From this point onwards, unless otherwise indicated, all references to Braidotti in this thesis refer to her book *Posthuman Feminism* (2022).

advancement and the significant environmental challenges posed by the climate crisis (12). The integration of these diverse theoretical perspectives enables Posthuman Feminism to offer a more comprehensive critique of power structures, recognizing the multiple, intersecting axes of oppression affecting different bodies and identities.

Braidotti criticises classical models of feminism that largely centralise on liberal or socialist frameworks, asserting that these models either align too closely with capitalism or position themselves in dialectical opposition. She posits that "whereas liberal feminism is perfectly attuned to capitalism and socialist feminism dialectically opposed to it, Posthuman Feminism attempts a more nuanced position" (12). This position is essential for understanding not just the novels and this study, but also the contemporary relations, in which traditional dichotomies and binaries no longer suffice in capturing the complexities of identity, power, and agency. Posthuman Feminism, in this aspect, according to Braidotti, offers a third path that maintains a critical distance from both liberal and socialist frameworks, fostering a more adaptable and inclusive approach. This framework does more than expand the feminist discourse; it redefines it by proposing a radical tradition that emphasises the heterogeneity of subjectivities and the complexity and malleability of contemporary identities. Likewise, Braidotti asserts that "the insights and critical knowledge of those who are considered less than human is urgently needed in the debates on the posthuman" (12). This perspective encourages a view of political and epistemological subjectivity as a diverse assemblage of embodied and embedded experiences, recognising the importance of non-human actors in these proposed sociological and philosophical re-configurations.

This redefinition of subjectivity and agency under Posthuman Feminism is crucial for addressing contemporary feminist concerns that intersect with environmental and technological changes. Braidotti's advocacy for understanding the human as part of a broader ecological and technological system aligns with the ideas presented by scholars like Donna Haraway. Haraway's concept of the 'cyborg', which dismantles the boundaries between human and machine, provides an archetypal allegory for how Posthuman Feminist Thought envisages identity. She argues that the cyborg, a symbolic

identity, blurs the lines between the organic and the technological, between nature and culture, challenging the humanist tradition that separates the human from the non-human. This perspective is essential for understanding how Posthuman Feminism paves the way for a more empathetic and inclusionary interaction with the non-human world and advocates for a reimagined sense of agency and identity that challenges dominant categories of affirmation, as she asserts in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991):

> The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation. In the traditions of 'Western' science and politics—the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as a resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of the reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other. (195)

Furthermore, scholars like Karen Barad extend this discussion through the concept of 'agential realism,' which posits that matter and meaning are mutually constituted. Barad's arguments in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) challenge the notion of passive materiality by emphasising that agency is not an inherent, static attribute of human objects but a dynamic and ongoing process of material-discursive practices, stating that "agency is not an attribute but an ongoing reconfigurings of the world. The universe is agential intra-activity in its becoming. The primary ontological units are not 'things' but phenomena-dynamic topological reconfigurings / entanglements/relationalities / (re)articulations" (141). This aligns with Braidotti's argument that Posthuman Feminism seeks to redefine agency by moving beyond anthropocentric and individualistic models embedded in traditional Western thought of essentialism. Barad's emphasis on the entanglement of humans and non-humans resonates with Braidotti's call to redefine the human as part of a larger network of relations, highlighting the importance of non-human actors in shaping the realities of power and identity. Cecilia Åsberg and Nina Lykke's work, "Feminist Technoscience Studies" (2010) further underscores the importance of integrating scientific and technological developments into feminist analysis, arguing that these advancements are interlinked with the conditions and configurations of the social and material world itself, holding that

> genealogically, feminist technoscience studies is inspired by social constructionist approaches to gender, sex, intersectionalities, society, science and technology. However, it is important to underline that these studies, together with other kinds of material or postconstructionist feminisms, has also transgressed social constructionism, forcefully

> drawing attention to the ways in which the discursive and material aspects of sociotechnical relations and processes of materialisation are inextricably intertwined. (299)

Their contributions emphasise the necessity for feminist theory to evolve in response to the changing landscape of technology and science, reinforcing the idea that Posthuman Feminism must address these emerging realities.

In this vein, Posthuman Feminism critiques the hierarchical binaries that have traditionally dominated feminist discourses, particularly the rigid male/female dichotomy, and highlights their inadequacy in capturing the fluid and multifaceted nature of identities and relations in the contemporary digital and biotechnological era. Braidotti identifies these binaries as reductionist and suggests that they fail to accommodate the complex reality of the contemporary world, which is shaped by a confluence of various factors, including technology and global interconnectedness. Her framework of Posthuman Feminism proposes a nuanced approach that recognises a spectrum of identities, challenging the dominant humanist perspective, as she states that "posthumanist feminisms together [caution] against any simplistic reduction of the two to a basic equivalence. Their sheer multiplicity undoes the restriction of any binary system" (92). By embracing the notion of multiplicity, Posthuman Feminism seeks to challenge and dismantle the persistent inequalities entrenched within not only patriarchal but also traditional humanist feminist frameworks, which put the 'human' at the centre and question "how inclusive and representative is the idea of the human implicit in the allegedly universal idea of 'Man'" (Braidotti 27).

This approach is particularly relevant in addressing the emergent gender roles and identities that are increasingly influenced by digital technologies and biotechnologies, pointing to a significant shift in how identity and embodiment are understood. Braidotti emphasises that the evolution of feminist thought must include a critical engagement with how identities are constructed and understood within new technological and ecological contexts (70). She argues that this reorientation is essential for feminism to remain effective and relevant in addressing the challenges posed by a rapidly changing world, where digital and biological technologies play a crucial role in shaping social and

individual realities (70). Additionally, Posthuman Feminism does more than adjust feminism to include technology and ecology; it fundamentally redefines the very foundations of feminist thought to integrate these elements. This redefinition is supported by scholars like Stacy Alaimo, who, in her work *Bodily Natures* (2010) argues that "bracketing the biological body, and thereby severing its evolutionary, historical, and ongoing interconnections with the material world, may not be ethically, politically, or theoretically desirable" (3), proposing an understanding of the human body as interconnected with the environment and technology, challenging the notion of the body as a distinct and bounded entity from its surroundings.

Thence, it is safe to reiterate that Posthuman Feminist framework aims to foster a more inclusive, equitable, and comprehensive understanding of human and non-human interactions and interdependencies. Therefore, it calls for a radical rethink of the interactions between human and non-human elements that shape the collective existence. This theoretical realignment, as articulated by Braidotti and echoed by scholars such as Alaimo, Haraway, and Barad, allows for a more elaborate critique of the power structures that govern identities of gender and species. By rejecting traditional binaries and embracing a more fluid and inclusive understanding of agency, Posthuman Feminism offers a platform for addressing issues of gender as well as the broader socio-political issues intertwined with collective understanding of humanity and identity in the twenty-first century.

Braidotti's argument highlights this notion by articulating limitations of traditional frameworks that centre human agency as an isolated and autonomous force, signifying how "Posthuman Feminism promotes a cross-species way of thinking that includes the zeo-geo-techno-mediated relations to the multiple ecologies composing the posthuman convergence" (101). That is to say, in the posthuman context, agency is seen as a distributed phenomenon that arises from the interactions within networks of influence, which include technological devices, environmental factors, and other non-human elements. This expanded view of agency reflects a more intricate understanding of how power operates in modern societies, where human actions are deeply intertwined with and

influenced by non-human agencies. Moreover, this reconceptualisation underscores the need for feminist theories to adapt to the realities of a posthuman world. Traditional humanist feminist approaches often emphasise individual empowerment and resistance within clear-cut social structures. However, in the posthuman paradigm, these structures are viewed as more fluid and complex, requiring a new approach to understanding agency. Feminist theories, therefore, in the 'Posthuman Turn,' must evolve to address how agency is distributed across a broader ecological and technological spectrum, recognising the entanglements of human and non-human forces. Braidotti's framework suggests that redefining agency in this way does not diminish the importance of individual action but rather situates these actions within a broader context of relational dynamics. This approach allows for a more nuanced analysis of power and agency that can better address contemporary issues such as digital surveillance, environmental policy, and biotechnology, which blur the lines between individual and collective agency. The distributed notion of agency in Posthuman Feminist thought provides a robust platform for addressing traditional feminist concerns and the broader socio-political and ecological issues intertwined with our understanding of humanity and identity in the twenty-first century. It calls for a critical reassessment of how we agency and identity are defined and enacted, urging a shift towards more integrative and collaborative models of engagement across the human and non-human division.

Speculative fiction, with its symbiotic relationship with Posthuman Feminism, emerges as a vital tool in this vein for exploring and contesting the complexities of identity, embodiment, and power. Braidotti's notion of "Speculative Feminism" positions speculative fiction as a form of activism that challenges the boundaries of humanism and anthropocentrism (216). This perspective is supported by scholars like Elana Gomel, who, in *Science Fiction, Alien Encounters and the Ethics of Posthumanism* (2014) argues that speculative fiction provides a "testing-ground for new forms of subjectivity and narrativity," allowing for the exploration of alternative ethical responses to radical alterity. It meddles with the question: "How can a human author describe a being which is definitely gifted with reason, but which, with equally categorical certainty, is not human?" (4). Through the creative and imaginative scope of such narratives, Posthuman Feminism advocates for a radical rethinking of identities that are fluid, dialogic, and interconnected

across different dimensions of social and natural order. Speculative fiction, with its protagonists whose otherness is compounded, engages with and dismantles the oppressive structures that define traditional humanist discourses. In line with this, the genre of new weird, as discussed by scholars like Benjamin Noys and Timothy Murphy in their work "Introduction: Old and New Weird" (2016), represents a new sensibility in welcoming the 'alien' and the 'monstrous' — beings that do not fall into rigid categorisations — as sites of affirmation and becoming, echoing the "new human" in literature and culture (Braidotti 225). Additionally, Sunand Tryambak Joshi articulates its capacity in terms of "refashioning of the reader's view of the world" (The Weird Tale 118). This engagement with the 'monstrous' or the 'alien' — apt descriptions for characters like Isserley in *Under the Skin* — symbolises the potential for significant individual and societal transformation, "allow[ing] shared critiques of binary power relations. But, more importantly, it is an experiment with alternative ways of designing the humans in their relation to others" (Braidotti 225). These characters and their stories reveal the cracks in existing social and cultural fabrics that coerce every entity into assuming prescribed roles and identities, thereby suggesting the resilience required to endure oppression and the potential for radical forms of resistance and rebirth in posthuman conditions. Speculative fiction thus becomes an essential site for exploring and contesting the complexities of identity, embodiment, and power in a posthuman context, proposing new possibilities for existence beyond traditional humanist limitations as indicated by Sarah Truman in "SF! Haraway's Situated Feminisms and Speculative Fabulations in English Class" (2018), "speculative fabulation, and the proliferating SFs (speculative fiction, situated feminisms, string figures—and perhaps speculative philosophy) are important practices in both scholarly writing and everyday life… queers perception and disrupts habitual ways of knowing" (31). This connection between speculative fiction and Posthuman Feminism is further reinforced by the idea that literature can serve as a platform for testing and developing new forms of subjectivity and agency. Through its engagement with non-human and more-than-human entities, speculative fiction allows for the exploration of alternative ethical responses to the challenges posed by the posthuman condition. As Hayles notes in her interview with Birgit Van Puymbroeck, the stories that promote inclusivity and equality have the potential to incite tangible social changes and to imagine "new roles and uses [for] the powerful tool of narrative" ("Enwebbed Complexities" 23).

In essence, the speculative realm emerges as a significant tool for Posthuman Feminist theory in the twenty-first century, highlighting its relevance in addressing and resisting not just issues of gender but also broader socio-political and ecological challenges in a globalised, technologised world. This approach, as articulated by scholars like Braidotti, Haraway, Barad, and others, extends the theoretical and practical reaches of Posthuman Feminism, aiming to transform how oppression and identity are understood on multiple axes. Similarly, Opperman reiterates that

> the emphasis on the nonhuman gathers into new materialist methods other theories as well, such as ecomaterialism, material feminisms, elemental ecocriticism, actor-network theory (ANT), object-oriented ontology, speculative realisms, biosemiotics, and thing theory, which all 'seek a repositioning of the human among nonhuman actants. A major point of convergence between all of these critical schools is to sustain a shift toward nonbinary modes of thought, to establish environmental justice, and to effect ethical accountability in a post-anthropocentric world. ("New Materialism and Nonhuman Story" 259)

As per, it can be posited that a keen awareness of the intricate interplay between male and female, human and non-human became central to the multifaceted rhetoric of feminist discourse. This is particularly evident in the later waves that overlap with posthumanism and emphasise inclusivity regarding the agency of all beings, where "Posthumanism jettison[s] binaries, seeing the human and technological (or the nonhuman in general) as mutually enmeshed" (Mays et. al 100). From the earliest waves of feminism to the contemporary explorations of intersectionality by Posthuman Feminists like Braidotti, feminist theorists have scrutinised the ways in which gendered hierarchies historically and continuously disempowered the others. This scrutiny, with the advent of posthuman thought, extends beyond the confines of human embodiment to encompass the myriad possibilities of non-human existence in contemporary discussions, challenging normative understandings of agency, subjectivity, and power via the utilisation of the speculative realm.

As this convergence of posthumanism and feminism that culminates in Posthuman Feminist framework is contextualised, the significance of their intersection within the chosen novels, and consequently within this thesis, becomes clearer. In *Under the Skin* and *The Power*, these intersections are vividly rendered as protagonists navigate settings

wherein the boundaries between human and non-human are distorted, and definitions become obscure. In Michel Faber's novel, Isserley's transformation from human to non-human challenges conventional notions of identity and belonging on multiple tangents as she grapples with the complexities of her altered existence, wherein her disempowerment is compounded, and her being coerced into conforming with traditional static identities eventuates in an identity crisis. Similarly, in Naomi Alderman's dystopian vision, women's newfound electric powers and their novel, non-human mode of existence unsettle anthropocentric binaries and traditional gendered power dynamics, destabilising the patriarchal structures that have long oppressed them, which similarly results in a global catastrophe. As both narratives unfold, they offer reflections on the nature of identity and difference in a world marked by rapid technological advancement within the axis of human/nonhuman and social changes within gender discourse. The protagonists' experiences illuminate the ways in which gendered and species-based hierarchies intersect with other forms of oppression, highlighting the need for recognising the fluidity of identity, and the potential for resistance within the posthuman condition.

In this context, as argued above, it is seen that the convergence of feminist theories and posthumanism serves as a lens through which to interrogate the complexities of identity, power and agency, showcase the shortcomings of rigid categorisations and opening up new pathways for understanding the ever-transforming reality. This lens is complemented by the utilisation of speculative fiction, which "offer[s] multiple interpretative (im)possibilities of the real, transcending the necessity of mimetic transparency…exploring the possible laterals of experience" (Monticelli 2). Through their exploration of non-human others within hierarchical binaries, these novels challenge the reader to reimagine the possibilities of morality, identity, and societal roles in a world where the boundaries between humans and non-humans are increasingly porous and contested.

Likewise, it can be asserted that Posthuman Feminism represents a significant shift in feminist thought, one that is deeply responsive to the complexities of the contemporary world. By integrating insights from various critical perspectives, including ecofeminism,

feminist technoscience, and LGBTQ+ theories, Posthuman Feminism offers an encompassing understanding of power relations that transcends traditional frameworks of identity politics. This approach challenges entrenched notions of human exceptionalism and promotes a more ethical interaction with the non-human world, advocating for a reimagined sense of agency that is not confined to humans. The interplay between Posthuman Feminism and speculative fiction highlights the transformative potential of these narratives, which provide a space for exploring and contesting the complexities of identity, embodiment, and power in a posthuman context. Parallel with this, Luciano and Chen in "Has The Queer Ever Been Human?" (2015), argue that "speculative fiction has long served as a rich source of queer posthumanist provocation, a site for imagining other, possibly queerer, worlds" (188). It thus becomes as an apt tool for extending the theoretical and practical reaches of Posthuman Feminism, thereby offering new possibilities for understanding and resisting oppression on multiple axes.

As the field of Posthuman Feminism continues to evolve, it will be crucial to explore these intersections further, both in literature and in the broader context of societal change. The insights gained from this exploration underscore the importance of continuing to question and reimagine the categories that shape collective understanding of the world and 'our' place within it. The novels analysed in this thesis, *Under the Skin* and *The Power*, in this vein, exemplify the potential of Posthuman Feminism to challenge traditional conceptions of identity and power, thus offering a critique of the structures that govern a multiplicity of interactions across each constituent of the social whole. In accordance with the thorough establishment of a theoretical framework above, the following chapters focus on the selected novels, examining how they subvert and problematise entrenched anthropocentric and androcentric narratives surrounding identity, power and agency.

CHAPTER 1

BEYOND BINARIES: POSTHUMAN FEMINISM IN MICHEL FABER'S *UNDER THE SKIN*

Michel Faber's *Under the Skin* presents a provocative narrative that follows the unsettling journey of Isserley, a figure who embodies a liminal posthuman existence. Through the lens of speculative fiction, Faber constructs a narrative that engages with the tenets of Posthuman Feminism pertaining to identity, power and agency. This chapter dissects Isserley's interactions within a human patriarchal social framework that objectifies the female body, as well as her disempowerment within her own species' equally patriarchal and xenophobic structure, which marginalises her for being both a non-human and a female. The novel critiques the intersection of anthropocentric and patriarchal norms through its protagonist's journey via a series of ontological and social repositionings as will be articulated below, aligning with Posthuman Feminism's broader objective to broaden feminist discourse into a more interconnected understanding of identity and agency. Hird's arguments further support this necessary expansion within Posthuman Feminism ("Feminism Theorises the Nonhuman" 112-113). By analysing Isserley's transformative journey and her complex relationship with her social environment, this chapter explores and problematises the implications of her liminal existence which challenges the boundaries between the human and the non-human, male and female.

In this light, Michel Faber's *Under the Skin* can be situated as an emblematic work within Posthuman Feminist discourse due to its detailed exploration of the boundaries and hierarchical systems dictating the concepts of identity, gender, and species through its protagonist, Isserley. The novel follows an alien disguised as a human female who roams the Scottish Highlands in search of male hitchhikers. Under the guise of offering them a ride, Isserley lures these men into her car, but her true purpose is far more sinister: she is

part of a covert operation to harvest humans for their meat, which is considered a delicacy on her home planet. She tranquillises ideal specimens – preferably muscular men – and delivers them back to the farm, essentially the headquarters of the harvesting operation of her species. The farm is presented as a meat farm, and kidnapped men are treated as cattle. After being processed, their muscular parts are packaged and shipped off to Isserley's planet on a monthly basis.

The narrative delves into Isserley's complex feelings regarding her identity as a marginalised other in multiple capacities, the physical and emotional costs and consequences of her transformation into a human-like form, and her interactions with both human males and male members of her own species. As she navigates a dual existence, Isserley becomes increasingly alienated from both the humans she exploits and her own kind, leading to a detailed exploration of what defines a human or non-human, and the increasingly blurred line between the two in a world defined by exploitation and otherness. In this context, the novel emerges as a critical text to challenge and problematise binary ontological and social categorisations. It positions itself at the intersection of feminist theory and posthumanist thought, articulating the limitations of binary social constructs and essentialist epistemological logocentric suppositions that Posthuman Feminist theory seeks to deconstruct. As stated by Caracciolo, "the book reveals our own assumptions and prejudices by taking them and flipping them on their head" (600).

Crucial to a Posthuman Feminist analysis, Isserley embodies a unique convergence of gender and species identity. Surgically altered to appear as an attractive human woman, she occupies a hybrid space—alien in origin, yet human in appearance. This transformation situates her in a liminal position, where she is neither fully human nor entirely alien, neither wholly female nor completely disempowered. She is "painfully caught between the human and nonhuman animal" (Hortle 107). Although her body mostly resembles that of a female human, it does not fully conform to human norms. She is objectified by both human males and the males of her own species, yet remains a functioning member of her alien society, participating within its patriarchal corporate

structure. Her existence within these intersecting identities facilitates an exploration of the constructedness, malleability, relationality and fluidity of identities across gender and species, which renders *Under the Skin* a fertile ground for Posthuman Feminist analysis.

As established in the previous chapter, Posthuman Feminist thought critically examines and challenges both gendered roles and the human non-human divide, challenging the anthropocentric and androcentric assumptions that have traditionally defined and empowered humans –particularly males– and marginalised other species and identities. *Under the Skin* directly engages with these issues through Isserley, "latch[ing] on to the image of a lone woman on the road— traditionally a masculine space —to launch its critique of the human" (Hortle 106). Her experiences highlight the complexities of navigating a world where identity is both imposed and contested in tandem with the Posthuman Feminist critique of binary social structures.

From this perspective, Faber's novel transcends the narrative of an alien's infiltration into human society to become an exploration of how identities are shaped, manipulated, and enforced through gendered and species-based expectations. Isserley's body, designed to appeal to male humans, becomes the site where these intersections are most evident, highlighting how Posthuman Feminism interrogates the boundaries between the human and non-human, the female and the other. By focusing on Isserley's unique position within these intersecting identities, *Under the Skin* participates in the broader discourse of Posthuman Feminism. It defies pervasive assumptions regarding ontological and social categorisations. Building on the theoretical foundation established earlier, this chapter scrutinises *Under the Skin* within the ongoing critique of anthropocentrism and gender binaries central to Posthuman Feminist discourse.

In the context of this thesis, Posthuman Feminism is understood as a framework that challenges traditional boundaries and hierarchies historically defining human identity, particularly in relation to gender and species. Previous discussions have introduced the key concepts of posthumanism, which critiques the centrality of the human in

philosophical and cultural narratives, and feminism, which has long interrogated the patriarchal structures enforcing gendered power dynamics. More recently, feminism has adopted a more inclusive approach to encompass a broader spectrum of othered identities. This chapter builds directly upon these discussions by applying the combined lens of Posthuman Feminism to a specific literary text. In doing so, it aligns with the thesis's overarching goals: to critique traditional humanist narratives that have centred on the male human subject and to explore how contemporary speculative literature engages with these critiques. Isserley, in this respect,

> is represented as a cyborg creature, very near to the cyborg as envisaged by Donna Haraway, even if its mobile qualities are turned into a dystopian experience in the novel…transcend[ing] gender polarisations. The cyborg is a deconstruction of Western traditions and the postmodern embodiment of difference and identity together. (Monticelli 17)

The novel, hence, disrupts, criticises and problematises the classic notions of humanity, gender, and species through Isserley's tragic and cautionary tale. Posthuman bodies, like Isserley's, "in a nomadic perspective, envisages identities as fluid and flexible, embodying the inseparability between culture and nature, technologically mediated cultures and the globally connected societies" (Monticelli 19). Considering these, this chapter seeks to consolidate the thesis's overall notion about the significance of Posthuman Feminist perspectives in understanding and remodulating identity, agency, and power in the modern world to establish a non-binary, all-encompassing social order, by presenting a speculative narrative that illustrates the dangers of rigid binary categorisations in a posthuman reality. Isserley's tragic demise serves as a poignant example of how the failure to conform to binary identities as a posthuman female entity leads to alienation and a profound identity crisis, underscoring the urgent need to move beyond traditional frameworks and embrace more fluid, inclusive conceptions of identity.

The novel presents Isserley as a character who embodies the posthuman condition, challenging conventional boundaries that define identity, particularly in terms of species and gender. Isserley's transformation into what appears to be a human female is marked by invasive surgical procedures that force her alien body into a form conforming to human standards of femininity. This transformation is not merely superficial; it profoundly impacts her sense of self and her place in the world, ultimately leading to an identity crisis

that contributes to her demise, with the novel culminating in her death as a result of a traffic accident. The transformative surgery she undergoes is a violent and thorough process that reshapes her alien body to meet specific human criteria. Originally distinct from human physiology, her form is forcibly altered into that of a small, delicate, and sexually attractive woman, reducing her to a utilitarian tool for her species at the cost of her individual identity and autonomy. This transformation is deeply rooted in the imperative to conform to male human expectations of female appearance, particularly through the lens of the male gaze as evidenced through Isserley's introspection: "Immediately she felt his gaze beaming all over her like another kind of ultraviolet ray, and no less intense" (Faber 13). The novel implies that Isserley's transformation is a somewhat voluntary choice to avoid the harsher alternative of working in the brutal conditions of the mines on her home planet, thus, it can be said that she is coerced into making a choice. She opts to join her species' mission on Earth, where her role is to lure human males for capture. This coerced bodily modification echoes broader feminist critiques of how women's bodies are often shaped and controlled by societal norms and expectations, as maintained by Dolezal in her article, "The (In)visible Body: Feminism, Phenomenology, and the Case of Cosmetic Surgery" (2010):

> Despite the invisibility of women as social subjects, the physical aspect of female bodies has traditionally been subject to heightened scrutiny; women are expected to maintain their form, appearance, and comportment within strictly defined social parameters, or else face stigmatisation and the loss of social capital … The visibility of the female body, as object, ironically engenders another type of invisibility: the female subject, in her efforts to fulfil the social expectations for her body, renders herself an anonymous, normalized subject, unindividuated and hence unnoticed and unobtrusive. (357)

The alterations made to Isserley's body are extensive and reflective of this problem, however, they go beyond mere cosmetic changes and involve significant structural modifications that cause her constant pain and suffering. Her alien form, previously characterised by different proportions, musculature, and skin texture, is forced into a diminutive, fragile sub-human shape. The procedures she undergoes are described as excruciatingly painful, underscoring the physical toll of forcing a body to conform to a normative and performative standard dictated by patriarchal expectations of femininity and human-centric ideals of appearance, as Isserley recounts: "The surgeons, [while modifying her body] had used pictures from a magazine sent by Esswis as a guide" (Faber

134). This pain, along with the resulting bodily dysphoria, is central to Isserley's experience and the study itself, highlighting the disconnect and clash between the external appearance imposed on her by firmly hierarchical social structures and her internal sense of self. To elaborate, her employers, representing a highly capitalistic and hierarchical patriarchal structure, exploit her doubly—first by objectifying her as a tool to harvest luxury human meat, and secondly by morphing her body to conform to the very human beauty standards they exploit. This complex interplay of objectification underscores her role as a commodified asset, victim of patriarchal manipulation, and predator, reflecting the deeply entrenched dynamics of power and control within the novel. This manipulation that eventuates in her altered body becomes a site of ongoing struggle, as she contends with the tension between the image she presents to the world and her true nature.

Isserley's identity, shaped by her transformation, becomes hybridised. She exists in a state of liminality—caught between the alien world from which she originates and the human world she must navigate. This hybrid identity arises from her physical transformation and acts as a catalyst for her dejected psychological state. She retains the consciousness and memories of her alien self while operating within the confines of a human body. This duality engenders a deep sense of alienation, as Isserley can neither fully identify with her original species nor integrate into human society. She is "always a hybrid, an in-between subject, she does not fit into anything" (Monticelli 8). Her hybrid identity challenges the notion of a stable, fixed identity, a concept often assumed within humanist and anthropocentric frameworks. Instead, Isserley embodies the Posthuman Feminist idea that identity is fluid, contingent, and constantly renegotiated, as articulated by Braidotti, "Posthuman Feminism insists that, in this project, the voices, experiences and visions of embodied and embedded subjects who were not considered as fully human, play a central role in defining possible patterns of becoming posthuman" (204). The tension she experiences between her internal alien self and her external human form illustrates the complexities of existing in a state that defies clear categorisation. She is neither entirely alien, as her appearance suggests humanity, nor truly human, as her internal experience and alien biology persist beneath the surface. As Caracciolo notes, "Faber's novel asks us to switch from a human to a non-human ('alien') perspective without ever finding stable epistemic ground" (597). This ambiguity forces Isserley to constantly mediate the

expectations of both her species and the humans she interacts with, leading to a profound sense of displacement and non-belonging. In this context, the technology used for Isserley's transformation acts as a tool of mediation, creating a gap between her alien origins and the human world she must navigate.

The surgical alterations that Isserley undergoes can be understood as a form of technological intervention that reconfigures her identity. Within the posthuman framework, technology plays a crucial role in reshaping the body and, by extension, the self. Isserley's transformation is a literal manifestation of this concept, where her body is technologically modified to fulfil a specific performative role. This modification blurs the lines between the natural and the artificial, between what is inherently alien and what is imposed to simulate humanity. As a product of both biological and technological processes, her body reflects the posthuman idea that the boundaries between the organic and the synthetic are increasingly permeable in the posthuman era. Her identity, therefore, becomes a technological and sociological construct, shaped by the enforced demands of her mission and the technological means used to alter her body. This re-raises the question of whether identity is fixed and intrinsic, or if it can be constructed and reconstructed through external means in a state of constant confluence with other factors. In Isserley's case, reconciling the imposed identity with her sense of self leads to ongoing internal conflict regarding who she was, who she appears to be, and who she is expected to be.

This experience—existing between two worlds—illustrates the fluidity and instability of identity in the posthuman era. Isserley's hybrid existence challenges the notion that identity is stable and inherent, instead suggesting that it can be revised and transformed, as postulated by Posthuman Feminist theory. The novel portrays this fluidity not as a liberating force but as a source of discomfort and alienation, due to its clash with fixed notions of identity. Consequently, Isserley's body, reshaped to fit human standards, becomes a prison, restricting her ability to fully express her alien identity while also preventing her from integrating into human society. This dichotomy establishes an unstable identity.

This instability of identity is central to the posthuman condition, where traditional categories and boundaries are no longer sufficient to encompass the complexities of existence. Isserley's hybrid identity, shaped by technological and biological interventions, embodies the challenges of living in a world where the lines between human and non-human, natural and artificial, are increasingly blurred, yet reductive binary categorisations remain and are enforced. Her struggle to reconcile her internal self with her external appearance highlights the difficulties of navigating an identity that is constantly in flux, subject to the pressures and demands of both human and alien societies that are built upon binary oppositions. Ergo, her transformation and hybrid identity serve as a representation of the posthuman condition, and this condition's nonconformity with the binary understanding of reality and social order. Her altered body and the resulting internal conflicts exemplify the involution of identity in a world where technological and biological modifications blur the boundaries between human and non-human. As she navigates the liminal space between these two identities, Isserley's experience signifies the disunity between fluid identities and fixed identities in the posthuman era, which ponders the definition of the self and the role of technology in shaping collective perspectives and social orders.

Along with identity, spatial displacement is a significant element that corresponds with the posthuman condition in which Isserley is placed, with the narrative "envisag[ing] a restricting spatiality for … posthuman women" (Hortle 106). In contrast to her memories of her alien home world, which she recalls as more controlled and less variable in climate, the wild and untamed surroundings on Earth highlight her displacement, further bolstering her posthuman condition. This contrast not only alienates her further but also accentuates the freedom she experiences on Earth, despite the constraints imposed upon her. The open landscapes where she preys upon hitchhikers starkly contrast with her confined living conditions, serving as a poignant reminder of her captivity within freedom, mirroring the notion of being "caught between predacity and vulnerability" (Hortle 106). These dichotomies mirror how Isserley's natural identity and agency are mutilated and constrained by societal roles and expectations. In consonance with this, it

can be inferred that Isserley's spatial displacement serves to corroborate her fluctuating emotional and bodily state of in-betweenness.

In line with the sense of in-betweenness that characterises the posthuman condition, Isserley's existence as a posthuman entity becomes a site where biological, social, spatial, and technological forces converge and interact. Isserley's modified body, designed to function within human society, continuously engages with these forces, challenging and shaping her sense of identity and belonging, it "thus shows itself as a modifiable structure. Accordingly, the self is incarnated and remediated from the body. Feminist theories are particularly aware of the body as medium and interplay of media, of the interaction of technology and the flesh" (Monticelli 17). The ongoing negotiation between her body and these external forces suggests that identity and agency are not inherent traits but are co-constituted through relationships with these forces in a continuous process, showcasing a "strange case of posthuman subjectivity, tracing the continuities and discontinuities between a 'natural' self and a technological posthuman condition" (Monticelli 19). Consequently, her interactions become performative acts that both reflect and construct her understanding of her own agency and identity. These ongoing reflections and reconstructions of self and identity solidify her posthuman condition. Notably, it is Isserley's constant renegotiation of her identity that provides her with a unique perspective as a liminal posthuman entity.

Isserley's body, in this context, serves a dual function within the novel: it is both a mask that allows her to navigate human society and a prison that confines her alien identity. This duality embodies the broader theme of tension between human and non-human elements. On one hand, her human-like body enables her to fulfill her mission on Earth, acting as a tool that grants her access to the human world. On the other hand, this same body restricts her, forcing her to exist within the confines of a form that does not truly reflect her alien nature. This juxtaposition mirrors the complexities of the posthuman condition, when clashed with binary categorisations and is encapsulated in the passage: "In fact, whenever she found herself grieving over what had been done to her *once-*

beautiful body in order for her to be sent here… *decay and disfigurement*[13] were obviously par for the course down there" (Faber 50). This reflection underlines the tension regarding identity and transformation, revealing how Isserley's liminal experience embodies the struggle against reductive binaries that dictate material and commodified aesthetics and worth within a posthuman framework.

The notion of the body as a mask is particularly poignant in Isserley's case. Her appearance is meticulously crafted to elicit specific reactions from humans—sympathy, desire, and trust—all of which are essential to her mission. Yet, this mask also prevents her from fully expressing her true self. Isserley's alien consciousness remains hidden beneath layers of skin and muscle that have been surgically altered to appear human. This concealment is not a choice but a necessity, imposed upon her by the requirements of her role. The mask of her human body thus becomes a barrier that isolates her from her own identity, as well as from meaningful connections with others, human or otherwise. Conversely, her non-human body as a prison is equally significant. Isserley's alien nature is confined within a form that limits her abilities and negatively alters her perception of herself. Her body, designed to meet human standards, imposes physical limitations that were not present in her original alien form. This confinement exacerbates the tension between her human appearance and alien consciousness, trapping her in a state of perpetual pain and dissonance, as evidenced by her introspection: "The pain was no worse than usual, but usual was bad. She would have to get up and do her exercises, regardless of what time it was, or she would end up unable to get up at all, trapped in a cage of her own bone and muscle" (Faber 108). The prison of her body also serves as a metaphor for the broader posthuman condition, where technological and biological modifications create new forms of identity that can be both liberating and restrictive, depending on how relationality and subjectivity are emphasised within the current social order. That is to say, when society is constituted by constructs based on hierarchical binaries—such as anthropocentric and androcentric frameworks—these modifications can become tools of confinement, reinforcing divisions rather than fostering inclusive, fluid identities, a notion that encapsulates Isserley's situation. Isserley's constantly re-negotiated identity

[13] Emphasis added.

and unique perspective allows her to see and experience the world in ways that challenge conventional understandings, making her first-hand accounts of experiences a lens through which the novel disrupts traditional anthropocentric pre-conceptions.

To start with, her hybrid identity highlights the superficiality of human perception, particularly how easily humans are deceived by appearances despite human centrality having its basis in reason and language. Her ability to pass as a female human underscores how identity, in the human world, can be judged based on arbitrary characteristics rather than deeper, more substantive traits. This critique is evident in Isserley's interactions with the men she encounters, who see her only as an attractive, vulnerable woman, never suspecting the alien nature that lies beneath her carefully constructed façade. These men's perceptions are limited by their anthropocentric worldview, which assumes that human-like appearance equals humanity. However, Isserley's internal experience is starkly different from her outward appearance. Isserley's existence, hence, questions and dismantles the validity of anthropocentric assumptions and the ease with which humanity defines itself in opposition to the non-human other based on appearance.

To expand, her existence, straddling the line between human and non-human, provides a canvas through which the notion that humanity occupies a unique and central position in the world is deconstructed. The novel's speculative repositioning Isserley's species as humans, and humans being relegated to "dumb animals" (Faber 174) helps its critique here. This vertical repositioning in the species hierarchy, by questioning what it means to be a member of their species, by extension, fosters a novel viewpoint regarding what it means to be human. This repositioning is encapsulated in the following excerpt:

> The thing about vodsels was, people who knew nothing whatsoever about them were apt to misunderstand them terribly. There was always the tendency to anthropomorphize. A vodsel might do something which resembled a human action; it might make a sound analogous with human distress, or make a gesture analogous with human supplication, and that made the ignorant observer jump to conclusions. In the end, though, vodsels couldn't do any of the things that really defined a human being. They couldn't siuwil, they couldn't mesnishtil, they had no concept of slan. In their brutishness, they'd never evolved to use hunshur; their communities were so rudimentary that hississins did not

> exist; nor did these creatures seem to see any need for chail, or even chailsinn. And, when you looked into their glazed little eyes, you could understand why.[14] (Faber 131)

The defamiliarisation technique Faber employs here facilitates a change in perspective, with "our first brush with Isserley's alienness [being] caused by an unknown, and mysterious-looking, word ("icpathua"). This is likely to estrange readers from the character even further" (Caracciolo 597). By shifting the focus on Isserley's alien nature, the novel critiques the superficial definitions of humanist essentialist notions of identity, particularly in a context where physical appearance and perceived intellect – particularly language – are often equated with essence.

This invites a discussion on the stability of human identity and the artificial boundaries that separate species, directly engaging with broader Posthuman Feminist critiques of anthropocentrism. The narrative specifically interweaves the tension between human and non-human through Isserley's character, whose very existence continually questions the anthropocentric perspective that traditionally places humanity at the centre of the world. Her outwardly human form, contrasted with her internally alien consciousness, embodies a state of dissonance that aligns with the posthuman critique of fixed identities and rigid boundaries. This tension functions as both a subtle undercurrent and a driving force in the narrative, shaping Isserley's interactions and the novel's broader exploration of cross-species identities.

Isserley, accordingly, becomes a lens through which to examine the fragility of the distinctions between human and non-human. Throughout the novel, these categories are portrayed as not only permeable but also easily manipulated, as "it quickly becomes clear that Isserley and her alien species view humans more or less as humans view other animals. Whenever Isserley uses the word "human," she appears to refer to her own species, reserving a neologism, "vodsels," for specimens of Homo sapiens" (Caracciolo 599). Expanding on this, the arbitrariness of human identity and the perceived superiority of humans over non-human animals are explicitly castigated through Isserley's perspective, particularly in relation to language. Despite the novel's portrayal of humans

[14] These terms are from Isserley's own language.

as speaking beings, this linguistic ability does not afford them any inherent superiority in Isserley's eyes. She views their language not as a marker of higher intelligence or moral worth but as a mere tool, bereft of any special significance that would distinguish them fundamentally from other animals, as exemplified in the following exchange between Isserley and her employer's son:

> "No-one told me they had a language," marvelled Amlis . . . . "My father always describes them as vegetables on legs." "It depends on what you classify as language, I guess," said Isserley dismissively. The vodsels had slumped behind his handiwork, head bowed in submission, eyes wet and gleaming. "But what does it mean?" persisted Amlis. Isserley considered the message, which was M E R C Y. It was a word she'd rarely encountered in her reading, and never on television. For an instant she racked her brains for a translation, then realised that, by sheer chance, the word was untranslatable into her own tongue; it was a concept that just didn't exist. (Faber 129-130)

This perspective challenges the anthropocentric assumption that language—and by extension, humanity—is what separates and elevates humans above all other species. Their language fails to bridge the gap between species or grant them any moral consideration in her mind, reinforcing the notion that human identity and superiority are not grounded in any essential quality but are arbitrarily constructed. As Sarah Dillon notes,

> the third effect of Faber's act of renaming is an exposure and destabilisation of the linguistic process by which we create the distinction between the human and the nonhuman animal. Faber's renaming[15] demonstrates how discourse produces this distinction, drawing attention to how the difference between human animals and nonhuman animals is not one of possession of language, but one created by language. (140)

Isserley's indifference to human language underscores the novel's critique of anthropocentrism, suggesting that the division between human and non-human is not a natural or inherent one, but one that is constructed. It is ultimately a fragile boundary that can be easily deconstructed by approaching the "question of the relation between the human and nonhuman animal if language (and in fact any of the other categories humanity has hitherto fixed upon) no longer marks the division between the two" (Dillon 136). This deconstruction of human superiority, as seen through Isserley's alien perspective, highlights the precariousness of the categories upon which humanity has traditionally relied to assert its dominance. Perceived superiority of anthropomorphic physical appearance is one of these categories that Faber deconstructs.

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[15] Refers to alien species being named as 'humans', and 'humans' being named as 'vodsels'.

In this conjunction, the arbitrariness of human superiority based on appearance is underscored through Isserley's unexpected identification with sheep rather than with humans. Despite her mission to capture and harvest humans, whom her species deems as mere resources, Isserley finds a deeper kinship with the sheep she encounters in the Scottish Highlands. This affinity stems from the fact that sheep, like her original form, are quadrupeds—a physical trait that resonates more with her true nature than the bipedal human form she is forced to inhabit. Unlike humans, whose appearance she finds grotesque and whose behaviors often repulse her, the sheep evoke a sense of familiarity and innocence. This connection challenges the anthropocentric belief that human form and appearance are inherently superior or more deserving of moral consideration. Isserley's identification with the sheep, coupled with her alienation from the human form she mimics, exposes the fragility and arbitrariness of hierarchical distinctions based solely on physical traits. Her preference for the sheep over humans reveals the tenuousness of anthropocentric values and questions the very foundations upon which human superiority is often justified, as articulated by Caracciolo:

> Isserley's description of a sheep involves a complex perspectival play. In this case, however, this effect is triggered not by a change in narrative perspective (i.e., focalisation) but by the multiple epistemic and axiological perspectives leveraged by the text. On the one hand, the sheep's physical similarity with her species leads Isserley to sympathize with the animal while seemingly ignoring the pain she causes in her human victims. On the other hand, the realisation that humans routinely subject non-human animals to comparable suffering may temper our indignation at Isserley: after all, what the aliens are doing is not unlike our own raising non-human animals to fulfill our nutritional needs. The non-human animal thus stands between two divergent conceptions of the human (ours and Isserley's), potentially revealing the limitations of both. (599)

As such, the narrative emphasises the arbitrary nature of using physical appearance as a marker of moral worth, suggesting that the boundaries humans draw between species are less about inherent differences and more about superficial traits that obscure a shared capacity for empathy and understanding. In this vein, the "novel also pursues its critique of the human through repositioning human men as farmed food animals. This bold fictional premise allows the novel to problematise its key terms: "human" and "animal" are made to signify in both unsubtle and slippery ways" (Hortle 107). This repositioning of species and Isserley's selective empathy for the sheep over humans exposes the superficiality of these distinctions, challenging the notion that appearance determines one's place in the species hierarchy. This critique aligns with the main tenets of Posthuman Feminism, which seeks to dismantle hierarchical binaries and advocate for a

more inclusive understanding of identity that transcends superficial markers like physical form. By revealing the arbitrariness of these distinctions, the novel underscores the Posthuman Feminist call for a reconfiguration of ethical and ontological frameworks that recognise the fluidity and interconnectedness of all beings.

Isserley's ability to pass as human further illustrates how the boundaries between species can be blurred, thereby extending the inquiry towards the very foundation of what it means to be human. This fragility is further emphasised in the way Isserley perceives and interacts with the humans she encounters. Her alien perspective allows her to discern the flaws and weaknesses in the human condition, often concealed by the anthropocentric belief in human superiority. For instance, she is acutely aware of the men's vulnerabilities and their susceptibility to manipulation, which she exploits to fulfill her mission. This awareness deepens the novel's critique of anthropocentrism, exposing the cracks in humanity's self-image when confronted with a non-human presence that is equally, if not more, intelligent and capable. As such, "not only are anthropocentric assumptions debunked—as in animal studies and "posthumanist" discourse—but the whole discussion on anthropocentrism is shown to be ineffectual and, ultimately, irrelevant in front of cosmic realities" (Caracciolo 595). Moreover, Isserley's own experience of inhabiting a human body demonstrates the instability of these distinctions. Her alien consciousness struggles to adapt to the limitations and expectations imposed by her human form, which underlines the constructedness of the boundaries between species. This instability reflects a broader posthuman perspective that challenges fixed categories of identity and species, advocating for a more fluid understanding of existence that transcends traditional human/non-human binaries—a core tenet of Posthuman Feminist thought.

The narrative also extends its scope to analyse Isserley's identity along the gender axis to explore the concept of otherness. Her gendered experience is deeply intertwined with her alien nature, creating a unique intersection that reveals the complex layers of marginalisation she endures in both human and alien societies. This intersectionality reflects the feminist critique of how women and non-human entities are othered by dominant societal structures. Isserley's transformation into a human woman is pivotal in

this context, as it foregrounds the intersection of her gender and alien identity. Her surgically altered body, designed to conform to human standards of femininity, becomes a site where societal expectations are inscribed. These alterations are not merely superficial; they are explicitly intended to make her appear desirable to human men, further underscoring how her identity is manipulated to serve a specific purpose. This transformation compels Isserley into a performative gender role that is inextricably linked to the expectations of human society, particularly those concerning female appearance and behaviour.

In her new form, Isserley must navigate the world as a female human, subjected to the male gaze and the power dynamics it entails. Her body, now marked by traits traditionally associated with femininity, positions her within a framework where women's bodies are commodified and judged based on their ability to attract male attention. This is evident in how men respond to her, seeing her primarily as an object of desire or pity, rather than recognising her as a complex individual. The novel underscores how these societal expectations shape Isserley's interactions, compelling her to perform a gender role dictated by external forces rather than personal choice.

The intersection of Isserley's gendered experience with her non-human identity reveals the multiple layers of marginalisation she faces, highlighting how identities are constructed and enforced across multiple axes, as posited by Posthuman Feminist thought. As a female within the human world, she is subject to the societal limitations and expectations that govern all women, yet her alien nature adds an additional layer of complexity. Her body, designed to be attractive to human men, serves both as a tool and a constraint, enabling her to fulfill her mission while simultaneously trapping her within a rigid gender role. This duality reflects the intersectional nature of her marginalisation, where her identity as a woman and as a non-human entity combine to deepen her alienation. She is a "woman according to human canons and her body has become a hybrid, a cyborg where nature and technology have blended without possibility of separation between nature and culture, flesh and technology, as mediation between identity and difference" (Monticelli 8).

Isserley's transformation and subsequent experiences, in this regard, underscore how societal mechanisms perpetuate discrimination based on both gender and species. Her forced conformity to human standards of femininity symbolises the broader societal pressures that dictate how bodies should look and behave, particularly for women, echoing the notion that gender is a performative construct as suggested by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (xv). These pressures are not just about fitting in but are tied to deeper structures of power and control, which seek to define and limit individuals based on physical appearance and perceived gender roles. By exploring these intersections, *Under the Skin* offers a lens through which to examine the constructed nature of identity on both axes and the power dynamics that underpin it. Isserley's marginalisation, however, is not limited to human society; it extends to her alien society as well, where patriarchal structures similarly govern social interactions. This parallel reveals the pervasive influence of patriarchal dynamics across species, affixing another level to the complex web of disempowerment and otherness: "Being functional, Isserley is doubly alien: as a woman and as a stranger in the new world, and in her own social system" (Monticelli 15).

To start with, Isserley's experience and externally perceived identity within human society are predominantly shaped by her marginalisation, a result of both her gender and her concealed alien identity. Her surgically altered body, designed to meet human standards of attractiveness, subjects her to immediate objectification; "Her breasts were perfect, flawless; perhaps they, too, were the product of surgery" (Faber 35). The men she encounters consistently view her through a lens that reduces her to her physical appearance and perceived sexual availability, stripping away any recognition of her complex internal world, as shown in one of the hitchhiker's remarks: "You'd make a fucking good model" (Faber 136). This objectification renders her vulnerable to the reductive judgments of those around her, reflecting a broader societal tendency to evaluate women based solely on external attributes. For Isserley, this reduction to a mere body is particularly distressing, as it obscures the reality of her profoundly distressed alien consciousness, which must remain hidden beneath her human facade. The men she

interacts with perceive her only as a potential object of desire, never suspecting the convolution and danger that lie beneath her appearance.

Isserley is acutely aware of the power imbalance inherent in her interactions with human men. Positioned in a society where her value is primarily tied to her appearance, she must carefully navigate these encounters to ensure both her safety and the success of her mission. This requires her to constantly perform, using the men's expectations to her advantage. Her survival hinges on her ability to control how she is perceived, manipulating these perceptions to keep her true nature concealed. This necessity to manipulate highlights the precariousness of her situation. The men she encounters hold power over her not only in physical terms but also in their ability to define her based on their assumptions. Any failure to meet their expectations could lead to her exposure, putting her life and mission at grave risk. To explicate, beneath Isserley's human exterior lies a constant, unspoken threat: her true identity as a female alien. This concealed aspect of her being adds yet another dimension to her marginalisation within human society. Unlike other women who might share similar experiences of objectification and vulnerability, Isserley bears the additional burden of ensuring that her non-human nature remains undiscovered. The consequences of exposure would be catastrophic, likely resulting in her immediate destruction—either by humans, who, driven by xenophobia and fear of the other, would perceive her as a threat, or by her male superiors, who might consider her compromised. Consequently, this hidden threat forces her to live in a state of perpetual vigilance. Every encounter is fraught with the risk of revealing too much, and she must carefully manage not only her appearance but also her behaviour and interactions to avoid suspicion. The need to maintain this elaborate deception places an enormous psychological strain on her, as evidenced by many examples; "She was feeling ghastly again, exhaustion and an inexplicable misery throbbing in her system like poison … she went straight to bed, covered her naked body in blankets, and wept and wept for hours" (Faber 106, 181). This compounds the alienation she feels in a society where she can never truly belong. Her entire existence within human society is predicated on maintaining an illusion, a fragile construct that could unravel with a single misstep.

Correspondingly, in her alien society, Isserley's marginalisation is primarily embedded in her interactions with her peers. Despite being an integral part of her species' mission on Earth, she is regarded as an outlier, largely due to the extreme modifications she has undergone to pass as human. These physical alterations, designed to make her appear attractive and unthreatening to human males, have rendered her a figure of discomfort and disdain within her own kind. Her surgically transformed body deviates so drastically from her species' natural form that it becomes a source of alienation. To her peers, her modified appearance is seen as grotesque — a betrayal of their species' identity and integrity. Although these modifications were necessary for the mission, they fundamentally alter her in ways that are deeply unsettling to her community. This perception places her on the margins of her society, where she is seen as neither fully one of them nor fully human. The social dynamics within her alien community exacerbate this alienation. Her peers, who have retained their original forms, view her with a mixture of pity and disdain. While they recognise the sacrifices she has made for the mission, this recognition is tainted by a profound discomfort with her physical transformation. Rooted in a belief in the 'sanctity' and purity of their natural form, her deviations are perceived as a violation of what it means to be a member of their species, mirroring human's emphasis on anthropomorphic bodily structure as a marker of essentialist normative constancy and superiority over non-human bodies. Likewise, Isserley becomes a marginalised, 'monstrous' figure, regarded as a necessary but unfortunate byproduct of the mission's demands, reinforcing her identity as a constructed, commodified, profitable but dispensable tool to meet certain criteria, othered both on species and gender axes.

The stigma attached to Isserley's modified body is not merely a social burden but also contributes to a profound internal crisis of identity. In her alien society, identity is closely tied to physical form, and Isserley's transformation disrupts this connection. Her new body, designed to mimic human femininity, becomes a source of shame and confusion on also her part, as it no longer reflects her true self. This dissonance between her internal identity and external appearance creates a deep sense of dislocation, both within herself and in relation to her peers. That is to say, this internal conflict is compounded by the lack of acceptance she receives from her own species. Rather than being appreciated for her dangerous role in the mission, Isserley is treated as an aberration, someone irrevocably

altered in ways that diminish her standing within her community. The rejection she faces fuels her sense of alienation, pushing her even further to the margins of her society, where her existence in the liminal space is reinforced further on a different axis. This marginalisation is further reflected in her role within the mission. Although she plays a critical part in capturing humans, her interactions with her fellow aliens are limited and often tinged with exclusion. She is frequently isolated, both physically and emotionally, from the rest of the team, who view her as an unsettling reminder of the extremes their species has reached to satiate their desires. This isolation is both a cause and a consequence of her marginalisation, as her physically and socially constructed role necessitates her separation from the rest of her society, reinforcing her status as an outsider threading the margins of both societies. Interestingly, this marginalisation resonated with the concept of internalised speciesism.

Expanding on this, Michel Faber implicates a deeper quandary regarding the human-nonhuman differential by exploring the notion of internalised speciesism through Isserley's complex relationship with both her alien species and the humans she preys upon. Speciesism, the belief in the inherent superiority of one species over another, becomes internalised in Isserley, shaping her perceptions and interactions with both humans and her own kind. Although she is an alien, Isserley has been conditioned to view humans, or 'vodsels', as lesser beings, valuable only as a resource for consumption. This internalised speciesism is evident in her disdain for humans, whom she sees as primitive and inferior despite her physical resemblance to them after the surgery, which complicates her xenophobia further. While she views humans with contempt, she also experiences a deep sense of inferiority and alienation due to her surgically altered body. This tension—between her internalised belief in her species' superiority and her experience of being treated as lesser by her peers—adds yet another layer to her conflicted identity. In that, her internalised speciesism is directed not only outward toward humans but also inward, as she grapples with feelings of inadequacy and self-loathing. The enforced conformity to human standards of femininity is a manifestation of gender oppression that parallels her speciesism. Just as she has internalised the belief that humans are inferior, she has also internalised the idea that her worth is tied to her ability to fulfill the role imposed by her society—namely, to seduce and capture human men. Ergo, it can be argued that her

speciesism is not proactive, but reactive, a response to being coerced to conform to a tailored set of roles. This dual internalisation of speciesism and gender oppression deepens her marginalisation. She is constantly reminded of her status as both a tool for her species' mission and a being whose value is derived from her physical appearance and sexual desirability in human society while being deprived of value due to that same physical appearance in her own. She views her body as a grotesque distortion of her true form, a constant reminder of the sacrifices she has made and the ways in which she has been dehumanised by her own species. This internal conflict is further exacerbated by the gendered expectations imposed on her. Isserley is painfully aware that her body has been altered not merely for practicality but to serve a patriarchal agenda—one that values her only for her ability to manipulate and seduce human men. This realisation intensifies her self-loathing, as she struggles to reconcile her internal identity with the external role she is forced to play, "she actually meant to make herself miserable. To make herself regret what she had done" (Faber 41). The internalised oppression she experiences is thus twofold: she despises the humans she preys upon for their perceived inferiority, yet she also despises herself for being reduced to a tool of exploitation, both as a member of her species and as a gendered being. The consequences of Isserley's internalised speciesism and gender oppression are severe, leading to a profound psychological and emotional toll. Her internalised beliefs manifest in an overwhelming sense of alienation and isolation, leaving her disconnected from both her own species and the humans she encounters. This disconnection is not solely a result of her physical transformation but is deeply rooted in the internalised oppressions that shape her identity. Isserley's self-perception becomes so entangled with these oppressions that she is unable to envision herself outside the roles imposed upon her by her society, internalising and trying to conform to her constructed role in a twisted manner as a means of resistance: "Visiting crackpots aside, she did have her own expectations to live up to[16]" (Faber 91).

Moreover, Isserley's internalised speciesism reinforces the hierarchical structures that justify the exploitation of disempowered others, which, in this case, are humans. By viewing humans as inferior, she rationalises the violence and cruelty inflicted upon them,

[16] She is referring to the quota given to her in regard to kidnapping humans.

even as she suffers under her own marginalisation. She does not even regard humans being capable of meaningful communication, as suggested in one of her other interactions with Amlis Vess, "Amlis would no doubt go into ecstasy over the vodsels' ability to link a pattern of scrawled symbols with a specific sound, however guttural and unintelligible. At a stroke, she would be dignifying the vodsels, in his eyes, with both writing and speech" (Faber 129). This internalisation of oppressive beliefs perpetuates the cycle of exploitation, as Isserley's actions, driven by her speciesism, contribute to the very structures that oppress her, as "Isserley [herself] is partly responsible for these atrocities" (Caracciolo 601). Both her gender oppression and internalised speciesism are central to her experience, shaping her self-perception, interactions, and sense of identity, the accumulation of which results in results in alienation and psychological distress. The novel uses Isserley's character to explore the complexities of internalised oppression, particularly how antropocentricism and gender oppression intersect and reinforce one another. Through Isserley's tragic downfall, the narrative offers a warning about the societal structures governed by hierarchical binaries that inherently empower one side while disempowering the other[17], which perpetuates these forms of oppression and othering. This cautionary aspect extends to the potential conflicts between rigid, binary identities and the non-binary, hybrid, and liminal identities that Posthuman Feminism envisions, identities that become increasingly possible in the posthuman era. Faber in this aspect, presents a cautionary exploration of the destructive impacts of these entrenched structures including internalised oppressive tendencies.

As for Speculative Feminism's relevance, as exemplified by the novel, it plays a significant role in Posthuman Feminism by creating narratives that challenge traditional binaries and offer new frameworks for understanding identity, agency, and power. The speculative elements in the narrative –such as the portrayal of an alien species that harvests humans for meat and the transformation of Isserley into a human-like figure– allow Faber to explore themes that would be difficult to address within the confines of realist fiction. These speculative scenarios open up a space where the boundaries between human and non-human, male and female, and self and other are destabilised, aligning

[17] Articulated by Derrida above.

with Posthuman Feminism's critique of fixed, hierarchical identities. By immersing readers in a world where these boundaries are fluid and contested, the novel forces them to confront the constructed nature of these distinctions and consider the potential catastrophic implications of such categorisations in the posthuman era.

To clarify, the importance of speculative fiction to Posthuman Feminism lies in its capacity to imagine and depict alternative realities where the rigid structures of anthropocentrism and patriarchy are exposed and questioned. In the novel, Isserley's dual identity as both an alien and a woman is a product of speculative storytelling that highlights the intersectional nature of her marginalisation. The speculative elements of the novel like the technology that allows Isserley to be surgically altered to fit human standards of beauty serve as a metaphor for the ways in which societal expectations are inscribed onto bodies, often violently and without consent. This narrative technique underscores the Posthuman Feminist argument that identities are not inherent but are instead constructed through power dynamics that privilege certain bodies over others. As Sherryl Vint argues, "literature, by enabling us to imagine the world from another's perspective, enables us also to grasp something of the other's experience and to extend our moral engagement" (177-178). This notion encapsulates the premise of speculative fiction, whose ability to project possible futures or alternative realities makes it an ideal medium for Posthuman Feminist rhetoric, which seeks to reimagine a world beyond the limitations of hierarchical, binary thinking. *Under the Skin* exemplifies this capability by presenting a scenario wherein the clash between a hybrid identity and rigid categorisations yields a tragic result in Isserley.

In closing, in *Under the Skin*, Michel Faber uses speculative fiction to explore and critique the arbitrary distinctions that humans construct to justify their superiority over other species. Isserley's character, who straddles the line between human and non-human, serves as a powerful vehicle for this critique. Her physical transformation into a human female, coupled with her alien consciousness, exposes the superficiality of identity categories that are often based on appearance rather than essence. The novel's speculative elements, such as the technology that enables Isserley's transformation and the depiction

of humans as "vodsels," create a narrative space where these boundaries can be questioned and deconstructed. As noted by Monticelli, "Science fiction[18] is a sensorium of what is wrong in society, and also a potential cognitive tool for self-renewal, where biophilic and multimedial energies may find a symbolic space for expression and reintegration in the ecology of cultural discourses and through the exposition of the media structuring them" (20). This aligns with Posthuman Feminism's critique of fixed, hierarchical identities and its call for more fluid and inclusive frameworks for understanding identity, agency, and power. Through Isserley's tragic journey, Faber demonstrates the dangers of rigid binary categorisations and how they disempower othered identities, showing how they lead to alienation, marginalisation, and ultimately, destruction.

Within the broader context of contemporary British fiction, *Under the Skin* exemplifies the significance of Posthuman Feminist perspectives in challenging traditional humanist narratives and in reimagining identity and power in a posthuman world. The novel's speculative approach is emblematic of a larger trend in British literature, which increasingly engages with social and political realities through innovative narrative forms that question and destabilise established norms—be it historiographic metafiction, magical realism, science fiction. By presenting a protagonist who cannot conform to binary identities, Faber underscores the necessity of moving beyond these outdated frameworks to embrace more fluid and hybrid conceptions of self. Isserley's downfall is not just a personal tragedy but a cautionary tale about the broader societal implications of maintaining rigid boundaries in a world where the lines between human and non-human, male and female, are increasingly blurred. This narrative aligns with the thesis's overarching argument that Posthuman Feminism is essential for understanding and remodulating identity and power in the modern world, as it advocates for a non-binary, all-encompassing social order that can accommodate the complexities of posthuman existence. Furthermore, in the current literary and cultural environment of Britain, where

[18] The reappropriation of the term by later schools of feminism was touched upon. For the purposes of this thesis, the quote can be argued to encompass speculative fiction as well. The terms are often used interchangeably within the context of later feminist movements, as discussed in the previous chapter.

issues of diversity, inclusion, and the deconstruction of binaries are increasingly prominent, Faber's work serves as a critical reflection on the need to rethink and reshape societal structures to better reflect the fluidity and interconnectedness of contemporary identities.

CHAPTER 2

UNVEILING THE BINARY: POSTHUMAN FEMINIST CRITIQUE IN NAOMI ALDERMAN'S *THE POWER*

Naomi Alderman's *The Power* presents a speculative exploration of a world where the traditional power dynamics between men and women are violently overturned. The novel's premise centres around the sudden emergence of a physical ability in women that renders them posthuman entities—an electrical power that can cause intense pain and even death. This newfound power fundamentally disrupts the existing social orders as women across the globe begin to assert dominance in various spheres, challenging long-standing diametrical oppositions between male and female, human and non-human. This chapter, in this vein, explores how Alderman interrogates the constructs of gendered identities, anthropocentrism and entailing hierarchical power differentials. Thus, revealing the fragility of societal structures that have historically empowered one side of the binary while disempowering the other. The world attempts to adjust to this new reality, but ultimately fails, resulting in a societal collapse and a reset, with humanity going back to a new Stone Age after what is referred to in the novel as the Cataclysm, as explained in this passage: "The Cataclysm happened when several different factions in the old world were unable to reach an accord, and their leaders stupidly each thought they could win a global war" (Alderman 321). The novel examines the upheaval and the consequences of such a reversal from a Posthuman Feminist lens, questioning whether simply inverting power dynamics can lead to equality or if it merely perpetuates existing forms of hierarchical oppressions under a different guise.

The main catalyst of the events transpiring in the novel is a new organ, skein. Biological transformation facilitated by the skein exemplifies a posthuman advancement, markedly enhancing human capabilities and initiating a novel evolutionary pathway specifically for women. This shift challenges the foundational assumptions of gender roles that are predicated on physical strength as maintained by Connell:

> In our culture at least, the physical sense of maleness and femaleness is central to the cultural interpretation of gender. Masculine gender is (among other things) a certain feel to the skin, certain muscular shapes and tensions, certain postures and ways of moving, certain possibilities in sex. (52)

Facilitated by the reversal of physical dominance engendered by a posthuman augmentation, the narrative follows five different characters and their accounts of the global upheaval as well as their shifting identities in the speculative reality. Each character, being situated in a diverse set of socio-economic and cultural positions, offers different perspectives and insights that bolster the analysis of the novel in different aspects. Roxy is the daughter of a powerful crime lord in London. Margot and Tatiana Moskalev are politicians who climb the political ladder with their posthuman enhancements. All three characters, in this respect, navigate the male-dominated strictly patriarchal systems with their new-found powers. Allie, also known as Mother Eve, is a young woman with a history of abuse from his foster father, a deeply religious figure, who plays also a prominent role by re-situating herself in the religious hierarchy, founding a new religion that sanctifies women. Tunde, the only male character in the novel is an aspiring Nigerian journalist, trying to document the global unrest and reversal of social dynamics.

To start with, the speculative twist in the novel, the skein, serves as a radical experiment in gender dynamics, begging the question of what happens when gendered power structures are flipped. The portrayal of the dismantling and reversal of gender roles, in this respect, is explored thoroughly through the journeys and experiences of all characters. This reversal is not just physical but also deeply symbolic, challenging the entrenched patriarchal systems that have long defined human societies. As Popova suggests, “speculative fiction allows writers to create alternative realities that shine a light on the deficiencies of our own world” (3). Alderman uses this speculative biological power shift as a metaphor to examine and problematise the deeper questions about hierarchical societal structures and notions of fixed, gendered identities. This chapter delves into how this subversion and alteration facilitated by the skein transpires in multiple domains from different characters’ perspectives.

Roxy, hailing from London, is initially presented as a vulnerable character, deeply embedded in a criminal underworld dominated by male figures. In a social environment where she is disempowered and side-lined, skein acts as a profound equaliser. Her ability to generate electric shocks does not merely add to her physical capabilities; it fundamentally alters her position within her family and the criminal community. Dominant patriarchs in her family that previously overlooks or ignores her, before the shootout, encourage her with the hopes of utilising her new powers for the benefit of the family. Her immediate interactions upon being imbued with this posthuman power reflect the notion that, despite having physical superiority over them, she is still manipulated by patriarchal figures in her family, serving their interests rather than building or reconfiguring her own identity. The identity she initially embodies is a tool, a weapon used to further her family's interests, as seen in how she is encouraged before a shootout with a rival gang: "Ricky pulls her into the loo before they leave. 'You're a big girl now, right, Rox?" (Alderman 58). Traditionally, power in such environments is closely tied to physical dominance and the threat of violence, realms often controlled by men. Roxy's enhanced capabilities challenge and progressively reverse these norms, providing her with a new form of immediate and indisputable empowerment, a notion that displays the malleability and fragility of gendered identities. The skein's introduction into Roxy's life represents a crucial turning point in this aspect, renegotiating her identity as the disempowered other. Prior to this biological evolution, Roxy's influence is mediated through her familial connections rather than her personal power. Her identity is defined within the context of his relation to the criminal organisation her father and brothers operate, as evidenced by her introspection: "Her dad's body is a castle for her. A shelter and a weapon" (Alderman 56). However, as the narrative unfolds, she unshackles herself from the strings of her family that intends to use her as a weapon. The skein enables her to assert her autonomy and challenge the patriarchal structures that define her world, as observed in her reaction upon being given cocaine before the shoot-out: "She doesn't need it. Everything belongs to her, anyway" (Alderman 58). This is also vividly illustrated in scenes where she confronts threats or challenges from male adversaries; her ability to subdue them with electric shocks reconfigures the existing hierarchies, positioning her as a dominant force within and potentially beyond the crime family.

Roxy's transformation from a daughter in a patriarchal family to a leader in her own right illustrates the reconstruction of female identity in a way that integrates strength and agency, stepping outside the conventional expectations of femininity as discussed by early Feminists like Wollstonecraft. This echoes the notion that identities, including gender, are socially constructed fluid phenomena defined by performative acts and relationality rather than fixed realities. A single, arbitrary biological change is all it takes to dismantle and subvert the power dynamics pertaining to gender roles and gendered identities, which ultimately displays their arbitrariness and fluidity, especially in a posthuman world. Alderman's narrative, in this respect, employs a posthuman perspective that views gender not as a fixed biological or social category but as a fluid and negotiable concept that can be reshaped by technological and biological changes. The novel suggests that gender roles, far from being natural or predetermined, are deeply intertwined with power dynamics that can be altered through changes in the material and social conditions of existence. Roxy's journey, in this context, serves as a microcosm of broader social implications of posthuman changes, which brings the discussion to Margot and Tatiana, and how Alderman's narrative extends its scope to not just thematise, but problematise hierarchical gender roles, even when they are reversed.

Tatiana Moskalev's character arc in *The Power* serves as a potent illustration of the novel's exploration of gender role inversion and its limitations. As the wife of Viktor Moskalev, a brutal Eastern European dictator, Tatiana initially occupies a role typical of many women in autocratic regimes—subservient, marginalised, and largely powerless. Her position is emblematic of the traditional gender binaries that have historically confined women to the periphery of power, reinforcing male dominance in both public and private spheres (Archer 256). However, the emergence of Tatiana's posthuman abilities marks a dramatic shift in her status. No longer content to remain in the shadows, Tatiana seizes control of Bessapara, positioning herself as a frightening ruler in her own right. Yet, rather than dismantling the oppressive structures of the dictatorship, Tatiana perpetuates them, wielding her newfound power in much the same way her husband did—through fear, violence, and ruthless authoritarianism against the male populace. This continuation of oppressive governance under a female leader highlights one of the novel's central critiques: that merely reversing roles in hierarchies does not lead to a lasting

liberation or systemic change. Instead, it often results in the replication of the same forms of oppression under a different guise. As Andrea Raso argues, “inverted dichotomies fall short of their ambitious objectives” (70) because they fail to address the underlying power structures that sustain oppression. Tatiana’s rule is characterised by the same tactics of control and domination that marked her husband’s reign. For instance, she uses her powers to brutally suppress dissent, maintain control over the populace, and enforce loyalty through fear—actions that mirror the very patriarchal methods she once existed under. This perpetuation of violence and authoritarianism underlines the novel’s assertion that power, when simply transferred without a fundamental rethinking of its nature, remains inherently corruptive, regardless of the gender of its wielder. Alderman encapsulates this sentiment towards the end of the novel in the following passage: “Gender is a shell game. What is a man? Whatever a woman isn’t. What is a woman? Whatever a man is not. Tap on it, and it’s hollow. Look under the shells: it’s not there” (Alderman 325), ultimately criticising hierarchical binaries and empowerment/disempowerment by showcasing their unsubstantiated nature.

Tatiana’s journey, in this trajectory, serves as a commentary on the dangers of equating empowerment with the mere acquisition of power: women’s newfound abilities offer them the means to challenge male dominance, but without a corresponding shift in the underlying ideologies that govern power, namely binary categorisations, this change becomes superficial at best and regressive at worst. This underscores how deeply entrenched the diametrically opposed dichotomies and hierarchical social order are, even when the roles are reversed. Tatiana, rather than using her power to create a more just or equitable society, simply adopts the methods of the previous male-dominated regime. Her character reflects the novel’s broader critique of how hierarchical relations of power, when not fundamentally re-examined, can inversely reinforce existing hierarchies and entail injustices. The result is a dystopian scenario where the oppressed, once disempowered group become the oppressors, replicating the same structures of domination they once sought to escape.

Moreover, Tatiana's story illustrates the fragility and contingency of gender roles within the context of gendered power. Initially, her rise might be seen as a triumph over the restrictive norms that once confined her. However, the ease with which she adopts the tactics of her male predecessors suggests that these norms are not as deeply entrenched as they appear; they are tools of power that can be wielded by anyone, regardless of gender. This realisation challenges the essentialist views of gender that have traditionally justified male dominance, suggesting instead that power dynamics are fluid and adaptable to the person who holds them. The novel, through Tatiana's character, thus critiques not just the inversion of gender roles but the very idea that such roles are anything more than constructs of power—constructs that, if left unchallenged, will continue to perpetuate cycles of violence and oppression. In this light, Tatiana Moskalev is not just a ruler who happens to be a woman; she is a symbol of the novel's broader argument that true equality requires more than just a reversal of roles—it demands a complete rethinking of the social order and relations.

Margot Cleary's rise within the political landscape of *The Power* provides another critical perspective on the novel's exploration of gender role inversion and its implications. Margot begins as the mayor of a small American city, navigating a political system that is inherently patriarchal. Her initial position is one of relative powerlessness compared to her male counterparts, and she is often forced to conform to the expectations of a male-dominated political environment. However, as women across the globe begin to develop electrical abilities, Margot discovers her own latent powers. These abilities offer her a new means of influence and control, enabling her to climb the political ladder to the position of United States Senator. Yet, rather than challenging the patriarchal structures of power that have historically marginalised women, Margot's ascent mirrors these very structures, suggesting that the mere acquisition of power by women does not necessarily lead to a more just or equitable system.

Margot's political strategies are strikingly similar to those employed by her male counterparts. After embracing a "manthropogenic view of politics" (Raso 78), she starts using manipulation, coercion, and even violence to secure her position and maintain

control, tactics that reflect the same patriarchal methods she ostensibly seeks to overcome. This mirroring of patriarchal strategies in Margot's rise to power underscores the novel's stance regarding the superficiality of gender role reversals when they do not address the deeper, systemic bases of power. As José Yebra notes, simply flipping the binary is insufficient for creating meaningful change, (114-115) as it often results in the replication of the same hierarchies and abuses, merely under a different gender's control. Margot's character exemplifies this concept through her willingness to employ the same oppressive tactics that have been used against women for centuries, thereby perpetuating the cycle of domination and subjugation rather than breaking it.

Furthermore, Margot's journey reveals the complexities and contradictions inherent in the concept of empowerment within a patriarchal system. On the one hand, her rise to power can be seen as a victory for women in a society that has historically excluded them from the highest echelons of political influence. However, the methods she uses to achieve and maintain this power suggest that her empowerment is ultimately hollow, as it is predicated on the very structures of domination that have oppressed women. Margot's story thus serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of equating empowerment with the ability to exert control over others. The novel suggests that true empowerment should involve the dismantling of these structures, not simply the ability to wield them. The replication of patriarchal structures in Margot's political ascent also highlights the novel's broader critique of gendered power as a corrupting force. As Margot becomes more powerful, she increasingly adopts the disempowerment tactics of her male predecessors, blurring the lines between oppressor and oppressed. These blurring challenges the binary distinctions that have traditionally defined gender roles, suggesting that power itself is inherently fluid and adaptable, capable of corrupting anyone who seeks to wield it without questioning its foundations. The novel, through Margot's character, argues that the problem lies not in who holds power in gender dichotomy, but in how power is structured and exercised in hierarchical systems. Without a fundamental shift in these structures, the novel suggests, the same patterns of oppression will continue to re-emerge, regardless of which end of the dichotomy is in control.

Margot Cleary's character arc in, in this vein, reflects the novel's central argument that merely inverting gender roles, due to their inextricability from hierarchical oppositions, is insufficient for achieving meaningful change. While her rise to power may appear to challenge the patriarchal status quo, it ultimately reinforces the same structures of domination and control that have historically oppressed women, only reversed. By replicating these structures, Margot's story underscores the novel's critique of superficial gender role reversals and the need for a more radical rethinking of power dynamics—one that transcends traditional binaries and seeks to dismantle the systems of oppression that underpin them. Thus, calling for a paradigm shift in understanding identity, power and agency in a fluid, emergent and equitable manner as postulated by Posthuman Feminism that attempts to build a social order where identities are fluid and power and agency are relational, contingent and equally dispersed.

As *The Power* delves deeper into the implications of inverted gender roles, it simultaneously begins to blur the lines between the human and non-human, intersecting this binary with that of male/female. The novel's speculative scenario, where women's newfound abilities elevate them to a near-superhuman status, challenges the traditional anthropocentric frameworks that are intrinsically tied to patriarchy, as asserted by Braidotti: "Humanism upholds an implicit and partial definition of the human, while claiming to provide a universal and neutral representation of all humans. This dominant idea of the human is based on an assumption of superiority by a subject that is male" (16). To elaborate, women, now possessing *The Power* to inflict pain and even death with a mere touch, are increasingly perceived as aberrations or monsters by certain segments of society, while others revere them as superhumans as evidenced in Tunde's observations, "It had been sparked by the death of two girls, about twelve years old. An uncle had found them practising their devilry together; a religious man, he had summoned his friends, and the girls had struggled against their punishment and somehow they had both ended up beaten to death" (Alderman 64). This dual perception stresses the instability of the human/non-human boundary and highlights the fear and awe that can accompany the disruption of established norms. Equally importantly, the male populace, stripped of their traditional dominance, begins to experience a form of dehumanisation and is pushed to the peripheries in the new order, where their vulnerabilities render them subhuman or less

than fully human in the eyes of the new power holders in a reversed hierarchy. This intersection is crucial because it exposes how the "hierarchical organisation of differences," which Braidotti identifies as central to "phallologocentrism" ("Cyberfeminism With a Difference" 255) in patriarchal systems, extends beyond gender to encompass broader ontological boundaries. For instance, Tunde's journey from a privileged observer to a hunted, marginalised and abused figure illustrates how men are increasingly "othered" in this new world order. By portraying women as beings who transcend traditional human limitations and men as vulnerable, almost subhuman entities, Alderman both showcases the fragility of gender binaries and the very definition of humanity and identity, suggesting that these frameworks are as fluid and contingent as the power dynamics they sustain. This blurring line between posthuman/human/non-human aligns with Posthuman Feminism's argument that "human exceptionalism needs to be challenged from within by decentring anthropocentrism" (Braidotti 17). The novel accomplishes this by dislocating men from institutions the patriarchal and anthropocentric hegemonies radiate from, namely the criminal underworld, politics and religion, which brings the discussion to another central character.

Allie, who later becomes known as Mother Eve, represents one of the most complex and compelling characters in this context. Her journey from a traumatised, abused and marginalised girl to a powerful religious leader bolsters the novel's criticism of both patriarchal structures and anthropocentric frameworks. Her journey begins in an abusive foster home, a setting that epitomises her vulnerability and lack of power, causing serious trauma and potentially psychosis. She converses with a voice in her head who she thinks is the god; "Allie kept her eyes down and her face impassive. The voice said: This is the first of my gifts to you, daughter. Learn to use it (Alderman 38). The discovery of her ability to generate electric shocks marks a pivotal turn in her life, inciting her transformation into a matriarchal spiritual figure. This transformation is significant, as it represents a shift from a victim to an 'empowerer'. To elaborate, supported by her self-identification as the instrument of the god, — which, in itself can be argued to have been caused by the abuse she experiences from her foster father, a devout Christian — Allie's ability to harness and teach *The Power* of the skein transforms her into a figure of mythic proportions, as evidenced in the excerpt: "Allie thinks, I know that you speak to me in

my hour of need. I know that you have guided me on the true path. Tell me what to do now. Tell me. The voice says: If the world didn't need shaking up, why would this power have come alive now?" (Alderman 55). The oppressive power exercised on her by a zealous religious male figure turns her into a religious, maternal leader. That is to say, via the skein, she reverts her identity as the other on both an ontological level and within gender dynamics. Allie's rise to power, in this context embodies the novel's exploration of the risks involved in such empowerment. As she assumes the identity of Mother Eve, she challenges the patriarchal religious order and begins to question the anthropocentric worldview that places humans, particularly men, at the centre of ontological categorisations within the context of religion. Allie's transformation is not contained in her personal growth, it extends outward, influencing other women and catalysing a broader social movement. Once she embodies the identity of Mother Eve, her teachings, in a reactive manner to her oppression by a zealous patriarch, eventuate in a radical reimagining of power dynamics, where women, who were once positioned as the 'other,' now take centre stage as the dominant side of the hierarchical binaries, both socially and ontologically.

Mother Eve's sermons, where she refers to God as a "She" and suggests that this power has always been latent in women, challenge the ingrained anthropocentric and patriarchal ideologies that have long defined humanity. By positioning women as closer to divinity than man, sanctifying them and imbuing them with almost superhuman status, Mother Eve blurs and disrupts the traditional understanding of what it means to be human; "Tunde asks the name of one of them; "'Noor[19],' she says. 'It means the light. We are the ones who bring the light" (Alderman 65). This echoes Braidotti's critique of anthropocentrism, which she argues is intimately tied to patriarchy with its emphasis on the "Man of Reason", and male-dominated constructs of humanity that permeated the social whole for millennia as argued by Genevieve Lloyd, "The associations between "male" and "rational" and between "female" and "non-rational have, of course, a very long history." (18). This anthropocentric essentialism excluded or marginalised the 'other', whether it

[19] It is not explicitly stated whether Noor is her birth name or if she took it up later. If it is the latter, her new name can be seen as a new identity formation, thence reflecting the fluidity of identities.

be women, non-human animals, or the environment as Koggel asserts: “Along with other anti-oppression theorists, feminist relational theorists have entered these debates about the ontological status of human beings by offering relational accounts of people as necessarily born into and shaped by and acting in and through relationships” (1). Similar to this patriarchal exclusionism, as Mother Eve’s movement grows, she begins to view men as a lesser species, a reversal of the traditional anthropocentric view that places men at the pinnacle of creation myths. This movement directly challenges patriarchal interpretations of Western religious narratives centred around male figures, namely Abrahamic religions. By positioning herself at the centre of a new religious narrative and claiming a divine connection through her abilities, Allie deconstructs the traditional exclusion of women from spiritual authority and power. Her reinterpretation of religious symbols and texts serves as a denunciation of patriarchal control over religious affairs and offers an alternative vision where women hold the power to define spirituality and moral authority, as seen in the excerpt: “You have been taught that you are unclean, that you are not holy, that your body is impure and could never harbour the divine. You have been taught to despise everything you are and to long only to be a man. But you have been taught lies” (Alderman 119).

The consequent dehumanisation of men, seen in the way her followers speak of men as ‘lesser beings’ or even ‘animals,’ reflects the novel’s critique of any social paradigm that seeks to establish a rigid hierarchy of beings which Val Plumwood articulates as: “The western rationalist ideals of the human embody norms not only of gender exclusion but of race, class and species exclusion” (26). This violent reversal is encapsulated in the passage: “God of the Israelites had a sister, Anath, a teenage girl? Did you know that she was the warrior, that she was invincible, that she spoke with the lightning, that in the oldest texts she killed her own father and took his place? She liked to bathe her feet in the blood of her enemies” (Alderman 72). By placing women in a position of absolute dominance, the novel ponders whether such a reversal is truly liberating or if it simply perpetuates the same exclusionary logic that has long characterised anthropocentric and patriarchal systems.

Mother Eve's rise highlights the dangers of reversing hierarchies without fundamentally altering the structures that reinforce them. She can be argued to have failed, as her movement "fall[s] short of the epistemological shift required for a reductionist vision to be overthrown" (Raso 67). As Mother Eve consolidates her power, she begins to replicate some of the same oppressive tactics that characterised the patriarchal order she seeks to dismantle, going so far as to sacrifice men:

> You are the sacrifice and we are the recipients. 'You are the son and we are the Mother. 'Do you acknowledge that it is so?' All the men in the circle looked on eagerly. 'Yes,' they whispered. 'Yes, yes, please, yes, now, yes.' And Tunde found himself muttering it with them. 'Yes.' The young man held out his wrists to the blind woman, and she found them with one sure motion, gripping one in each hand. Tunde knew what was about to happen. (Alderman 261)

Her movement becomes increasingly authoritarian, and her followers, who initially seek liberation, find themselves enmeshed in a new form of domination, embodying a "worldview that turned out to be fraught with the perils of the dialectical paradigm they had wished to disrupt in the first place" (Raso 67). This trajectory mirrors the imbalanced dangers of hierarchical phallogocentric structures—the risk that new forms of power, if not critically examined and restructured, can merely replicate old oppressions under a different guise, namely an oppressive matriarchy. Consequently, through the character of Allie, aka Mother Eve, the novel, in an intersectional manner, scrutinises the dismantling of patriarchy and anthropocentrism by illustrating both the potential and the pitfalls of such a radical transformation. Mother Eve's story serves as a cautionary tale, a reminder that facilitating a social order without hierarchical oppression requires more than just the reversal of hierarchical power dynamics; it demands a fundamental rethinking of the structures that govern those dynamics. Without such a rethinking, the novel suggests, the cycle of oppression is likely to continue, merely with new actors in the roles of oppressor and oppressed, a notion encapsulated in this excerpt: "Bodies have been rewritten by suffering. They have no fight left. They cannot, in that moment, tell which of them is supposed to be which" (Alderman 279). This echoes the notion that as long as there are binary power relations, be it on the axis of gender, or species, there will be a perpetuation of domination and disempowerment, reinforcing the need for a critical examination of the hierarchies in favour of a new social paradigm.

Tunde's journey, in the same trajectory, provides a complementary perspective to Mother Eve's, focusing on the male experience in a world where traditional gender and anthropocentric hierarchies are upended. As an observer and chronicler, he provides a unique vantage point from which the novel explores the complexities and ethical quandaries associated with the widespread manifestation of this new power. Tunde's journey across the globe to document the effects of the skein positions him as an almost anthropological figure, as implied by the quote, "This is it. His war, his revolution, his history" (Alderman 63). As a Nigerian journalist, Tunde begins as a relatively privileged figure, travelling the world to document the seismic changes brought about by women's newfound abilities. However, as the novel progresses, Tunde's experiences increasingly highlight the vulnerability and dehumanisation of men in this new world order, offering a lens through which the novel examines the intersection of gender and human/non-human binaries. Initially, Tunde's role as an observer allows him to maintain a certain distance from the chaos unfolding around him. His perspective is one of curiosity and, at times, awe at the power women now wield. However, as societal structures shift and women begin to assert dominance in more violent and oppressive ways, Tunde's status as a man becomes a liability. Women's new power disrupts the status quo, and men, including Tunde, find themselves having to renegotiate their identities, which have been largely predicated on physical and social dominance. Men, accustomed to physical superiority, are coerced into a repositioning into a state of passivity: "When [Tunde] walked past a group of women on the road—laughing and joking and making arcs against the sky—Tunde said to himself, I'm not here, I'm nothing, don't notice me, you can't see me, there's nothing here to see" (Alderman 256). They become so disempowered that they cannot even leave their houses anymore, as Tunde observes, "It is the middle of the day and the man is frightened" (Alderman 65). The shift in power dynamics is not just about the empowerment of women but also about the systematic dehumanisation of men, who are increasingly seen as subordinates or expendable beings, as showcased in Tunde's conversation with UrbanDox who claims that "[women] will only keep the most genetically healthy of us alive" (Alderman 179). This exchange highlights that, in speculative reversal, men are situated in a subordinate position, relegated to sub-human beings whose function are reduced to their reproductive capabilities in a dehumanising manner. This unsettling reconfiguration of gender roles challenges, while criticising

patriarchal power structures on a surface level, emphasises that mere reversals in power relations should not come at the expense of another group, thereby inviting a critical re-evaluation and dismantling of all hierarchies as posited by the Feminist Posthuman framework in chapters above.

This dehumanisation of men is depicted through various graphic episodes where they are subjected to violence, fear, subjugation, and sexual assault. For instance, Tunde witnesses men being hunted down, tortured, and killed simply for being men, reflecting a strong reaction to the disempowerment women have faced with Jos – a male blogger –pointing out that "there are accounts on Tom Hobson's website of things happening in Bessapara that Jos can't really believe. Torture and experiments, gangs of women on the loose in the north near the border, murdering and raping men at will" (Alderman 252). This reversal, however, is not presented as a simple moral correction but as a deeply troubling replication of the same logic that underpinned the original oppression. Thus, Tunde's journey further complicates the novel's exploration of these themes. As Tunde and his colleagues move from being privileged observers –demonstrated in one of Tunde's accounts: "Semple shrugs. 'I'm staying. I'm a British citizen, under the protection of Her Majesty" (Alderman 239) – to a hunted and marginalised figure, Tunde's experiences, as a microcosm of the male populace, highlight the fragility of the social constructs that once assured safety and status. The novel uses Tunde's descent into vulnerability to question the stability and legitimacy of these constructs, suggesting that they are contingent on power dynamics that are far more fragile and reversible than once believed, as seen in the following discussion between men:

> What do you think will happen to the men?' Hooper shakes his head. 'Not in Iran. Not like this. They're not going to change their beliefs overnight, cede everything to the women.' 'You do remember,' continues Semple, 'that they turned overnight when the Shah fell and the Ayatollah came to power? You do remember that it happens that quickly?' (Alderman 239)

In one particularly harrowing episode, Tunde is captured and tortured by a group of women who force him to admit his inferiority, a scene that starkly illustrates the novel's position against hierarchical oppositions. Him being treated as an animal and dehumanised is not just a reversal of roles but a dismantling of the idea that any group—whether defined by gender or species—should hold absolute power over another.

Additionally, Tunde's evolving perspective on the changes he witnesses provides a critical commentary on the dangers of unchecked power. Initially fascinated by the upheaval, Tunde becomes increasingly disillusioned as he realises that the new world order is not a utopia of gender equality but a dystopia where power has simply shifted hands without addressing the underlying structures of hierarchical oppression. His journey from excitement to fear mirrors the novel's broader sentiment that equality and inclusivity cannot be achieved through the simple inversion of existing hierarchies. Instead, it requires a fundamental rethinking of how power is distributed and exercised on multiple axes, one that moves beyond the binary dichotomies of male/female and human/non-human. This shifts the discussion to the novel's sentiment for the need paradigm shift devoid of diametrically opposed fixed identities and hierarchical social constructions.

The novel, in this context, emerges not just as a speculative exploration of gender dynamics but as a critique of the hierarchical structures that have defined human societies for centuries. By exposing the limitations of simply inverting existing binaries, such as male/female or human/non-human, the narrative advocates for a more radical paradigm shift towards a relational, rhizomatic social order proposed by Posthuman Feminist thought that emphasises a dispersed, contingent and emergent means of agency, identity and power.

It employs its speculative elements to problematise hierarchical structures that perpetuate cycles of disempowerment and othering. Alderman illustrates that power and agency, when merely reversed within the same hierarchical framework, inevitably replicate the same oppressive dynamics. This is embodied in the trajectories of both Allie, who becomes Mother Eve, and Tatiana Moskalev. Allie transitions from a marginalised figure to a powerful leader, and Tatiana, who rises to power as the ruler of Bessapara, follows a similar path. However, their rise to power does not create a genuinely new social order; instead, they establish systems that mirror the very patriarchal structures they sought to

overthrow. In Tatiana's case, her regime becomes increasingly authoritarian and violent, reflecting the same control and domination that characterised the previous male-dominated systems. Similarly, Mother Eve's matriarchal system replicates the hierarchical dynamics it aimed to dismantle. The shift from male to female dominance does not dismantle the underlying logic of hierarchy; it simply reconfigures it, leaving the structures of oppression intact. Thence, suggesting that a true paradigm shift is needed to move beyond the binary oppositions altogether.

Alderman's portrayal of women as both superhuman and monstrous complicates these binaries, showing how the empowerment of one group within a hierarchical system can lead to the marginalisation and dehumanisation of another. However, the novel does more than simply depict this reversal; it critiques the very notion of hierarchical power itself. The narrative suggests that the path to true liberation lies not in reversing roles but in dismantling the structures that create and sustain these roles. In this context, the novel can be seen as a call for a Posthuman Feminist rethinking of social organisation. By dismantling the binaries that have long structured human societies—whether those are based on gender, species, or any other category—the novel advocates for a more inclusive, relational approach to identity and power. This approach does not seek to establish new hierarchies but rather to dissolve the existing ones, creating a space where multiple forms of agency can coexist without the need for domination. The failure of Allie/Mother Eve to create a new, more just order is emblematic of the novel's broader message: that any attempt to create change within the existing framework of hierarchical power is bound to fail. True equality, *The Power* suggests, can only come from a fundamental reimagining of what power means – a shift from a model of power as domination to one of power as relationality, interconnection and inclusion as Posthuman Feminism suggest.

In conclusion, the novel, via leveraging its speculative element, articulates the urgent need for a paradigm shift that moves beyond the limitations of binary thinking that Posthuman Feminist theory seeks not to reverse, but dismantle, aligning with Rossi Elanora's argument that "SF writings from the margins offer a rich critical standpoint from which

to confront and reimagine Human's hegemonic relation to its oppressed Other" (12). By critiquing the inversion of patriarchal structures and advocating for a more fluid, interconnected understanding of power, Alderman's novel aligns with Posthuman Feminist thought, which calls for the dismantling of anthropocentric and patriarchal systems in favour of a rhizomatic, relational social order. This shift is not merely about redistributing power but about rethinking the very nature of power itself, embracing a model that is more inclusive, flexible, and attuned to the complexities of identity in the posthuman age. The novel, thus, as this chapter argues, ultimately serves as both a warning and a guide, urging a paradigm shift informed by Posthuman Feminism's insights, pointing towards a renegotiation of the social structures and envisioning new ways of being that transcend the hierarchical binary oppositions that have long defined human existence.

CONCLUSION

In examining *Under the Skin* by Michel Faber and *The Power* by Naomi Alderman through the lens of Posthuman Feminist theory, this thesis has interrogated the limitations of binary-based categorisations—be they epistemological, gendered, or ontological. Both novels, through their speculative frameworks, transcend traditional definitions prescribed by grand narratives and invite a reimagining of identity, agency and interactions that are more fluid, inclusive, and adaptable to the complexities of the posthuman era.

Faber's *Under the Skin* confronts the human/non-human divide by centring on Isserley, a female alien surgically altered to appear as an attractive female human. This narrative deconstructs the concept of humanity by highlighting the arbitrary and constructed nature of the boundaries that separate humans from other beings, namely anthropomorphic bodily features and language. Isserley's compounded otherness—as an alien, a female, and a surgically modified being—intersects to create an analysis of the ways in which othered bodies are exploited and objectified. The novel questions the ethics of maintaining rigid ontological boundaries that serve to marginalise and dehumanise those who do not conform to normative human and gender identities. Faber's work, in so doing, criticises anthropocentrism and patriarchal structures alike, urging a remodulation of the hierarchical relations that intrinsically positions certain lives as superior to others. By placing a hybrid, othered alien as the protagonist, the novel subverts anthropocentric assumptions of superiority and compels a re-evaluation of what it means to be human, prompting a confrontation of the intertwined oppressions that shape identity, agency and otherness.

Meanwhile, Alderman's *The Power* introduces a world where gender dynamics are dramatically inverted through the biological evolution of women who then can generate deadly electric currents. This premise does more than simply reverse power hierarchies; it exposes the fallacy of essentialist –phallogocentric– gender constructs by showing how

arbitrary power relations are, regardless of the gender that dictates them. Alderman's work dissects the anthropocentric and patriarchal structures that have historically defined and maintained gender norms and human essentialism since the classics as Plumwood notes:

> The characteristics traditionally associated with dominant masculinism are also those used to define what is distinctively human: for example, rationality (and selected mental characteristics and skills); transcendence and intervention in and domination and control of nature, as opposed to passive immersion in it (consider the characterisation of 'savages' as lower orders of humanity on this account); productive labour, sociability and culture. Some traditional feminist arguments also provide striking examples of this convergence of concepts of the human and the masculine. (25)

These characterisations are dismantled in the novel, suggesting that power and agency are not inherently tied to sex or biology but are artificial constructs that can be upended upon an arbitrary evolutionary change. The novel also touches upon the non-human aspect as the newfound power in women creates a posthuman species, pushing the boundaries of what is considered human and challenging the stability of human identity as a fixed category.

Together, these novels emphasise the necessity of abandoning outdated epistemological, ontological and cultural binaries in favour of more nuanced, relational and inclusive philosophical frameworks that acknowledge the fluidity and mutability of identity, power and agency. They both argue for a posthuman understanding of identity—one that is not dictated by hierarchically superior notions of gender and species[20], problematising the classical anthropocentric maxim by Pythagoras which asserts that 'man is the measure of all things', challenging the "modern and especially Western liberal accounts of the human being that take the primary unit of analysis to be the individual, who is owed certain rights and freedoms to pursue a rational plan of life without undue interference from the state or others" (Koggel et al. 1).

As articulated above by Koggel, feminist relational theorists, alongside other scholars focusing on systemic oppression, have joined discussions on the fundamental nature of

[20] Embodied in the term phallogocentrism.

humanity. They present the idea that individuals are inextricably tied to relationships, emphasising that identity and actions are inherently shaped by the social and relational context into which they are born and within which they transpire. In this intersection, the speculative elements of the novels open up possibilities for envisioning realities where identity is never static, but instead is continuously evolving, influenced and reshaped by social, biological, and technological dynamics. This approach aligns with the goals of Posthuman Feminism, which seeks to dismantle the inert binary epistemological definitions and entailing social structures that have permeated Western Discourse in favour of a more inclusive, non-binary and equitable understanding of identity and relations.

The relevance of *Under the Skin* and *The Power* extends beyond their immediate narratives, as they are situated within the broader landscape of contemporary British literature and culture. Both novels reflect a growing trend in British fiction towards exploring the intersections of identity, technology, and power in a rapidly changing world. In the context of contemporary British culture, these works engage with pressing social issues—such as gender inequality, environmental degradation, and the ethics of scientific advancements—through the lens of speculative fiction.

Under the Skin speaks to contemporary anxieties about the human/non-human divide, a theme that resonates in a world increasingly concerned with the ethical treatment of animals, the impact of climate change, and the consequences of technological advancements. Faber's novel challenges readers to reconsider the boundaries that separate humans from other forms of life, suggesting that these distinctions are not as clear-cut as they might seem. In doing so, the novel aligns with a broader cultural shift towards recognizing the interconnectedness of all life forms and the need for a more ethical and sustainable approach to the environment and non-human beings. In the context of contemporary British literature, *Under the Skin* represents a significant exploration of these themes, offering a critique of anthropocentrism that is both timely and necessary.

The Power, meanwhile, resonates with contemporary discussions on gender and authority, particularly within the broader context of systemic inequalities and gender/species-based violence that continue to affect disempowered parties. Rather than merely reflecting or responding to diversity and inclusion movements, the novel proactively reimagines the dynamics of power by envisioning a world where women possess a new, biologically rooted form of dominance. This speculative scenario does not simply reverse existing power structures but rather disrupts and complicates them, compelling readers to consider the implications of such a shift. Alderman's narrative challenges the notion that power itself is inherently gendered and questions whether the redistribution of power can truly lead to equality, or whether it merely replicates existing hierarchies in new forms. By confronting said issues within a speculative framework, *The Power* contributes to contemporary British literature as a portrayal of how anthropocentrism and patriarchy, both being based on the empowerment of one party at the expense of the marginalised other, fall short in accurately defining social relations and identities.

The current literary landscape in Britain is marked by a vibrant engagement with themes of identity, power, and social change, increasingly through the lens of science/speculative fiction. Both *The Power* by Naomi Alderman and *Under the Skin* by Michel Faber are exemplary of this trend, using speculative narratives to push the boundaries of traditional literary forms and address complex social and ethical issues. These novels can be situated within the broader context of contemporary British fiction, which has been shaped by significant cultural and political shifts, as well as by the ongoing redefinition of what constitutes British identity and narrative form. Nick Bentley's book *Contemporary British Fiction* (2008) highlights several trends that are relevant to understanding the significance of *The Power* and *Under the Skin* within the current literary climate. Bentley notes that postmodernism and realism have both influenced the evolution of British fiction (30), with many contemporary novels experimenting with narrative forms to explore issues of identity, memory, and history. This experimentation is evident in Alderman and Faber's novels, where speculative elements are used not merely as a backdrop but as a critical tool for deconstructing established power structures and social norms. In contemporary British fiction, there is a notable focus on the intersection of class, gender, and ethnicity, reflecting the diverse and multicultural nature of post-colonial

British society. This focus aligns with the Posthuman Feminist critique present in both *The Power* and *Under the Skin*, where the authors challenge traditional hierarchies not just in terms of gender, but also in the broader context of human/non-human and self/other distinctions.

To elaborate, the literary climate in Britain today can be characterised by an engagement with pressing global issues, such as climate change, technological advancements, redefinition and re-situation of humanity with its surroundings in the face of these challenges. The speculative genre has become an increasingly important vehicle for exploring these themes, allowing authors to imagine alternative realities that necessitate a reconsideration of humanity's conceptions about, and relationship with the non-human world in the Anthropocene[21] epoch. This is exemplified in many novels: like *Stone Gods* (2007) by Jeannette Winterson (1959–), a speculative narrative blending eco-criticism and posthumanism to explore humanity's destruction of Earth and the search for a new home planet; *Carhullan Army* (2007) by Sarah Hall (1974–), which imagines a dystopian future where a group of women form a separatist community to resist a totalitarian government and ecological disaster; John Lanchester's (1962–) *The Wall* (2019), a reflection on climate change and immigration, where a giant wall is built to keep out 'othered' climate refugees; and Chris Beckett's (1955–) *Mother of Eden* (2015), a speculative narrative set on an imaginary planet, grappling with environmental and social exploitation in a rigidly hierarchical political framework, touching upon gender politics in the meantime. This trend extends to narratives in cinema, as seen in *The Lobster* (2015) by Yorgos Lanthimos (1973–), –whose publisher and distributor are British, as well as most of the main cast, with the movie itself being nominated as the Outstanding British Film in BAFTA awards– where the dehumanising forces of a dystopian society coercively reduce individuals to their reproductive capabilities, lest they be turned into pets, reflecting on gender and speciesism through a speculative scenario. *Ex Machina* (2014) by Alex Garland (1970–), another example, explores the intersection of artificial

[21] The term Anthropocene was coined by Crutzen and Stoermer originally in 2000, stating that human activities have significantly altered the Earth's ecosystems to such an extent that we have entered a new geological epoch (484).

intelligence, posthumanism and their relation to gender roles, questioning the ethical implications of creating female-coded cyborgs designed to serve men and how patriarchal control permeates tech giants and technological advancements. *Children of Men* (2006) by Alfonso Cuarón (1961–), based on the 1992 novel by British author P.D. James (1920–2014), meanwhile, uses a speculative eco-feminist narrative to explore themes of environmental collapse, human infertility and fragility while positioning female characters as symbols of hope and renewal in a decaying world. Both *The Power* and *Under the Skin* align with this trend by using speculative fiction to similarly interrogate further the ontological and epistemological quandaries faced in an increasingly rapidly evolving reality that blurs the line between the human and non-human world. Ergo, Faber and Alderman can be regarded as being reflective of a broader shift in British literature towards narratives that are interconnected with contemporary culture, ecology and gender/human identity debates. In a time when issues such as gender equality, environmental sustainability, and the impact of technology are at the forefront of public discourse, novels like *The Power* and *Under the Skin* provide reflections on these issues and offer novel ways of thinking about the nature and future of humanity, as well as its relationship with its surroundings.

The insights gained from this thesis highlight the importance of speculative fiction as a tool for Posthuman Feminist criticism. By challenging the boundaries that have traditionally defined human identity—be they gendered, species-based, or ontological—*The Power* and *Under the Skin* open up new possibilities for understanding the complexities of identity in the posthuman era. These novels demonstrate that identity is not a fixed or static concept, but one that is constantly evolving in response to social, biological, and technological forces. This thesis also contributes to the broader discourse on intersectional schools of feminism by emphasising the need to consider multiple axes of identity in feminist critique. In doing so, it aligns with Posthuman Feminist goals of moving beyond anthropocentric and patriarchal frameworks to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the social and material world, as well as their interconnectedness. The exploration of these themes in *The Power* and *Under the Skin* suggests that the future of feminist theory lies in embracing the fluidity and hybridity of identity, recognizing that traditional binaries are no longer adequate for understanding the

constantly fluctuating state of reality. Moreover, it also points to the potential for further research in the field of Posthuman Feminist theory. Future studies could explore other works of speculative fiction that engage with posthuman themes, thereby furthering the understanding of how literature –particularly SF genre– can contribute to the further evolution of feminist thought. Additionally, the insights gained from this thesis could inform broader discussions on the role of technology and science in shaping feminist theory and praxis in the twenty-first century. As the world becomes increasingly more influenced by posthuman alterations, the need for a more nuanced and composite approach to emergent identities and relations is very likely to grow more urgent.

In conclusion, *Under the Skin* and *The Power* not only scrutinise binary-based existing social and ontological structures but also offer a vision for a more inclusive understanding of identity in the posthuman era. By destabilising the boundaries between human and non-human, male and female, these novels challenge readers to reconsider the categories that have long defined the understanding of identity, agency and power relations. Correspondingly, this thesis highlights the significance of speculative fiction in advancing Posthuman Feminist theory and contributes to the ongoing dialogue about the future of feminism in a world increasingly shaped by technological and biological changes. The findings suggest that the future of feminist theory lies in embracing the fluidity and hybridity of existence, recognising that traditional binaries are no longer adequate for understanding the involutions of contemporary interactions between emerging identities. As such, *The Power* and *Under the Skin* stand as significant contributions to the evolving discourse of Posthuman Feminism, offering a roadmap for a more inclusive, relational, subjective and equitable understanding of identity, agency and power in the posthuman era.

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