PATRIARCHY REINCARNATED: POSTHUMAN FEMINISM IN ALAN AYCKBOURN'S *HENCEFORWARD AND COMIC POTENTIAL*

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Abstract

This study attempts to analyze Alan Ayckbourn's Henceforward (1987) and Comic Potential (1998) from the standpoint of posthuman feminism. It is argued throughout this study that androids emerge as the extension of humans and are predominantly constructed upon particular ideological foundations laden with essential patriarchal privileges, gender stereotypes, and social norms. Unsurprisingly, comedy scenes are galore in both plays, and in line with the Ayckbournian trademark dramaturgy, tragedy is always offered as a side dish to its side-splitting laughter. In Henceforward, the non-operational composer Jerome hopelessly attempts to consign a motherly-woman role upon his flawed android, Nan while Comic Potential's actor android Jacie, thanks to her more robust AI, epitomizes female subjugation yet enjoys an incomparably distinctive denouement, evoking the modern-Pygmalion. The plays eventually allow a viable comparative analysis as they share mutual tenets about what essentially makes us humans. It is further maintained that deeply ingrained, historically formed, socially constructed patriarchal fantasies are ultimately reincarnated on the android body.

Keywords: *Alan Ayckbourn, Comic Potential, Henceforward, Posthuman Feminism.*

ATAERKİLLİĞİN YENİDEN DOĞUŞU: ALAN AYCKBOURN'UN *BUNDAN SONRASI VE KOMİK POTANSİYELİNDE İNSAN SONRASI FEMİNİZM*

Öz

Bu çalışma, Alan Ayckbourn'ın Bundan Sonrası (1987) ve Komik Potansiyel (1998) başlıklı eserlerini post-insan feminizm perspektifinden analiz etmeye çalışır. Bu çalışma boyunca androidlerin insanların bir uzantısı olarak ortaya çıktığı ve ağırlıklı olarak temel ataerkil ayrıcalıklar, cinsiyet klişeleri ve sosyal normlarla yüklü belirli ideolojik temeller üzerine inşa edildiği tartışılmaktadır. Şaşırtıcı olmayan bir şekilde, komedi sahneleri her iki oyunda da bol miktarda bulunur ve Ayckbournian'ın dramaturjisine uygun olarak, trajedi her zaman kahkahaların yanında bir ek olarak sunulur. Bundan Sonrası başlıklı eserde, işe yaramaz besteci Jerome umutsuzca kusurlu androidi Nan'a bir anne-kadın rolü devretmeye çalışırken, Komik Potansiyel'in aktrisi android Jacie, toplumda kadınların boyun eğdirilmesini özetlerken, kendisi daha güçlü yapay zekası sayesinde, modern Pygmalion'ı çağrıştıran kıyaslanamayacak kadar farklı bir sonun keyfini çıkarıyor. Bu oyunlar, bizi esasen insan yapan şeyin ne olduğuna dair ortak ilkeleri paylaştıklarından, nihayetinde aralarında karşılaştırmalı bir analiz yapmak mümkündür. Ayrıca, bu çalışmada derinden kök salmış, tarihsel ve sosyal olarak inşa edilmiş ataerkil fantezilerin android bedeninde yeniden doğduğu iddia edilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Alan Ayckbourn, Komik Potansiyel, Bundan Sonrası, Post-insan Feminizm.*

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Introduction

Men's incessant desire to create a perfect woman image dates back to ancient times. There has been a passionate quest to depict the physicality of the female body for centuries. To start with, Venus of Willendorf is one of the world's oldest female statues ever excavated in the history of humankind. *"It was unearthed in Lower Austria in 1908 from a Paleolithic site and is thought to have been produced in 20.000 B.C.* (Clark, 2015: 405)*"*. The Venus epithet is surely allegorical as the figurine predates the period which is associated with the mythical Roman goddess by thousands of years. The statue features saggy, large breasts, a protruding belly, and a beefy waist. It lacks details on the head and indeed it is devoid of a face. The prehistoric artist aims to draw the onlookers' attention solely to the body. Considering that her large breasts, symbolize fertility, nurture, abundance, and her fat belly is reminiscent of nurture and reproduction, one can conclude that this primeval figurine is the earliest emblematic embodiment of women's association with certain stereotypical forms. It is also the precursor of the culture versus nature binary, one of the oldest boundaries in Western thought. The idea also branches out into Greco-Roman depictions of mythical goddess Venus/Aphrodite's half-naked sculptures that express female refinement, tenderness, and beauty.

To further extend this argument, it is also worth looking at literary and cultural texts related to creating the perfect human image. According to Greek Mythology, Pygmalion, the king of Cyprus, carves a statue of the ideal woman out of ivory and names her Galatea. The woman was so beautiful that he falls in love with her. He is engrossed by her beauty and his prayers are accepted by the goddess Venus who finally brings Galatea to life. Other than that, in Book X of the ancient Roman poet Ovid's epic poem *The Metamorphosis*, the story of Pygmalion and Galatea is also depicted picturesquely. The story later inspires the great socialist British playwright George Bernard Shaw who takes the opportunity to write the play *Pygmalion (*1912*)* in which the cockney flower seller woman Eliza Dolittle is transformed into a refined Victorian lady by Professor Henry Higgins. Higgins teaches her the accepted principles of pronunciation, rhetoric, and etiquette, creating the ultimate lady figure. Shaw is a social satirist, and in this play, he attempts to devalue class discrimination. From another perspective, it could also be argued as part of his taming education, Higgins tweaks the linguistic competencies of a vulgar street girl to work out his quest to create his perfect woman image. This parodies the notion that men are more competent in language learning compared to women. However, scientifically speaking men are not at a privileged status that assigns them the role to transform a woman linguistically as there is *"no difference in language processing could be proven to exist between the sexes"* (Joel & Vikhanski, 2019: 19).

The word posthuman flourished in the 1990s while its roots are based on the post-1968 anti-humanism trend or can be traced further back to the anti-anthropocentric movement which dethrones humans from their privileged status of being the gauge of everything in the universe. On the heels of rapid technological advances, scientific developments, and the urge for the need to redefine what it means to be human, the posthuman idea gained momentum (Leitch, 2018). Talking about the historical culture/nature continuum, Italian feminist critic Bradiotti asserts that the historical nature/culture boundary is currently *"replaced by a non-dualistic understanding of nature-culture interaction"* (2013: 3). She theorizes the idea of posthuman from a feminist perspective and argues that the posthuman turn in history begins with the convergence of *"feminist anti-humanism and anti-anthropocentrism"* (Bradiotti, 2016: 673). Since posthuman theory derives its force from critiquing anthropocentrism and androcentrism, it is intertwined with ecocriticism. By feminist anti-humanism, she refers to the established notion that men are the source of everything and representative of the world while anti-anthropocentrism positions humans on top of the hierarchal order of the species. Putting this thought at the heart of our discussion, this study attempts to scrutinize androids in the related literary narratives via a posthuman feminist lens and maintain its arguments accordingly.

Bradiotti furthers her argument by referring to ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras and Renaissance painter Leonardo da Vinci's thoughts favoring the universal superiority of man as the measure of all things (2013: 73). Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man (1492) sketch is the product of an underlying stereotypical perception in Renaissance humanist thought. The drawing which is subtitled as "the proportions of the human body according to Vitruvius" comes with a scrupulously prepared, lengthy footnote defining the perfect bodily proportions of man. The importance of this drawing is essentially not to define how a perfect male body should

appear. Instead, Da Vinci portrays first century BC Roman architect Vitruvius's architectural remarks on his *Da Architectura* (c.a 30-15 BC). Vitruvius records that if a man spreads his arms and legs to form an imaginary circle, his navel corresponds to its circumference. Vitruvius points to the shape of a circle which was an integral part of architectural design. However, the use of man as a standard model for the description of a geometrical shape lays bare sexist perceptions, and similarly, Da Vinci's portrayal of *Vitruvian Man* supports the idea that Renaissance thought prioritizes man as the representative of humankind.

Braidotti's posthuman theory takes its foundational cues from American cultural critic Donna Haraway's revolutionary ideas about the borderlines between humans and non-humans (machines and animals). Parallel to the argument raised in this study, Haraway rejects the culture/nature distinction and claims that these binaries substantiate each other. Her 1985 article entitled *A Manifesto for Cyborgs* is important for the foundation of posthuman theory. Putting cyborg, a half-machine, half-human entity, at the core of her argument, Haraway asserts that it defies traditional borderlands, binaries, and boundaries historically constructed by culture. Her manifesto is surely based on feminist perspectives and her main argument revolves around the fact that historical boundaries that define male/female, culture/nature, etc., are nullified in cyborgs who do not have a gender, nationality, race, or religion. This peculiar tenet of cyborgs put them in both a precarious and an advantageous position simultaneously. The cyborg has amorphous and highly fluid borders as it *"is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence"* (Haraway, n.d). On the other hand, the cyborg does not have to worry about gender, racial or cultural stereotypes because it is sexless, genderless, and race-free featuring an all-neutral body. These two characteristics of the cyborg lend a view to our argument in this article that the cyborg could either be exploited to turn into a male subject or defy norms to excel human limits via its ever-enhancing AI.

At particular points, this article also resorts to the concept of "bare-life" as explicated by hotheaded Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. The concept is based on the double denotations of "life" as a word. Agamben observes that ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle's use of the word "life" denotes two distinct meanings.

Although to modern ears the Greek *zoe* conjures zoos and zoology and thereby the world of animals other than ourselves, the distinction between it and *bios* is not one between sentient life in the animal world and that special form of sentient life that is our own (a topic that Agamben takes up in connection with the term creature in The Open). The distinction is of a far different nature than a hierarchy of intensity or worth attached to living things. *Zoe* was then life in its most general sense, a sense every bit as general as being. The second term, bios, referred to the forms our lives take-to the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group. In addition to the undifferentiated fact of a thing being alive-zoe-there are specific ways of living-bios. This distinction corresponded to a fundamental division in the Greeks' political landscape. For them, simple, natural life (zoe) was not the affair of the city (polis), but instead of the home (oikos), while bios was the life that concerned the *polis.* (Agamben, 2009: 205)

To elucidate, "Agamben's *bare life* is simply too bare: motivated by the clarity of a philosophical paradigm, it overlooks what is involved in living" (Agamben, 2009: 270). Agamben uses this discussion to reveal how the hegemony of nation-states and military regimes intervene in people's lives. In the present study, bare life comes to the fore when analyzing the status of androids and their relationship with humans.

The plays of the scope of this study span a decade in the last quarter of the 20th century. The 1990s saw a rapid escalation in the popularity of science fiction films and narratives as new technological advances ignited a spark to deal with the human-machine interaction. Ayckbourn as a playwright has always been interested in science fiction and its allegorical potential for the delivery of comic interaction. He has written several science-fiction plays two of which will be analyzed in this article. The first part of this study provides brief information about Sir Alan Ayckbourn and his dramaturgy. Ayckbournian theatre draws its subject matter from middle-class social conflicts and incongruities. More importantly, when it comes to dealing with middle-class women, his plays deserve extra scrutiny and attention. The second part deals with *Henceforward* and dissects its characters and plot meticulously to reach an analytical point that reveals how female stereotypes are rejuvenated on the metallic body of a posthuman entity, Nan. This part further argues that androids end up being puppets of humans

and more notably they turn into platforms on which patriarchy could materialize and sustain its ideological dominance. These machines are designed to assist humans in numerous ways in life, but they also embody traditionally accepted human (male) constructs.

In the third part, the study moves on to the analysis of *Comic Potential*, another dystopian fantasy world set in the near future with clear undercurrents of a modern-day Pygmalion myth. Ayckbourn leads us to a fantasy world where actoids, (actor androids), play in soap operas and the limits of AI have grown so extensively that an android like Jacie could excel the limits of imagination. In this world, androids demonstrate the vast linguistic potential to grow out of the limits of mere mimicry and imitation. It is understood that the TV studio owned by Mr. Trainsmith employs several actoids for the ongoing comedy soap opera which is constantly in a competitive race for more audience ratings. The company starts to employ actoids more than humans thanks to the latter's low recruitment costs. Jacie, a female actoid, stands alone from the crowd with her potentially expandable AI. She learns fast, gradually develops a sense of humor, and ultimately replaces Carla Pepperbloom, the TV studio's Regional Manager. Adam, Trainsmith's cousin is a would-be scenario writer and visits their studio to gain some professional experience. His interaction with Jacie provides much of our analytical discussion in this part of the study. Androids are offshoots of human imagination and fantasies. In that sense, they are avatars of humankind. The final part of the study juxtaposes both plays in a bid to reveal shared visions on the grounds of posthuman feminist criticism.

Throughout the study, the posthuman feminist theory of Rosi Bradiotti and Donna Haraway's groundbreaking views on the gender defiant manifesto on cyborgs constitute the backbone of our main argument. The study adopts the term-post human to identify non-human conditions of androids that appear in the related plays. It also attempts to employ a posthuman feminist analysis not only on androids but on humans as well. Therefore, at certain points, the analysis expands to consider even humans to be part of the posthuman realm, suggesting that the term is stretchy and flexible when it comes to analyzing the otherized individuals in dystopian settings.

1. Alan Ayckbourn

Ayckbourn's mother was a short story writer and a novelist. Talking about his childhood years, Ayckbourn recalls his mother's zealous writing career with enthusiasm and passion. *"The mother image, writing ardently in the kitchen becomes a feasible role model for the young Ayckbourn"* (Watson, 1981: 136). His father abandons the family at an early stage, leaving young Ayckbourn in his efforts to develop an identity towards life through his mother. In a 2011 TV BBC documentary, Alan Ayckbourn is referred to as *"the most popular living playwright in the world"* (Yentob, 2011). Ayckbourn has written more than eighty plays, and this makes him unquestionably one of the most prolific playwrights in English literature, including the canon of William Shakespeare. At the age of eighty-two, Ayckbourn continues to write popular plays. It is, however, quite astonishing to see that he is still underrated in terms of critical acclaim and reception. Comedy's main function is usually underestimated by critics. It is predominantly thought to function as a pastime designed for laughter. For Ayckbourn, comedy is a serious business. He adeptly taps human nature and digs deep until he discovers darkness. The very fabric Ayckbourn hinges on to weave his comic narratives derives its essence from human weaknesses, class conflicts, and the psychological traumas of middle-class lives. In a 2013 interview, he explains that he likes " to write comedies with dark shadows or dark comedies with patches of sunlight, as Chekhov did" (Murgatroyd, n.d). His dark matters affect women characters such densely that the "Ayckbourn women" have become a symbol for the distressed, otherized, or marginalized females in his dramas. This makes it clear that women constitute a great part of the making of his narratives. The plays subject to this study also feature the conflicts experienced by female characters, or, in a more proper wording; androids that have been turned into females.

2. Posthuman Feminism in *Henceforward*

Henceforward is a 1987 play in which Alan Ayckbourn depicts Jeremy's dystopian world. Jeremy is an accomplished composer in pursuit of inspiration in a world where crooks and culprits are everywhere and life without technology cannot be even imagined. The play sets in Jeremy's high-tech flat. Ever since his wife Corinna left him with their daughter, Geain, he has been psychologically devastated and unable to compose any musical piece. Quite interestingly, after his wife abandoned him, he began to share his flat with a nanny android called

Nan that was sort of replaced by his wife. Although the play events take place in 1987, Ayckbourn seems to have been way ahead of his time as he pictures the supersonic progress of technology that is beyond the wildest dreams of every human being. It appears that the events of the play are rather easily understandable for today's people the most compelling evidence of which is the COVID-19 pandemic that locked almost everyone down paving the way for virtual interaction, i.e., technology could impose itself on human relationships as well. Indeed, this weird lifestyle of Jeremy has been favored by today's audience. It is as if all those 80s' dreams have come true these days. To put it differently, Jeremy has been so infatuated by the high-tech world that has turned his eyes shut to the reality of human essence by attaching greater importance to man-made machines. As a matter of fact, this outlandish way of living is a "tortured quest to discover the meaning of life as well as the dual nature of man" (Bakşi, 2019: 276). According to Billington, "Jeremy fails to see Nan's incapacities by naively assigning her the mother role" (1991: 198). Nan's constant technological difficulties disclose the highly intricate and complicated human nature and that no matter how technological machines can be, they're still human-made and under man's control. Jeremy's dystopian tragedy is revealed here by portraying machine-human relationships. Nonetheless, one more subtle point is that Jeremy is of a patriarchal mindset as to the concept of family. Indeed, this is the root cause of his assigning Nan a feminine role than a masculine one.

The term posthuman has the tendency to encompass a wide array of coverage rather than referring only to non-human elements, machines, or the environment. Using this perspective, we could open a brand-new analytical window on the interpretation of prostitution. Women who are involved in prostitution are surely doing this in return for money. They would sell their body for a limited time at a specific fee. As a result of this transaction, the body (either male or female) becomes disposable paraphernalia. It turns into a disposable commodity with a price tag attached to it. Using this debate as a springboard, we can also argue that women who are prostituting are consigned to a passive, docile, and receptive role; a role that is approved by both sides of the transaction. The buyer (in our case, the male) dictates, imposes, and enforces predetermined roles on the female body which is at the disposal of the buyer at a specific time. As a natural consequence of this argument, and from a rather unorthodox point of view, one could also assert that the female body turns into a posthuman artifact. This is rather unconcerned with and different from Donna Haraway's argument on "cyborg". Just like a cyborg or a biomechanical organism, the body becomes a platform on which the intended practices are implemented. In other words, the body becomes the *Other*, a subject for interaction. Having been transformed into a posthuman prostitute, she would receive orders and apply them accordingly. This argument can be implemented to Zoe, the prostitute who is hired by Jerome not solely for purpose of substituting a motherly woman or a wife but also to rejuvenate, rectify and enliven his already crippled creative talent. Jerome hires Zoe for 24 hours and asks her to act as his "loving, caring companion" (2014: 190) and reminds her that he is preparing for an important meeting with the Wellbeing Department and if he cannot satisfy their "high standards of homeliness and hygiene, then it's unlikely [he] shall be allowed to see [his] daughter again" (2014: 190). After getting the job, Zoe is now ready to be voluntarily enslaved by Jerome. She is supposed to act like a caring partner, a motherly woman, tender stay-at-home parent, loyal spouse, and a passionate bedmate for Jerome.

Zoe is the epitome of the assumption that the female body is reduced to a sexualized object and a mechanized toy. It should also be noted that Zoe has acted minor in roles previously and among these characters are Arkadina of Chekov's *Seagull* and Bertha Mason of *Jane Eyre*. Chekov's Arkadina is a mid-aged actress whose physical beauty has already worn off and she is offered a minor, lower-paid role compared to her earlier career. She is one of the trademarks of Chekov's authorial realm and emerges as an emblem of the psychological and financial worries of middle-class individuals. Bertha Mason on the other hand is the outcast, otherized figure in Charlotte Bronte's 19th-century masterpiece. The novel is replete with possibilities of multiple critical analyses via its multidimensional narrative conflicts. Although there is a little account of Bertha's background in *Jane Eyre,* it is evident that she is locked up in the attic in Thornfield estate due to an alleged mental illness. Once a beautiful, attractive Creole lady (alternative fictional accounts are also available in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*), she is mentioned as a wretched, brutal and beastly figure. Like Arkadina, Bertha is also far from her glorious days. Ayckbourn's tactful intertextual alignment of these female figures with the acting prostitute Zoe provides further room for the notion that the female body has an expiry date, and it is good only for a limited time. When physicality vanes off, the body is ready to be disposed of or eradicated.

Resorting to the earlier discussion on Vitruvius Man that aligns the proportionate bodily image with the expressive quality of arts and architecture, it could be maintained that physicality is perhaps the primary means through which the human body is abused and objectified. When Zoe's tolerance toward Jerome's mechanical lifestyle depletes, she flees the house and leaves Jerome no other option other than using Nan, an android robot, as a substitute for an appropriate wife for himself. As mentioned earlier, Ayckbourn's play sets in a distant future in which sharing a house with an android is not a far-fetched dream anymore. In this dystopian future, it is clear that people are competent with the nuts and bolts of dealing with robots. Having lost Zoe, Jerome rectifies Nan's body and upgrades it to a physically more attractive version using his creative toolkit. Nan should resemble a "real lady" with decent stay-at-home spouse qualities. The newly refurbished Nan (albeit with some software and technical issues) becomes a perfect candidate to replace a real human wife. State directions indicate that *"she's a degree more voluptuous than Zoe and more shapely than Nan. She looks like a parody of an old-style Southern Belle"* (2014: 209). The reference to Southern Belle is also reminiscent of how physicality is traditionally and historically imposed as a visual complement to the pre-established roles for women. The term is based on the French word "belle" which denotes "beautiful" and echoes all the subjective reifications of how a woman must be attired in order to look attractive in 19th century southern America. It comes out as another view of the androcentric normativity, restricting the female body in corsets, hoop skirts, straw hats and, bonnets for the sake of attaining one standardized version of "beauty".

Since Jeremy is a very family-oriented and sociable man, his artistic creativity fades away for a while once his wife, Corinna, abandons him with their daughter, Geain. Having realized this artistic loss, Jeremy resorts to post-human ways in order to regain his artistic and uplifting talent. He has a well-equipped room along with diverse high-tech devices. He does everything in his power, just to restore his lost inspirational power. To make this come true, he keeps recording any perceptible human sound, be it ordinary conversational statements and phrases, or even very emotionally private moments such as kissing and having sex between people. Since the presence of a human is highly required for Jeremy to spark his artistic creativity, he assigns a human role to Nan, an amassed metal object in the hope of getting inspiration from this piece of metal as an inspiration of human existence. Nonetheless, upon realizing that even those private and confidential moments have been recorded, Zoe loses her temper and leaves the house halfway through the undertaking. The key point that must be taken into consideration is that Jeremy seems to be suffering from a severe psychosexual complex that drives him to make love with both a human being, namely, Deborah, his close friend's wife, and any non-human/posthuman machine, i.e., Nan. Thus, it is no exaggerating claim to label his personality pejorative, pervert and insulting.

Indeed, it could be claimed that in *Henceforward*, Nan, like all androids is not born female but is turned into one by the historical praxis of androcentric perceptions which are represented by Jerome. Nan emerges as the posthuman android body on which androcentric fantasies as well as, male/female, culture/nature binaries are ultimately personified. Androids are platforms that defy gender binaries. They are a bunch of electric cables, chips, circuits, and metal parts operating harmoniously with the help of an operating system and software. When Jerome attempts to turn Nan on in the first act, an electronic male voice is heard from the machine, reading the model and version number. When androids are covered with synthetic flesh, they are not solely reshaped into the female body but also consigned to the cultural roles deeply ingrained in traditional values. As the culture/nature continuum suggests, the female body epitomizes reproductivity which ultimately naturalizes the role of motherhood. Ayckbourn's Nan is the perfect incarnation of the posthuman body on which female roles are carefully entrenched. To start with, *"unless she is told otherwise, Nan registers everyone as children"* (1999: 182). In her initial encounter with Zoe in Jerome's flat, Nan quickly moves toward her *"producing a colored bow from her pocket which she fastens in the protesting Zoe's hair"* (1999: 183) as she ponders that Zoe is a child. Other than that, despite her flawed software and awkward limping, Nan is programmed to do house chores and rear children. In other words, she is designed to be a motherly woman at the outset. This is a role of her ontological significance in a world that has deeply rooted patriarchal traditions.

In addition to that, Jerome makes preparations for an official visit from Mervyn, the welfare officer from the Child Wellbeing Department, who will be accompanied by Corinna and Geain. He has applied to the Department previously for the legal custodianship rights of her young daughter and this visit is kind of a formal inspection to approve whether domestic conditions Jerome could provide for her daughter are appropriate. Since the law

naturally privileges heteronormative nucleus family values and the roles of partners are stipulated based on male and female division, Jerome feels compelled to create a happy, peaceful, cozy domestic house together with a tender, sensitive, loving, and gentle mother. Since his plans to introduce Zoe as a mother figure, he turns to Nan and reconfigures her to fit that role. Moreover, he renames Nan as Zoe, a replacement that bolsters our previous assumption that "bare life" or zoe reduces individuals to their biological forms, making them disposable items. Regarding this scheduled visit, Ayckbourn provides more laughter in the last act. The audience discovers from the read stage directions that Corinna's physical appearance now resembles Nan's. This unearths Jerome's obsessive sub-consciousness where there is only room for a standardized female image. Stage directions naturalize the process by adding "of course" to identify Jerome's impulse for creating female a replica collection*: "Corinna is, of course, very similar in looks to the original Nan but with little of Nan's submissive and a good deal more personal aura, not to mention neurosis"* (Ayckbourn, 2014: 212). Programmed to perform the role of Jerome's fiancée, Nan's introduction to the guests by Jerome is redolent of sexist remarks: *"Let me tell you that that - that woman (waves his hand in NAN's direction) has more dignity, more sense of loyalty and responsibility than any other fifty women you can name put together"* (Ayckbourn, 2014: 231). Jerome here not only reduces Nan to the degree of a servant, but also naturalizes the role of housewife with a total sense of normalcy. Surely, today's families and gender roles have altered significantly compared to earlier periods in that women no longer abide by the traditional gender roles; that is, they're quite cognizant of their very basic and natural rights both as mother and wife within legal frames. To elaborate, women know that they're not to please always their husbands, rear up children, do household chores, act like a lady all the time, be reproductive rather than productive and the like; the other way round, they are struggling to be independent of men which does not necessarily mean they're against men, to be exact. Nevertheless, the deeply ingrained perception of the nuclear family model assigning the ownership of a household to the father and domestic roles to the mother is still somewhat persistent, especially in non-urban, conventional regions. "Feminist movements reject a political theory of patriarchy, which assumes that men should naturally have authority over women" (Freedman, 2006: 88). For instance, "in her book Sexual Politics (1970), Kate Millett set out to analyse 'patriarchy as a political institution'. Politics, she insists, refers to all 'power structured relationships', and the one between the sexes is a 'relationship of dominance and subordinance' which has been largely unexamined" (Walters, 2005: 105). Jerome tries hard to create this image of a "perfect family" first hiring a prostitute and later carving out his own posthuman female figure who he could exploit as a mother figure.

Motherhood is biologically a controversial issue for females; that is, some women would rather give birth, nevertheless, some refuse to do so as they find it a sort of commodification of women. It has been a phenomenon that challenges the major feminist urge for gender equality. As stated previously, Nan is primarily preprogrammed to rear children and do house chores. For Jerome, Nan's domicile subservience is a sign of her dignity and womanliness. Geain is a thirteen-year-old girl who is obviously experiencing a double-identity crisis regarding her gender inclinations as she gets irritated for being called a girl and insists that she's a boy. What turns out to be striking is that she gets enticed by and sympathizes with Nan's non-human intricacy in just a matter of minutes after they are introduced to each other. As this queer young girl, Geain and Nan, the android, develop an affinity, Corinna appallingly confesses*: "that woman's done more with that kid in five minutes than I managed in five years"* (Ayckbourn, 2014: 228). This scene is a remarkable instance in which the posthuman female outclasses human females in the designated role of motherhood and child-rearing. It has a standalone significance to support our argument that posthuman is the extension or even the rejuvenated version of men who are covertly exploiting technology, bolstering supremacy and holding advantageous position upon society. Transferring the motherhood role to Nan, Jerome institutionalizes the role and its accepted repercussions for females.

Motherhood, with its pre- and post-phases, is both physically and psychologically painful and it entails a great deal of devotion and sacrifice. According to Canadian American radical feminist Shulamith Firestone, motherhood is the primary point where women's subjugation to men inaugurates. In her ground-breaking *Dialectic of Sex* (1970), she states that the biological condition of motherhood, giving birth, and child-rearing underprivileged women's social role, captivates her within the constricts of certain borders and pose a hindrance to the fair distribution of family roles. Indeed, she urges scientists to invent artificial placenta so that women will be able to

strip themselves of the burden of giving birth. Her radical solution to curb female awkwardness in motherhood is the invention of artificial reproduction systems. If there is an artificial placenta in which the baby develops until birth, women will physically and psychologically unshackle their constraints. Firestone, rather prophetically, also speculates on the big potential of the science of cybernetics. She believes machines would soon surpass humans in creative thinking and problem solving, but *"to envision it in the hands of the present powers is to envision a nightmare"* (Firestone, 1970: 27). It is radically challenging for Firestone to speculate, quite appropriately, on the negative ramifications of technology in the wrong hands in a feminist manifesto in 1970. Firestone's radical solutions with our center argument comprising the concept of posthuman are interrelated. Gendered androids are the version of the female typified by Firestone. The android enjoys motherhood without giving birth. She does not suffer physical and mental shocks related to it. Therefore, it would not be appropriate to argue that Firestone defines the parameter of android motherhood back in 1970. However, once the android is dragged into the traditional family spheres (by the wrong hands Firestone mentions), she is remolded into the so-called motherly woman. In a nutshell, the patriarchal definition of motherhood is a crucial point for the analysis of Nan's conditions in terms of the posthuman feminist perspective.

Human invention and maintenance of androids obviously serve the purpose of sustaining deeply rooted anthropocentric principles, in other words, they help promulgate the notion that humans rank at the top in the hierarchal order among other living and non-living things in the world. We could argue that developing cybernetic organisms in the form of androids promotes monistic solutions in human relations. For instance, Nan's speech is generated via a software algorithm that is based on catching repetitions and mimicry of human utterances. This aspect of the android devalues pluralistic means of interactions, favoring one ultimate side as the ruler or decision-maker. To explicate it further, following the revelation of Nan's android status to the guests, Jerome plunges further deep into his virtual world of emotional anguish as Nan fails to perform even the most rudimentary bodily moves. In a state of evasive naiveté Jerome utters perhaps the most sensational lines of the entire play … [i]f human beings behaved a bit less like human beings and a bit more like machines, we'd all be better off –" (2014: 311). From the posthuman critical perspective, androids, as an extension of humans, tend to challenge social changes and ameliorate human life conditions.

3. Posthuman Feminism in *Comic Potential*

Considering that posthuman is the offshoot of humanity, it has certain characteristics that align itself with a newborn human. All androids have inborn software that is made of millions of lines of computer codes. Although AI systems have developed extensively, there are certain limitations imposed on a robotic system's cognitive capacity. Once they leave their predetermined spatiality, they switch to learning mode to react to this new environment. Posthuman turns into *tabula rasa,* a concept famously explained by 17th century English philosopher John Locke. The hotel scene in *Comic Potential* offers us several points on which we could extend this argument. Adam and Jacie arrive at a hotel after the acting company decides to melt the latter down following one of its flawed acting experiences. It is Jacie's first step out of the acting studio and naturally, her AI-assisted system experiences certain confusions in this novel social milieu. Adam takes her to the boutique, and she tries on new clothes there. In this scene, Jacie and the female partner of another male customer are contrasted. While the girl voices her dissatisfaction and irritable mood after each dress trial, Jacie is tender, relaxed, and leaves the decision to Adam, just like an obedient wife. From a discourse analysis perspective, the girl's language is laden with words such as *"detest, loath, dreadful, hate"* (2014: 73-74), contrasting her with the candid, childish naive Jacie. After a couple of trials, "Jacie comes out of the cubicle. She is wearing a long dress bag. Open at the bottom, it is zipped up to her neck. Her arms are trapped inside the bag. The Assistant hurries after her, agitatedly" (2014: 74). The importance of this scene is attached to Jacie's posthuman condition that is compatible with basic male expectations of an ideal wife, however, the other girl's behavior defies and challenges the traditional patriarchal norms of society.

The scene primarily juxtaposes a female human and a female posthuman. The norms of what is wearable and what is not have certain social codes for the former, whereas, the latter, unaware of social norms, attires herself in a dress bag, sending everyone in the boutique into awe and surprise. The posthuman is an ever-learning, ever-becoming, ever-growing platform. This tenet of posthuman and the inefficiencies of AI technology, enable us to link Jacie's learning process with English philosopher John Locke's *tabula rasa* theory according to which,

the mind thinks in proportion to the matter it gets from experience to think about. Follow a child from its birth, and observe the alterations that time makes, and you shall find, as the mind by the senses comes more Human Understanding and more to be furnished with ideas, it comes to be more and more awake; thinks more, the more it has matter to think on. After some time, it begins to know the objects which, being most familiar with it, have made lasting impressions. Thus it comes by degrees to know the persons it daily converses with, and distinguishes them from strangers; which are instances and effects of its coming to retain and distinguish the ideas the senses convey to it (Locke, 1999: 99-100).

Today, practical research has demonstrated that the human brain already comes with an innate competency to learn, rationalize and grow itself. However, our main argument throughout this study revolves around the assumption that posthuman is the exploitative extension of humanism. Therefore, Jacy, removed from her domestic sphere (acting studio) steps into a new realm and turns into a newborn baby. Her experiences with the outer world are supposed to shape her mind. This shaping process is no different from a human's cognitive and mental development. Cultural norms, traditional values, social constructs are to be carved up in her consciousness.

As an extension of this argument, Jacie and Adam's hotel scene produces more relevant connections. Strikingly, the first piece of material Jacie learns comes from "the book of books", the Bible. Ayckbourn's hotel room-Bible association is surely more than a symbolic reference to the deeply rooted tradition of placing the Bible in the UK and US hotel rooms. In their hotel room escapade, Adam chooses the Bible as the first written material to be recited by Jacie. The "blank sheet" should be inscribed by the biblical principles at the onset and molded by religious doctrines accordingly. They start reciting from the first chapter of the Book of Genesis as Jacie utters the following words with the sheer awkwardness of an immature schoolchild*: "in the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth"* (p. 90). Obviously, the first chapter begins with the story of the biblical creation of humankind. Jacie is instilled with dogmatic principles even before she learns to read and write, which again enhances our assumption that posthuman is an artificial construct, not only physically but also historically, ontologically, and empirically. This scene, like many others in *Comic Potential*, also lends us additional reasons to scrutinize Ayckbourn's play from the perspective of the malign concept of ideology that sets the standards of normality. As stipulated by French philosopher Louis Althusser, "religious institutions, education system, mass media control, shape and reconfigure our lives through what he coins as Ideological State Apparatuses or the hegemony" (Bressler, 2007: 199). This hegemonic configuration starts from childhood and occurs in a nonviolent yet suppressive fashion. Jacie's bible scene is in many ways the embodiment of this ideological practice working on the terrain of the posthuman body.

In her *A Manifesto for Cyborgs*, feminist cultural critic Donna Haraway describes cyborgs as the illegitimate offspring of humanity and maintains that "the illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins". This notion rationalizes a potent outlook for the posthuman Other. As AI technology continues to develop at mind-blowing speeds, robots have already started to make autonomous decisions. As a result, AI is incessantly developing and Ayckbourn's prophetic vision creates these reflections in his theatrical androids. Unlike Nan in *Henceforward*, *Comic Potential* offers us the mighty posthuman image of Jacie who finally excels to subvert all reified categories and emerges as the victorious posthuman. Taking over the role of regional manager from Carla Pepperbloom, Jacie proves her prowess as the excelled posthuman. Her AI exceeds *Henceforward's* Nan with her incomparably vaster potential for growth and excellence. Ayckbourn's play leaves us with a modern posthuman Bildungsroman as he depicts a journey of self-becoming. Parallel to the traditional coming-of-age stories, the route Jacie follows to transform from an innocent actoid into a powerful character has been thorny and turbulent. She draws Adam's attention from the beginning with her eerily intrinsic sense of humor. However, when the owner of the acting company, Trainsmith, decides that she should be melted following an exaggerated acting rehearsal, Adam, Trainsmith's distant cousin, becomes her savior. Adam is both aware of Jacie's high potential as an actoid and he is also attracted by her posthuman aura.

Trainsmith's media company is erected upon viciously capitalistic pillars. The company produces soap operas for big TV channels and the only thing that counts is audience ratings. His company replaces human actors with actoids to maximize profits and boost efficiency. In this dystopian world where human jobs are stolen by posthuman actoids, life is inherently meaningless and valueless. For instance, according to the experienced

movie director Chandler, in visual arts, it is no longer important at all *"if it's an actoid, or a person or a performing parrot"* (Ayckbourn, 2014: 115). In this highly material world, everything is disposable. Actoids are sent to a melting facility if they fail to abide by expected performing principles. When the successful regional manager Carla Pepperbloom is fired by Trainsmith, few could have guessed that she would be substituted by Jacie. However, Ayckbourn shows us nothing is unrealistic when it comes to understanding the status of posthuman. This practice of reducing the human body to its biological essence is quite analogous to Agamben's concept of "bare life". Financial gains precede human life in this creepy world of dystopia. The body (whether a posthuman or a human) counts merely as a statistic; utterly anonymous and inessential.

4. Conclusion

According to the prevalent stance embraced within the scope of this study, the posthuman challenges all historical boundaries in the cultural and traditional system. This unique tenet bestows upon it an unclassifiable status that evades fixed dichotomies that identify borderlines. It favors the *"disruption of standardized patterns of sexualized, naturalized and racialized interactions"* (Bradiotti, 2016: 689). The paradoxical condition of the posthuman, however, arises when the human reconfigures it with certain boundaries. As a result of this reconfiguration, the posthuman entity unorthodoxly reincarnates as a hybrid extension of its owner. Today, the expansive potential of androids is still ripe for imagination as AI technology is constantly expanding. The posthuman object mimics its creator, so it also neither becomes one nor another. This in-betweenness makes it vulnerable to ideological exploitation mentioned throughout the study.

The Radical feminist Rich argues that *"the woman's body is a terrain on which patriarchy is erected"* (1995: 55). This argument is quite parallel to our assumption that the posthuman objects represented by Nan and Jacie in our plays are systematically exploited by their male possessors to the limits of subservience. Ayckbourn parodies the gender-neutral condition of the android body several times in both plays, surely to level up the dose of laughter. In *Henceforward*, Jerome puts his hands in Nan's blouse and pokes its contents. On the other hand, Jacie can mimic eating and chewing food, but the food is stored in her in-built storage case which should be emptied regularly. When Adam puts his head under her skirt to work this out, the scene turns into typical hilarity. The female body in the form of an android becomes a perfect mechanical platform for patriarchy to maneuver its aims. The concept of bare life is emergent in both *Henceforward* and *Comic Potential.* In line with Agamben's above-mentioned distinction between zoe and bios, the world depicted in the two plays reduces not only human life but also anything to its biological or ontological essences.

The object which is stripped of any meaningful social value becomes an anonymous being, subject to eradication. It is interesting to observe that Ayckbourn names its female android after this dichotomous Greek word zoe. Paradoxically enough, the name Zoe in *Henceforward* is used to call the model prostitute at first and then for the rectified Nan. This is quite reminiscent of our argument that when bare life conditions are activated, it is barely of any importance who is performing who or what is exchanged for what. On a similar note, androids have turned into commodities in the ultra-capitalistic world of *Comic Potential*. Though it sounds spooky, the biological life can easily be exchanged for the robotic alternative in both plays. This human-android exchangeability is realized through Zoe-Nan and Carla-Jacie pairings, respectively. The human member of the pair is eradicated for the sake of the latter. On the back of peculiar connotations of Zoe, the bare life notion is surely a 21st-century reality that our world is facing today. It has also become a vicious tool used by governance systems to contain and control masses, devouring them via this meaningless, void, and futile grinding machine of hegemony.

Both plays are evocative of the Pygmalion myth which is about creating the ultimate female figure from scratch as a result of the rigorous female taming and education process. Nan is given instructions to act as a servile housewife. Her looks, linguistic competency, and manners have been manipulated by Jerome. In the end, albeit with serious technical deficiencies, Nan is the fully converted mother figure who is deemed more skillful in child-rearing than Geain's biological mother, Corinna. In a parallel and more astonishing vein, Jacie rises to her prime in the world dominated by humans. Having survived the risk of being disposed and melted, she becomes the manager of Trainsmith's TV studio. It could be concluded that *Henceforward* is closer to Shaw's

Pygmalion, which ends on a pessimistic note as Eliza Doolittle barely shows satisfaction as a result of her lady-like transformation. Comparably, the android-mother Nan's transformation is remote from providing the much-needed spirit to Jerome's dilapidated life. On the contrary, thanks to the play's happy ending, Jacie is more akin to Galatea in Ovid's ancient Pygmalion myth. Though it is not mentioned in the text, one can guess that Adam and Jacie are even likely to end up in a marriage. As we discussed earlier, Haraway states that the cyborg has the potential to betray his owners and in the two plays we have scrutinized the idea of betrayal that comes in the form of the posthuman object's potential to transcend stereotypical borderlines. Accordingly, Nan and Jacie have had their respective moments in which they excelled humans.

Posthuman is the reincarnated image of humanity. It is androcentric, selfish, materialistic, and equipped with the familiar weapons of patriarchal hegemony. It is a custom-made entity tailored to the needs of humanity. Parallel to Simone de Beauvoir's (1956) epoch-making discussion *of "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" in Second Sex,* we could argue that the posthuman in Ayckbourn's drama is not born a woman but gradually becomes one, as a consequence of human reification. Androids we have covered in both stories are progressively molded to embrace the role of a woman. Apart from the designated gender roles, the taming process also includes religion-oriented family education as we have analyzed in the example of Jacie's bible recitation. In that regard, the posthuman fabric is methodically interwoven with cultural and ideological forces and it is *"never outside the history of concrete relations of power and dominations"* (Balsamo, 1999: 40).

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