

Electronic Technologies and the Subversion of Family Power in Postmodern Drama: A Study of Jennifer Haley's *The Nether*

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Abstract—Set in a near-future virtual reality where existential threats have eroded the very fabric of society, Jennifer Haley's *The Nether* (2013) interrogates how familial structures and ethical boundaries are corrupted as digital spaces increasingly blur the lines between the physical and the virtual. Using a post-human feminist lens, the paper aims at analyzing the disruption of conventional family power structures through electronic technologies in Haley's *The Nether*. Based on post-humanist theories, especially on the notion of cyborg presented by Donna Haraway and the critical post-humanism of Rosi Braidotti, the paper provides a context for the play within the larger national and international discourses over gender, technology, and the ethics that shape the popular critical debates on post-human identity and agency. In conclusion, the paper contends that *The Nether* highlights the need for critical scrutiny of how technology shapes our connections with others and advocates a feminist refashioning of power dynamics in virtual reality.

Index Terms—electronic technologies, family dynamics, Haley's *The Nether*, post-human feminism, virtual reality

I. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary postmodern phase of human experience, characterized by a revolution in electronic technologies, has had a profound influence on every area of human existence including the family. Drama, as a kind of media, has a great role in shaping the identity of the people, especially in postmodern age, since it contributes to changing their attitudes towards every thing even the family relationships (Jassim & Almaarroof, 2024). Haley's *The Nether* is a much heavier treatment of these transformations; its premise is a dystopian future whose society has unraveled due to climate crises and pandemics. The play contextualizes its narrative in a virtual reality platform, *The Nether*, a place that is at once a sanctuary and a site of moral quandary. This paper focuses on how electronic technologies deconstruct the family power structures, reorder identity and agency, and transgress ethical borders through the post-human feminist lens. Such an analysis must be couched in a post-human feminist critique that questions how technologies reconstitute what it means to be human concerning gender and relationships of power. Drawing on Donna Haraway's (1985) concept of the cyborg, post-human feminism dismantles the divisions between the human and the machine, placing hybridity and multiplicity as sites of successful resistance to patriarchal systems. Similarly, Rosi Braidotti's (2013) critical post-humanism builds on this view by working against anthropocentrism and promoting a relational ontology, or interdependence and co-evolution of human beings, machines, and the environment. Such theoretical standpoints allow for a subtle reading of the play, as the virtual world subverts existing patriarchal family dependencies and opens up new possibilities for identity and relationality.

Haley's *The Nether* is a dystopian play that grapples with the moral and the ethical quandaries posed by advanced virtual technologies. The play takes place in a future in which the internet has advanced into *The Nether*, an immersive virtual reality network. In this framework, people can enact fantasies without the apparent effects on the real world. The story is about investigating The Hideaway, a dimension in *The Nether* built by a man called Sims, or "Papa" for short. In this virtual space, its users can pursue illegal and ethically questionable activities such as relationships with what appeared to be child avatars. It is the site whereby Sims and his fellow deviant people show their true sexual desires virtually while in real life they conform to societal conventions and morality. Through interviews and flashbacks, the play explores the characters' motivations and struggles. Doyle is an old schoolteacher who acknowledges that he relies on The Hideaway for emotional connection and Iris, a central avatar in The Hideaway, represents the challenge of reconciling freedom on virtual soil with actual ethical consequences. Detective Morris, a statistician who acts as a government investigator, questions Sims' Hideaway. However, through Morris, Sims reveals the darker realities behind

The Hideaway and this makes him examine the implications of what he has created, and the morality behind the world of virtual escapism. Haley (2013) challenges the audience to ponder whether the actions taken in a virtual world, removed from tangible reality, hold any moral weight, and what role technology plays in the construction of identity and relationships (Williams, 2020).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Electronic technologies have changed the fabric of familial ties in a remarkable way. Academics like Turkle (2011) suggest that the social platforms mediate human bonds in a manner that fortifies and shatters relational frozen stands. Turkle's idea of being "alone together" emphasizes how technology creates an illusion of intimacy but nurtures emotional distance. Similarly, Hayles (1999) highlights the destabilization of established boundaries between the physical and the virtual, as she indicates that technology changes the meaning of "being there" in the family and the communitarian spaces.

In the play, this information is vital. The play's virtual reality setting, which serves as a refuge from the impending breakdown of the physical world outside, echoes the wider reality of our reliance on digital spaces for intimacy, identity, and escape. *The Nether* challenges the blurring of the lines of morality, especially the reconstitution of familial roles and the familial relationships in virtual spaces (Williams, 2020). Feminist scholars have critiqued the patriarchal underpinnings of technological innovation for decades. Haraway (1985) defines her Cyborg Manifesto as a critique of the gendered divisions of the human and the machine, proposing the cyborg as a hybrid, boundary-straddling subject that disrupts the patriarchal control. Haraway's cyborg becomes a powerful emblem of resistance and re-forming, and a point of departure for exposing male-centric narratives in discourses of technological advancement.

Rosi Braidotti (2013) builds on this critique to explore the post-human condition in which the human subject is not the only locus of analysis. From her particular focus on relational ontologies and interconnectedness emerges a relevance to the investigation of virtual realities in Haley's *The Nether*. The characters of the play navigate a disembodied digital existence, yet at the same time they uncover the feminist critiques of dehumanization and exploitation which become central to understanding the ethical dilemmas posed by such technologies.

Post-human feminism has been employed increasingly in the analysis of cultural texts, literature, and drama specifically, to examine how plots unsettle established forms of being, acting, and power. According to Hayles (1999), cultural artifacts act to interrogate the delimitations of the human and the nonhuman, particularly in the postmodern milieu. In a dramatic context, post-human feminist critiques have shown how plays such as *The Nether* reveal the ethical and the social implications of emerging technologies.

The present paper suggests that through *The Nether*, Haley disrupts the patriarchal family structure by creating a virtual world where the traditional roles are upended and leaving the audiences to ponder the ramifications of such changes. This connects to Braidotti's (2013) argument advocating a feminist rethinking of the relational and the ethical frameworks in the time of post-humanism.

The literature synthesized here forms a strong foundation for the exploration and the theorization of the vital intersections between electronic technologies, family and household dynamics, and post-human feminist theory. Such studies echo this transformative potential of technology and its feminist critiques. However, the argument is made in this paper through situating Haley's *The Nether* as a substantial cultural text. Utilizing post-human feminist frameworks, this analysis engages with the play in a way which shows how virtual worlds reconstitute power, identity, and ethics, interrogating how the family is formed in the post-human age.

III. METHODOLOGY

The method is part textual analysis and part theoretical inquiry. The textual analysis attends to character relations, narrative structures, and thematic motifs, while the theorizing part engages post-human feminist notions to articulate and interrogate the play's critique of techno-patriarchy. Through this dual approach, comprehension of the intricate dynamics within the context of the play is ensured.

The play rings especially true at a time when digital technologies mediate more and more human relationships. By disrupting traditional power dynamics, Haley's play asks crucial questions about the moral lines and the social ramifications of the virtual worlds. Through a post-human feminist approach, the study highlights the need to reconceptualize gender and power relations in the digital realm and to make feminist engagements that focus on ethical relations and inclusivity in a more diverse digital ecosystem.

This paper uses post-human feminism as its main theoretical framework, using Jennifer Haley's *The Nether* as a case study to examine how the use of electronic technologies deconstructs traditional family power dynamics. Post-human feminism is defined as an intersection of feminist and post-humanist thought that critiques anthropocentric and patriarchal frameworks to rethink the bounds of identity, agency, and embodiment in a technologically mediated world (Bhattacharjee, 2024, p. 250). The theoretical scaffolding of this framework rests on the foundational work of Donna Haraway (1985) and Rosi Braidotti (2013) as well as other critical modalities that consider the play as an interrogatory of the relationship between technology, power, and family.

Post-humanism problematizes the Enlightenment view of the human being as a rational, autonomous individual, advocating instead relationality, interdependency, and co-evolution of the human, the machine, and the environment (Braidotti, 2013). Based on "the refusal to take the distinction between human and non-human for granted" (Barad, 2007, p. 32), this perspective rejects human exceptionalism and embraces a pluralist vision of the world in which the humans and the nonhumans (including technologies) are interconnected. Building on this, Hayles (1999) argued that the "post-human" condition destabilizes the static categories of subjectivity as technological interfaces collapse the differences between the organic and the synthetic.

In the play, the post-human state is represented by the virtual environment itself. Much of the world feels more virtual than it does physical, with characters interacting in a space that does not require physical embodiment, and questions of identity, agency and the ethics of othering abound. Through post-humanist approaches, the present paper investigates how the play critiques the fragmentation of the human-centered values and the family.

Feminist theory also focuses on the intersections between technologies and power structures which align well with post-humanist criticisms of anthropocentrism. Both often argue that technologies are embedded within and reproduce power dynamics. Cyborgs have been put forth as hybrid entities that provide a way to see through binaries (Haraway, 1985), such as male and female, human and machine, and nature and culture. To be a cyborg does not mean simply to be aware of oppression; rather, cyborgs come to replace the patriarchal orientation altogether, to introduce fluidity and multiplicity into the normalizing discourse.

The virtual space acts as an arena in which patriarchal power is both subverted and replicated. Framing the play in Haraway's terms, this paper examines how the actions of the characters in the digital world reflect or resist traditional dynamics of family roles and power. The virtual world's potential for freedom comes with ethical quandaries, revealing the ambivalence that characterizes the spaces of technology.

Critical Post-humanism by Braidotti (2013) rejects anthropocentrism and seeks an ethical framework that recognizes the inter-existence of beings. It also critiques the techno-patriarchal exploitation of bodies and environments and seeks a more inclusive and sustainable way to redefine the relational. The notion of "becoming", put forth by Braidotti, catalyzes the fluid and the mutable characteristic of identity status in post-human realms.

The Characters' engagement with the virtual realm reveals the ethical tensions of this "becoming". The play's investigation of the disembodiment and the re-embodiment in virtual avatars interrogates fixed ideas around self and mission. Drawing on Braidotti's theories, this paper investigates how the play negotiates the ethical ambiguities of virtual reality, especially regarding familial relationships and power.

Williams suggests that "techno-patriarchy" is another term describing all of the ways that technology more often serves to uphold patriarchal institutions (2020). Technologies can democratize and decentralize power, but they can equally re-affirm existing hierarchical dynamics, especially within a family context. Turkle (2011) claims that in digital contexts such instances can separate people from the experience of authentic relationships. However, other authors also create, through these instances, new opportunities for connection and identity.

The virtual world both subverts and thereby mirrors traditional family formations. This paper uses post-human feminist theories to explore the ambivalence of Haley's play to the power of technology as the characters of the play critique the mobilization of family power through the mediation by technology.

A combination of post-humanist and feminist critiques forms the theoretical framework which enables an encompassing analysis of Haley's *The Nether*. Synthesising Haraway's cyborg metaphor, Braidotti's ethical relationality, and a critical perspective on techno-patriarchy, the paper explores how Haley's play engages with ethical, ontological, and gendered implications of virtual realities. This suggests the potential of technologies to pack a punching bag of patriarchal family ethics and the need for ethical scrutiny moving forward into a digitized ecosystem.

IV. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

A. *The Nether: Contextualizing the Play Within History*

The postmodern age is a period that comes with much destruction regarding everything starting with thoughts and ending with social relations. Haley's *The Nether* appeared at a time of rapid technological advancement and growing public conversation around the ethical implications of virtual realities. Novel immersive technologies including VR headsets, AR platforms, and advanced online gaming environments surfaced around the early 2010s. These advancements sparked new questions about identity, and the lines that divide the real from the virtual.

Haley's work taps into a larger societal anxiety that technology dehumanizes, which theorists like Sherry Turkle (2011) have popularized as they stress the importance of digital interactions in shaping human interactions. "technology provides the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship" (Turkle, 2011, p. 16), which is the driving premise behind the emotional detachment of *The Nether*.

Moreover, the play intervenes in the philosophical and the ethical debates inspired by postmodern theorists – such as Jean Baudrillard (1994) – who claimed that things or experiences have become so saturated with signs that the difference between what is and what is not, or what is real and what is virtual has collapsed. This, in turn, helps to situate *The Nether's* critique of our increasing use of virtual spaces as a means of escaping the realities of our lives, which, in this brave new world, poses the danger of removing accountability and potentially encouraging the same behaviors that are considered acceptable in real life.

In addition, the early years of the 21st century were characterized by increasing awareness of issues related to internet ethics, and privacy concerns, as well as discussions of how to regulate digital platforms. *The Nether* is all of these fears wrapped up in production, using its fictional premise to interrogate the implications of free-range virtual worlds. Rosi Braidotti's (2013) posthuman critique of technology's remaking of human subjectivity and ethics resonates here a push to redress the uglier sides of the progress.

B. Disembodiment and Cybernetic Subjectivity

The characters' often liminal experiences in *The Nether* resonate with Donna Haraway's (1985) boundary-transgressing cyborg. The cyborg as "a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (p. 65) is "a hybrid of machine and organism" which does not respect categorical divisions between human or computer, soldier or civilian. *The Nether's* virtual world enables its characters to don avatars that sever them from their physical bodies, allowing explorations of identities and behaviors which are otherwise circumscribed by society's standards. For example, Sims, who designed the virtual space called "The Hideaway", says, "We're not meant to live in reality. We are meant to feel it" (Haley, 2013, p. 29). This statement manifests the posthuman state of the flux between the bodily and the embodied. Sims' simulated universe is a space of suspending traditional family roles and society's expectations, and this resonates with Haraway's cyborgian challenge to fixed identities.

C. Disruption of Patriarchal Family Configurations

Post-human feminism interrogates the ways that technologies either reinforce or subvert patriarchal power. As Rosi Braidotti (2013) notes, post-humanism represents a "rethinking of subjectivity away from hierarchical structures" (p. 13). Family dynamics are reconfigured in cyberspace but are left haunted by longstanding power imbalances. The reluctance to give up control is manifested in Sims' treatment of The Hideaway, using his dominion over it to enact a patriarchal power-play at a space where his desires establish and govern the commandments. Indeed, this dynamic comes across when he says, "I've built a world that's better than reality and no one has a right to destroy it" (Haley, 2013, p. 45). If the virtual realm holds liberating potential, then Sims' conquest shows how patriarchal control can penetrate even seemingly liberated spaces.

At the same time, the play critiques this sort of control through Detective Morris, who questions Sims' ethics and authority. Morris's questioning of Sims and what he does is a feminist refusal of the power of the patriarchy, with Morris declaring, "This isn't about your world. It's about what it does to ours" (Haley, 2013, p. 63). This has been a deeply feminist way of thinking about the ethical implications of virtual realities.

D. The Ethics of Relationality and Becoming

Braidotti (2013) points out that relationality reveals the ethical reality, and she claims that "post-human ethics must be grounded in respect for life as a zoe-centered, interconnected continuum" (p. 190). The focus of feminist posthumanism is then "centered on a feminist ethic of relationality, care and difference" (Asberg & Briadotti, 2018). This framework interrogates the isolated, exploitative trajectories of techno-patriarchy. This ethical tension is reflected in the characters' relationships in the virtual space, where corporeal bodies give way to disembodied avatars.

Iris gets to know some of the other characters, and together start to navigate the ethical ambiguities of virtual embodiment. She says, "If I'm not real, what do you care what you do to me?" (Haley, 2013, p. 39). This question frames the moral complexities of the virtual existence, where disembodiment risks dehumanization and objectification, stirring dilemmas about agency and accountability.

This technomathematical hug, from a post-human feminist viewpoint, calls into question the moral lack of techno-patriarchal assemblages too often focused on innovation at the expense of responsibility in relations. Haley uses Iris' plight to enlighten us on the failures of a purely instrumental view of technology, arguing that we should be pursuing an ethical framework that takes interconnectedness and mutual responsibility into account.

E. Rejection of the Virtual as a Citadel of Resistance and Ambivalence

Haraway's cyborg metaphor can also be a way of interpreting the liberatory, yet ethically complicated aspects of virtual spaces. According to Haraway (1985), cyborgs "can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms" (p. 82) that have previously defined identities and power. The virtual universe gives characters a place to exercise freedom from social responsibilities, yet this is a counterproductive to the other plot points of moral dilemmas and power imbalance.

Morris, for example, embodies a feminist critique of technology's unchecked potential, engaging the ethical murkiness of The Hideaway. She writes, "You're not building a world, you're building a void where accountability vanishes" (Haley, 2013, p. 67). This criticism fits well into post-human feminist concerns on how technology can erase the ethics of relation to reproduce exploitative modes of practice. Haley's depiction of The Hideaway as a space of both release and moral murkiness draws attention to the ambivalence that becomes endemic in post-human futures. In destabilizing traditional power structures, the play asks the audiences to critically engage with the opportunities afforded by the virtual realities, as well as the potential dangers.

V. CONCLUSION

Analyzing Haley's *The Nether* through the frame of post-human feminism reveals a multifaceted critique of technology linked to identity, power, and ethics. The play scrambles patriarchal family structures, contests stable ideas about embodiment and agency, and interrogates the ethics of virtual realities. Drawing on Haraway's cyborg metaphor and Braidotti's ethics of relationality, this analysis demonstrates how Haley's drama mirrors the prospects and dangers of post-human futures. Indeed, ultimately, *The Nether* reminds us that the feminist interventions into technological discourse are essential to ethical and inclusive paradigms of navigating digital transformation.

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