What is Left of Human Nature?

Posthuman Subjectivity in Joanna Russ's
The Female Man

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* and its radical challenge to the neoliberal concept of humanity. Throughout Western thought, the human has been hierarchically positioned in relation to the non-human realm. This symbolic structure has not only supported human dominance over animals and the natural environment, but has also perpetuated sexist, racist, classist, homophobic, and ethnocentric assumptions within human society. Drawing from the ideas of post-structuralism, deconstructionism, ecology, and feminism, Russ challenges traditional assumptions by blurring boundaries between humanity and the environment, culture and nature, and human and non-human entities (animals and machines), as well as between men and women.

While the novel primarily addresses the problematic definition of female subjectivity, both individual and collective, it also presents an alternative concept of human subjectivity in general. Russ's text presents a view of human nature as a process rather than a stable entity, which can be interpreted as anti-essentialist. This perspective anticipates some of the key aspects of critical posthumanism.

The main category in the representation of this alternative subjectivity is hybridization, which Russ identifies as a principle of poietic and narrative composition that informs the entire novel. This strategy operates on three interconnected levels: thematic hybridization, conveyed through hybrid figures such as the cyborg, android, female man, and transgender character; ontological hybridization, conveyed through the trope of parallel universes

commonly found in science fiction; and linguistic and narrative hybridization in the text's postmodern style. At the first level, I focus on the role of technology as an instrument of hybridization and historical change through its capacity to transform the human body. At the second level, I demonstrate how Russ's use of the multiverse narrative challenges Western ontology by rejecting the traditional idea of a unitary essence as the foundation of reality and instead embracing a vision that anticipates the relational ontology of philosophical posthumanism. At the third level, two stylistic strategies are employed to express a new subjectivity: the uncertain and shifting identity of the narrative 'I' and the blurring of the boundaries between the author and the characters. Identity is thus understood not as a fixed and uniform entity but rather as a dynamic process of composition and reconfiguration of fragments.

KEYWORDS

In his pioneering exploration of the genre, Brian Aldiss contends that science fiction's essence lies in the quest for "a definition of mankind and his status in the universe" (30). However, as numerous scholars have emphasized, science fiction achieves this by delving into diverse manifestations of the human condition, constructing worlds based on alternative assumptions. This departure from conventional norms prompts a critical examination of human nature, a concept historically enmeshed in hierarchical frameworks within Western thought. This hierarchical view, deeply ingrained in humanism and liberalism, has perpetuated discriminatory ideologies that marginalize groups based on gender, race, and class.

Many theorists such as Marshal Sahlins, Leon Kamin, Richard Lewontin, Steven Rose and Sherryl Vint have highlighted universality and individuality as the core of liberal humanism. Universality often entails the belief in fundamental human rights and freedoms that are inherent to every individual simply by virtue of being human. However, the claim for the universal has often been critiqued for its failure to acknowledge the diverse experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups, such as women and non-white individuals, whose exclusion challenges the notion of a universal human essence.

In liberal humanism, individuality is highly valued as it recognizes the importance of personal freedom, self-determination, and the pursuit of one's interests and aspirations. However, as highlighted by Sahlins

in his critique of liberalism as possessive individualism, the concept of individuality can be problematic when it leads to a narrow understanding of society that prioritizes self-interest and competition over communal well-being and solidarity. This perspective views individuals as isolated entities, disconnected from broader social contexts and obligations, which can undermine the cohesion and collective welfare of society.

The shifting discourse surrounding human nature in the twentieth century reflects a multiplicity of perspectives across disciplines, fostering a contentious dialogue that challenges traditional notions (see Fuentes; Visala). This discourse intersects with the emergence of philosophical posthumanism, a framework critiquing traditional human representations. Francesca Ferrando characterizes critical or philosophical posthumanism as "a post-humanism, a post-anthropocentrism, and a post-dualism" (103). Recent advancements in technology and life sciences have led scholars like Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti to advocate for a post-anthropocentric view, where the human subject is redefined as inherently interconnected with non-human entities. This reconceptualization expands the notion of subjectivity beyond the individual, emphasizing its distributed nature across various agents, objects and contexts. Braidotti characterizes the posthuman subject as a relational, material, and vital process: "[p]osthuman subjectivity expresses an embodied and embedded and hence partial form of accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality and hence community building" (49). Rather than stemming from some inner essence, the subject is embodied and interconnected with networks of relationships with other subjectivities, both human and non-human, organic and inorganic.

This evolution in thinking about human nature resonates with the transformative potential of science fiction. A number of scholars have examined the close relationship between science fiction and various expressions and currents of posthuman thought. Simona Micali, Pramod K. Nayar, Sherryl Vint and others have highlighted the ways in which many science fiction works, particularly those that have been most commercially successful (especially films and TV series), offer a representation of the human subject that is marked by what Nayar and Vint have named 'popular posthumanism'. The latter "retains the key attributes of the human – sensation, emotion and rationality – but believes that these characteristics

might be enhanced through technological intervention. This implies that traditional views of the human persist in popular posthumanism: it only seeks an enhancement of the human" (Nayar 18). Many science-fiction classics, from Heinlein to Asimov, from Philip Dick to Ballard, and most cyberpunk works fall into this groove. Although authors such as Theodor Sturgeon and Clifford Simak departed from this model to some extent, it was above all the feminist writers at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s who proposed convincing narrative representations of an alternative subjectivity. The works of Ursula K. Le Guin, James Tiptree Jr., Marge Piercy, Samuel R. Delany, Suzie McKee Charnas, and others can be considered in this connection. In particular, through the form of critical utopia, as Tom Moylan formulated it, feminist science fiction has been able to imbue the radical contestation of the humanist subject with a positive connotation.

By deconstructing traditional gender roles and offering alternative subjectivities, such feminist narratives fashion aspects of posthuman subjectivity. For many years, critics have acknowledged the pivotal influence of Joanna Russ's works on the emergence of feminist science fiction (see LeFanu; Cortiel; Mendelsohn; Jones). I will concentrate my analysis on Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (hereafter *TFM*), a renowned feminist science fictional utopia, arguing that it presents a vision of human identity that defies essentialist binaries and embraces fluidity and hybridity. *TFM* visualizes a female humanity realized in the absence of men in Whileaway's utopia which is placed within the framework of a multiverse of which it constitutes only one parallel universe alongside three others. In fact, *TFM* is structured in four worlds, each inhabited by the novel's protagonists Jeannine, Joanna, Jael and Janet, who turn out to be versions of the same subject. The plot can be summarized as the protagonists' journeys to their respective universes and their eventual meeting. Initially, Janet travels to Joanna and Jeannine's universes, while it is only later in the novel that Jael reveals herself as the main architect of their meeting. This revelation occurs when she summons them to her own universe, unveiling her plan to seek allies in the fierce battle of the sexes in which she is engaged.

Through the deconstruction of traditional gender roles and the construction of alternative subjectivities, Russ's novel navigates themes of fluidity, hybridity, and interconnectedness. By rejecting binaries and embracing complexity, *TFM* offers a visionary exploration of human and

non-human relationships, contributing to broader discussions within philosophical posthumanism and feminist theory. "One would think science fiction," Russ stated, "the perfect literary mode in which to explore (and explode) our assumptions about 'innate' values and 'natural' social arrangements, in short our ideas about Human Nature, Which Never Changes" (*The Image of Women* 206). Science fiction possesses the dual capacity to deconstruct and construct. As noted by scholars such as Sara LeFanu and Brian Attebery, feminist science fiction boldly questions conventional notions of femininity and identity, while also providing pathways for the creation of new subjectivities. *TFM* operates adeptly on both fronts. On the one hand, it exposes the mechanisms of ideological construction surrounding women and the social practices that reinforce such constructs, thereby deconstructing the notion of woman as a cultural artefact. On the other hand, through its science fiction characters and worlds, Russ constructs an alternative image of women that challenges macho stereotypes and embodies a worldview characterized by a critical reappropriation of feminine values and attitudes, aligning with the perspective of the second generation of feminism.

Although the novel primarily deals with the problematic definition of female subjectivity, both individual and collective, it provides an alternative idea of human subjectivity *tout court*. Drawing on the theme of role reversal and locating itself in the tradition of the feminine utopia, it shuns rigid distinctions and seeks to challenge essentialist binarism traditionally attributed to Western thought. This crucial goal is clearly outlined in the author's presentation at the Khatru Symposium:

> One of the best things (for me) about science fiction is that – at least theoretically – it is a place where the ancient dualities disappear. Day and night, up and down, "masculine" and "feminine" are purely specific, limited phenomena which have been mythologised by people. They are man-made (not woman-made). Excepting up and down, night and day (maybe). Out in space there is no up or down, no day or night, and in the point of view space can give us, I think there is no "opposite" sex – what a word! Opposite what? The Eternal Feminine and the Eternal Masculine become the poetic fancies of a

> weakly dimorphic species trying to imitate every other species in a
> vain search for what is "natural." (qtd. in Smith and Gomoll 38)

Rather than subscribing to the postmodern inclination for the inescapable
dissipation of the subject, Russ's text captures the subject both as a
fluid, composite, and hybrid entity, as well as an ongoing process. The
main category in the representation of this alternative subjectivity is
hybridization, which Russ identifies as a principle of stylistic and narrative
composition that informs the entire novel. This strategy operates on three
levels: thematic hybridization, conveyed by a set of hybrid figures, such as
the cyborg, the android, the female man of the title, and the transgender
character; ontological hybridization, conveyed by the trope of the parallel
universes, highly frequent in science fiction; and linguistic and narrative
hybridization in the text's postmodern, anti-romantic style. The three
levels are closely interconnected and continually refer back to each other,
shaping a radical questioning of gender categories through a strictly anti-
essentialist conception of human nature.

Hybrid Figures: Contrast the Man and Dissolve the Woman

Thematic hybridization consists in the production of hybrid figures,
especially narrative agents, but also entire cultural universes. The first hybrid
figure is, in fact, the utopian society of Whileaway, constructed as the most
typical of feminist utopias: a society based on the exclusion of men. Taking
an all-female world as an emblem of hybridization may seem paradoxical.
In fact, the eradication of the male gender, which implies the dissolution of
a patriarchal gender system, is an extremely fruitful narrative premise for
creating mixed subjects in which the categories of masculine and feminine
are blurred and almost lose their essence. This solution is articulated in two
of the four worlds that structure the novel's fictional society.

Russ employs the multiverse as a trope that challenges patriarchal
ideology, by highlighting the formative and performative role of culture
in relation to the natural datum. The social articulation and material
conditions of each world produce different female subjects. The central role
of the socio-cultural context in shaping female personality is stressed by

devising the four protagonists as variants of the same genotype in different time continuums.

As also pointed out by Jeanne Cortiel (160), Russ articulates her narrative multiverse through "generic discontinuities" (Jameson 254), relating each universe to different literary genres. Jeannine's and Joanna's worlds can be classified as mimetic since they replicate the empirical world. They are conveyed through narrative forms, such as alternative history and autobiography, which are fully relatable to the realistic mode. In contrast, Jael's and Janet's worlds belong to science fiction as they present situations that are completely different from reality, based on different ontological and epistemic paradigms.

Marilyn Hacker's study on Russ highlights how realist and mainstream fiction depicts the struggles of female subjects dealing with present circumstances (5-10). The solutions to their oppressive situations are limited to existing within the current societal framework, leading to individual choices such as conformity, madness, death, or departure. In fact, Russ's "realist" worlds stem from her portrayal of contemporary gender inequality, sexual repression, and cultural discontent. The characters of Jeannine and Joanna exemplify the predicament of women under patriarchy, where the available options are to conform to male-defined femininity or to strive for independence akin to men. Jeannine represents the former, inhabiting an alternate reality where women are further oppressed due to an historical context where the Great Depression never ended, World War II never occurred and the economic growth that facilitated women's liberation doesn't exist. Joanna, on the other hand, symbolizes the rejection of patriarchal ideals. In a setting reminiscent of the late 1960s, she initially resists conformity through passive means, attempting to maintain her own survival within an oppressive environment.

In contrast, the other characters, belonging to the science fictional worlds, are examples of emancipated women. Jael exists in a society where women and men live separately and are engaged in a fierce battle of the sexes. Her environment fosters a unique female subjectivity, showcasing women's capability in traditionally male-dominated roles and challenging stereotypes of female vulnerability. She is, in fact, an ethnologist and skilled warrior. Janet, On the other hand, represents the potential of liberated women in a society without men. Free from gender-based constraints,

women like Janet can define themselves and exhibit the full range of human behaviors, including violence.

In both science fiction worlds, technology is closely linked to new possibilities for women and has a crucial role in shaping alternative subjectivities. By emphasizing the political and metaphysical implications of power in shaping human beings' material existence, Russ rejects any naïve approach to technology as an intrinsically progressive means of sociopolitical transformation. The novel draws upon the ambivalent discourses of technology, as both a danger to nature and humanity and as an enhancement of human agency.

The human body's transformative capacity positions technology as an instrument of hybridization and historical change. As Donna Haraway argued, this challenges pre-established identities and conventional distinctions, not only concerning gender identities but also the dichotomy of nature and culture (149-154). Technology clearly emerges as a metaphor for culture in Jael's universe. Its creative potential is illustrated with subtle irony in the different practices of designing human body that are implemented in the Manland and Womanland societies. The difference lies in the political use of this potential. On Manland, technology plays a conservative role in that it is the instrument for preserving gender hierarchies. Through biological manipulation, Manland maintains the gender system despite the absence of women. Following the anatomical clues provided by the women of Womanland, men transform the genital and hormonal apparatus of male infants, turning them into a complement of women. More than anatomical accuracy, what is at stake is the recreation of a subordinate subject that allows men to exert control. As a tool for preserving the gender system, technology here confirms the artificiality of gender and once again exposes its political nature, showing how it is both the product and the basis of certain power relations.

Yet technology is also presented as a means of women's emancipation and liberation. In this sense, *TFM* aligns with Firestone's belief that the technological capacity of late capitalism can liberate women from what she deemed their biological limitations (196-202). Indeed, the symbol of this possibility is Jael's own body. Jael is a cyborg with a set of steel teeth and retractable claws. These prosthetic weapons equip her for the war of the sexes, thus allowing her to counter the diminished image of women

implemented in the gender system. Here, technology is a tool for women's empowerment.

Indeed, Jael's technological body symbolizes women's anger against oppression. However, the subtle interplay with generic discontinuities reveals that technology ultimately preserves the gender system in Womanland, albeit in a reversed manner. In Jael's world, technology is an instrument of power, a means that confirms and reinforces gender divisions and the separation between technology and nature. Jael's body is in a sense a functional necessity for war, an instrument of struggle rather than liberation. In fact, the dystopian scenario of the unrestricted war between men and women also involves nature. We see a desolate landscape, ravaged by war and polluted. Portions of unspoilt nature do exist in Womanland, but they can only be gleaned from rare hints. The window of her apartment is a digital screen reproducing images of a rural landscape, which is emblematic of the pervasive dominance of technology over nature in Jael's world. Furthermore, technology has the capacity to completely replace nature by the fact that, although Jael describes herself as "old-fashioned," she uses an android as a sexual companion in an explicit reversal of traditional roles: now the man is reified and reduced to a mere instrument of pleasure. The capacity of technology to produce subjectivities and bodies is here used to reproduce and reinforce relationships of domination and hegemonies. Jael, in fact, reproduces the essentialising patriarchal system but reverses its terms. She believes that all men, without exception, are stupid because "it's in their blood" (Russ, *TFM* 170), that is, it is in their nature. The construction of masculinity is based on the same binary logic with which patriarchy constructed the idea of femininity. The android Davy plays the ancillary role typically assigned to women in the patriarchal system. He is Jael's housewife and sex slave, lacking his own consciousness and will. By featuring this universe as a dystopia Russ criticizes this degeneration. As Darko Suvin suggests, dystopian literature primarily serves to highlight the dangers of socio-political tendencies by taking them to extreme consequences (394-96). Here, the dystopian form serves as a warning about the perils of unrestrained anger, particularly the risk of perpetuating sexual oppression that feminist movements aim to eradicate.

In contrast, the absence of men on Whileaway enables a unique portrayal of technology. Russ illustrates how linking women and technology

challenges the ideological association of woman and nature, materially reinforced by women's exclusion from science and technical domains. Susana Martins accurately points out that

> despite the emphasis on ecology and rural living on Whileaway, "nature" as a concept – as in human nature, or, more precisely, female "nature" – will not provide the resources for political change in *The Female Man*, because nature is culturally figured as that which does not change; it is the essential, the eternal. Redefining what counts as "female nature" seems to require the historicized and forward-looking connotations of technological development, even if such development functions only as metaphor. (410)

The novel, however, does not simply let women enter the realm of science but changes the traditional conception of science, specifically by rejecting the system of desubjectivization of technology and science, which aims to purify them from the partialities of their bodies. The invention of the 'induction helmet' is a telling case in this regard. This invention offers new connections between human and nature, but more importantly, it redefines the boundaries of the self, or rather, it generates a self with mobile borders that exist, according to Bruno Latour's formula, in a network of human and non-human actors. Women wearing the induction helmet "run routine machinery, dig people out of landslides, oversee food factories (with induction helmets on their heads, their toes controlling the green peas, their fingers the vats and controls, and their back muscles the carrots, and their abdomens the water supply)" (Russ, *TFM* 51). Through association with machines, women's bodies and minds can become intertwined with technological and organic entities. Additionally, the use of machines can extend their capabilities for action and perception. This tool allows for the operation of multiple machines and the management of large plots of land by a single person. This implies an expanded perception of nature and an extension of the self to the prosthetic body, that becomes part of the acting subject in carrying out the work.

   The combination of the situated body and technology gives substance to the idea of a composite subjectivity distributed among multiple actors who play the roles of subject and object in combination. Susana Martin has

captured the ontological scope of this hybridization, interpreting it as a forerunner of posthuman thought: "the realms of the human and the non-human [...] do not occupy distinct, exclusive categories: all objects are quasi-objects and all subjects are quasi- subjects – products of both nature and culture" (408). In essence, the human is viewed as a technonatural, inherently hybrid entity; it appears to function as a boundary that connects rather than separates natural and technological entities. The Whilewayans' integration of their bodies and minds with computers and various machines evokes the concept of humans as actors within a vast organic, technological, and informational network. This connection serves not only for carrying out heavy physical labor but also for engaging in intellectual and creative pursuits. Particularly, the elderly find solace in immersing themselves in virtual reality, seeking respite from the fervor of youth. The younger individuals "are tied in with power plants" (Russ, *TFM* 76) and are equally proficient in working with animals, plants, and machinery, as Janet explicitly states: "I've supervised the digging of fire trails, delivered babies, fixed machinery, and milked more moo-moo cows that I wish I knew existed" (2). Older individuals, on the other hand, primarily engage in academic research and artistic creation, as they have "learned to join with calculating machines in the state they say can't be described but is most like a sneeze that never comes off" (53).

Computers offer a temporary escape from daily reality, allowing individuals to delve into abstraction and meditation. However, Russ's novel transcends conventional divisions between the human and non-human by merging characteristics of both the biological and the virtual. While cyberpunk literature often depicts access to virtual reality as a complete disembodiment, representing it as a liberation from the limitations of matter, Russ reverses this perspective. The analogy of 'a sneeze that never comes off' deromanticizes and desacralizes the myth of virtual reality, equating the abstract and intellectual with the material. This blurring of traditional conceptual borders, such as spirit/matter and mind/body, challenges preconceived notions and prompts a reevaluation of the human-machine relationship.

Ontological Hybridization: The Trope of Parallel Universes

The element that has most attracted the attention of readers and critics is Whileaway's all-female utopian society. *TFM* visualizes a female humanity living in the absence of men. However, Whileaway is placed within the framework of a multiverse of which it constitutes only one parallel universe alongside three others.

Parallel universes have been used in science fiction to explore the nature of reality, create speculative cosmological models, and imagine the consequences of historical events that deviate from their actual course. The concept that reality is an ongoing creation of alternate universes aligns with the narrative theory of possible worlds. Umberto Eco characterizes a narrative text as a world-creating machine that generates possible worlds whenever a character contemplates or makes a decision, even in a fictional universe based on the one-world model (136-40). As Marie-Laure Ryan has pointed out, science fiction adopts the plurality-of-worlds model as the underlying structure of the fictional world, establishing a direct relationship with the multiverse as a theme (634). In the case of *TFM*, we should more appropriately speak of divergent alternative universes. As stated in the text:

> Every choice begets at least two worlds of possibility, that is, one in which you do and one in which you don't: or very likely many more, one in which you do quickly, one in which you do slowly; one in which you don't, but hesitate, one in which you hesitate and frown, one in which you hesitate and sneeze, and so on. To carry this line of argument further, there must be an infinite number of possible universes (such is the fecundity of God) for there is no reason to imagine Nature as prejudiced in favor of human action. Every displacement of every molecule, every change in orbit of every electron, every quantum of light that strikes here and not there – each of these must somewhere have its alternatives. (Russ, *TFM* 6)

Parallel worlds are, therefore, connected to each other: they usually coincide with our world until a major transformation or countless small shifts trigger separation and differentiation, generating an alternative timeline.

This challenges the traditional Western ontology of a unitary essence as the foundation of reality, thus aligning itself with the relational ontology of philosophical posthumanism. According to the theory of parallel universes, reality is fragmented and composed of multiple alternatives. "The main purpose of most science fiction stories," Renato Giovannoli points out, "is not to describe an alternative world, but to postulate the simultaneous existence of some, if not all, worlds, and to evaluate the consequences of contacts that may be established between them" (367, trans. mine). Francesca Ferrando argues that the multiverse challenges a universe-centric perspective and problematizes the notion of a single universe (169). It also materializes the dissolution of strict binaries, dualistic modes, and exclusivist approaches.

Russ's use of this trope embodies the plural unity or unitary plurality that distinguishes the new materialistic monism and relational ontology described by Braidotti, Haraway, and Ferrando. According to Braidotti, "Monism results in relocating difference outside the dialectical scheme, as a complex process of differing which is framed by both internal and external forces and is based on the centrality of the relation to multiple others" (56). Relational ontology rejects the reductionist principle that views reality as made up of independent, separate parts and fragments that mechanically come together to form larger systems. Instead, it prioritizes the internal relations between parts, considering them as the foundation for their identity. "It's possible, too, that there is no such a thing as one clear line or strand of probability, and that we live on a sort of twisted braid, blurring from one to the other without even knowing it, as long as we keep within the limits of a set of variations that really make no difference to us" (Russ, *TFM* 6). The different parallel worlds interact and converge into a single multiverse. Thanks to the protagonists' journeys, the parallel worlds overlap and partially intersect, representing reality as a site of exchange and dynamic interaction between multiple worlds in what can be defined as an ontological fibrillation.

The novel's lack of clear explanation regarding the physical means of inter-universal travel and the moment of crossing the threshold between universes contributes to theorizing a posthumanistic relational ontology. The protagonists are abruptly transported to another world without any explanation. For instance, Janet's arrival in Joanna's world is described as a

sudden appearance on Broadway. Similarly, Joanna finds herself suddenly transported into Jeannine's world, as she says: "I got stuck with Jeannine" (83). These movements and appearances occur thanks to teleportation, suggesting a fluid reality composed of interconnected worlds.

The fluid state of the multiverse is exemplified not only by the journeys of the four J's from one universe to another, but also by the intersection of their identities, the sudden and unexpected transformation of one character into another during a given action. The most significant example is the cocktail party scene, in which Joanna and Janet merge into one character after being molested by a man. Another example of character overlap occurs in Jeannine's universe. After isolating herself during a family reunion, Jeannine is scolded by her brother for her gloomy mood. The action seems to be the typical male oppression of women, but when her brother, in a form of physical imposition, grabs her by the wrist to take her back to her relatives, there is Janet on the scene. She reacts promptly, with verbal and physical self-assertion.

The sudden and abrupt teleportation, along with the merging of selves from different space-time continuums, bears a striking resemblance to Ferrando's description of the post-human multiverse:

> More than parallel dimensions, ontically separated from each other, the posthuman understanding of the multiverse would be envisioned as generative nets of material possibilities simultaneously happening and coexisting, corresponding to specific vibrations of the strings, in a material understanding of the dissolution of the strict dualism one/many. The identity of one dimension would be maintained under the conditions of a specific vibrational range, and by the material relations to other dimensions, in a multiplication of situated affinities and convergences. (178)

This ability to preserve the difference of the multiple in unity makes the trope of the multiverse a particularly apt metaphorical resource for expressing the notion of plural, relational, and ever-forming subjectivity, which, in the novel, is embodied in the fractured identities of the characters.

Narrative-Linguistic Hybridization

The cognitive theory of parallel worlds is turned into a poietic principle so as to justify the novel as a postmodern pastiche made of different styles, tones, literary and discursive genres and, most of all, the fragmentation of the narrative I and of the figure of the author. These sophisticated formal devices acquire a strong political significance in Russ's text: literary postmodernism is charged with eminently political meanings, becoming the literary and aesthetic category for a revolutionary and specifically feminist political agenda. The experimental use of language is used as an anti-logos weapon, to use Sally Robinsons's words (105), in order to dismantle patriarchal discourses and ideology. The novel constructs an alternative language to the patriarchal one, based on linear logic, cause-and-effect relationships, a precise and unambiguous definition of categories and entities through the principle of non-contradiction. In contrast, *TFM* breaks all the formal rules of fiction. It has no beginning-middle-end, no clear relationship between author and characters, and above all no clear relationship between text and meaning.

Two intertwined strategies are of paramount importance in prospecting a new female subjectivity: the uncertain and shifting identity of the narrative I and the blurring of the frontiers between the author and the characters. If, on the one hand, the massive recourse to first-person narration represents the female claim to take the floor, to speak for herself in order to define the self and the world from her own perspective, on the other hand, the narrating self is internally split, made fluid and changeable. The novel continually sows doubt about the reliability of the narrating self and the status of the entire narrative, so that the reader must constantly question who is speaking, who is making the claims, whether the speaker is trustworthy, and whether and on what basis the truth claims are acceptable. The main effect of this narrative solution is to disrupt the notion of the unitary subject with a well-defined identity.

The narrating self is internally fractured as it is occupied by different identities from time to time. In the final section of the novel, the narrators seem to have collapsed completely onto each other: "We got up and paid our quintuple bill; then we went out into the street. I said goodbye and went off with Laur, I Janet; I also watched them go, I Joanna; moreover,

I went off to show Jael the city, I Jeannine, I Jael, myself" (Russ, *TFM* 212). The first-person narrative is thus not the vehicle for expressing and constructing a single identity, but rather becomes a position of power shared by multiple psychological instances. In keeping with the premise of the ontological plurality of universes and their intersection, the entire narrative is fragmented and dispersed.

The process of one subject being possessed by another and abruptly replacing it in the action has a definite direction and function in this text. It is mainly Janet and Jael who 'possess' the other protagonists. For instance, in the episode of the cocktail party there is a merging of Joanna and Janet in one subject. It seems that there is only one woman in the room, a woman split between two consciousnesses – one performing the Joanna-actions which comply with gender stereotypes, and one performing the Janet-actions which break them. The purpose of this narrative strategy is to demonstrate how the alternative representation of women, marked by rage and utopia, functions in developing a new female subjectivity that can serve as a model for all of humanity.

Just as there is no hierarchical relationship between the four protagonists, who are alternative versions of the same subject, so the privilege of the authorial voice, characteristic of the bourgeois and patriarchal novel, is constantly undermined by several strategies. First, through meta-commentaries that involve the author and reveal the process of composing the story. Second, by blurring the boundaries between author and character and the very logical relationship between the creator and his creature. Especially in the third part, the character of Joanna is confused with the author Joanna Russ, not only by the coincidence of names, but also by her character traits and life experiences. By transforming the author into a character and making her interact with the other characters, she breaks the hierarchy between the two figures, with the character descending from the author in a unidirectional relationship of production.

It is no longer the author who has the exclusive prerogative of creating the character's identity, but the character acquires an almost autonomous status that actually contributes to the formation of the author's personality. Catherine McClenahan suggests that the four protagonists represent different aspects of the author's personality (116). The plot of the text centers around Joanna's transformation into "the female man," and the

other characters represent different stages of this process. The narrative complicates the relationship between the characters of Joanna and Janet. In a section in which she assumes the narrative voice of Joanna speaking to Janet, she disguises and claims authorial prerogatives with statements such as "I made her up.... Oh, I made that woman up; you can believe it ... I imagined her" (Russ, *TFM* 30-31). Yet, another statement immediately makes this distribution of roles uncertain: "After I called Janet, out of nowhere, *or she called me*" (29; emphasis added). The author creates the character, but the character also creates the author.

The status of author is disputed between Joanna and Jael. In fact, the latter plays a decisive role in the creation of Joanna. Jael presents herself as the material author of the shifts between the universes of the other protagonists. She is therefore responsible for their meetings and reunions. Her role as a demiurge who arranges the situations in which the characters will find themselves, makes her the hidden engine of the plot, thus partially assuming the prerogatives of the author. Before revealing herself by taking the place of the narrator in the eighth part of the novel, she declares, "I am the ghost of the author and know all things" (166). Indeed, before she enters the scene, Jael is a kind of ghost, a spiritual presence that accompanies the protagonists' actions, haunts buildings and places, and possesses the gift of omniscience because of the technique of interdimensional travel. When they find themselves together in Manland, the connection between Jael and Joanna is further confused. "Oh, I couldn't, says the other Jael" (180).

This formal feature voices a new conception of female subjectivity. Identity is understood not as a fixed and uniform entity but rather as a dynamic process of composition and reconfiguration of parts and fragments. The new female subject is multiple, with a mobile and constantly changing identity. For its fractured identities as well as for the literary techniques deployed, *TFM* is one of the most effective literary expressions of the postmodern critique of essentialism and its theories about the unity of the subject. The novel also tries to figure out a possible unity through Jael's interpellation to the other characters to join the struggle, yet they respond differently to this request, each according to her personality. The dispersive fragmentation of the selves is held together by common political goals. This form of a cooperative but differentiated unification is a narrative dramatization of Haraway's concept of coalition by affinity.

Haraway argued that any definition of a unified political subject in the feminist movement must consider the differences that exist among women. Haraway proposed an active alliance-building strategy based on affinity, rather than an identity politics that assumes political uniformity and unity of purpose. This can be achieved through sharing a particular ideology or working towards specific political goals. "This identity," Haraway states, "marks out a self-consciously constructed space that cannot affirm the capacity to act on the basis of natural identification, but only on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship" (*Cyborg Manifesto* 156). The diversity resulting from the multiplicity of resistance actions is seen as a political asset: the general strategy of tactical separatism is broken and fragmented, allowing for different actions and opposition strategies depending on the different conditions (social, psychological and cultural) the four Js.

The novel focuses more on the process of constitution of the subject than on its final outcome, suggesting that this unity is fluid and evolving. The novel itself is thus a political act. Postmodern narrative techniques extend beyond the mere linguistic play of traditional forms and are imbued with a specific set of political values. Contrary to Barthes' assertion in "The Death of the Author," for Russ writing is not the "destruction of every voice" (*Image* 142) but the space for the expression of silenced voices, the different facets of the female psyche that are silenced and repressed in patriarchal culture. Her writing becomes a space for the expression of women as embodied subjects facing systemic social oppression. Rather than erasing subjectivity, *TFM* provides a platform for the emergence of alternative subjectivities. Through its hybrid figurations and narrative forms, the novel encapsulates the subject as a fluid, multi-faceted entity constituted in and by a network of evolving relationships.

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