

**WHEN LANGUAGE LIMITS THE LUST:
MOMENTS OF DESIRE IN UNGENDERED NARRATIVE**

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Abstract. Desire knows no boundaries. However, when an author depicts an amorous scene that involves ungendered characters – those whose gender is not disclosed in the text – language creates boundaries around the desire. Desire is chained and shackled under the restriction of language in an effort to keep the gender hidden. In ungendered narrative, bodies express desire, but we never know to what gender the bodies belong. The reader is in constant search of clues to gender-segregate the bodies, but the author does not let the reader succeed. Moreover, the gendered nature of language comes to the fore, making hiding gender a daunting task for writers. The author manipulates the language to depict the lust of bodies, devoid of gender. The description of intimate moments in gendered narratives is pleasure-inducing for readers, but in ungendered narratives it becomes a thorny issue. The solution to this problem is to stop searching for clues to a character's gender by looking beyond the binaries of gender. The lovemaking should be treated as an act that does not require the knowledge of what is between legs, but the genuine desire in the heart. This realisation makes the readers sense the same passionate experience felt by the bodies of the characters. The readers witness how love transcends the limitation of gender and achieves greater significance at the hands of writers of ungendered narratives.

Keywords: queer, gender, narrative, desire, bodies, identities, readers

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1. Introduction

Ungendered narrative is fiction where one or more characters' gender is kept secret throughout the entire work, or in a significant portion of it. We witness the characters take part in actions that move the plot forward with their gender identity fiercely protected by the writer. Matters get more complicated when the characters make love. The readers know the characters are in an intimate state, but do not have any idea about the gender of the couple. Richardson writes in a similar vein:

“The strategy that causes the most consternation among conventional readers, however, is the refusal to identify the gender of the narrator, especially when the narrator is involved in sexual acts” (Richardson 2008:4). The rare feat of hiding gender in ungendered narrative, even during romantic scenes, is achieved through the masterful use of language. The writer also needs to make sure that scenes do not become complex and the reading experience still remains pleasurable.

In *Written on the Body* (1993), a novel by Jeanette Winterson, the narrator is ungendered, but the love interest is a woman named Louise. Hence, we know the gender of one of the couple. David Levithan’s *The Lover’s Dictionary* (2011) has a male narrator whose lover’s gender is not revealed. *Love Child* (1971) by Maureen Duffy has two ungendered characters – Kit and Ajax, the lover of Kit’s mother. In the intimate scenes between Kit’s mother and her lover the gender of one person in the couple is clear. June Arnold in *The Cook and the Carpenter* (1973) uses ungendered pronoun *na* and *nan*, and characters named cook, carpenter and Three, thus we have no idea of whether the couple engaged in lovemaking consists of the same gender, opposite gender, or have non-normative gender identities. The same is the case with *Brooklyn, Burning* (2011) by Steve Brezenoff, which has lovers Kid and Scout as gender-secretive characters. Anne Garréta includes a character identified as A*** and an unnamed, ungendered narrator madly in love in *Sphinx* (1986).

In this three-part paper, textual passages from these six novels are analysed. The first part discusses how bodies are depicted and desired. The second part is about solo pleasure. Intimacies between two bodies are probed in the third part.

2. Describing the body

How to describe a genderless body? The writer needs to make sure they reveal enough to make the person sound desirable, but must also not reveal the gender of the body. In *The Lover’s Dictionary*, Levithan walks a tightrope. He uses ‘peak of your chest’ instead of gender-specific words like ‘breast’. Another gender non-specific body part mentioned by the author is the neck: “The nape of your neck. Even the sound of the word nape sounds holy to me. That the hollow of your neck, the peak of your chest that your shirt sometimes reveals. These are the stations of my quietest, most insistent desire” (Levithan 2012:177). Garréta’s dexterous character sketch of A*** in *Sphinx* leaves readers guessing about the character’s gender, but that does not make the description any less erotic:

Those hips, narrow and broad at the same time, those legs that I never knew how to describe except, mundanely, as slim and long. But it wasn’t this that made them desirable to me – when we made love, I couldn’t stop caressing them, my lips against the inner thighs – it was something else, always something else, this indefinable something else where desire hide itself. Perhaps I was enticed by the slow motion of the dance, before my eyes sublimely taking the body out its rhythm (Garréta 2015:84).

Certain body images that are fixed in our minds are based on gender stereotypes. Ideally, girls should have a slim body, and boys a muscular physique. A female bodybuilder is never considered beautiful.¹ Garréta plays with that idea by describing the narrator's love interest as having 'hips narrow and broad at the same time', she makes it difficult for the readers to gauge the gender of the character. A little further, the author heightens the intensity by mentioning the 'inner thighs'. The reader begins to feel that the author will now reveal what is between the thighs, and thus disclosing the gender of the characters, but it never happens.

In the beginning of the novel, Garréta narrates a scene in a strip club. Surprisingly, none of the dancers' gender is revealed:

I noticed ironically that the dancers spent more time adjusting these little delicate nothings that elude nudity than one would dressing oneself from head to toe for gala at the Opéra ... a thousand details in order to show off a behind, leaving the thighs and hips free and visible, but without revealing the crotch. I was amazed at the time it took for a body always to appear smooth, hairless, supple, and flawless: in a word, angelic (Garréta 2015:8–9).

The images are of skimpily clad bodies on display, with a little covering that hides the private parts. There is no mention of an ample bosom or bulge on the crotch. To further quote Garréta, "There a thousand details to consider when putting on a simple g-string that never even cross the mind of the socialite pulling on her long gown or the man fastening a bow tie on the wing collar of his shirt" (2015:9). The same can be said of how an author describes bodies. Clothed bodies are easier to describe, but not naked bodies, as gender can be easily given away with the slightest hint. Garréta also questions the needless importance we attribute to clothes and dressing that further segregate people according to gender, such as the expectation that skirts are worn only by women. The narrator stands naked in front of a mirror, looks at the reflection and ponders, 'was it really that important how I choose to veil my nudity?' (Garréta 2015:41). In everyday life, trans and genderqueer persons are laughed at, mocked, and called names when a person who appears to be male chooses to cover their body with so-called woman's clothes.²

Garréta's skilfully crafted writing is evident in the following: "That night, A*** was wearing a black silk shirt and white pleated leather pants that showed off a firm behind. A***'s hair, shaved not long for the show, was beginning to grow back, materializing as a light shadow" (2015:39). The writer's mention of the sexually enticing 'firm behind' is followed by the shaved head that diminishes the eroticism of the image. A cisgender man reading the sentence would like to imagine that A*** is a woman with shapely buttocks, but the phrase 'hair, shaved

¹ To quote Shantanu Prasher (2016), "Talk to a girl who packs on impressive muscles and she would tell you about all the bullshit she has to go through. Every day".

² A man in Delhi, India's capital, chose to wear a skirt for a day while hanging around the city. This seemingly harmless act required bravery on his part and exposed the stigma attached to women's wear when worn by a man (Indian Express 2017).

not long' goes against the ideal female beauty standard. Men with shaved heads can be considered desirable, but women are not. "Historically, shaving women's heads as a form of punishment was firmly established during and in the aftermath of, World War II" (Alexandra 2017).

3. Pleasuring the body

The texts in consideration are replete with images of ungendered characters pleasuring themselves. In gendered narratives, the masturbatory experience is described as such:

She runs her hands down her belly. Her right forefinger touches the clitoris while the left forefinger goes deep inside her, pretending to be a penis. What does a penis feel, surrounded by those soft, collapsing caves of flesh? Her finger is too small. She puts in two and spreads them ... She moves her fingers to that rhythm, feeling the two inside get creamy and the clitoris get hard and red ... She feels the convulsions of the orgasm suck violently around her fingers. Her hand falls to her side and then she sinks into a dead sleep (Jong 1973).

Words and phrases like 'she', 'clitoris', and 'caves of flesh' prove that the character is a woman. However, in ungendered narrative, the scene is completely different. There is no mention of genitals that could serve as a clue to the character's sex. The most common non-gendered word suggesting private parts is *crotch*, rather than *penis*, *vagina*, or terms generally considered vulgar, like *dick*. For example, this quote from *The Cook and the Carpenter*: "Na knew as na lay on the bed fingers moving toward nan crotch that na loved Three" (Arnold 70).

Duffy's work includes a precocious Kit busy in self-pleasure. The author leaves us wanting with just the description 'caressing myself'. What part is being caressed is not stated: "As I lay in my bed that night, a hand inside my pyjama pants gently caressing myself ... My hand moved faster until in a minute I too was shuddering and jerking into sleep" (Duffy 1994:19–20).

In another part of the novel, Jude, a friend of Kit, is described giving Kit pleasure:

She took me by the belt of the levis ... No one had ever touched me before yet I understood; I had read enough. Where her hands moved flames licked up so that I was powerless to pull away as she undid the zipper. "You're a virgin," she said. "You'll go like a bomb." I braced my legs muscles to keep me from falling and as the pain and pleasure bit through me I heard her say, "It isn't love, Kit, it isn't love." My mouth filled with ash (Duffy 1994:24).

As Jude checks Kit out, she concludes that Kit is a virgin. Does her finger come across a hymen? If so, it indicates that Kit is female. Another phrase that supports this argument is the 'pain and pleasure' that is usually experienced by a woman during the first sexual encounter. What goes against the idea that Kit is a woman is the entire plot that revolves around Kit's jealousy of their mother's affair with Ajax, secretary of Kit's father. It can be interpreted as an Oedipus

complex, which would lead us to believe that Kit is a male having an unnatural obsession towards his mother and hatred for his mother's lover.

One of the scenes mentions the 'wet curls' of Kit's crotch: "I went into my own room, tore off my also damp clothes ... I slid a hand over the wet curls of my crotch and began to caress myself slowly ... I thought and laughed and squirmed with simultaneous pleasures" (Duffy 1994:75). 'Wet curls' connotes the female privates, specifically the labia, one more indication of Kit being a girl, or gender non-specific pubic hair. It depends on how the reader chooses to read the text. A heterosexual woman might prefer reading Kit as male, deriving pleasure from the scene of a male Kit masturbating, while a man might read Kit as female, 'caressing' her vagina. The gender that was in the author's mind while creating the character or scene is secondary to the gender assigned by the reader.

In another masturbatory scene, Kit is shown as having failed in self-pleasuring. The scene is important because the term 'jerk off' is used: "[I] tried to get back my body by jerking off. But there was nothing there. Hard as I tried I was quite dead. I must have fallen asleep very suddenly" (Duffy 1994:175). The word's dictionary definition, '(of a man) to masturbate' (Collins 2014), alludes to Kit being a male. In a later scene, Kit masturbates on the same bed where Kit's mother and her lover Ajax made love:

Lust had impregnated the sheets on my mother's lover's bed with her balm. At night Ajax could sink again into her flesh. As I lay there as naked as either of them, playing first one and then the other as I'd seen them. Now when my mother's lover lay down it would be into a mingling of my sweat with theirs. When I came it was so hard and fierce I thought I was going to be sick but that may have been the unaccustomed scotch in my stomach (Duffy 1994:180–81).

The clear portrayal of Kit alternately playing the role of the mother and her lover, and deriving immense sexual pleasure from it, points to Kit's abnormal and obsessive sexual attraction to Kit's mother. A hint of incestuous affection cannot be denied here.

4. Meeting of two bodies

Depicting intercourse generates most of the gender identity confusion. It questions the readers' deep-rooted idea of love being legitimate only between two individuals of opposite sex. Brezenoff's *Brooklyn, Burning* is a young adult novel, therefore intimate scenes do not involve graphic details, and the scene between Scout and Kid is limited to kissing and 'tearing into each other': "In the night, I dreamed you rolled over and kissed me on the mouth. I dreamed that my hands found your body and that we tore into each other like Christmas presents. But when I woke up, I was fully dressed and you were gone" (Brezenoff 2011:159). Elsewhere, Brezenoff portrays intimacy in a mild manner, but the gender of Felix, one of the couple, is known:

[I] sat on the arm and ran my hand across his head, front to back, then again, and he reached up and took my hand. I leaned down and found his mouth with mine, gently, our lips barely meeting because we were not close enough. I had to strain a little, to get closer, and he pulled me down, so our mouths pressed together, I turned and slid down off the arm so I was next to him, and he wrapped himself around me (Brezenoff 2011:77).

It should be noted that wherever the scene involves ungendered Scout, Brezenoff switches to the second person point of view. He utilizes the gender neutral 'you', avoiding the gendered 'he' and 'she'. When writing about gendered characters such as Felix in the above quote, he changes to the third person point of view.

Duffy's novel has quite a detailed lovemaking scene. Kit peeks into Ajax's hotel room and narrates, "My mother lay quite naked on the bed in my vision ... My mother lifted her arms and her lover went into them to be entwined there. I saw the strong tensing of carved marble muscles as the knee thrust to part her thighs" (Duffy 1994:124). What catches our attention is the word 'knee' without any of the possessive adjectives *his*, *her*, or *their*. Other body part share preceded by pronouns, such as those of Kit's mother: *her* arms, *her* thighs. But the 'marble muscles' and 'knee' of Kit's mother's lover have no adjective, hiding the gender of Ajax. The English language is devoid of gender-neutral pronouns, so either the writers resort to invented pronouns like *na* (coined by June Arnold in *The Cook and the Carpenter*), or they avoid using pronouns altogether. Duffy goes with the second choice. For this reason we see Ajax, a gender-neutral name, referred to as "my mother's lover" or by the name itself in the entire text.

The action 'the knee thrust to part her thighs' suggests the possibility of Ajax being a male. The position they follow for lovemaking is seemingly missionary, widely used among heterosexual couples. For penetration, the male partner mounts the female partner and parts her thighs to enter her. This also supports the idea of Kit having an Oedipal complex, as shown in Kit's extreme hatred for the mother's lover: "Sometimes Ajax would lightly kiss my mother's breast or temples and she would respond with a movement or a smile. Their mutual tenderness and absorption was almost frightening" (Duffy 1994:152). It is justifiable if Kit's father finds his wife having an affair as 'almost frightening', but it is not expected that Kit's obsession over the mother's love life would be the reason for Ajax's suicide at the end of the novel.

Ajax and Kit's mother being a heterosexual couple is also suggested by "At night Ajax could sink again into her flesh" (Duffy 1994:180). 'Sinking into her flesh' alludes to penetration. On the other hand, if we assume Kit's mother's lover is female, the Oedipal situation has to be ruled out, as Freud did not mention anything about a child's jealousy of the mother's same-sex lover. Regarding the Oedipal debate of the novel, Brimstone reasons 'the evident acting out of Freud's archetypal Oedipal crisis will depend on whether we are reading Ajax and Kit as male or female' (Duffy 1994:33).

Jeanette Winterson's work has an unnamed, ungendered narrator, but the gender of Louise, the narrator's love interest, is known. The following scene involving them finds a place in John Fox's list of "50 Incredibly Written Sex Scenes in Books" (Fox): "She arches her body like a cat on a stretch. She nuzzles her cunt into my face like a filly at the gate. She smells of the sea. She smells of rockpools when I was a child. She keeps a starfish in there. I crouch down to taste the salt, to run my fingers around the rim. She opens and shuts like a sea anemone. She's refilled each day with fresh tides of longing" (Winterson 2014:73).

Here the reader comes across the delineation of Louise's feminine body, and the narrator giving her oral sex. The point to be noted is there is no mention of the narrator's body, how it looks, or how it reacts to pleasure. A non-penetrative form of sex being performed in the heat of the moment can be due to the narrator being female, making them a lesbian couple. Our suspicion is reinforced by the lack of any allusions to heterosexual love-making in the rest of the text. But again, this is our assumption. We can never be sure of what an author intends, or what a character's gender is, unless the character themselves declare it.

Garréta's work leaves both love interests' gender unknown. Particularly noteworthy is the scene that begins with tender intimacy and ends with the phrase crotches crossed and sexes mixed":

*I staggered as A*** moved to kiss me; I didn't know what to do except let it happen ... I have in my mouth, still, the taste of skin, of the sweat on that skin; against my hands, the tactile impression of skin and the shape of that flesh ... Crotches crossed and sexes mixed, I no longer knew how to distinguish anything. In this confusion we slept (Garréta 2015:54–55).*

The lovers are in 'confusion', and so are the readers. 'Crotches' and 'sexes' do not refer to any definitive gender. Their 'mixing' suggests an exchange of deep intimate moments but nothing can be known about the love-making details – who is giving, who is receiving, and exactly what kind of sex is taking place – except for the intense kissing and touching that occurs at the beginning of the act. Like lovers, after failing to identify the gender, in 'confusion' the readers read, as in 'confusion' the couple slept. In the second coupling scene, set in a New York hotel room, Garréta's description is vague. The copulation is hinted rather than directly stated:

*A*** came out of the shower, wearing only a towel. I coaxed A*** onto the bed, and then held my new prisoner captive between my arms and legs. As we rolled around, a juvenile excitement seized me, the desire to play, to roughhouse, to run out of breath doing something frivolous .. I horsed around with A*** like I had never dared to do before, allowing myself the liberties and improprieties that formerly I had thought of as obscene, but which now seem innocently naive. When asked what I was doing, I replied that I had finished my homework and certainly had the right to play with my toys before my afternoon snack (Garréta 2015:61).*

The description abounds with romance. The physical act is referred to in phrases like 'liberties and improprieties', 'to play with my toys', and includes

making A*** prisoner by holding them between the narrator's 'arms and legs'. There is a mention of A*** covering the body with a towel after taking a shower, but how A*** looks in the towel is not described because it runs the risk of revealing the gender. Garréta is an expert in aesthetic portrayal of a scene by avoiding the explicit delineation of bodies. The readers know an intimate moment is in progress, but who is doing what is not clear, and is left to the reader's imagination.

The position described in the mating scene may reveal the gender of the persons involved in it. Take the example of the scene depicted in *The Lover's Dictionary*: "My ankles against the backs of your ankles, my knees fitting into the backs of your knees, my thighs on the backs of your legs, my stomach against your back, my chin folding into your neck" (Levithan 2012:63). The position, penetration from the back, is popular among male same-sex couples, though we cannot completely rule out the possibility of the narrator lying flat on his female lover's back, with anal copulation in mind. However, rear penetration is very uncommon in literature among heterosexual partners, and its usage is limited to erotica, as it is considered 'unnatural' and may offend the sensibilities of the readers. Another reason the scene hints at the possibility of a gay couple is that Levithan has publicly identified himself as gay and is famous for his same-sex love stories. However, the biographical approach to reading literature is not a fool-proof way to judge a fictional character. In addition, there is a conversation in the novel where the couple is seen joking about a pregnancy: "After a dramatic pause, you said, totally serious, "I'm pregnant." And then you cracked up. I laughed even though I didn't feel like laughing. I raised my Manhattan, tipped it a little in your direction, then asked, 'whose is it?'" (Levithan 2012:4).

Let us look at another lovemaking scene that appears in Levithan's novel:

Laughing at our recklessness, feeling the grass and the dirt as we rolled playfully – me on top, then you on top, then me on top – zippers down, hands everywhere – night on skin and such nervousness. We sensed people coming closer and got ourselves back together, riding the excitement until the excitement ended, then gliding on a little further, buoyed not by thrill but by happiness (Levithan 2012:51).

The scene oozes with a sense of happiness and pure joy. Lovemaking is not a serious matter. The way the couple makes it light, enjoyable, and exciting, with their laughter and daring to get close in a public place, is heart-warming. Again, their position is ambiguous; 'me on top, then you on top' does not assist the reader in discerning the gender. The attention should be paid to nouns related to body parts that are not preceded by possessive adjectives as the grammar rules demand. 'Hands everywhere', but we do not know whose hand – the narrator's, his lover's, or both. Whose clothes zipper is down, or whose skin the narrator is referring to, is left to the readers' imagination.

The following scene by Arnold has the ungendered couple achieving orgasm without penetrative copulation:

The carpenter took off nan shirt and the cook's blue-jeans and put the shirt under na bare skin and nan own hand ached when it touched na. They stroked each other's skin and the palms of their hands were stroked back by the skin. They tasted each others mouths for a long time. The cook bit the carpenter's neck and pulled back and bit again and said, I'm sorry I can't help it and bit na again and cried out and the carpenter's own orgasm shook nana whole body a moment later (Arnold 1995:24).

There is no mention of private parts. Touching, fondling, caressing and kissing – that is all. Kissing is the furthest they go in the make-out session. ‘Stroking, biting and tasting each other’s mouth’ is enough to give them an orgasm. However, the blue jeans worn by the cook and the shirt worn by the carpenter, supposedly male clothing, also keep us from pinpointing the gender as female.

Another scene has lovemaking described in just one sentence, “One night the carpenter and Three lay in each other’s arms and loved each other entirely until morning” (Arnold 83), and it does not provide us with gender clues.

The following quote is particularly notable: “The carpenter had longed to hold, stroke, kiss, ignite, explode, touch Three since dawn. Na had been aware of Three’s body inch by inch during the drive, the frustrating meeting, the after-beer. Nan lust was now so heightened it was tapping against nan insides like frantic fingers” (Arnold 1995:109-10). The comparison of lust with ‘frantic fingers’ can be a tip-off to the erected male organ ‘tapping’ inside against the clothing.

There is a clear reference to giving orgasm through hand and mouth in this scene:

In the beginning, na had had an orgasm naself from giving Three one, as if there were a sensory connection from nan hand or mouth to the brain's sexual trigger. Even now, na almost did. Na lay in that content of almost, waiting for Three to subside. Na pretended Three was present. Na pretended nan touch, a minute later, was not listless. Na pretended na had a second eyelid and closed that, descending into deafness (Arnold 1995:111).

Fingering and oral acts are a means of pleasure in lesbian mating. The reference to these acts, and the absence of a penetrative form of sex in the above paragraph, indicates that this is a same-sex couple. However, the possibility of it describing a heterosexual couple cannot be ruled out, as these are common acts, but in heterosexual couples it is typically used for foreplay rather than a means to achieve climax, as is evident in Arnold’s scene.

The following scene, depicting the narrator’s childlike need of protection, suggests that the narrator is a woman:

Louise took my face between her hands. I felt her long fingers tapering the sides of my head, her thumbs under my jawbone. She drew me to her, kissing me gently, her tongue inside my lower lip. I put my arms around her, not sure whether I was a lover or a child. I wanted her to hide me beneath her skirts against all menace. Sharp points of desire were still there but there was too a sleepy safe rest life being in a boat I had as a child. She rocked me against her, sea-calm, sea under a clear sky, a glass-bottomed boat and nothing to fear (Winterson 2014:80).

It is difficult to imagine that a man wants to go ‘beneath the skirt’ of the beloved to receive protection against the ‘menace’ of the world. A man goes down on a woman to give her oral pleasure. However, this reading is based on stereotypes that promote the idea that man is the protector, and a woman requires protection. Thanks to the woman’s liberation movement, this view is no longer common. Depicting a male in need of protection breaks a common stereotype and is forward-looking. It is also reality – men also require emotional support. They too like to be nurtured. These gender-based character traits are now passé. It was never a reality and never will be. It was an image spread in media across the globe that men are strong and women weak, requiring the support of the stronger sex to move forward in life.

In another scene, the focus is on the female body of Louise, instead of the ungendered narrator. The reason could be to hide the clues that might reveal the gender of the narrator:

We lay down on my floor, our backs to the day. I needed no more light than was in her touch, her fingers brushing my skin, bringing up the nerve ends. Eyes closed I began a voyage down her spine, the cobbled road of her that brought me to a cleft and a damp valley then a deep pit to drown in. What other places are there in the world than those discovered on a lover’s body (Winterson 2014:82)?

The only hint of the narrator’s body is given through ‘her fingers brushing my skin’. While only the narrator’s skin is mentioned, many of Louise’s female body parts are identified. Her spine, cleft, damp valley, and deep pit are mentioned as if the narrator were on an expedition to unearth Louise’s body.

There is no reference to the ungendered narrator’s body in the novel except this: “I took her hand and put it underneath my T-shirt. She took my nipple and squeezed it between finger and thumb” (Winterson 2014:162). However, to describe the female character Louise, the writer devotes a whole 24-page section titled, “The Cells, Tissues, Systems and Cavities of the Body”. The use of the word ‘nipple’, a unisex body part, for the narrator is perfectly suitable instead of the gendered ‘breast’.

Arnold’s portrayal of an orgy film scene is unique in the sense that the other coupling descriptions are of two ungendered individuals, but here there is a group of six bodies whose gender is kept hidden. The underage cook watches the film with their peers:

The film was of six naked people making love with people of either sex or themselves. The cook was sixteen. It was easy to avoid being shocked. It was less easy to avoid laughing because although there was panting and moaning and grimace, nothing happened on the bodies; nothing erected, changed colour, throbbed or pulsed. Then one body responded, one out of six. The camera zoomed in. The cook’s mouth quickened, nan own sex swelled up and pushed against nan heart (Arnold 1995:25).

Particularly noticeable in the scene is the ‘swelling up’ of cook’s ‘sex’. We can infer that it is male genitals since it swells up in the moment of arousal. In addi-

tion, the phrase ‘pushed up against nan heart’ can be read as a penis in erection pushing against the underpants. Another possibility could be the ‘swelling up’ of a female private part, such as the clitoris. But it does not push itself against its covering. Overall, the scene captures the teenagers sneaking in to watch a film with pornographic content. The surprising thing is that the six naked people involved in sexual activity were ‘panting and moaning’, but ‘nothing erected, changed colour, throbbled or pulsed’, except for one of the participants.

5. Conclusion

This paper exposes the futility of attempting to discover a character’s gender based on the clues provided by the author and the stereotypes prevalent in the reader’s mind. Even if we come to any sort of decision, it is entirely based upon a gendered assumption without any validity. We should start accepting people as human, rather than segregating them into strict compartments based on gender and sex. If we come across a person of non-normative gender identity, we first want to identify whether the person is a man or woman. How do we find that out? By knowing whether one has vagina or penis. It highlights people’s obscene obsession over one’s sex organs.³ The authors of the works cited are frequently prodded about a particular character’s gender by interviewers.⁴ It is like asking a person, ‘do you have a vagina or a penis?’

Another issue is the gendered nature of the English language that makes description of genderless desire a challenging task for the author. A simple mention of a body part needs to be accompanied by possessive adjectives that are gendered. We can imagine the difficulties faced by an author attempting to describe intimate scenes without using gender markers, while still making the text enjoyable for the readers. The text, thereby, questions the nature of language, the fixed rigid notions of lovemaking, and the gender of the people involved in it. Ramadan (2015) writes:

How can stepping into a universe where relationship can be described without using gender markers expand our ways of thinking about love, desire, relationship? About gender? About identity? If our pre-conceived notions about all of these things are defied by this text, what does that say about our pre-conceived notions? Reading Sphinx is one way to think about these questions, to question our ways of thinking (“Translator’s Note”).

Beliefs such as a male should be active and a female passive, or that a bed can only be shared by two people of the opposite sex, are some of the ideas that the

³ Sam Escobar (2016), who identifies as non-binary, requests that readers ‘don’t ask me about my junk’.

⁴ In an interview, Jeanette Winterson (1997) was asked by Audrey Bilger, “Did you intend for *Written on the Body* to be completely ambiguous in terms of gender?” Similarly, Stephanie Hayes (2016) questioned Ramadan, “if Garréta had certain genders in mind when she wrote the characters or not.”

ungendered narrative dismantles. As long as the persons involved desire each other, it is valid. The ungendered narrative questions the heteronormativity that considers only the relationship of two opposite-gendered people as valid and moral. The readers' initial desire to uncover the gender of the people in the relationship dissolves once they realize it does not matter. This realization can help advance the cause of equality and the elimination of archaic laws that are against any sexual act that does not result in procreation.⁵ Such laws are responsible for the exploitation of sexual minorities, who are discriminated against based on who they choose to share their bed, and who they fall in love with. Ungendered narratives question these 'norms', and play a part in creating a world that is free of gender-based discrimination. It teaches us that the most significant thing in a relationship is genuineness of feeling and authenticity of love, not the gender of the person in question. It highlights how gender is a phenomenon constructed and normalised by society, and not by the way nature intend us to be. Ramadan (2015) contends, "Gender difference is not an important or necessary determinant of our amorous relationships or our identities, but is rather something constructed purely in the realm of the social" ("Translator's Note"). Genderless love in ungendered narrative thus has the ability to change the world by changing the mindset of the readers.

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⁵ Section 377, the law that criminalizes sodomy and other non-procreation sexual activity even if it performed between two consensual adults, is still enforced in the former British colonies (Winter, et al. 2017:183).

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