

**TITLE:       Towards a genderless society: Androgyny in late 20<sup>th</sup> century fiction**

**Abstract:**

This dissertation will look at the concept of androgyny and the form this takes in contemporary novels, focusing on four different works of fiction taken from the late 1960s to early 2000s. A brief overview of the development of the idea of androgyny within literary texts from early creation mythology, through Plato to the fiction of the modernists provides contextual background to understanding current representations. Concepts of androgyny within contemporaneous literary and social theory will also contextualise the fictional representations, looking at how they both draw on and reflect theoretical concepts and social discourses.

Androgyny will be shown to be an archetype which takes on various forms depending on the social circumstances in which it emerges. The forms in which androgyny is manifested in the four novels under consideration here will be seen to range from the embodiment of both maleness and femaleness in futuristic androgynous humans in Ursula LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), the earliest novel analysed here, through to poststructuralist genderless and intersexed narrators in the two later novels, Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* (1992) and Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* (2002). The dissertation will look at how this is achieved within the novels through a consideration of plot, narrative and textual analysis.

Concepts of androgyny will be shown to be bound up with destabilizing the categorization of people via gender and sexuality in its ultimate aim to become obsolete as a referent in a post-gender society. Androgyny's ability to bring this about can be seen to lie in its fluid and multidimensional nature.

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## **Introduction**

In 1989 the Jungian analyst June Singer wrote that 'androgyny is not yet obvious or familiar in our time...even though it is older than history itself' (p.6). This dissertation will look briefly at that history of androgyny as it has been represented in fiction, and whether it has yet become 'obvious' or 'familiar' in literature of the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It will look at the concept of androgyny and the form this takes in contemporary novels, focusing on four different works of fiction taken from the late 1960s to early 2000s. A brief overview of the development of the idea of androgyny within literary texts and theory gives contextual background to understanding current representations and ideas of androgyny in literature; which can be seen to be based in archetypes created through mythology, scientific discourses and developments in critical theory (Singer, 1989; Humm, 1995). The four novels under analysis represent differing genres and non-genre fiction and can be seen as falling into two distinct time periods in terms of dominant critical theory. The first two books, *The left hand of darkness* (1969) by Ursula Le Guin and *Woman on the edge of time* (1976) by Marge Piercy, were written and published during the second-wave of feminism. The second two books, *Written on the Body* (1993) by Jeanette Winterson and *Middlesex* (2002) by Jeffrey Eugenides, roughly correspond to Queer Theory. This essay will look at how contemporaneous theory is reflected in, and affects, these works of fiction.

Androgyny is a fluid term, encompassing 'a vast theoretical domain' (Theumer, 2013, p.30) which has altered in meaning over the passage of time and has remained both contentious and amorphous in its definition and applications (Caselli, 2008). It will be seen that ancient ideas of the primal androgyne have combined with mid-twentieth-century ideas of androgyny to create an essentialist definition that still holds sway for many in the twenty-first-century and co-exists with post-structuralist concepts of androgyny. This is evident in the fact that the word androgyne is still in use and is itself a conflation of the two Greek words 'andro', meaning male, and 'gyne', meaning female (Kuznets, 1982, p10; Humm, 1995, p10; Wood, 2009, p.26). Thus many theorists, such as Hargreaves (2005), have argued that androgyny is a self-contradictory concept in that it resides within, or is 'bounded by the binary categories' (p.5), that it seeks to query. Contemporary representations utilize the very contradictory and shifting nature of the many historical versions of androgyny to effect a new queered androgyny that seeks to operate beyond existing categorizations.

## Background

References to the androgyne, or androgynous ideas, can be traced through antiquity, peaking at various historical moments such as in Greek mythology; in the ideas, lifestyle and works of the Bloomsbury group in the 1920s and 1930s, the bohemian revival of the 1960s, the 'Women's Movement' of the 1970s and the anti-Thatcherite arts and social movements of the 1980s (Heilbrun, 1964; Kuznets, 1982; Humm, 1995; Hoffman & Borders, 2001; Hargreaves, 2005). Singer tells us that 'Androgyny began in a mythic time so distant that one might almost say that androgyny was the beginning of mythic time' (1989, p.33) because in all ancient myths about creation there was a time before the beginning, a void or blackness or chaos, and then a time of creation when there existed the primal unity containing the potentiality of all things. This primal unity takes many forms: the pre-Hellenic Universal Egg, the T'ai-Chi figure of Taoism, the alchemic Nigredo or the God of Creation in Judeo-Christianity (Humm, 1995; Singer, 1989). Androgyny is that primal unity which then split, or fell to Earth, to form the beginnings of all life. Male and Female become two distinct entities formed along with other binaries such as day/night, sky/Earth, Good and Evil. Singer (1989, pp.61-64) tells us that the Judeo-Christian culture has two creation myths: in the first chapter of Genesis man and woman are created simultaneously and equal by a deity that is androgynous, in that it is both male and female, but in Genesis two woman is born of an hermaphroditic Adam. Translators of the Bible have 'crowded out of existence' any reference to the androgynous deity and 'overlooked the tale of the simultaneous creation of man and woman' (Singer, 1989, p.64). In many of these myths sexual division was punishment for the 'Fall'.

Plato's Symposium gives us the first mention of androgyny within Greek philosophy. In Greek mythology there were not two original sexes but three, the third being a combined male/female, the androgyne, which became split when the gods were angered and set humans up from that point onwards to forever try to reunite the two elements of the 'perfect' third sex. This reunion is seen to go 'beyond the demands of pure sexuality or reproduction' (Singer, 1989, p.83) to encompass psychological and spiritual wholeness (Chambers, 1985, p.68). The platonic myth also included the need for homosexual reunion as the other two original beings were double figures of male/male and female/female which also became split into single entities. The Platonic stage is the final stage in these early mythologies which set the foundation for psychological theorists such as Freud and Jung and created the conditions for the backlash of feminism and the Women's Movement, followed by Gay and Lesbian Rights activists and, more recently, sexual politics of the

transgender and transsexual activists, all of which are still bound up in the mythology of the binary split and its eternal search for reunification.

'The Great Mother' is also a common theme in creation and matriarchal myths, from the pre-Hellenic Eurynome to Rhea and Demeter and Isis (Singer, 1989, pp.33-41). Archaeologists such as James Mellaart have established that utopian matriarchal societies did exist in prehistoric sites across the Asiatic provinces and into Greece and Rome (Singer, 1989, p.41). In these mythical times women were dominant and feared by men who eventually sought to defeat the Great Mother to end their servitude and make way for the suppression of 'the feminine principle' which has dominated throughout the Western and Judeo-Christian world until present day (Singer, 1989, pp.6 & 49). Ideas about the traits of femininity can also be traced back to the Greek tales of Demeter, Earth Goddess, who was responsible for nurturing humanity. When the roots of our modern thinking can be traced back so many hundreds of years it is clear why these discourses came to be seen as natural and inevitable and why they have not been completely overcome in less than one hundred years of movements toward equality of the sexes and egalitarian society. Even though attempts to establish a non-binary androgynous concept of humanity have arisen at various times throughout history.

Early mythology continued to hold sway, through religious doctrine, until around the time of the Enlightenment when attempts were made to scientifically rationalize understanding of humans and their environments (Goodlad, 2005). This was the beginning of what would develop via sexology into the psychoanalytic sciences which came to pathologise non-hegemonic sexuality and gender identity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Tanches, 2011). The beginning of the twentieth-century saw androgyny linked to hermaphroditism in the works of eminent psychologists and theorists such as Freud (*Sexual Aberrations*, 1905) and Earl Lind (*Autobiography of an Androgyne*, 1918) (Hargreaves, 2005; Caselli, 2008). Wood (2009) and Dimock (2014) both discuss the prominent role played by literary figures and authors in highlighting the pathological view and the contemporaneous conflation of homosexuality with androgyny. This can be seen through instances such as the trials of Oscar Wilde, who was seen to personify the 'intermediate sex'; in Eliot's and Forster's experimentation with androgynous ethics and normative boundaries; in the publishing and subsequent banning of books such as Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, whose central character changed between male and female personas; and in Rose Allantini's 1918 novel *Despised and Rejected*, banned for its call for non-binary gender alternatives (Halberstam, 1998; Goodlad, 2005; Hargreaves, 2005).

Critics, such as Kingsley Kent (cited in Hargreaves, 2005, p.47) and Barker (2012, p.315), have said that the First World War heralded the death of any movement towards androgynous or non-binary ideas of gender and sexuality, establishing an era of aggressive masculinity and a return to strict separation of sex roles.

However, the modernist period between the wars and throughout the Second World War also brought about reactionary attempts to nullify this dominant masculinity and establish a new 'androgyny of the mind' (Woolf, 1929) most prominently through the lives and writings of the Bloomsbury group, who sought to establish an association between androgyny, as a blending of masculine and feminine thinking, and creative genius (Theumer, 2013). The most well-known literary representations of this time being Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness*; the former articulating the link between art and androgyny and the latter blurring the lines of gender and sexuality. These ideas were the fore-runners of the psycho-analytical view of androgyny in the 1960s and 1970s in which androgyny became the hope of a more egalitarian society, expressing 'a range of sexual identities, social possibilities and imaginative freedoms' (Rahman & Jackson, 2010; Hargreaves, 2005, p.10).

A key text on androgyny is Carolyn Heilbrun's *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*, published in 1964 and still relevant today. Her work epitomises the view throughout the 1960s and 1970s of androgyny as a balancing of masculinity and femininity within the individual and, by extension, within society (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Wood, 2009). As an antithesis of androgyny she cites many examples within both literature and life of the 'fatal division of the sexes' (1964, p.57) leading to such outcomes as patriarchal power, war and 'atrophy of sexual life' (1964, p.58). Heilbrun talks about the 'intrinsic virtues of either "masculine" or "feminine" impulses' both of which she argues 'humanity requires' (Heilbrun, 1964, p.xvii). Throughout the book the terms masculine and feminine (and their derivatives) are given within quotation marks to indicate her stance that whilst androgyny is an undefinable concept that seeks to free humans from 'sexual polarization and the prison of gender' (p.viii) it cannot be expressed without recourse to these terms as they are the only ones understood by society and convention. A stance that was continued twelve years later by June Singer, in her book *Androgyny: Toward a new theory of sexuality* (1976), who expressed androgyny in terms of a balancing of spiritual and psychic energies within individuals and society. Both theorists encapsulate the central thesis of androgyny as striving for an ideal harmony in opposition to the harmful effects of extremism embodied in what Sandra Bem and others would soon label 'sex-typed' personalities.

In 1974 Sandra Bem invented a psychology tool for measuring the extent of culturally defined aspects of femininity and masculinity that an individual had incorporated into their self-view or identity (Hoffman & Borders, 2001; Worell, 2001). She espoused a personality type that included both masculine and feminine traits equally, or in balance, as the most healthy psychologically. She named this balanced psychological personality androgynous (Deaux, 1984, p.109; Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p.224; Woodhill & Samuels, 2004, p.16). To either side of the androgynous ideal were sex-typed individuals who manifested only masculine or only feminine traits. Sex-typing was the process by which society 'transmutes male and female into masculine and feminine' (Bem cited in Hoffman & Borders, 2001, p.39). This work had a huge impact on the psycho-analytical world and was still in use at least into the beginning of the twenty-first century (Hoffman & Borders, 2001, p.39). The importance of this work for androgyny was that it situated androgyny within the sciences in a positive light, in contrast to earlier medical attempts to pathologise it. It also provided a necessary distancing from feminism, which had usurped androgynous ideals in the crusade for sexual equality, and paved the way for later ideas of androgyny as asexual.

### **More recent ideas**

So far androgyny had been located both bodily, through mythological unified beings, associations with a third, or inter-sex and embodied gender traits, and in the mind via psychological and spiritual harmony. Both of these views are predominantly intrinsic, essentialist ontologies although deeper readings of the theoretical works illuminates an ever-present acknowledgement of the interdependency of the essential being and the culture which defines it and Singer (1976; 1989) insisted that androgyny could only be attained when humans understood themselves as an inseparable part of the universe (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). With the onset of post-structuralism and queer theory androgyny was denigrated as an unattainable, essentialist utopia which ignored bodily specificity and the social construction of gender through dominant discourse (Halberstam, 1998, pp 173 & 215; Goodlad, 2005, pp.216-217). Androgyny was seen by theorists such as Judith Butler as being defined by the materiality of sexed bodies which located conceptions of femininity and masculinity as essentialist polarities and then sought to balance or combine the two. For Butler and others, there is no materiality that is not defined, or constituted, by discourse and therefore there can be no pre-discursive androgynous state of being (Butler, 1993; Martin, 1994; Butler, 2004; Barker, 2012).

For theorists, such as Judith Halberstam and Chris Straayer, androgyny was too broad a concept which denied the specificity of lived experience (Halberstam, 1998; Hargreaves, 2005). Post-structuralists' argument with the idea of an androgynous utopia is that, in current society, we cannot choose to be the androgynous, genderless person because society does not recognize that person as existing (Halberstam, 1998; Butler, 2004). So, like Cal in *Middlesex*, the hermaphrodite, the transgender, the transsexual and anyone whose identity does not align with hegemonic heteronormative categorisations, must choose an existing gender category whilst engaging in attempts to change society's view of gender. Only when accepted hegemonic norms change will the androgyne be possible. However, the androgyne, for some people, undermines their own sense of being and queers the very differentiation by which humans have identified themselves (Butler, 2004, p.1) and the relations that allow othering and thus hierarchical society. Goodlad (2005) and Moi (2002) point out that as capitalism rests on hierarchical society it would seem that androgyny, the genderless, undifferentiated personhood, cannot exist in a capitalist society. Thus the settings of many fictional androgynous societies have been in science-fiction, future-worlds and 'alternative' societies that are open to less power-based views of humanity, as in LeGuin's *Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and Piercy's *Woman on the edge of time* (1979).

Where later contemporary novels are androgynous, it is often through structure and language, extending Irigaray's and Cixous's ideas of a feminine narrative that would subvert hegemonic patriarchal structures, to a genderless narrative (Greene, 1990, pp.83-84); or by having characters that refuse to be categorised by, or perform, gender as defined by society. Judith Roof suggests that Samuel Beckett's work provides examples of narratives that 'suggest a degendering' and a 'transformation of the heteronarrative' (2002, p.50). This reflects the queer theory perspective on androgyny taken by theorists such as Halberstam (1998) and Gayle Rubin, who recognise a new androgyny that encompasses the wide variety of existing and emerging modes of 'gender variance' (Park, 2006; Leitch et al, 2010). Halberstam (1998, p.164) argues against any fixed notions of gender categorisation but simultaneously asserts the need to recognise specific, lived experiences of gender categories such as female masculinity, the title of her book (Goodlad, 2005, p.221). Androgyny, it would seem, is alive and well in the new post-structuralist era of queer theory, adapting as it has done throughout history to encompass the prevailing conception of humanity, which has always been its central precept. It appears that to find contemporary androgyny one has to pick a route through gender performance, where the performances blur and become unsustainable and therefore open up

space for a new 'ungender' that is at once all genders and none. It must give viability to all currently recognized gender categories and non-recognized categories (Halberstam, 1998, p.162). In Butler's terms, 'paradox is the condition of its possibility' (2004, p.3). Only when the generation of second-wave feminists are a distant memory is this likely to become a social reality because ideas generally move from theory to social acceptance over many generations. Until that time they creep into society at the fringes, within groups that already feel outside the norm. This can be seen in the path of twentieth and twenty-first century literary representations of androgyny which began with futuristic settings and have gradually moved into the fringes, in 'gay' and 'lesbian' identified fiction, such as the novels of Leslie Feinberg and Jeanette Winterson, and in other recent novels that refuse genre categories (Roof, 2002). A refusal of genre can be seen as a step towards a refusal of gender through a 'blending of different genre conventions' to allow 'resistance to hegemonic ideology' (Baccolini, 2004, p.520).

So, within the timespan of the novels considered here there are two main distinct versions of androgyny. The earlier definition of it as a balancing of masculinity and femininity within one individual and, by extension, in society. The later version sees androgyny as a category beyond gender, a refusal to accept or perform gender at all, a playing with or queering of social perceptions of gender. Via critical analysis of the four contemporary novels and relevant attendant literary and social theories, this essay will propose that the earlier view of androgyny still holds sway contemporaneously with the newer, queered view and, further, that these two can and should be considered together as merely two aspects of a concept that has no fixed interpretation (Hargreaves, 2005; Brennan & Hegarty, 2012). In fact, as Woodhill & Samuels (2004, p.23) state, androgyny, like queer theory, is fluid and multidimensional in its very nature. Since both approaches to androgyny place it in relation to gender issues, my review of the novels will necessarily investigate how gender is dealt with in each novel.

### **Chapter 1: Fiction of the 1960s and 1970s**

In a 1974 special edition of the *Women's Studies Journal* devoted to 'Androgyny papers' Cynthia Secor reminds us that the concept of androgyny as an individual's capacity to 'embody the full range of human character traits, despite cultural attempts to render some exclusively feminine and some exclusively masculine' (p.139) was enjoying renewed interest. This was also the era of psycho-analytical scientific representations of gender; the BEM scale and Personal Attributes Questionnaire could measure the extent to which individuals were masculine or feminine, with the aim for mental health and well-being a perfect balance of the two (Hoffman & Borders, 2001, pp.41-43). Androgyny was seen as a real bodily capacity and yet its fictional representation tended to be created within science fiction, such as the Gethenian race in *The left hand of darkness*, or in alternative fantasy worlds such as that in *Woman on the edge of time*.

#### **Ursula LeGuin, *The left hand of darkness* (1969)**

In LeGuin's science-fiction tale of one branch of humanity sending an envoy to the furthest reaches of its universe to form peaceful and co-beneficial alliances with their inhabitants, we can see strong influences from the prevailing theoretical, scientific and social movements of the time. Theorists such as Singer (1976, pp.165-184 & 205-219) and Heilbrun (1964, p.xviii) linked the balancing of masculinity and femininity to create an androgynous whole with broader concepts of cosmic balance, as epitomised by philosophies such as Taoism and Hinduism (Hargreaves, 2005, p.97). This corresponded to a general trend within the public sphere, via cult popular figures such as The Beatles and the Hippy culture, of looking towards eastern beliefs as an alternative to the oppressive capitalism and aggressive patriarchal society. In *The left hand of darkness* we can see many examples of this belief in the circular nature of life and the redeeming forces of balance within the whole. The structure of the book is circular. There is no straight path for the characters. Escape from prison and certain death leads to death for one and prison for the other of the main characters. After an arduous journey into the hinter-lands, through personal discovery, hunger and near-death experiences, they return to the beginning of their journey in material terms and in physical space; only the inner path of self-discovery and co-operation between people has progressed. LeGuin (1989) called this balancing device of the novel a balance of 'the circular against the linear' (p.141).

Within the text itself there are many references to mystic circles: the circle of life, Yin and Yang, the wheel of fortune. In fact, the title of the novel is shown to be a line from

Gethenian mythology; a mantra that reminds their people of the inevitable renewal of the life-cycle and the balancing forces of natural polarities:

Light is the left hand of darkness

And darkness the right hand of light.

Two are one, life and death[...]

Like the end and the way. (LeGuin, 1969, p.190)

The balance is always achieved by the combining of binary opposites, which corresponds to the prevailing concept of androgyny as the balancing of male and female aspects of character. The two central characters at times form a physical sharing, of body-heat and mind-speak, but also balance each other in terms of height, strength and temperament. As the opposing versions of humanity they also share an equal but opposing interest in each other's culture: one from the perspective of trust and one from mistrust. Polarities that are gradually overcome through shared experience, so that at the end of the book Genly explains to the king of Karhide that both himself and Estraven became united in serving a greater authority than his, 'Mankind' (p.238), and a greater cause than local politics, to create a situation in which all peoples could 'find unity' (p.238).

These two key characters, Genly and Estraven, representatives of Earth and the 'alien' world Gethen, discuss their world's two contrasting approaches to dualism. On Gethen, Estraven tells us, dualism is still an essential of life 'so long as there is *myself* and *the other*' (p.188); leading us to muse along with Genly that dualism is 'wider than sex' (p.188). In this respect LeGuin has opened up and aligned the androgynous whole with categories of race, age, culture, discourse, even sanity (the king of Karhide and his cousin Tibe are regularly described as insane) and other identity locators that theorists and activists are often accused of ignoring in their focus on issues of gender and sexuality (Hillman, 2013, p.71). However, in this book the dualism of humanity is focused on the sexed body, physiological differences, even tone of voice, and the processes of child-birth and nurturing. Wholeness is achieved from two within one, as Genly says of the Gethenian people, who are both male and female, masculine and feminine, capable of giving life both by insemination and birthing children. The one biological aspect which had stood in the way of a true androgynous life for both women and men has been annulled by making the Gethen people biologically capable of either or both.

By the end of the novel the dual-sexed Gethenians have come to seem 'normal' and 'right' to Genly. His own people, coming off the spaceship, seem strange and unbalanced, 'two

different species' (p.241). Genly's inner journey to acceptance of these initially alien people seems to offer a possible way forward for humanity. In this part of the novel the language becomes more 'feminine', emotional and bonding, as Genly attunes to Gethenian ways and appears to embrace his own femininity. In the words of Carol Pearson (1977), he 'becomes fully human' (p.60). In terms of narrative structure it feels a little understated and a little too late as the reader is well entrenched in masculinity by this stage. In terms of plot this embracing of femininity, or achievement of balance, by Genly comes too late as well. He feels love for Estraven at the end of their journey together and is bereft of Estraven's company when he is shot as a traitor, finding no solace in visiting Estraven's birth family. Again, this could be read as a message to readers to find balance before it is too late for humanity and leaves us with no form of solace. The "message" of the book, it seems, is not the focus on physical and cultural differences as barriers or as the basis for discrimination, but that understanding, acceptance and a willingness to absorb elements of each other's differences is what is needed to achieve harmony among all peoples (Hillman, 2013, p.69). Yet Genly still refers to the people of Gethen as 'a new mankind' (p.242) setting them up in comparison to the linguistically privileged patriarchal humanity of the known world of the readers.

The book exemplifies the difficulty of portraying androgyny through a language based on dualism. The androgynous Gethenians read predominantly as male characters, mostly due to the use of the masculine referents he, his, man, son. At no point is a character referred to as she or as having a daughter. This seems a major oversight of LeGuin, who was sympathetic to the Women's Movement and its political aims; saying of herself 'I didn't see how you could be a thinking woman and not be a feminist' (LeGuin, 1989, p.135). However, when LeGuin was writing this novel 'he' was the accepted 'generic pronoun' and her background in formalized French and Renaissance literature caused her to take this stance in her 1976 essay *Is Gender Necessary?*: 'I call Gethenians "he" because I utterly refuse to mangle English by inventing a pronoun for "he/she"' (p.145). A stance she later retracted, acknowledging that the use of 'he' was political and did not embrace women within it but 'disappeared' them (LeGuin, 1989, p.2). This later stance corresponds to that taken by Marge Piercy who did invent a new genderless pronoun 'per', which linked to the referent person, in her novel of polarities and utopian alternatives, *Woman on the edge of time*.

There is also a masculinity to the narrative structure of *Left hand of darkness*, in that chapters are laid out mainly as reports and documents, utilizing masculine speech-conventions in which language is used predominantly to convey knowledge, question,

impress and show dominance (Wood, 2009, p.130). In contrast to this masculinity is a balancing feminine plot circularity, the traditionally 'feminine ending' of the book which avoids closure, and the 'co-presence of multiple narratives' which 'evoke an insistent sense of relativity' (Roof, 2002, p.62). LeGuin (1989) states that the novel was a 'thought experiment' (p.137) based on ideas of exploring the meaning of gender and sexuality in individual lives and in society and in trying to expose the 'simply human' qualities that she assumed would remain if sex/gender were taken out of the picture. She acknowledged the difficulty of portraying such thoughts via the existing dualistic language, saying that one of the tasks of science fiction is to question 'a habitual way of thinking' through 'metaphors for what our language has no words for yet' (LeGuin, 1989, p.137).

Applying a post-structural, Barthian approach to the novel it becomes apparent that it is actually the binary-entrenched thought habits of the reader, through social conditioning, that make the characters appear masculine because they are shown in 'roles that we are culturally conditioned to perceive as "male"' (LeGuin, 1989, p.145). LeGuin accedes that 'for the reader I left out too much' because the Gethenian characters are not shown 'in any role that we automatically perceive as "female"' (1989, p.145). Her androgynous thought experiment was almost beyond its time. An heuristic attempt to encourage readers to examine existing culture and question some of its basic 'certainties and universalist assumptions' (Baccolini, 2004, p.520), particularly around binary concepts of gender, to 'broaden the definition of human' (Hillman, 2013, p.69). LeGuin herself stated that she was not predicting that humans would develop into Gethenian-type beings or that they ought to be androgynous, but, in accord with Singer, that 'we already are' androgynous (1989, p.133). Singer (1976) believed that we are all naturally androgynous but that cultural discourses and practices demand unbalanced, sex-typed behaviours within the binary code masculine/feminine.

In *The left hand of darkness* the king of Karhide acts as a foil to the circular progression of the book towards this acceptance and understanding of an androgynous unity or balance. He represents the short-sighted, mistrusting element of society that sets his shields against progress because he does not understand it. In searching for balance within humanity we must acknowledge that there are those who represent extreme polarities. To achieve androgynous balance the Gethenians also experience extremes: of sexual arousal, when they are in kemmer, and serenity. The Foreteller characters provide balance of thought, answering the Gethen's philosophical uncertainties. The Commensals of Orgota represent a move towards a masculine power-based society, recognisable in our own Western patriarchies. They seem to stand as a warning that even when physical, biological balance

is achieved one must continue to pay attention to and work towards balance within culture to maintain harmony. In her 1976 essay LeGuin says that, in *The left hand of darkness*, she wanted to show the 'delicacy of a balance' within society and that this balance 'is a precarious state' (p.141).

**Marge Piercy, *Woman on the edge of time* (1976)**

Written seven years after LeGuin's novel, there are a surprising number of parallels in narrative structure and allusions to androgynous themes of balance and unity. The 1970s psychoanalytical interpretation of androgyny as a balance of masculinity and femininity is still apparent as a key theme in both plot and structure. Structurally, this balance is achieved by an alternating of setting between the harsh, masculine, here-and-now of the central character's life and the more feminine future-world that she visits through cerebral time-travel. The 'now' of the novel is shown as an uncaring society, lacking any nurturing, where anyone who is not at the top of the social hierarchy (not a wealthy, white, male) is preyed upon by those above them in the social order. Therefore being a poor, 'brown' Latin-American female puts Connie at the bottom of the heap, abused and beaten by men, abandoned by her family, experimented on by state doctors, left to either recover from her injuries or die locked away out of sight in a 'mental hospital'.

The contrasting feminine utopian future-world is nurturing, egalitarian, based around emotional, sensitive responses to human, animal and environment and is peopled by non-gendered humans who can all choose to be 'mothers' or not. Child-birth has become an external bio-chemical process that takes place in large tanks in a specially designed birthing-house (pp.101-104). So, as in *The left hand of darkness*, the divisive bodily capacity for child birth as a basis for naturalistic arguments for the subjugation of women has been removed to allow for an egalitarian, androgynous society. This is a necessary plot device. As Alsop et al point out, 'Maternity itself is often problematic for egalitarian feminists' (2002, p.184). The androgynous society is achieved not only through the genderlessness of the people but also in their approach to life: they 'think art *is* production' (p.267) and value it as much as work in the fields or on a scientific project. No role or person is seen as any more important than any other, and 'tasks which women commonly perform' in a dualist society are seen 'as being a public responsibility' (Alsop et al, 2002, p.183). Each person is allowed to follow their dream or calling and not expected to spend all of their time on just one occupation but to share in the work of growing food, making council decisions, becoming mothers, helping to look after all children and being creative. Thus balance is achieved

through variety and not the equalising of binary opposites. As Woodhill and Samuels (2004) point out, 'androgyny is itself a multidimensional identity' (p.23).

This novel, written in the 1970s, shows elements of the newer androgynous ideas to emerge out of late twentieth-century post-structuralism and queer theory, in that the androgynous future people exist outside of our contemporary gender binary masculine/feminine. Although Connie attempts to categorize them as male and female they see each other merely as 'people' who may take on masculine or feminine traits variously according to the role they are performing. There is no fixed idea of sexuality. Any persons can 'couple' and their genderless state means that there are no notions of heterosexuality or non-heterosexuality, replacing the binary with an acceptance of variety and individuality: the specificity that Halberstam sees as missing from current categorisations of sexuality and gender, and her interpretation of androgyny, in her book *Female masculinity* (1998, pp.175, 215). Halberstam contradicts herself when she states that 'certain attributes long defined as masculine' need to 'become human qualities and not those of a particular gender' (1998, p.272). This latter statement corresponds to the utopian androgynous future world in *Woman on the edge of time*. As the character Parra explains to Connie: 'All coupling[...]goes on between biological males, biological females, or both. That's not a useful set of categories.' (p.214) It also encapsulates the idea of androgyny espoused by Singer in 1989 as an 'archetype, rather than[...] merely a social phenomenon' (p.ix). Singer explains that an archetype is 'a consistent core idea that expresses itself in a variety of images and behaviours which depend upon the cultures in which they exist for their content' (1989, p.x).

*Woman on the edge of time* is the only novel of the four under consideration that successfully extends the genderless notion into the language of the text. Characters in the future-world are referred to as 'person', with the attendant pronoun 'per'. Thus language creates another balancing device within the novel, using existing masculine and feminine pronouns in Connie's present-day sections of the story to contrast the genderless pronouns of Luciente's world. In fact, Piercy could be said to have experimented with a form of feminine language, in the style of Cixous' 'écriture féminine', to represent her androgynous future-world (Bentley, 2008, p.13).

Another aspect of plot-balance comes from the masculine alternative future-world that Connie visits only once. To create this Piercy has used the more traditional science-fiction technique of extrapolating present society to its perceived logical extremes; something that LeGuin had refused to do in her work, saying that 'science fiction is not predictive; it is

descriptive' (1989, p.130). The world Piercy takes us to is believable and recognizable, showing us the extremes of the worse parts of twentieth-century society: hierarchy, dehumanizing of all but the richest, a world built around greed and money and the god of market economy in which everyone is owned by a corporation (pp.287-301). Thus, making it both predictive and descriptive.

In its structure the novel is both androgynous and not androgynous simultaneously. We have the balance of opposites, the masculine and feminine future worlds, but they are not in balance within the structure of the book. The novel is weighted heavily in favour of the predominantly feminine world of Luciente. This may be to readdress the overall balance against the harsh masculinity of the book's present. Connie sees the feminine future world as having gone 'Forward, into the past' (p.70). This appears to be a deliberate ploy to show that not all changes, or things that our society sees as progressive, are positive, and that we must be ever vigilante to ensure that we are advancing society in the right direction. This accords with Piercy's personal view that 'science marches where people push it. There is no inevitable way of living' (Lyons, 2007, p.331). This technique of looking backward to find a better future relates to theoretical and social ideas of androgyny at the time; many of which looked back into history for answers to the problems of social inequality (Hargreaves, 2005, pp.6-7).

Contemporary views of androgyny see it not as a balance of binary forces but as existing outside the gender binary, refusing to take part in it and yet relying for its existence on that very binary as a definition of opposition. We can see that Luciente's world still has biological males and females, still has people of varying skin colours, ages, strengths and weakness, and still has 'mental illness', as we would term it; but all of these are regarded as interesting aspects of individuals and each is valued simply as a 'person'. The only categorization is in terms of 'what they're good at and bad at' (p.214). So binaries exist, but they do not define people or organize society. This is what is at the heart of true androgyny, the encompassing whole that exists in balance but contains within it recognition of all manner of variety and personal specificity.

This is echoed in the structure of the novel, which revolves around two simultaneous stories: the harsh struggle for survival of poor 'Chicana' in a rich white 'Anglo' dominated society, and the utopian future world of equality where no sex, race, colour or age dominates. Where all have equal rights and responsibilities, and yet even in this utopia they are engaged in a war against those who would return to the 'old ways' of power and hierarchy. The androgynous balance has been taken to a global level where the Yin and

Yang elements, the harsh 'masculine' and the yielding 'feminine' are represented by battling societies.

Finally, the narrative structure is circular or even spiral. Connie's tale begins half-way through the story-line with the events that led her to being institutionalised. From here it goes back to her earlier life, and the first time that she was locked into a 'secure' ward of a mental 'hospital', until the narrative returns to where it started and then beyond. Through Connie's experiences whilst locked away, her brief escape and return to yet more barbaric treatment at the hands of the medical staff, who are trying to turn all the patients on Connie's ward into a form of human robot, chemically and electrically controlled via brain implants. The fact that many of the inhabitants of the 'masculine' alternative future-world are cyborgs seems not only to underline the appeal of the 'feminine' future-world but also to emphasize the urgency of creating it in reality. For the present of the book is already beginning to look like the nightmare alternative future which 'will come to pass if the needs of patriarchal corporations take precedence over human needs' (Gardiner, 1983, p.75).

At the end of the novel Connie is back where she started, being controlled and abused. It seems to be showing that giving in to the negative, 'masculine' response of using violence, only returns us to the problem; for Connie ended up back under institutional care because she fought back against the system and killed several doctors. Only feminine, or balanced, responses offer the answers to the problems of 1970s society. In this the book can be seen to be very much a product of its time. Written at the height of support for, and inception of, many humanitarian and ecological protest groups who were seeking not only alternative societies but alternative ways to solve existing problems at both local and global levels: groups such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, Women's Movement, Lesbian and Gay Rights groups.

### **Conclusion**

Both *Left hand of darkness* and *Woman on the edge of time* are what Moylan termed 'critical utopias' which deviate from previous utopian literature by 'presenting the utopian society in a more critical light' (cited in Tabone, 2013, p.187). The main way that both books do this is by holding up their alternative societies not as destinations but as a device for readers to examine their present to deduce which elements of society could produce a more desirable future for all humanity. In both novels this element is predominantly the 'feminine', which is seemingly offered to balance our existing 'masculine' world and therefore to work towards an androgyny created by the reader beyond the texts themselves. Neither book presents a traditional utopia; this is by design. As LeGuin pointed

out 'All it tries to do is open up an alternative viewpoint' (1989, p.146). Both novels also have a circular structure and open, inconclusive endings which seem to imply that what proceeds from here depends on the reader's interpretations and actions. In both these aspects the books can be read as social projects, which accords with LeGuin's emphasis that *The left hand of darkness* was a 'thought experiment' (1989, p.137) and is in keeping with the fact that both LeGuin and Piercy were involved with the feminist movement to varying degrees.

## **Chapter 2: Fiction of the 1990s and 2000s**

In social terms the contexts for the following two novels changed dramatically from that of the preceding chapter. The socialist-based agendas of the Women's Movement and other social and environmental protest groups had been subdued and pushed to the very margins of society by the Thatcherite policies of the 1980s, which were still very dominant throughout the following two decades. The voice of feminism had been replaced by the voice of the global corporation. Greed and individualism were pervasive. Only at the end of the twentieth-century does the voice of new sex and gender based politics begin to emerge on the social scene.

### **Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body* (1992)**

Since its publication in 1992 critics have argued as to whether *Written on the Body* can be read as an androgynous text (Hargreaves, 2005, p.119). The arguments centre on critics interpretations of androgyny. The book's approach is certainly different from the previous two novels under consideration here. It does not seem to question the gender binary per se. The gender of the lovers and their husbands is not under debate. However, it does show the destructive nature of both the binary gender system and heteronormative sexuality (represented in this book by heterosexual married couples). As the book is set in the present of the late twentieth-century there are no futuristic bodies that have done away with biological capacities such as childbirth. Instead it seems to be directing the reader to pay close attention to its language, to look beneath what appears to be at first glance a heteronormative love story. This accords with the change in theoretical perspective by the 1990s to post-structural viewpoints, such as those of Foucault, Derrida, Lacan and Butler and the views of the French Feminists such as De Beauvoir. Sarah Salih explains that these poststructuralists saw all existence as only interpretable, and thus experienced, through language and discourse (2002, pp.61-91).

Within the novel's word-play are clues to the fact that hidden beneath the veneer of society are the variety of gender variances and sexual specificities that constitute lived experience. We cannot pin down a masculine or feminine gender for the narrator precisely because no-one can be exactly pigeon-holed in this way by examining the details of their lives. In June Singer's words 'we are all androgynous' in the minutiae of our lives (1989, p.121). It is only society that needs to categorize people. In *Undoing Gender* Butler recognizes this variety and questions 'how might the world be reorganized so that this conflict can be ameliorated' (2004, p.5). Winterson offers us not a way to organize the world, but a way to view it in which

gender becomes secondary and, as in Piercy's novel, not a useful category. In Butler's terms, society or culture creates us through discourse which is 'beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author' (2004, p.1) which dictates the performativity of our lived experience. Winterson seems to be showing us that it is possible to both live within these culturally defined normative terms that are 'written on the body' (Salih, 2002, p.65) externally and to query the very same discourse through the specificities of lived experience which do not correspond to binary gender attributes. Through thoughts, words, actions and emotions that are 'human' rather than 'feminine' or 'masculine'. For example: 'I'd rather hold you in my arms and walk through the damp of a real English meadow' (p.97)

In *Undoing Gender* (2004) Butler realises that the time has come for alternative and infinitely various views of gender to be highlighted 'within the context of lives as they are lived' (p.8). Fiction writers such as Winterson have taken up this challenge by creating novels that play with notions of gender within realistic, recognizable social settings as opposed to those of the mid-twentieth-century that only felt able to situate it in futuristic fantasy. Detloff (2007) sees *Written on the Body* as opening up space for 'thinking of the future as open to adaptation and change' (p.149) through the use of 'characters who are difficult to place in predictable categories of gender and sexuality' (p.151). Front (2007) suggests that this 'thinking beyond dichotomies' requires 'a new notion of temporality' (p.13), which Winterson introduces through disruptions to the novel's time-line.

The narrative structure appears linear, in the unfolding of the love-story with Louise, but this is disrupted, and the time-line constantly disturbed, through narrative devices of analepsis, reliving of memories as if in the present-tense. Prolepsis is also used when the narrator imagines alternative future realities with and for Louise, only to disavow them shortly afterwards. Near the end of the novel, when the narrator is deciding to leave London completely and start a new life, we're told 'there's a light on in my flat and you'll be there', followed at the beginning of the next paragraph with 'The lights are out [...] you won't be back' (p.181). Detloff (2007) sees this as one of Winterson's uses of 'Einsteinian' [sic] non-linear time theory to queer heteronormative views of experience, which works to enhance the opening up of gender possibilities (pp.149-151).

Gender is not the only dichotomy under subversion in the novel. Expressed mostly through irony, there are instances of opposing interpretations occurring in one statement; words cast in ironic juxtaposition with action and oppositions of character traits. Louise, the narrator's lover, can 'read' the narrator with her hands on his/her

body. However, the narrator is a translator of Russian texts but cannot interpret Louise, misreading her intentions on many key occasions. For instance, when Louise tells the narrator 'I'm going to leave'. She is leaving her husband but the narrator interprets this as her leaving their relationship. When she explains this, her/his response is not joy but 'This is the wrong script' (p.18). Later, the narrator tells Louise 'You deciphered me and now I am plain to read' (p.106). This is a misnomer. The language of the novel is plain to read but the narrator remains indecipherable to the end. Even the narrator's self-descriptions deliberately set up positions of antithesis. 'I had Mercutio's swagger' (p.81) is followed shortly by 'I quivered like a schoolgirl' (p.82).

*Written on the Body* shows the material body as a text that can be both read by a lover, 'I didn't know that Louise would have reading hands. She has translated me into her own book' (p.89), and be written upon by life experiences as well as discursively constituted by society. In Lindenmeyer's view, 'the distinction between "body" and "text" becomes blurred' (1999,p.55). Thus the body is the site of ever-changing possibilities in the same way that the novel has a range of possible interpretations depending upon who is reading it. Both the novel and the bodies of the characters within it invite the reader to create possibilities beyond the existing gender binary and heteronormative sexual categorization. The careful use of language supports this further through the use of first-person narration, which allows Winterson to avoid the use of gender-bound pronouns for the narrator. Other characters are referred to as 'he' or 'she' but the narrator is only ever 'I' or 'you' or simply engages with other characters without them addressing him/her.

Throughout, the novel undermines accepted (heteronormative) views of society: if the narrator is female, how is she able to seduce, or be seduced by, a stream of married women? Is bisexuality so common and yet unnoticed? This is perhaps the point: the highlighting of the range of variance within and between individuals that both encompass and move beyond accepted traits of gender and sexuality. The assumptions upon which Eurocentric Western societies base ideas of normality are constantly brought into question. This uncertainty over the narrator's sexuality is created by the play with gender norms and leads us to see 'the artificial and vulnerable character of gender constructs' (Breger, 2008, p.165) in contrast with the 'plurality of the selves within the subject' (Front, 2007, p.13) of the narrator. There is no possibility of reading the narrator as a heterosexual male. The only thing that we can say with any certainty is that the narrator has had sexual relations with both males and females.

Genre conventions are also brought into play in this constant queering of expectations. On the surface the novel reads as a timeless romance of a commitment-phobic narrator who meets the woman whose love overcomes all previous character flaws and wins the day. A novel about love, obsession and infidelity. But always, equally as prominent, a detective story in which the reader frustratingly seeks to pin down the narrator and give them an identity in terms of gender and sexuality. References to sexual activity are always so carefully worded as to make it impossible to say with certainty whether they are being performed by a male or female. To further confuse the issue are the constant references to what society would term feminine traits: emotional reactions, crying, consoling her/himself by doing the dusting. Set against these are a further set of typically masculine traits or actions: the narrator is shown 'prowling [...]like a private dick' (p.95), an expression that usually applies to a male detective but here also plays with the reader, who is the detective in this story. A little later the narrator has 'Mercutio's swagger' (p.81) and 'prided myself on being the superior partner' (p.86), both traditionally masculine descriptions. And yet, a few pages later the narrator is falling in love with 'Crazy Frank', whose ambition is to 'find a hole in every port' (p.93). Heteronormative and genre conventions lead us to expect a female narrator to be seduced by 'the perfect vagabond' (p.93), whom the narrator begs 'to come back to England with me' (p.93). However, the fact that the boyfriend finds the idea of returning to England laughable because it 'was for married couples' (p.93) turns the tables again. This could be a perfectly laudable concern for a travelling vagabond who wants to remain free, but given the complexity of the text so far, there is an ever-present uncertainty: should we read this as an indication that marriage is out of the question as both narrator and Frank are male? Written over ten years before single-sex marriage became legal in England, this seems likely to be another ploy to undermine gender expectations. The only reference to the narrator's body is near the end of the book: 'she took my nipple' (p.162). So the reader is drawn again towards the conclusion that the narrator is female, but then men have nipples too, they just don't often appear in romantic novels.

It seems that the only "solution" to reading the novel is to accept the androgynous ideal, as Liquori (2012) reminds us, of 'a spectrum of signification' of humanity which writers such as Winterson have used to 'destabilize the heteronormative [...] constructions of sexual and gender identity' (p.abstract) through poststructuralist, queer theory, conceptions of the discursively constructed body, which in this case construct a genderless narrator. The text relies on the normative societal and literary generic expectations of the reader to work against these norms, undermining

expectations at every turn and thus 'Winterson's androgyny works to open up possible variations in personality and act' (Burns, 1998, p.387)

**Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex* (2002)**

This is the most recent of the four novels and yet shows aspects of many of the earlier interpretations of androgyny. Zora's identification as an hermaphrodite and her insistence that 'everybody's always searching for their other half. Except for us. We've got both halves already' (p.489) fits in with late 1960s ideas of androgyny as an embodiment of the reunification of male and female traits within each individual. The constant reference to medical definitions of gender remind us of the 1970s era and the psycho-analytical tools used to measure individual levels of androgyny, which are extended in the novel into considerations of the impact of 'nurture' by the famous Dr Luce that Calliope's parents hope will 'fix' her. This is consistent with the fact that the novel spans many generations, ending at the onset of the 1980s, a time when 'gene theory' scientific approaches had developed, which in turn harp back to nineteenth-century medical pathologization of sexuality and gender. There is also the obvious balancing of male and female, masculine and feminine, within the narrator, Calliope as she becomes Cal, adopting a masculine persona but refusing to undergo genital surgery or hormone 'treatment' and finally coming to terms with both masculine and feminine aspects of his identity. Much of the novel's language, as well as its circular structure, also link back to earlier interpretations of androgyny as a cosmic wholeness that is part of the universal 'Wheel of life'.

Both medical pathologizing of the body and the interrelated nature of past and present generations develop into tropes of the novel. The narrative loops back through generations of Cal's family raising superstitious and biblical interpretations of malformation due to incest between his grandparents, who are both cousins and brother and sister. The narrator, Cal, identifies him/herself, at least by the end of the book, as an hermaphrodite; reinstating essentialist concepts of a pre-discursive body that, through medical intervention, becomes gendered at the moment of birth. Drawing on Butler's ideas that the apparent description "'it's a girl'" is in fact the way that society constitutes bodies (Salih, 2002, p.80). This idea is both extended and queered simultaneously through the novel's diegesis, which amalgamates time-frames over three generations; tracing several tropes of familial relationships outside of the accepted hegemonic norms. Included in this is the trope of the 'unnatural'; bodies created outside of the normal male/female binary as a result of attempted human intervention in the workings of nature. Cal's 'malformation' is suggested to be a result of his parents trying to 'play God' and pre-determine the sex of their

unborn child. At the same time the plot relies on scientific discourses of heredity genes, suggesting that the DNA marker has been passed through generations, surfacing again in Cal.

Cal moves from entrenchment in, and explicit acceptance of, binary gender (moving from 'being a girl' to 'being a boy') through an androgynous stage of accepting himself as embodying the original androgyne (a combination of male and female) through to a final stage in which he recognizes that gender is learned behaviour, like language, and is not the defining attribute of identity after all. This imagery works well, as trying to imagine beyond our current binary gender system is, for many, like trying to imagine communication beyond language.

Unlike *Written on the body*, where the narrator, or rather the narrative, embodies androgynous form, Cal, the narrator of *Middlesex*, specifically states near the beginning of the novel 'I'm not androgynous' (p.41). However, the narrative constantly invokes androgyny. A plot device giving Calliope the ability to exist bodily and spiritually, or psychically, in separate places at one time allows Calliope to enact both passive-feminine and aggressive-masculine sexual acts simultaneously, with her awareness flitting back and forth between the two. At the moment of personal awakening, when she realises she is neither male nor female, the plot has her mentally and physically experiencing both masculinity and femininity. On the cusp of adolescence she is neither and both simultaneously. Unable to find a social possibility of androgyny she alternates between traditional, hegemonic gender performatives. To perhaps show that this is not just experienced by teenagers who do not fit normative ideas of male and female physically, the character of Jerome, with whom Calliope has her first sexual experience, displays many feminine traits such as resting 'his head against my shoulder', 'to nuzzle me' (p.379) and wanting to share a 'cozy' morning coffee. His actions only become more aggressive and 'masculine' when she doesn't respond to his amorous approach. As Winterson does in *Written on the Body*, Eugenides constantly sets up traditional sex/gender associations only to undermine and contradict them, showing the falseness of such constructions.

As the plot moves towards Calliope taking on the masculine identity, Cal, the language of the text takes on masculine speech code; Wood (2009) tells us that masculine speech is used to give facts and solve problems (p.14). By Book Four we have narrative devices such as the list of medical definitions (p.430) and the doctor's report (pp.435-437). Structurally, books one and two use story-telling, with language focused on relationships and emotion; book three is a transitional stage both in

terms of plot and language, where the feminine world of home is replaced by the business world in which Cal becomes the character 'Hermaphrodites' in a sexual 'freak show'. The final book is based on solutions: the medical solutions of Dr Luce which Cal ran away from, scientific explanations, medical terminology and the importance of language, historical information and psychological solutions offered by the co-hermaphrodite, Zora. Finally, the acceptance that 'contrary to popular opinion, gender was not all that important' (Eugendies, 2002, p.520) at least at the level of familial relationships if not yet in society, comes at the end of the novel. As with all of the novels under analysis here, *Middlesex* ends not with a conclusion but on the cusp of new possibilities. Cal stands in the doorway of his childhood home that was built 'for a new type of human'; that new type was 'me and all the others like me' (p.529). The very last words of the book leave us, along with Cal, 'thinking about what was next' (p.529).

To the outside world Cal continues to present as male in terms of external 'secondary sexual characteristics', clothing, hairstyle and manner of walking and speech. His language use constantly casts doubt on femininity and retrospectively assigns masculine thoughts and behaviours to an earlier self; for example, 'did I see through the male tricks because I was destined to scheme that way myself?' (p.371). This is a consciously cultivated masculinity that tries to adopt normativity through behaviour and language. However, Cal is also still Caliope, a 'good daughter' (p.520) who likes to spend time with her mother discussing 'what's wrong with men' and having their 'hair done together' (p.521). Cal's progress has been from femininity to masculinity and finally towards an androgynous multiplicity. Turner (1999) tells us that 'intersexuals who have not undergone surgical intervention [...] find some balance of identity[...] despite [dichotomous] cultural models' (p.470). By the end of the novel Cal has found this balance and, through the characters of Tessie and Chapter Eleven, Cal's mother and brother, Eugenides shows how gender variance may also come to be socially acceptable. Tessie moves from her 'optimistic, dishonest, bed-side face' of endurance to acceptance by 'picking up on the cue from my brother that this thing that had happened to me might be handled lightly' (pp.520-521).

We can see that society is still predominantly stuck in a binary understanding and expectation of gender but that this is gradually being highlighted as a false construct through the lives of people such as Cal and Zora. The novel shows not only an ideology of multiple genders, but actual lived possibility at both the physical and psychological levels. Love (2011) sees this portrayal of intersexed persons as 'a symbol of divided heritage rather than a focus in its own right' (p.159). Eugenides'

shifting of the focus in this way could be read as lighting the path towards androgyny by illustrating that acceptance of all manifestations of 'gender variance' is only possible by focusing away from, rather than on, a person's gender. As Brennan and Hegarty (2012) point out 'nobody would classify anyone [...] as the heterosexual Mr or Mrs Somebody, but a homo- or bisexual person is first and foremost categorized as such' (p.160). Only when gender and sexuality variance is not worth special note will we have reached the stasis that some would name 'utopian'. As Adrienne Rich reminds us, this will continue to be a struggle against the normative, as 'even minds practiced in criticism of the status quo resist a vision so apparently unnerving as that which foresees an end to male privilege and a changed relationship between the sexes' (cited in Burns, 1998, p.370).

The difficulty in exposing, exploring and finally accepting this multiplicity occurs at the level of the English language, which has not yet caught up with the physical reality of more than two genders and leaves us bound by the inadequacy of the binary masculine/feminine referents. However, Turner states that 'the linguistic shift from "transsexual" to "transgender" and finally to "transperson" [...] suggests their success in moving beyond the constraints of binary language' (1999, p.474).

Showing that the hope expressed at the end of the novel may be gradually coming to pass through the new transgender politics.

### **Conclusion**

At times of crisis 'societies tend to revert reflexively to what appear to be stable gender norms' (Nye, 2005, p.1955). In our multi-cultural, global, post-modern world, where old taboos are constantly being shattered and brought into acceptance (homosexual marriage, rise in visibility of transgender people) society is once again grasping at traditional, 'comfortable' notions of gender and sexuality. The androgynous once again poses a threat to this monolithic stability and has moved back into the 'hidden river', as Heilbrun (1964, p.1) dubbed it, which moves in the undercurrents of society. *Written on the Body* and *Middlesex* highlight this in their dichotomous approach to gender variation. The one, *Middlesex*, entrenched in traditional gender binary and eschewing the label 'androgyny' whilst highlighting the existence of embodied sexual ambiguity through the characters of Cal and Zora. The other, *Written on the Body*, destabilizing the binary and showing it to be destructive, refusing to assign a bodily sexed or gendered identity to the narrator.

Both books were written in eras that had abandoned any ideas of wholeness and still laboured under the Thatcherite mantra 'there is no such thing as society' (Bradford, 2007, p.34), to fully embrace individualism and disparateness. This is

reflected in the themes of separation into parts, bodily, physically and temporally, throughout *Written on the Body*. Androgyny could no longer be seen as a realizable entity and yet it is constantly alluded to, and sought after, in both these realist fictions. In fact, according to Burns (1998) 'androgyny also refers potentially to Winterson's ideal voice' (p.384).

## **Conclusion**

The books under consideration and the range of theories that they appear to draw on have shown, I believe, that as humans we are living contradictions. We define ourselves through difference. For every aspect of humanity that begins in opposition and is gradually assimilated into the norm we will find, or invent, a new aspect to set in opposition. People simultaneously strive to be, as Butler put it, 'constituted as socially viable beings' (2004, p.2) whilst valuing and insisting on their individuality and uniqueness. The side of us that strives for individual recognition, which is seen as 'masculine' and which has become the dominant force in Western society, is unsettled and fearful of homogenizing terms such as androgyny, which it sees as threatening to efface what theorists such as Halberstam term our 'specificity' (1998, p.173). However, as the novels and theories analysed here have shown, androgyny is in fact 'a goal of the person's individuation' (Singer, 1989, p.236).

We have seen that fiction provides the utopian ideal in order to free us from the binary present and allow space to reconfigure current gender categorisation towards a genderless ideal; to show ways in which differentiation, in terms of individual and group identity, can remain outside of gender limitations. Salih (2002) suggests that 'since sexual and gendered differences are performatively installed by and in discourse, it would be possible to designate or confer identity on the basis of an alternative set of discursively constituted attributes' (p.89), like the inhabitants of Luciente's world in *Woman on the edge of time*, whose only classification is 'what they're good at and bad at' (p.214). The absolute ideal of androgyny has to be beyond a contemplation of gender alone, to incorporate race and class as power differentials, as well as what Turner (1999) calls 'nothing less than indifference toward sexual and gender ambiguity' (p.476). Turner also states that 'at the present time, such indifference defies the imagination' (p.476). However, we have seen that *Woman on the edge of time* portrays this successfully, incorporating a future world with no hierarchy or social divisions on the basis of gender/sex, skin colour, ethnicity, class or age.

If we understand androgyny as an archetype, a core idea that depends on the society in which it appears for the details of its manifestation, we can see that all four novels strongly evoke their own version of this archetype. *Left Hand of Darkness* through the embodiment of both maleness and femaleness in futuristic androgynous humans; *Woman on the Edge of Time* through a future utopian society that sees all humans as 'persons' beyond categories of gender, sexuality, race and

other identity markers; *Written on the Body* in the linguistic creation of a genderless narrator and *Middlesex* through the physical body of an intersexed narrator. This is created in all four novels via circular structures and open endings which invite the reader to imagine a range of possibilities for human social acceptance beyond current restrictive gender and sexuality based categorizations. Acknowledging androgyny as 'a celebration of multiple, composite identities' (Turner, 1999, p.460) which, Goodlad (2007) assures us, would eventually 'become obsolete [...] in a genderless or postgender society' (p.118) once the need for a gender referent had been surpassed. So the novels have mapped the path of androgyny from an idealised embodiment of the balance of masculinity and femininity to a post-modern interpretation of it as 'the frame through which we imagine what we require of subjects' (Goodlad, 2007, p.119) in a 'postgender' society.

(10,981 words)

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