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## A Study of Transgressed Boundaries in *The Gate to Women's Country* by Sheri S. Tepper

# ABSTRACT

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This paper endeavours to delineate the gender dynamics and ethical quandaries arising from the repercussions of war and the decisions undertaken to preserve societal norms, as depicted in the 1988 science-fiction novel entitled *The Gate to Women's Country*, written by American author Sheri S. Tepper. Serving as a critique, the narrative provides insight into inquiries surrounding the supposed genetic determinants of violence. It interrogates established paradigms pertaining to gender, introducing a society meticulously crafted through scientific design.

**Keywords:** Sheri S. Tepper, science-fiction, gender, American literature, boundaries.

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As Wallace McNeish states in his article “From Revelation to Revolution: Apocalypticism in Green Politics,” “apocalyptic discourse is a major mediating frame through which publics have come to engage with the issue of climate change, and by proxy with wider green politics” (1037). The apocalyptic milieu embodies a tabula rasa approach for numerous societies, facilitating the re-creation and reconfiguration of social structures. Such realms, realized contemporaneously mainly through an environmental cataclysm, used to be the reflections of nuclear dangers lurking in the Cold War and the arms race. The reproduction of such a vision is discernible in the writings of Sheri S. Tepper, especially her 1988 novel *The Gate to Women’s Country*. The narrative delves into the thematic terrain of social structure and gender roles. Situated within a post-apocalyptic future, the narrative artfully elucidates apprehensions surrounding global annihilation through the deployment of a pinnacle nuclear armament—an unsettling resonance that holds significance in the contemporary world.

This article seeks to trace the gender dynamics and moral dilemmas that arise from the consequences of war and the choices made to maintain people’s way of life. In the narrative, Tepper’s method of subverting the patriarchal viewpoint is twofold: by constructing a non-stereotypical society and by adapting the classical Greek myth of Iphigenia. A critique, the story offers an insight into the questions of genetical determination of violence. The theoretical underpinning of this study draws upon gender theories, notably exemplified by Rosi Braidotti’s conception of subverting rigid gender boundaries. Braidotti’s theoretical framework, evident in her examination of posthuman subjectivity and critique of traditional humanism, challenges established fixed and essentialist interpretations of gender. She advocates for a more nuanced understanding, introducing the concept of “nomadic subjects” who navigate diverse identities and subjectivities, thereby proposing a subversion of strict gender roles. In this perspective, the subversion encompasses an embracing of the multifaceted nature of identity beyond conventional binary categorizations. Furthermore, Braidotti integrates Deleuzian philosophy, especially the notion of “becoming,” challenging the concept of fixed identities. According to her, the subversion of rigid gender roles involves a continuous process of becoming, where individuals participate in the exploration of and experimentation with diverse aspects of their identities. Building upon Braidotti’s perspectives, the work of Donna J. Haraway enriches the theoretical framework of this article. Haraway promotes a more adaptable and intersectional understanding of identity, disrupting binary dichotomies and underscoring the significance of nuanced lived experiences. Haraway’s methodology aligns with Braidotti’s, urging a shift away from inflexible gender norms towards a more comprehensive and diverse appreciation of the dynamics of identity.

In contrast to Sheri S. Tepper's other literary works, *The Gate to Women's Country* has undergone scholarly examination; however, such analyses have not prominently addressed the thematic exploration of boundary crossings depicted within the narrative. One of the seminal works addressing the novel explores the theme of (anti)sexuality and accuses it of being homophobic. Wendy Pearson, in her critical examination, expresses dissatisfaction with the narrative, asserting: "The hetero-/homo-sexual binarism that is valorized in our culture and reproduced in *Gate* tends to obscure and distort the sexual natures of individuals and acts and thus to suppress other stories of sexuality whose binarisms are different or non-existent" (202). Responding to Pearson's critique, Sylvia Kelso, in her article "On *The Gate to Women's Country*: An Exchange: Re-Opening the Gate to Women's Country," challenges Pearson's overtly negative assessment, contextualizing the novel within Tepper's larger body of work. Kelso counters, stating: "I would argue that Pearson's reading of the passage on homosexuals' fate in *Gate* (§17:200) is a case of irony missed—irony that drops an early clue to the dystopic nature of *Gate*" (139). Another critical analysis by Peter Fitting examines the theme of separatism in Tepper's novel, emphasizing an overall pessimistic tone. Fitting contends:

This pessimism has to do with Tepper's essentialist view of the origins of violence and her reliance, however metaphorical, on an elite (the Women's Council) which knows what is best, implying that most of the women cannot be trusted to make enlightened decisions or to act in their own best interest. (43)

Building upon the critical discourse surrounding Tepper's text, Shiloh Carroll, in her 2008 work "Both Sides of the Gate: Patriarchy in Sheri S. Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country*," characterizes the text as a convergence of "a feminist utopia and "a 'battle of the sexes' novel" (25). Expanding upon this nuanced examination, Carroll rigorously delves into an analysis of misogyny within the narrative, elucidating the origins of women's endeavour to establish a tranquil societal framework as rooted in the manifestations of "male aggression and domination" (26). This analytical exploration enriches the broader scholarly conversation regarding the complex thematic elements present in Tepper's literary oeuvre.

Tepper's narrative unfolds within two principal locales: the designated Women's Country and the martial bastion of the warrior city. As accurately highlighted by Rowland Hughes and Pat Wheeler, "the human relationship to the natural world has long been central to the dystopian imagination" (2). In the novel, the antagonism exhibited by female characters towards

the external milieu substantiates this assertion. Tepper conceptualizes the idea of female supremacy, a common motif of the science fiction genre, by establishing a republic governed entirely by women. Just as Csicsery-Ronay Jr. calls science-fiction “self-aware” and “rich in social diversity,” Tepper’s novel experiments with the familiar dichotomy of two genders (1). Established after a series of nuclear conflicts, known as *convulsions*, Women’s Country remains a protected area governed entirely by women, whose main concerns are intellectual pursuits and social designing. On the other hand, men reside in garrisons, outside the city limits. The nomenclature of towns is predicated upon feminine names, exemplified by instances such as Alicetown, Tabithatown, Susantown, or Marthatown. The men’s primary objective is to defend the city from external threats and undertake minor military conflicts against their enemies.

The issue of gender is investigated by means of a profound examination of social roles, desires and power dynamics. As a critique of the patriarchal worldview, the novel portrays its central character, Stavia, in one of the breakthrough moments of her life, when, at the age of fifteen, her son David has to decide whether to come back to the realm governed by the women, or to live outside the Country’s borders with the men. This is inextricably linked with a pattern shared by all males, who, at the age of five, are separated from their mothers and relocated from the city to the garrison. There they undergo physical education and are trained to become warriors. At the age of ten, they return to the city to announce their first individually-made decision: whether to stay with men and hold physical power or to return to the realm of women. The stark contrast between the two lies within the activities offered. The inhabitants of Women’s Country are the primary decision-makers and intellectuals, while those of the garrisons are trained as warriors and hold physical power.

Undoubtedly, Tepper is not the first author to depict such a utopian matriarchal state. Ancient myths, such as those of the Amazons, the Hindu text *Devi Mahatmya*, or Sumerian and Egyptian mythical tales, were all connected by the common feature of heroines or goddesses. In modern times, such experiments in writing were undertaken by a plethora of authors: Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett in *New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future* (1889), Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *Herland* (1915) or Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (Bekum Rokeya) in her short story “Sultana’s Dream” (1905) to name only a few. Tepper, nevertheless, was a pioneer in exploring the concept of selective breeding. Considered to impede human development, features shared by the patriarchal society of men, like zealotry, aggressiveness or physical strength, are slated for eradication.

Central to the narrative is Stavia, a character whose heightened discernment of societal intricacies is prompted by the noteworthy act of

her son, David, as he repudiates the female sphere and ardently commits himself to a life situated beyond the delimited confines of the urban landscape. The foundational trajectory of the narrative is fundamentally shaped by the poignant experience of losing her son. The primary heroine in the tale seems torn between her female duties and the bitter truth hidden in the purposeful separation of the two genders that she reckons with as the story unfolds. Stavia's memories regarding her initial contacts with Chernon, a boy of the garrison who turns from a friend into an offender who rapes Stavia and impregnates her with her son, provide an insight into the gender dynamics. As elucidated by Tepper, within the delineated societal group, contrasting roles are assigned to the representatives of the two genders. Subsequently, these elements intricately contribute to the delineation and formulation of the characters' identities. The character of Chernon functions as a narrative conduit, facilitating an in-depth examination of gender dynamics and power structures. Initially portrayed as a dutiful soldier adhering to societal expectations, he embraces the entrenched gender roles and responsibilities inherent in the matriarchal community. Driven by his role as a protector engaged in conflicts against external societies, Chernon's allegiance to societal norms is profoundly ingrained. As the narrative progresses, he undergoes substantive character development, involving a nuanced exploration of masculinity. This introspective journey challenges traditional notions enforced by societal norms and contributes to a more inclusive and intricate understanding of manhood. The metaphorical battleground where he engages in conflicts symbolically encapsulates broader struggles within Women's Country. This emblematic arena encompasses both external conflicts as a soldier and internal struggles associated with his questioning of societal norms, and masculinity.

The unrestricted crossing of borders appears to be inherently challenging, influenced by both literal and symbolic considerations. The literal aspect pertains to the tangible barrier constructed to safeguard the residents of Women's Country from the potential perils present in the surrounding open expanse. The gate serves as a symbol of transformation and growth, representing a pivotal moment in characters' personal development and the evolution of their perspectives. Beyond individual journeys, it metaphorically encapsulates the barriers and challenges within Women's Country, symbolizing the obstacles each character must overcome in their pursuit of understanding and autonomy. Within the narrative's complexity, the gate takes on additional layers of symbolism, signifying the interconnectedness of different realities or dimensions. Passage through the gate signifies a deeper connection between visible and hidden aspects of Women's Country. As such, the gate alludes to

the presence of secrecy and concealed realities gradually discovered by characters like Stavia. The gateway leading to Women's Country remains predominantly closed throughout the year, opening periodically to admit initiates partaking in the *Ritual of Sacrifice*—boys proclaiming their future destinies—and warriors granted access during the carnival, facilitating intermittent interactions with women. The symbolic meaning involves the renunciation of one's prior family existence in the matriarchal society.

The abovementioned *Ritual* is a one-way journey, a renouncement not only of one's female family members, but also of the possibility of advancing in education or science. Nevertheless, boys already trained to become warriors express their unshaken belief in the seemingly higher cause. In fact, the *Ritual* was designed purposefully to select males who display aggressive patterns of resolving conflicts and exclude them from the rest of society as a threat to the stability of life. The primary objective is to separate the disruptive element, transforming it into a means of protection. Remarkably, Tepper's discourse refrains from acknowledging females of an analogous nature within the confines of this particular world. Regrettably, there exists a conspicuous absence of information pertaining to women manifesting similar behavioural patterns. The element contributes to the core tension of the plot. It is a moment of sacrifice to society, as well as by the mothers who would not have the possibility to partake in their sons' lives. In the story, the common welfare outshines the emotional toll the mothers have to endure. This ethical dilemma is a recurring motif since the societal choices express the priorities in the represented world. Not only are the boys abandoning their mothers physically, but they also lose the possibility of forming families. Their lives are now ruled by means of the commands of their military leaders.

The familiar dichotomy of male and female worlds in the novel stands as a starting point in the discussion over questions posed by the second wave of feminists. Tepper seems to suggest that the peaceful coexistence of the representatives of the two genders is rather fragile and hardly possible. The reversal of the patriarchal mode makes one ponder over the equality of the genders. In the novel, men are excluded from gaining advancement in education, science or politics, the elements that, historically speaking, females had long been deprived of. This is a world based in grave injustice, sexism and a reversal of stereotypical gender roles. At the same time, Tepper's narrative questions the validity of binary perceptions of gender. In the story, the fear of men is rooted in their supposedly inborn propensity towards aggression and violence. Thus, the attempts at selective breeding were undertaken so as to provide a means of shaping the generations to come. Engaging with the concepts of scientific determination, the females in the Women's Country control their population by letting women

become impregnated by mild non-violent individuals residing alongside them within the urban setting. Intermittent sexual encounters with the warriors during the designated *carnivals* are allowed, even desired by the authorities so as to reassure men about their paternity of children born in Women's Country. However, during the alleged medical examination, women receive contraceptive measures.

Additionally, Stavia's current existence and recollections serve as a foundational locus for contemplation on the significance of loss. Immediately after the announcement of her son's decision, Stavia attended the rehearsal of an annually staged play, *Iphigenia at Ilium*. A woman in her thirties, she was to recreate the mythical Iphigenia, an unmarried virgin girl, the daughter of Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae, and his wife Clytemnestra. Due to some unfortunate occurrences and troubles with the weather triggered by the goddess Artemis, whose favourite deer had once been killed by Agamemnon himself, Iphigenia was to be sacrificed to let the Greek fleet sail to Troy to participate in the war.

Iphigenia was a character in a plethora of ancient Greek texts: in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, her murder is a reason for Clytemnestra's plotting against the king. In Hesiod's *Ehoiai (The Catalogue of Women)* her name is written twofold: both *Iphigenia* and *Iphimede*. In this version, the blameless maiden experiences an unexpected salvation orchestrated by Artemis, being supplanted by an *eidolon*, a ghost, whereas Iphigenia is transformed into Hecate, the goddess of magic, darkness and transitional phases. The Greek concept of *eidolon* is inextricably linked with the discussions on perception, reality, and the relationship between appearances and underlying truths in philosophy. It reflects a recognition of the distinction between the world as it appears to the senses and a deeper, more fundamental reality that may be hidden or blurred. It corresponds to a multitude of ideas associated with image, among others the Aristotelian concept of *phantasia*, "similar to a perceptual content, but can be retained in imagination . . . even when perception of the object is no longer taking place" (Aristotle 256).

Similarly, Plato, in his allegory of the cave from *The Republic*, uses the term *eidolon* to refer to the shadows or illusions that prisoners in the cave mistake for reality. The shadows cast on the cave wall are mere images or representations (*eidola*) of the true forms, which exist outside the cave in the realm of perfect, eternal Forms. Plato employs the concept of *eidola* to underscore the dichotomy between the realm of appearances and the domain of ultimate reality. It is the "bearer of illusion, opposed to the real being" (Chow 156). Therefore, in accordance with a Platonic interpretation, within Hesiod's text, Iphigenia's *eidolon* is construed as an equivalent representation of the actual girl.



Two plays by Euripides also revolve around the character of Iphigenia: *Iphigenia at Aulis* and *Iphigenia in Tauris*. In the former, Agamemnon is torn between loyalty to his nation and love towards his beloved daughter. Iphigenia, devoting her life to the higher cause, acknowledges the inferiority of the desires of human beings. Bearing much resemblance to the Biblical story of the Binding of Isaac, Iphigenia is rescued by means of a *deus ex machina* device and replaced with a deer at the altar. According to Girard, “[t]he sacrifice serves to protect the entire community from its own violence; it prompts the entire community to choose victims outside itself” (8). There is little structural difference between a human and an animal sacrifice.

The latter play, *Iphigenia in Tauris* covers the subsequent events, queen Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus being assassinated by Orestes, Iphigenia’s brother, who arrives at Tauris to escape Erinyes, tormenting his soul and triggering madness after matricide. Stealing the *xoanon*<sup>1</sup> of goddess Artemis from her temple, the young man is captured and sentenced to be sacrificed. Recognized and rescued by his sister, Iphigenia, Orestes happily returns to Greece. Thus Iphigenia undergoes a paradigm shift, transitioning from a position of victimhood to that of a rescuer. In this rendition of the narrative, she is dispatched by the goddess Athena to the sanctuary of Artemis in Brauron.

As Girard writes: “In many primitive societies children who have not yet undergone the rites of initiation have no proper place in the community; their rights and duties are almost nonexistent” (12). Consequently, the choice of the young princess in the mythical story of Iphigenia is a perfect choice. Summoned by a pretext that the acclaimed warrior Achilles is to marry her, Iphigenia arrives with her mother only to discover the murderous plans of her father. Martha Nussbaum studies the ethical dimensions of the slaughter of the mythical Iphigenia, focusing on the inner struggles of the characters involved in the conflict. As she states in her book, “[t]he sacrifice of Iphigenia is regarded by the Chorus as necessary, but they also blame Agamemnon” (33). The tragedy studied by Nussbaum is Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* in which Iphigenia’s father is “allowed to choose: that is to say, he knows what he is doing; he is neither ignorant of the situation nor physically compelled; nothing forces him to choose one course rather than the other” (Nussbaum 34). The concept denoted as “familial guilt,” as characterized by Nussbaum, is situated within the sphere of responsibility assigned to Agamemnon, the tragic protagonist compelled to confront a poignant dilemma between filial affection for his daughter and allegiance to his nation (34). In the Euripidean version of the story, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, the protagonist articulates

<sup>1</sup> A wooden image of Artemis, a cult object in ancient Greece.



a profound sentiment, declaring: "I am afraid—not of death itself! But of the interim, the dying hope," thereby exemplifying her courageous disposition (55). Within Tepper's narrative framework, the myth undergoes a process of reinvention wherein it is recounted from the victim's vantage point: "Really she was murdered, but made the men feel guilty, so they pretended she had sacrificed her own life" (Tepper 72).

Reinterpreting the ancient myth by means of science fiction, Tepper questions the universality and topicality of classical tales, challenging their patriarchal frame of reference. Grappling with the consequences of societal choices, Stavia aptly observes the existing struggle between the genders. Torn between her desires and obligations, she bears a strong resemblance to the mythical Iphigenia, who entrusted her life into the hands of her father to save the nation from troubles, claiming in the Euripidean *Iphigenia at Aulis*: "Think of me and forget your cares for now" (43). On the other hand, within Tepper's narrative interpretation of the Iphigenia mythos, the central heroine articulates allegations of male brutality, asking Polyxena during the performance: "Tell me. Did the men cry when they slit your throat? . . . They didn't cry when they were slitting mine, either" (Tepper 264). Polyxena, the mythical youngest daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy, is often compared to Iphigenia. Her story is found in various works of the classical canon, including the writings of Virgil, Euripides and others. She was ritually killed, presumably for having contributed to the death of Achilles, whom she despised for having murdered her brother Troilus. In this way, Tepper challenges the reader's understanding of gender by using the idea of cognitive estrangement (as used by Darko Suvin). Situating the character of Stavia-Iphigenia within a dystopian context, Tepper subverts the existing boundaries and considers possibilities that may not have been apparent within the constraints of the classical canon that expresses the patriarchal viewpoint.

Ancient myths are saturated with examples of the subjugation of women. As Braidotti writes about women: "Their representations are overdetermined and depicted as necessarily absent, excluded from the centre stage" (*Posthuman Feminism* 19). According to Best, "through her adaptation of Euripides's plays, Tepper comments on gender ideology in a continuum of time from ancient Greece to both Tepper's own contemporary context and the future that she has illustrated in her novel. She questions the universality of the classical canon by demonstrating the distinctly problematic patriarchal ideologies inherent in examples from this canon, and uses strategies of cognitive estrangement found in both science fiction and the reception of classical texts to allow readers to explore potentially problematic aspects of their own context through contexts far removed from their own" (Best 105). A fundamental tenet of the theatrical production revolves around the assertion that the deleterious

repercussions of conflicts and warfare instigated by males extend significantly to impact women, children, and the broader societal fabric. The performance serves as a censure of acts of violence, predominantly perpetrated by the male demographic.

Moreover, Tepper's narrative expresses the limitations and negative consequences of rigid gender stereotypes and the expectations that come with them. It depicts how these expectations can stifle individual potential and lead to moral dilemmas for the characters. As the novel unfolds, the concept of otherness is being redefined. In accordance with the view proffered by Rosi Braidotti:

Subjectivity is equated with consciousness, universal rationality, and self-regulating ethical behaviour, whereas Otherness is defined as its negative and specular counterpart. 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. (*The Posthuman* 15)

The concept is realized in Tepper's narrative by means of subversion of the patriarchal viewpoint and traditional gender roles. The novel significantly challenges conventional ideas about gender. Using Braidotti's definition, "[f]eminism is the struggle to empower those who live along multiple axes of inequality" (*Posthuman Feminism* 3). Embracing this delineation of feminism, Tepper's narrative embodies the "subversive politics" factor of feminism that Braidotti writes about (3). In accordance with her perspective, "[i]t means creating the alternative versions of 'the human' generated by people who were historically excluded from, or only partially included into, that category" (3).

Moreover, in the matriarchal society of the Women's Country, there is a subversion of the stereotypical patriarchal viewpoint on gender roles. Not only does the story question the idea of fixed gender roles, but it also raises questions about the binary concept of gender. It challenges the notion that gender is strictly male or female, as the narrative hints at non-binary or gender-fluid individuals who do not fit neatly into such categories. This is exemplified through the characterization of servitors, individuals who are genetically designed and exhibit a lack of aggressive tendencies. The principal proposition aligns with the conceptual framework of identity fluidity as elucidated in the scholarly discourse of contemporary academics. In accordance with Rosi Braidotti's explication, "the becoming woman/animals/insect imperceptible consists of deconstructive steps across the boundaries that used to separate qualitatively Self/same from others"

(*Nomadic Subjects* 35). Clearly “[t]he reference to ‘woman’ in the process of ‘becoming woman,’ however, does not refer to empirical females, but rather to topological positions, degrees, and levels of intensity, affective states” (37). Utilizing Braidotti’s conceptual framework pertaining to the contemporary global milieu, characterized by elements of instability, mutability, fragmentation, hybridization, and progressive nomadization, proves advantageous in the nuanced characterization of debated concepts such as “womanhood” within Tepper’s narrative. The beginning of Stavia’s journey toward womanhood is instigated by the emotional resonance associated with the sense of loss that she encounters.

In her writing, Braidotti actively interrogates the materiality inherent in corporeal entities, positing an exploration that extends beyond their biological essence to encompass intricate social and cultural inscriptions. In the realm of gender studies, this scholarly endeavour involves a meticulous examination of how prevailing societal norms and expectations intricately determine the lived experiences of individuals possessing a female physiognomy. This intricate process significantly influences the conceptualizations of femininity and womanhood, thereby contributing to a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted interplay between embodiment, societal constructs, and gender identity.

Also, employing the Deleuzian conceptual framework of “becoming,” specifically elucidated as “[i]t is not the girl who becomes a woman; it is becoming-woman that produces the universal girl” (Deleuze and Guattari 305), facilitates an examination of the emotional intricacies inherent in the character of Stavia-Iphigenia. The protagonist engages in a profound contemplation of her societal role and identity within a cultural milieu that prioritizes intellectual prowess over the authentic expression of emotions. This emotional complexity challenges the idea that certain emotions are inherently tied to one’s gender, which seems to be the dominant tenet in *The Gate to Women’s Country*. Throughout the transformative process, Stavia perceives herself in dual roles—as both an observer and the observed, an active participant in actions and a passive object in a state of inertia.

This process also corresponds to Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity, affecting diverse aspects of human life, including identities, relationships, and social structures. In his *Liquid Modernity*, he studied the difficulties individuals encounter when manoeuvring through a world in which social connections are increasingly temporary, and conventional structures defining identity and significance are less secure, claiming:

The disintegration of the social network, the falling apart of effective agencies of collective action is often noted with a good deal of anxiety and bewailed as the unanticipated “side effect” of the new lightness and

fluidity of the increasingly mobile, slippery, shifty, evasive and fugitive power. But social disintegration is as much a condition as it is the outcome of the new technique of power, using disengagement and the art of escape as its major tools. For power to be free to flow, the world must be free of fences, barriers, fortified borders and checkpoints. Any dense and tight network of social bonds, and particularly a territorially rooted tight network, is an obstacle to be cleared out of the way. (14)

Moreover, *Stavia*'s transformation corresponds to Donna J. Haraway's concept of the cyborg, a subversive figure that disrupts traditional gender norms and opens up possibilities for new forms of identity. In her writings, Haraway challenges the idea of fixed, natural identities and embraces notions of constructed, contingent identities. She asserts that "[t]here is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices" (155). The cyborg, through its defiance of conventional gender norms, paves the way for a postgender world. Postgenderism, as envisioned by Haraway, entails transcending the limitations of gender categories entirely, imagining a future where identities are not preordained by biological sex. As Haraway claims: "The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation" (150). The blurring of boundaries, a key concept in her writings, undermines binary oppositions and fixed categories, including those associated with gender. Nevertheless, *Tepper*'s vision of a female world entirely separated from the male one does not fully comply with Braidotti's philosophical ideas since her experiment with a subversion of the patriarchal viewpoint in the novel results in the formation of an eugenic matriarchy.

Moreover, the narrative delves into the regulation of sexuality within *Women's Country*, utilizing this exploration as a conduit to elucidate the profound impact of societal values and expectations on the lives and choices of its characters. Furthermore, it instigates contemplation regarding the repercussions of a society that rigorously governs sexual activity, inviting an examination of its implications on individual autonomy and emotional well-being. In the societal construct of *Women's Country*, the governing council exerts control and regulation over sexual activity. The prevailing ethos within the social leadership posits the prescription that sexual interactions should be exclusively circumscribed to purposes of procreation. This methodical regulation of sexual conduct stands as an indispensable component of the society's strategic endeavours—strategically crafted to safeguard tranquillity and cultivate intellectual pursuits. Women are expected to practice sexual abstinence unless they are in the approved relationships that

result in childbirth. Sexual relationships outside of these sanctioned unions are discouraged and considered disruptive to the society's values, which resemble a fusion of feminist separatism with a quasi-Victorian morality. Thus, procreation is considered a duty, and women are encouraged to have children for the betterment of society. Those who produce children for the society are highly valued. Their march towards a perfect peaceful society ironically inscribed within the war novel.

This is inextricably linked with the concept of genetic engineering, undertaken by the female inhabitants of Women's Country. In order to design a peaceful society, women meticulously delineate the criteria governing the selection of desired traits in their prospective sexual partners:

Three hundred years ago almost everyone in the world had died in a great devastation brought about by men. It was men who made the weapons and men who were the diplomats and men who made the speeches about national pride and defense. And in the end it was men who did whatever they had to do, pushed the buttons or pulled the string to set the terrible things off. And we died, Michael. Almost all of us. Women. Children. Only a few were left. Some of them were women, and among them was a woman who called herself Martha Evesdaughter. Martha taught that the destruction had come about because of men's willingness—even eagerness—to fight, and she determined that this eagerness to fight must be bred out of our race, even though it might take a thousand years. (Tepper 301)

The male inhabitants who have opted to remain within the confines of Women's Country are referred to as the "Damned Few." This epithet denotes not only the scarcity of men authorized to reside in this societal framework, connoting a purposeful inclusion of males within the community, but also their inferiority and enslavement. The planning and operational efficacy of the city lay within the purview of the councilwomen and servitors, as they assumed pivotal roles within the socio-structural framework, as Tepper says: "Those who kept things running. Those who did what had to be done" (313). The insight offered depicts a rather pessimistic vision of the society. In the concluding scene, as Stavia assumes the role of Iphigenia on stage, she is posed with the mythical Achilles' inquiry, "What's Hades like?", to which she responds:

Like dream without waking. Like carrying water in a sieve. Like coming into harbour after storm. Barren harbour where the empty river runs through an endless desert into the sea. Where all the burdens have taken away. You'll understand when you come there at last, Achilles. . . . Hades is Women's Country. (Tepper 315)

Tepper underscores that death serves as an equalizer between genders and provides women with a means of liberation from a restrictive patriarchal ideology. According to Iphigenia, Hades, the domain of the dead, is governed and filled by females. Such a view is in sharp contrast with the classical canon, since Odysseus in *The Odyssey* encounters both men and women there, and Aeneas, the eponymous character of *The Aeneid*, finds only men in Hades. Additionally, the abovementioned snippet could suggest that Women's Country remains a realm of death and bitterness.

Nevertheless, challenging the patriarchal worldview, Tepper inserts a peculiar remark. Namely, Stavia conversing with one of the servitors, expresses the taboo nature of a particular phenomenon referred to as the "gay syndrome": "'That's absolutely forbidden.' Stavia bit her lip. Even in preconvulsion times it had been known that the so-called 'gay syndrome' was caused by aberrant hormone levels during pregnancy. The women doctors now identified the condition as 'hormonal reproduction maladaptation,' and corrected it before birth" (Tepper 76). There exists a societal prohibition against a "gay syndrome," attributing it to abnormal hormone levels during pregnancy. Within the narrative, women doctors are depicted as recognizing and rectifying this condition, which is now labelled as "hormonal reproduction maladaptation," prior to birth. This section underscores the speculative and dystopian elements in Tepper's narrative, illustrating the influential role of societal norms and medical interventions in regulating different facets of human existence, including sexual orientation. The term "hormonal reproduction maladaptation" is not really provided with sufficient explanation. The introduction of such a surprising remark within the provided narrative is not unexpected, given the portrayal of the eugenic matriarchy. Across a spectrum of speculative narratives, characters embodying queer identities find themselves recurrently subjected to discriminatory practices, marginalization, and oppressive circumstances within alternative settings.

The centrality of the transgression of boundaries in Sheri S. Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* aligns with the theoretical framework propounded by Judith Butler, who in her *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Reality* states:

The masculine/feminine binary constitutes not only the exclusive framework in which that specificity can be recognized, but in every other way the "specificity" of the feminine is once again fully decontextualized and separated off analytically and politically from the constitution of class, race, ethnicity, and other axes of power relations. (7)

In Butler's conceptual framework, she critiques the normative boundaries linked to gender, urging individuals to interrogate and surpass societal norms.

Sheri S. Tepper's investigation into the subversion of gender roles is primarily instantiated through insight into the gender dynamics and ethical quandaries arising from the aftermath of war, intertwined with societal decisions aimed at sustaining established ways of life. The meticulous engagement with the concept of selective breeding constitutes a nuanced exploration of socio-biological paradigms within the thematic framework of her work. In the narrative, the challenge to the patriarchal perspective involves two aspects: creating a society that diverges from stereotypes and reinterpreting the classical Greek myth of Iphigenia. Tepper's novel can be viewed as an endeavour to experiment with subverting conventional gender boundaries. However, a critical examination through the lens of philosophers such as Rosi Braidotti, who advocates the subversion of entrenched categories, particularly emphasizing fluidity and diversity within identity, notably concerning gender, reveals a nuanced perspective. Contrary to a complete deconstruction of binary oppositions and a rejection of fixed gender notions, the narrative unfolds within a matriarchal community whose political structure, upon closer scrutiny, appears rooted in eugenics rather than fostering a constructive collaboration between diverse groups.

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