

A FEMINIST POSTHUMANIST APPROACH TO RESIST GENDER- BASED VIOLENCE (GBV): RE- READING LARISSA LAI'S *SALT FISH GIRL* AND MONICA BYRNE'S *THE GIRL IN THE ROAD*

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ABSTRACT

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The persistence of Gender-based Violence (GBV) against non-normative identities, despite declining heteronormative hegemony, underscores the urgency of reimagining resistance. The science fiction novels—Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002) and Monica Byrne's *The Girl in the Road* (2014)—foreground female protagonists with different desires that disrupt gender constructivism and pave new ways of resistance to dismantle patriarchal and essentialist symbolic order. The near-future narratives of the two novels provide perspectives on how GBV is shaped by intersecting oppressions that affect the “weaker other” and how resistance emerges in a techno-futuristic world. This research paper, therefore, aims to investigate various entangled layers of GBV that are represented in the two novels and, in doing so, also tries to deconstruct gender essentialism through a feminist posthumanist lens, which critiques gendered and anthropocentric hierarchies. Moreover, this paper attempts to show how the narratives locate the roots of gender-based violence and means of combating the same in speculative settings. By re-reading the novels in a feminist posthumanist way, this research paper also proposes to represent hybrid identities in interaction with future technologies and ultimately aspires to a simultaneous posthumanist and post-gender world. By interrogating the interplay of speculative technology and posthuman agency, this study aims to contribute to a broader discourse on understanding gender and power in the imminent future.

Keywords: Feminist posthumanism; science fiction; near-future narrative; Gender-based Violence; cyborg politics

1. INTRODUCTION

Discussing violence is still a social taboo, and it stems from multiple reasons. For many years, academicians have come together to talk about how their gender identities and experiences have influenced how they theorize violence, i.e., Gender-based Violence (GBV). Gender-based violence occurs when it is “directed against a person because of established gender norms” and when the “ascribed roles and expectations, which are socially and culturally informed” (Biholar & Leslie, 2022, p. 1; UN WOMEN, 2018, p. 2;

United Nations, 2017, 2024) are violated. As reported by the European Commission (The European Union, n.d.), this violence can encompass physical harm, such as beating, strangling, or use of weapons; sexual harassment, especially forced sexual acts, inappropriate touch, or actions targeting a person's sexuality; psychological harm, including controlling behavior, blackmail, and even economic harm.

This research paper, therefore, aims to investigate various entangled layers of GBV represented in the two selected novels: Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002) and Monica Byrne's *The Girl in the Road* (2014) through a feminist posthumanist approach.

1.1 Terminology, representation, and critique

To clear the misconception around the term, Gender-based Violence, it does not refer to violence against women only, even though "women and girls are exposed to a higher risk of gender-based violence than men" (The Council of Europe, 2011). In the introduction of *Representing Gender-Based Violence: Global Perspectives*, Sinalo and Mandolini (2023, p. 2) explained why the term "Gender-based Violence" is more accurate than "violence against women" by drawing reference to Karen Boyle, who contends, the term "violence against women" facilitates the normalization of violence against women. This term refers to a kind of violence that indicates "women's vulnerability rather than men's responsibility", and in turn, people learn to accept violence against women as an inevitable part of life, as Boyle writes (Boyle, 2019, p. 20). Apart from this, another compelling reason for adopting the term Gender-based Violence is the necessity of foregrounding gender inclusion and solidarity towards the LGBTQIA+ community, as it is crucial to position ourselves as allies to this community, keeping in mind the fact that genderism and its related violence not only equally affects its community members (Sinalo & Mandolini, 2023, p. 3), but the extent of the violence can be greater than that experienced by individuals of the two binary genders. Therefore, gender-based violence is not solely a problem for women or men; this is something closely related to masculinity as an ideological construct that normalizes the employment of violence to maintain rigid gender roles and hierarchies. In her influential article on representation and gender, De Lauretis critiques existing frameworks that overlook how gender and violence intersect. She advocates for a new way of looking at how violence and gender are portrayed, focusing on how these portrayals are created and circulated (De Lauretis, 1985, p. 18). De Lauretis (1985) highlights that violence often reflects the power dynamics in society, especially when it comes to maintaining specific social structures. By reframing violence through the lens of power and gender, she suggests that gender-based violence is not just an isolated issue but reflects larger societal conflicts and power relations (p. 8). She, moreover, emphasizes that the way violence is represented is deeply connected to ideas of gender, meaning that violence is imbued with gendered meanings that influence how it is discussed and understood. This underscores the necessity of examining these representations to effectively tackle the complexities of gender-based violence (p. 2). De Lauretis's (1985) critique of gendered representations underscores the urgency of reimagining narratives that challenge hierarchy and the violence that it takes to maintain this order.

1.2 Science fiction as a site of resistance

Indeed, some critics would argue against such representations of violence and dismiss the research and writings that mirror this violence, a means of combating the violence per se, as fragile. However, this research paper brings forth two contemporary writers, Larissa Lai and Monica Byrne, who not only portray the trauma and despondence of gender-based violence in their writings but also fight against the violence by laying bare the layers of such violence and destroying gender essentialism. Larissa Lai, recipient of numerous literary awards, is a Canadian writer born in America. This paper analyzes her second novel, *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), which was shortlisted for the James Tiptree Jr. Award, an annual literary award in the United States of America to science fiction or fantasy novels that examine or question the understanding of gender. The analysis shows how a speculative near-future novel can examine the intersections of gender and violence while navigating through the pain and struggles inherited by generations of Canadians. On the other hand, this research paper also takes Monica Byrne's debut science fiction novel *The Girl in the Road* (2014), the 2014 James Tiptree Jr. Award winner, set in Ethiopia, India, and the Arabian Sea. Hence, it can be said that speculative science fiction's capacity to reimagine the future makes it an ideal medium for deconstructing GBV. Byrne's novel deals with two women's journey towards self-discovery while exploring the intricate relationship between gender and violence. Both novels chosen for analysis imagine the world almost fifty years ahead of the present timeline. Additionally, the shift in temporal settings within the novels not only helps to frame the narratives but also serves to criticize the anthropocentric timeline by exposing its role in sustaining GBV. Anthropocentrism's reliance on linear time is a cornerstone of exerting its ideological power, as time is "deeply intertwined with the rhetorical act of harnessing and subverting power in the unfolding struggle for justice" (Bjork & Buhre, 2021, p. 179). This linear temporality naturalizes hierarchies by framing them as inevitable outcomes of "advancement," while marginalizing nonhuman and queer temporalities. Societal power structures—by imposing linearity label the marginalized identities as "backward", thereby legitimizing

exploitation and violence. The novels contest this by asserting queer, non-human, and cyclical temporalities that disrupt anthropocentric control. The hybridity of the characters in the novels defies “natural” genealogies. Themes like reincarnation, disruption of cause-and-effect sequence, and fragmented experience of time recur across the narratives and resist rational chronology. Considering these dynamics, the novels reframe temporality as a contested site of anti-anthropocentric resistance in itself in demonstrating how linear time’s hegemony reinforces the binaries while proposing alternative temporalities of becoming that disrupt these hierarchies. Apart from this, complex sexual relationships and the engagement between gender and technology are themes that persist in the two narratives. Though the novels differ in their approach to future technologies and their relation to gender identities, the main focal point of the novels—fighting gender-based violence in a technology-mediated futuristic world—remains the same. The novels are also based in three different regions of the world. The versatility of the locations contributes to the research’s broader, more global perspective. While a truly global viewpoint may not be feasible, this research paper focuses on specific regions to capture a sense of the global context and the diverse perspectives that exist within it. The geographically disparate settings of *Salt Fish Girl* (spanning southern China and the Pacific Northwest) and *The Girl in the Road* (traversing India, Ethiopia and the Arabian Sea) are not merely backdrops but also a critical framework to investigate how techno-futurism intersects with GBV. These futuristic narratives in distinct cultural and geopolitical contexts expose the uneven distribution of technological progress while resisting homogenized visions of the future. While in *Salt Fish Girl*, the Pacific Northwest’s corporate region starkly contrasts with southern China’s mythic past, in *The Girl in the Road*, readers can perceive that the dominance of renewable energy coexists with persistent gender and caste violence. Although the novels reveal that techno-capitalism adapts to regional forms of oppression rather than obliterating them, the focus of the narratives on diverse settings decentralizes the vision of resistance, enabling it to transcend borders while preserving local particularities. Therefore, by linking disparate geographies while simultaneously exposing and resisting global asymmetries, the novel refutes techno-utopianism. The diversity of settings underscores that “the future” must be co-created rather than imposed by a single hegemon, offering a blueprint for resistance that is both globally resonant yet locally grounded.

2. METHODOLOGY: FEMINIST POSTHUMANISM AND HYBRID FUTURES

This research paper employs a close textual analysis of the two novels—Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl* and Monica Byrne’s *The Girl in the Road*—from a feminist posthumanist perspective to show how Lai and Byrne deploy speculation to dismantle gender essentialism, revealing how patriarchal systems weaponize violence to enforce binary norms. Both authors, through their writings, invoke a post-gender world that transgresses the boundaries of various gendered cultural constructs. As a theoretical framework, feminist posthumanism is an emerging academic field of enquiry that foregrounds intersectionality and interdisciplinarity to address the traditional imagination of gender and posthuman perspectives. This theory will help broaden the analysis of these two novels, as feminist posthumanism is not any “right or best ways to do research but an active doing and experimenting” (Niccolini & Ringrose, 2019, p. 8). Through a detailed analysis of these two novels, this research paper, therefore, proposes to disclose how hybrid identities co-evolve in interaction with future technologies, ultimately aspiring to a post-gender world that aims at the coexistence of different species and bridges differences between the binaries.

3. SALT FISH GIRL: FEMINIST-POSTHUMANIST SOLUTIONS TO COMBAT GBV

3.1 Hybridity and subversion of gender binarism

The novel *Salt Fish Girl* deals with two locations—South China and the Pacific Northwest—in two different time periods. Hence, the protagonists also belong to two different timelines, though they are linked to each other through rebirth. The novel starts at the beginning of time, presenting Nu-Wa, a half-fish and half-woman who lives multiple lives across different times and spaces, as the creator goddess of everything. Nu-wa delineates herself as:

I have lips, a woman’s lips, a woman’s mouth already muttering secrets under my breath. Look, I have a woman’s eyes, woman’s rope of smooth black hair extending past my waist. A woman’s torso. Your gaze slides over breasts and belly. The softest skin, warm and quivering. And below? Forget modesty. Here comes the tail, a thick cord of muscle undulating, silver slippery in the early morning light. (Lai, 2002, p. 2)

Nu Wa's evocative self-description, situated at the novel's outset, intertwines human and non-human forms, mounting an immediate affront on anthropocentrism and its associated notions of purity and individuality. Nu Wa creates humans due to her loneliness. But she wants to live a human life now and feel every human pleasure and experience. Nu Wa later turns into a human with the help of a fish, which is more ancient than her. The human Nu Wa now falls in love with Salt Fish Girl, the daughter of a dry goods merchant. Here, the author does not mention or give a slight hint about the possible "stigmatized" relationship between the two females, casting their relationship in a positive light that does not even require any attention. This approach of the novelist fights homophobia in particular and gender binarism in general in a way that makes it seem as though there is no gender binarism at all. Dismissing the existence of gender binarism is a way to combat gender-based violence, as the primary root of gender-based violence is gender binarism itself. Nu Wa and the Salt Fish Girl elope and start a new life in a different place. One day, Nu Wa meets Edwina, the usherer to the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness. Upon reaching there, Nu Wa forgets about her identity and her own language. After getting deceived by Edwina, Nu Wa returns to China after years but finds that the Salt Fish Girl has aged, but she still remains the same. After struggling a lot, Nu Wa takes recourse in water and becomes one with a durian seed that grows into a tree. In 2044, Aimee, Miranda's mother, eats fruit from this tree and gets pregnant with Miranda, Nu Wa's reincarnated figure.

3.2 Problematising enlightenment origin stories

Here, Lai problematizes the idea of origin by putting the outset of the novel against the traditional Enlightenment concept of origin. Through the depiction of the creator's desire to walk among the creatures that she made and live as a human being on earth, Lai promotes the idea of shared experience and not of shared origin. This contradicts the linear and heterosexual-patriarchal structure of genealogies that undergird Western origin stories. In her article *Troubling Origins: Cyborg Politics in Larissa Lai's Salt Fish Girl* (2010), Sharlee Reimer brings together posthumanist thinkers such as Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles and Lai in a feminist posthumanist framework. Reimer shows how the author of this novel discards the Enlightenment idea of the universality and linearity of origin and embraces epistemological uncertainty (Reimer, 2010, p. 7). Lai is keen to grapple with uncertainty as it also begets chances for unlimited possibilities that take coalition building to a further level, as Lai, in her novel, accentuates variable levels of coalitions that do not share the same origin promoted by Enlightenment epistemology. However, this lack of shared origin complicates the process but opens possibilities for new dynamic relationships. Despite the doubts surrounding the alliances formed from non-uniform experiences, feminist posthumanist writers tentatively embrace the possibilities these epistemologies offer for coalition building (Reimer, 2010, p. 4). This ambiguity of the origin story is a component that directly relates to feminist politics, especially since this feminist posthumanist reading can offer an "imaginative space" in which to "examine alternatives to patriarchal structures" (Booker & Thomas, 2009, p. 87).

Miranda grows up in the walled city of Serendipity in the mid-21st century. From her birth, a distinct smell of durian like rotten eggs lingers with her like a cloud above her head. Miranda's father does everything he can to eliminate the smell, even searching for treatments in the dangerous Unregulated Zone, but nothing seems fruitful. Eventually, the family moves to the Unregulated Zone and opens a grocery store to sell durian. While stocking durians with her mother, Miranda accidentally drops a crate of fruit on her mother's head, and she dies. Eventually, she takes up a job as an apprentice at a clinic run by Dr. Rudy Flowers, who makes clones through experiments mixing human and animal genes. Unaware of Evie's true identity, Miranda meets Evie at the clinic, a clone who appears to be the Salt Fish Girl's reincarnated version. The two quickly become close, akin to the initial bond between Nu Wa and the Salt Fish Girl. Later in the novel, it is revealed that Evie is a member of Dr Flowers' Sonia clone series, in which some of Evie's sisters—other clones from this series—have escaped their lives as factory workers and are now living together. As Miranda spends more time with Evie, she starts to feel time blending together, as if past and present are repeating, and eventually, the cycle of reincarnation appears to be beginning anew.

In the final moments of the novel, when Miranda and Evie discover a hot spring, their legs unite to form two interlocking tails as they plunge into the water. This problematizes Miranda's status as a human. Reassuring her that everything will be all right, Miranda gives birth to a baby girl in the ocean, knowing that the cycle of reincarnation will repeat again.

3.3 Cloning, labor, and systematic violence

The posthumanist critic Rosi Braidotti explains that the posthuman subjectivity she supports is grounded in material reality, emphasizing the importance of being "embodied and embedded" and located, as highlighted by feminist ideas of "politics of location" (Braidotti, 2018, p. 340). As our identities and experiences are shaped by where we are and who we are in relation to others, the identities and interactions of Nu Wa, Evie, and Miranda get connected to the animals and nonhuman traits they embody and to their positions in the world

(social, cultural, and physical). The characters' fluid identity aligns with Braidotti's posthuman subjectivity, which rejects fixed identities in favour of multiplicities (Braidotti, 2013). This directly challenges the patriarchal logic that equates non-binary existence with deviance or "otherness". Nevertheless, if a person is associated with any nonhuman quality, he or she is often considered less than human or "other" than human. Parallely, belonging to the "weaker" sex and not having a "pure" origin are similar to having "fractured identities", as the traditional anthropocentric view is that having a pure origin, some racialized bodies or having impure origin is subjected to dehumanization, where marginalized entities are perceived as outside the "human". This might suggest that the intersectionality of race, gender, and other factors in causing violence, as evident from the fact that all of the suffering characters in the novel are not "pure" and of the "weaker" sex. While speaking about the hierarchy constructed by human exceptionalism, Braidotti says, "In so far as difference spells inferiority, it acquires both essentialist and lethal connotations for people who get branded as "others." These are the sexualized, racialized, and naturalized others who are reduced to the less-than-human status of disposable bodies. We are all humans, but some of us are just more mortal than others" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 15).

Coming back to the discussion, when Ian Chestnut, Miranda's only friend, takes her to a sort of hidden boiler room at school, they recognize women's voices that come from "dark bodies in blue uniforms with strange curling text in a language I didn't recognize printed in large white letters across their backs. Some carried mops. One pulled a large industrial vacuum cleaner" (Lai, 2002, p. 75). Ian replies, "What women?... They're not women" (Lai, 2002, p. 76) to Miranda's question about who those women are. The author describes that they have "rectangular holes in their uniforms ... the organs had been shifted, had been carefully arranged like stones in a formal garden" (Lai, 2002, p. 77). So, going through some bioengineering processes makes them less than human. Going through the bioengineering processes makes them "impure" as opposed to the patriarchal ideology of racial purity. However, it should be noted that all the janitors are female, though not acknowledged. This is one of the examples of assigning tasks based on gender, leading to gender binarism that works as the root of gender-based violence. This could suggest that the author uses this narrative to raise awareness among readers about how gender binarism works and how the patriarchal late capitalist technocratic society assigns roles based on gender. In addition, the novel describes the women who work in factories as "screaming and howling" (Lai, 2002, p. 123). Their "throwing themselves against the wall in sheer frustration with the dreariness of their toil and the damage it was exciting from their once young bodies and once bright faces" only intensifies and further clarifies the instance of violence (Lai, 2002, p. 123). The fact that the female factory workers' faces are not bright and their bodies are not young anymore proves the possible violence that might have occurred to them due to their "weak" gender. This often leads to the erosion of identity due to the violence on the freedom of one particular gender. In addition, the colour of these women's skin suggests that immigrant workers have a common role as caretakers, emphasising once more how non-white bodies are devalued, which is undoubtedly a denial of their humanity.

3.4 Establishing solidarity to fight back

As the research paper focuses on combating gender-based violence, Lai perfectly paves the way for fighting back through *Salt Fish Girl*. While Chen, in his writing about the history of racism, associates Asian people with nonhumans, Lai embraces this hybridity of human-nonhuman to foster solidarity. While hybridity might seem to exoticize marginalized identities, Lai reclaims it as a site of power, positioning "impurity" as a radical alternative to violent connotations of "purity". Lai also hails rebellion to battle the violence, for example, the rebellion of Dr. Flowers' clones against the acceptance of their patriarchal origin. Moreover, the hybrid identities of the clones help to confront and dismantle the rigid binary conceptions. Thus, the narrative not only portrays the violence of subjugation and social rejection faced by the characters but also underscores the transformative power of rebellion within smaller communities (Ludlow, 2023, p. 41). Hence, Lai, through the cloned characters, demonstrates the rebellion against gender-based violence, highlighting the potential for a non-hierarchical future based on queer roots.

4. THE GIRL IN THE ROAD: BREAKING FREE AND A JOURNEY TOWARDS EMANCIPATION

4.1 Global power shift and feminist world building

In her interview with Lydia Kiesling (2015) for *The Guardian*, Byrne mentions that she finds the American novel regime as "very much a masculine preoccupation ... I wanted to reach against that by writing a great world novel. There's so much more that any of us can do in the novel form that we're just not doing" (Kiesling, 2015). Byrne does write a "world" novel where the readers can find a global perspective, as the novelist sets her novel *The Girl in the Road* (2014) in major locations in India and Africa. Byrne's "world novel" framework also prioritizes radical empathy across boundaries, offering a transnational lens to confront

systematic violence. In her novel, set in the futuristic timeline of the 2060s, Byrne inverts the existing geopolitical power dynamics, assigning global power to India and China while conferring cultural power upon Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. This speculative inversion critiques contemporary patriarchal structures and envisions a world where marginalized regions reclaim agency.

The future envisioned in her novel already challenges the current global powers, shifting our perspective to consider the changes necessary to confront the binaries of today's patriarchal society and break free from gender prescriptions. Though the novel shows extraordinary potential to fight violence and is based on "radical empathy across national and sex and gender and class lines" (Kiesling, 2015), evident through the variety of genders, races, cultures, and sexualities portrayed in the narrative, the novel has seldom been discussed or researched, hindering the spread of its powerful message about combating violence that can reach a broader audience.

4.2 The trail as a cyborg: Technology and posthuman agency

By incorporating technology into the stories of individuals in the formation process of their identities and altering interpersonal interactions, the novel anticipates what the future can look like. The novel introduces technologies such as the Trail, a futuristic energy-harvesting structure, presenting it as a real-world and symbolic location. Here, technology connects the past and the future, promoting self-discovery, survival, and connectivity. The Trail, resembling a pontoon bridge, is described as a self-repairing structure having "an intelligent chip that, like a human cell, understands where it goes and what it's supposed to do" (Byrne, 2014, p. 24). This self-sustaining organic nature of this structure breaks the human/nonhuman divide. Inhabited by different species, this futuristic constitution works as a liminal zone where the inhabitants seem to shed their identities with constant adaptation, endurance, and symbiosis. In this way, the Trail symbolizes the death of the rational and autonomous human subject and the emergence of a relational posthuman subject. Therefore, it becomes a hybrid zone where human-technology interaction blurs distinctions between the natural and the unnatural. Consequently, the Trail becomes a living character in the novel, influencing lives. As the "source of a society's energy must necessarily shape their language, art, and culture" (Byrne, 2014, p. 25), the Trail—the site of becoming—evolves into a liberating space for those seeking transformation. The omnipresence of the Trail, like a sentient agent, defies traditional boundaries, reflecting loosely on Haraway's "cyborg politics", where the complexity and multiplicity are underlined, and challenges to traditional power structures are emphasized. Haraway's cyborg represents diversity and defies totalizing narratives. In the same way, the Trail provides a method of living free from such classifications. Its technological essence and capacity for self-reinvention complement Haraway's idea of affinity-based ties rather than biological or cultural determinism, creating a setting that challenges established hierarchies of power and embraces a more fluid, posthuman way of being. "Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism" (Haraway, 2004, p. 34). Similarly, Byrne thematizes complexity and ambiguity in her novel, indicating that the quest for perfect communication is in cahoots with phallogocentric ideology, where "communication" is reduced to something that can be controlled and standardized. Byrne's narrative looks beyond that "perfect communication".

4.3 Emancipation from patriarchal violence: Journey of the protagonists

Ott (2024) accentuates the difference between various gender-based genres. He highlights that, in the screenplay, female-centred genres generally tend to focus on a protagonist's journey in terms of her personal success, which is in contrast with male-centred genres where more external, action-driven achievements often measure success. A female character's success often needs to align with the traditional feminine roles, or it challenges these roles in ways that can be both empowering and subversive. The way a female character navigates the oppressive systems around her—be it patriarchal forces, social expectations, or personal dilemmas—becomes a defining characteristic of her journey, and how she does so can either reinforce or question societal norms around gender and power (Ott, 2024, p. 2). Byrne's novel showcases two female protagonists' journey that breaks free from the criteria of fulfilling traditional gender roles and questions the norms around it to show how a journey can be taken towards emancipation. The novel has two women Meena and Mariama as its protagonists who travel across the continents to escape their pasts.

The novel unfolds primarily within the realm of nature, depicted through the characters' journeys on the sea and land across expansive natural landscapes. Meena's desire to be one with the sea serves as a metaphor for the influence that nature has on one's existence, showcasing a unique amalgamation of nature, technology, and humans. However, the further narrative says that Meena is separated from her mother at the time of her birth. She kills her lover, Mohini, while catching her cheating, and completely breaks down after that. She then attempts to leave India and reach Ethiopia to confront the murderers of her mother by crossing the Trail, the energy-harvesting bridge from the future that is spread across the Arabian Sea and connects India and Africa.

Meena's journey along the Trail transcends mere physical movement—it becomes a radical act of resistance against the patriarchal structures that seek to confine and control her body. As she traverses the energy-harvesting bridge, her merger with the Trail dissolves the boundaries between the human and the machine, the organic and the technological. This fusion is not merely symbolic; it embodies Rosi Braidotti's concept of nomadic subjectivity, which rejects fixed identities in favour of fluid, ever-evolving becoming. Braidotti argues that the nomadic subject thrives in multiplicity, "a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity" (Braidotti, 1994, p. 22). In this novel, Meena epitomizes this fluidity, as Meena is close to whom we can see as Braidotti's "nomad". Braidotti emphasizes that a nomad "does not stand for homelessness", but rather expresses "the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes, without and against an essential unity" (Braidotti, 1994, p. 22). Meena's physical and emotional integration with the Trail erases the myth of a "self-contained" human identity, destabilizing the patriarchal logic that equates bodily purity with legitimacy. By blurring the human-machine binary, she escapes the rigid categorizations that enable gendered violence—violence rooted in the patriarchal obsession with policing boundaries (between male/female, human/nonhuman, natural/artificial).

This transformation also resonates with Karen Barad's theory of agential realism, which posits that agency is not a property of individual beings but emerges through intra-actions mutually constitutive relationships between human and nonhuman entities. The Trail is not a passive backdrop to Meena's journey. It actively co-creates her agency. As Barad writes, "agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something someone has" (Barad, 2007, p. 214). Meena's hybridity and her entanglement with the Trail's technology, generates a distributed, collective form of resistance. Her body, no longer legible within patriarchal frameworks of "authentic" humanness, becomes ungovernable. The violence she faces stemming from attempts to categorize, control, and commodify her—loses its grip as she slips through the cracks of binary logic. The Trail, in enabling this metamorphosis, transforms from a tool of capitalist infrastructure (harvesting energy for profit) into a site of posthuman liberation, where technology disrupts rather than enforces hierarchy.

Byrne's narrative further aligns with Stryker's critique of "authentic" origins, particularly her rejection of biological essentialism as a basis for identity. Stryker, writing within a trans-feminist framework, challenges the notion that legitimacy depends on conforming to static, "natural" categories (Stryker, 2011). Similarly, Meena's merger with the Trail dismantles the myth of purity the idea that "authentic" humanness requires separation from technology or nonhuman elements. Byrne deconstructs this fallacy by positioning the Trail, not the human body, as the locus of power and transformation. In doing so, she echoes Stryker's assertion that identity is a dynamic, self-determined process rather than a predetermined essence. The novel suggests that "authenticity" is a patriarchal construct used to justify exclusion and violence; by embracing hybridity, Meena exposes the fragility of such hierarchies.

Ultimately, Byrne's (2014) portrayal of Meena's journey illustrates how speculative fiction can operationalize feminist posthumanist theory. The Trail becomes a metaphor for resistance itself—a rhizomatic, boundary-blurring force that enables marginalized bodies to evade categorization and reclaim agency. By rejecting the fiction of "pure" origins and fixed identities, the novel imagines a world where survival depends not on conformity but on the radical embrace of multiplicity. In this way, *The Girl in the Road* does more than critique patriarchal violence; it maps a posthuman ontology where fluidity is not just survival—it is revolution.

Mariama's story is told in tandem with Meena's, which occurs decades earlier. Mariama is a small child living with her mother. However, the man they fled from eventually finds them and rapes Mariama's mother. Mariama runs away from this incident and makes her way all the way to Addis Ababa with the assistance of some generous strangers. After growing up in Ethiopia, she falls in love with Gabriel, a young Indian doctor. After finding that Gabriel is with another woman, Mariama kills them and rips off her baby. The child is none other than Meena, who has been sent back to India.

4.4 Intersectional violence: Class, race and gender

From the beginning of the novel, the plight of gender-based violence and the desire to combat it is noticeable. Byrne describes a little girl as a "crusader" as she is bitten by a snake. The snakebite may signify the "bite" of the society that always discriminates and agonizes the "other" gender irrespective of age. Meena also identifies herself with the same plight "This is what happened to me, too" (Byrne, 2014, p. 1), indicating that every woman's condition is identical to each other. When Meena travels by train, she is constantly afraid that she might be tracked by an unknown enemy, whom the author does not clarify well enough, maybe to indicate that the animosity that always surrounds the weaker gender cannot be pinned down as it can come from multiple sources. In the narrative, the author very subtly injects the intersections of class, caste, race and gender. In the train, when a fellow passenger shows curiosity towards her identity, Meena thinks to herself to flaunt her Brahmin lineage. But she keeps quiet, accepting that "being looked down upon is good for the soul, good for empathy, good training for a human" (Byrne, 2014, p. 6). So, being not a Brahmin and being looked down upon are two things that run parallel here, and the protagonist herself does not even escape this negative

outlook towards class and caste. As the narrative progresses, Meena recounts the story of a girl named Preeti. At one of her charges at a women's clinic, she meets Preeti, who got involved with K. P. Pillai, a married politician. But the politician gets her pregnant and "beat(s) her up to induce a miscarriage" (Byrne, 2014, p. 100). But Preeti seems to be very unconscious about the violence that has been inflicted upon her. When Meena asks her if Preeti wants to press charges against the politician, she says, "it was an accident...He just needed to get his frustration out of his system" (Byrne, 2014, p. 100). Preeti adds more, "Human beings are passionate. Energy comes through us, and we keep moving it around, and sometimes we're the receivers, and sometimes we're the pushers" (Byrne, 2014, p. 100). Gender-based violence is so normalized in society that the victim thinks that acts of violence are trivial actions and that acting against violence is insignificant. The author asks such victims through Meena's voice, "Have you ever been the pusher?" (Byrne, 2014, p. 101), triggering the victims to think beyond the gendered convention.

Byrne also depicts the violence that happens against the transgenders in a gender-based and gender-biased societal structure while disclosing Mohini's identity as a trans-woman: "Hijras had been assured of ostracism for most of recent history, except when they were allowed to sing at weddings or the birth of boys or to serve as bottoms for men who had sex with men but weren't gay" (Byrne, 2014, p. 147). Byrne highlights the hierarchies that are formed based on who a "true" hijra is. Moreover, when Meena wants to live with Mohini, Meena's grandmother shows her objection as she is not a Brahmin and she belongs to the transgender community, "How do you know Mohini will be faithful to you? You know her kind" (Byrne, 2014, p. 195). This statement makes it visible that having a non-binary gender identity is just like a "tribal tattoo that makes one's personhood cognizable" (Stryker, 2011, p. 93). So, violence both verbal and physical can be traced in every brick of the structure named gender, motivated by prejudice and stigmatization.

While on her journey across the trail, Meena comes across the body of a woman wearing a saree. When Mohini, with whom Meena always has inner conversations, asks her to assume what might be the story, Meena replies, "Maybe she was a refugee from another seastead nearby. Or maybe this was a cruel and unusual death sentence. Not by a court, but by, I don't know, the woman's spouse. Drove her out here in a boat, blindfolded, and then left her here with no supplies." (Byrne, 2014, pp. 253–254). Meena also elaborates on the story of Parvati Rai, her first client at the women's center. Parvati was a woman who had been born into slavery, not in the sense of karmic reincarnation or intrinsic value, but rather in the sense of social construction. Given that people have no control over where they are born, this was evidently not her fault. When her mother passes away, Parvati grows up in the house as a slave. She is a slave in the sense that she has no education, is never paid enough to live independently, and is not allowed to build any kind of relationship that would help her escape her circumstances. After the master's wife leaves him, the man she serves becomes violent towards her. He repeatedly rapes Parvati while there is nobody in the house. "And that was just her normal life" (Byrne, 2014, p. 272), though Parvati sometimes thinks of committing suicide. Ultimately, Parvati takes a stand for herself, harnessing all her life force to confront the violence she faces, driven by the intersecting forces of class and gender. Parvati flees. Eventually, she gets better and helps other women get out of their situations. And she has one wish, "She wanted to lay eyes on him again and show herself that she had nothing to fear" (Byrne, 2014, p. 273). The author's portrayal of breaking free from gender-based violence is particularly vivid in Parvati's story, highlighting the primary focus of this research paper.

4.5 Solidarity and resistance: Art, speech and collective empowerment

Byrne's novel posits resistance through communal solidarity and creative agency. Byrne now uses Mariama as her mouthpiece to represent violence and combat the same. When Mariama escapes the abusive father with her mother, the father somehow finds them, and when Mariama returns, she sees her mother "upside down", indicating a possible marital rape which is also a kind of gender-based violence, a power exercise of the male over the female. Her mother tells her to run away, and then she takes her journey of self-discovery. Mariama expresses her awe when she sees the real world. She says the word "world" used to mean to her only "the mosques at the center of the city, the market to the south, and the stars hanging low, which is where everything we saw and heard on the computer and television and radio and phones came from" (Byrne, 2014, p. 72). Now that she is learning to be "free", she is amazed at the sight of "women walking freely in the streets, the women beautiful and beaming, each one a queen with a bright headwrap" (Byrne, 2014, p. 73). Although the men assist Mariama throughout her journey, whenever she speaks, their interruptions highlight the dominant role of men in society, and the author skillfully weaves this dynamic into the narrative with her usual acumen. To give more details of the violence, the author mentions Dinkenesh, the fossilized bones hailed as the oldest early human. Mariama speculates maybe she was too running away and innocently asks, "Did she know it was better to die than be taken by a man?" (Byrne, 2014, p. 179), signifying the pervasive tension that works within women because of violence. The reader should be very conscious to read the message of the author, infused in the narrative very tactfully. Mariama asks about Maryam, the mother of God, and after knowing that the statue of Maryam is in every place, she repeats to herself, "The woman is in every place"

(Byrne, 2014, p. 75), and tries to see every woman's face as her own. This part of the narrative highlights that every woman belongs to herself yet is also connected to all other women. It suggests that each woman has the power to set herself free, which is evident in the line, "You must stop thinking you are owned. You only belong to yourself" (Byrne, 2014, p. 175). Byrne also gives the mantra of fighting back, which is possible through "By being alive. By speaking out. By making art" (Byrne, 2014, p. 126). Byrne frames arts and speech as acts of reclaiming agency, destabilizing patriarchal narratives that silence marginalized voices.

Thus, by repeatedly asserting the characters' queer sexuality, introducing guiding figures like Yemaya, and emphasizing the word "Saha", which indicates the power of togetherness, the narrative presents a subtle yet profound strategy for confronting gender-based violence and achieving empowerment. Byrne skillfully reflects the quiet yet persistent nature of such struggles and wins in everyday life.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research shows how both *Salt Fish Girl* and *The Girl in the Road* dismantle oppressive systems, such as patriarchal capitalism, which exploit bodies especially female and feminized ones for labor, reproduction, and profit, as seen in *Salt Fish Girl's* depiction of corporate control. The novel combats the gendered violence rooted in biological determinism by dismantling traditional ideas of gender by presenting fluid and hybrid identities. Characters like Miranda, born with unconventional traits—durian smell and scaly feet—challenge the idea of fixed identities. This fluidity undermines the rigid binaries that sustain patriarchal systems. Also, the corporate dystopia in the novel highlights the exploitation of women, particularly through the use of cloned workers like the Sonias, who are treated as disposable commodities. By addressing the roots of gender-based violence—patriarchal systems, biological determinism, and binary thinking—*Salt Fish Girl* not only critiques existing injustices but also inspires visions of a post-gender world. On the other hand, in *The Girl in the Road*, Monica Byrne paints a world where Meena's journey on the Trail symbolizes a reclamation of getting her power back, as the fusion of body and technology transcends traditional gender roles. Similarly, intertwined with Yemaya's mythic presence, Mariama's narrative challenges patriarchal constructs by depicting fluid, non-hierarchical and interconnected relationships. This shared experience and the interconnectedness with a mythic figure dismantle biological determinism, which Haraway describes as "related not by blood but by choice" (Haraway, 2004, p. 14). By depicting the characters' rejection of singularity and their embrace of multiplicity as a form of resistance, the novel critiques gendered violence while emphasising healing and redefinition through fluidity.

Complementing this, the novels employ the strategy of near-future narratives to create a speculative yet perturbably familiar world where GBV persists in evolved, technologized forms. The near-future's proximity collapses the distinction between present and future, exposing GBV as a persistent structure rather than a historical aberration. The implementation of near-future narrative allows the novels to extrapolate current systems of oppression into dystopian but plausible futures. Issues like marital rape, caste violence, the unethicity of corporate biotechnology, and the commodification of female bodies mirror present-day exploitations, critiquing how "progress" often excludes marginalized genders. Thus, the narratives force readers to confront continuities between present and future violence, which can help in envisioning post-gender resistance within reach. Hence, the near-future setting makes the novels' radical alternatives—hybrid identities, queer kinships, techno-organic symbiosis—feel urgently actionable, not utopian fantasies. In doing so, they resonate with the objective of feminist posthumanism: to unsettle the systems that naturalize GBV by reimagining time, body, and resistance itself.

Therefore, the novels—*Salt Fish Girl* and *The Girl in the Road*—when observed through a posthumanist re-reading framework, show how the representation of hybrid identities that emerge from the interplay between humans and future technologies can help to transcend traditional boundaries of identity and gender. The narratives envision a post-gender world where, by breaking down gender hierarchies and by imagining identities beyond biological determinism, differences are bridged, and co-evolution becomes a central theme in redefining human existence. This perspective aligns with the feminist goal of destabilising fixed identities, making room for diverse expressions of selfhood that fight against oppressive power structures. It rejects any justification for violence that happens due to gender hierarchies, just as feminist posthumanism exposes how power structures use binarism to justify violence and domination.

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