

A Post Gender World

Gender is the socially created division of humanity into the two camps, ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. The assumption that society follows today is that those born of the ‘male’ sex, should, and will exhibit masculine qualities, and the opposite for those born ‘female’. Sex “is either the male or female division of the human race, especially as differentiated with reference to the reproductive functions” (Dictionary.com). While people born with ambiguous sexes and sex-change surgery do exist, in today’s world there is no overt middle ground between the genders. It is assumed that those of ambiguous sex will conform at a given point in time to one of the two gender stereotypes, and that after sex-change surgery, one will adapt to the gender identity of their new sex. There is no apparent middle ground between the genders. Indeed this is what living in a “post-gender world” might change (Haraway 149).

A post-gender world is one in which distinctions between different genders are not predetermined by sex, social expectation, or anything else. While gender still exists in a post-gender world, it is much more circumstantial and subject to change. Sex will still exist to determine who bears children, but gender will not depend on it. It will depend on an individual’s subjectivity, and hence there cannot be a fixed number of genders, though there are only two sexes. Haraway in *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Fausto-Sterling in *The Five Sexes* and Stone in *The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto* contribute to my idea of a post-gender world.

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Haraway treats gender as she would treat race and class: “Gender, race or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of ... patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism” (Haraway 154). According to her, like race and class identities, gender identities are forced and unnatural. “There is nothing about being ‘female’ that naturally binds women” (Haraway 154). Thus fostering a unity between women on the basis of what is “natural” is not a good course of action for feminists in a post-gender world. She elaborates by presenting the discourse of Sandoval, King and MacKinnon.

Sandoval defines what she calls “oppositional consciousness”, the consciousness of certain women like black women for example (Haraway 154). These women are excluded from the “naturalizing” movements of white women because they are not white and of black people because they are not men. While they still have political desires, these “naturalizing” movements prove too narrow in their identity definitions to include such (and many other) women. Thus Sandoval theorizes the “‘women of colour’”, born out of “otherness, difference and specificity” realized because of such oppositional consciousness (Haraway 154).

‘Women of colour’ embody the feminist understanding of gender in a post-gender world. “There is no essential criterion to be a woman of colour” (Haraway 154). While in a perfect post-gender world there will be no need for feminism, Haraway argues that to achieve a post-gender world, the institution of ‘women of colour’ is a crucial change that feminist movements must

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adopt. 'Women of colour' foster unity between people with any number of different

subjectivities, to achieve collective political goals for all. This is crucial in a world today where race is no longer a simple matter, (as discussed above it is tempered by patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism) and there can be no "naturalization" of people on the basis of race because of the potentially diverse circumstances they have endured. Subjectivity can no longer be reduced to race, and so feminist politics needs to be based on "affinity [(for those with similar goals)], not identity" (Haraway 154).

Paraphrasing King, Haraway finds that "Taxonomies of feminism produce epistemologies to police deviation from official women's experience" (Haraway 155). She is trying to point out that clumping feminist groups on the basis of identity "marginalize[s]" or "incorporate[s]" all other feminist movements. To define "official women's experience" is futile within women of the same race and circumstances, and to apply this "official experience" to women of separate circumstances is simply false. Thus trying to organize a feminist movement on the basis of identity is almost a contradiction; it attempts to "essentialize" those traits that unite women, yet in doing so, excludes many women (Haraway 155). This is because as the world moves to a post-gender world, neither race, nor class nor gender have any "natural" roots. Thus Haraway brings us that any political movement in a post-gender world would rely on affinity and not identity to unite its participants.

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Stone presents the clearest picture of what a post-gender world would entail. She pivots her case against the modern definition of gender on her criticism and ridicule of the medical screening process that determines whether potential transsexuals will be given the sex-change surgery. She reveals that “Benjamin’s book was the standard reference” for those doctors determining whether a potential transsexual belonged enough to the other sex, to be given surgery or not (Stone 9). She goes on to describe how the “[behavior of the] first transsexuals evaluated for surgery... matched up gratifyingly with Benjamin’s criteria”, and it was only later that the medical community realized that this was because the transsexual community had access to this book as well (Stone 9). Stone is implicating not the ineptitude of the medical community, but the ridiculousness of trying to define gender identity in objective terms. If simply reading a book can “change” one’s gender Stone suggests, then surely gender shouldn’t be defined so rigidly. Thus, to Stone, the medical and legal communities impose this artificial concept of gender on the world.

The arbitrariness of this concept of gender is further evidenced from early accounts of transsexuals themselves. “Jo Star writes: In the instant that I woke from the anaesthetic, I realized that I had finally become a woman” (Stone 5). Hoyes reports that “Elbe’s voice... had completely changed” (Stone 6). This is ironic, since scientifically speaking Elbe’s voice could not have changed. Thus Stone presents an example of an empirically masculine voice appearing

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feminine because the source of the voice identified as feminine. Why not, then, can this conflict

between empirical truth and appearance be extended to the whole body? Stone wonders how Jo

Star can give such importance to the surgery, how one event can change Star's gender identity,

when she in reality conformed to it before the surgery. It is the social definition of gender,

resolutely intertwined with sex, that gives these transsexuals their own false sense of how

important the surgery is. A post-gender world on the other hand recognizes that sex has no

primacy, recognizes that if the female (female gender identity) "is immanent [and] ... bone-

deep" then there shouldn't be a female identity at all, but a more fluid allowance for individuals

to determine their own gender identity, based on their own, unique subjectivity (Stone 6). A post-

gender world makes visible the "intervening space in the continuum of sexuality", which,

because of the reasons argued above, surely exists (Stone 6).

Fausto-Sterling is an ally to Stone. Fausto-Sterling exposes the potential and actual lacks

of connection between sex and gender. She makes two arguments. Firstly, as Kessler says

"everyday gender attributions are made without access to genital inspection... what has primacy

[is] the gender that is performed" (Fausto-Sterling 12). Fausto-Sterling makes clear that in

everyday reality people don't need to physically check the genitals of others to know what

gender they are. They are guided by the "gender that is performed" far quicker. Secondly, were

biology to be given this artificial primacy, "one should acknowledge that people come in an even

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wider assortment of sexual identities and characteristics than mere genitals can distinguish”

(Fausto-Sterling 13). To define a different gender for every woman with "[a] large clitori[s] or [a] fused labia," or every man with "[a] small peni[s] or [a] misshapen scrot[um]," is clearly arbitrary and futile (Fausto-Sterling 13).

Fausto-Sterling argues against the cultural obsession with genitalia as the crucial definer of gender. She gives the example of Emma, who is perhaps a perfect example of what gender may entail in a post-gender world. “Emma had both a penis-sized clitoris and a vagina” (Fausto-Sterling 4). Growing up he/she was more inclined to have sex with girls, but finally got married to a man. “. Unfortunately, he had given Emma little sexual pleasure, and so throughout that marriage ... Emma had kept girlfriends on the side” (Fausto-Sterling 4). From this report, it was clear to urologist Young that Emma might have more pleasure as a full-time man, and when he offered to operate on her to make this so, she replied, “Would you have to remove that vagina? I don't know about that because that's my meal ticket” (Fausto-Sterling 5). Clearly in his/her everyday existence, Emma performs both male gender roles and female ones. Yet, being supported by a man (female gender role) and penetrating women (male gender role) are only called female and male gender roles because society today needs to place every activity into either one of these camps. Clearly, Emma as a whole is neither male nor female, why then do the roles she/he performs have to be called so, Fausto-Sterling questions? If male and female gender

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roles were indeed so polarized, such a person as Emma shouldn't exist. Yet Emma, exploiting her/his ambiguous genitals, can be both a male and a female. This is the embodiment of the middle ground between male and female that Stone theorizes. In today's world however, it took someone of ambiguous sex to expose this, as people with discrete sexes conform unthinkingly to the corresponding genders.

The people of Gethen from Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* exemplify life in a post-gender world. The act of kemmering itself is almost the perfect metaphor for a post-gender world. Gethenians engaging in kemmering, take on a sex only during the actual intercourse, and if fruitful, by random chance one or the other will be impregnated. Sex, here, is entirely circumstantial. In a post-gender world, this will be the place of genitalia. Though they exist, they will only matter at the time of sex and reproduction. In normal everyday life they will have little importance because of their complete lack of bearing on the gender that people perform.

The difference in gender between today's world and a post-gender world is exemplified in Genly's first dinner with Estraven. Genly is having trouble communicating with Estraven and gradually he begins distrusting him. He wonders whether "Estraven's performance had been womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance", and with this attribution Genly reads far further into Estraven's actions because of the gender stereotypes he has associated with "being womanly" (Le Guin 12-13). In a post-gender world, with less rigid gender definitions, perhaps in

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such a situation Genly would not associate Estraven's cunning with the cunning of 'all women', because women would not be united by such (or any) qualities. This may allow Genly to infer Estraven's cunning for what it is itself, and understand it better.

Similarly, Deirdre in Moore's *No Woman Born* is a character in a post-gender world. In the climactic scene the scientist that brought Deirdre back to life in her current form is attempting suicide. Deirdre is trying to reason with him, but when that is eventually futile, in a flash of movement quicker than the narrator John, has ever seen she physically pulls him away from the window he was about to jump out of. Then "[v]ery gently and smoothly... [s]he set[s] him down before a sofa" while he is at a loss for words (Moore 30). The picture painted is of a powerful figure entirely controlling a weaker, cowering one against the latter's will. In today's world, what would come to mind with such an image is some sort of domestic disagreement between a man and a woman escalating to the stage where the man is physically imposing his will on the woman against her choice. In fact, in this scene Deirdre, the robotic, reincarnated female is in power over Maltzer, her male creator. She exudes masculine authority in this instance while preserving feminine grace.

As a direct juxtaposition to this we see her in her first concert since she has been reincarnated. John describes how "While she danced the audience did not seem to breathe", and when she prepared to sing, "she was a woman now" (Moore 19). It almost seems as if her appeal

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transcends feminine appeal, but in today's world John knows no other way to describe it. Her feminine beauty that has little to do with any physical feminine characteristics. Even her voice is far more robotic in reality than it is perceived by the audience. To readers in today's world, the best description of Deirdre calls upon both genders. We are captivated by her feminine grace and masculine majesty. She shows how beauty is not contingent on gender at all. She shows how concepts that in the current world make no sense if not ascribed by one gender to the other would adapt to a post-gender world. The concept of seduction for gain, would also take on a similarly new character in a post-gender world as shown in *The Left Hand of Darkness* when we see Gaum attempting to seduce Estraven for political gain; without gender, seduction becomes a more universally applicable method of eliciting compliance.

Hence Haraway shows the implications of a post-gender world on women and feminism. Fausto-Sterling and Stone expose the arbitrariness of tagging gender to sex, and reject the polarity of gender. They show that characteristics need not be masculine or feminine and certainly need not depend on genitalia. Though Le Guin's Gethenians have polarized sexes, this is only at the time of reproduction and sex, and therefore has no bearing on gender. Moore's Deirdre embodies what beauty would mean independent of gender in a post-gender world.

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