

## **Ungendered Narrative: A New Genre in the Making**

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on ungendered narrative with reference to select fictional works, to shed light on the elements that define the genre. One or more characters with an undisclosed gender are the focal point of the narrative. The paper discusses techniques that authors employ to keep gender hidden, such as employing inventive gender-neutral pronouns or not using them at all. First- and second-person points of view are also common modes of narration, as “I” and “you” are gender-neutral. In depicting characters, authors consciously merge masculine and feminine stereotypes to create gender-sective characters. The heterosexual love interest that has hitherto ruled the creative world is thus replaced by endless gender possibilities with which a couple may identify. Love, rather than the characters’ gender, is at the forefront of these works. These narratives confront readers with the importance they assign to gender and their habit of pigeonholing certain behaviors, characteristics, and tendencies into a binary gender system. They force readers to question gender segregation and the consequences of choosing to defy the gender one is assigned at birth. Ultimately, these narratives ask whether gender matters in life.

### **Keywords**

gender, narrative, language, queer, non-binary, gender-neutral pronouns,  
genre, identity, readers

The ungendered narrative is a work of fiction where the gender of one or more characters is kept undisclosed throughout the entire work, or in a significant portion of it. This paper examines the features of these narratives and the elements and techniques that writers use. The central idea around which the narrative revolves is that “the narrator or protagonist does not care about sexual identity, whereas the reader wants to find out about it—if only to be able to speak about her or him” (Schabert 86). The seven novels that this paper considers are Maureen Duffy’s *Love Child* (1971); June Arnold’s *The Cook and the Carpenter* (1973); Gene Kemp’s *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler* (1977); Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body* (1993); David Levithan’s *The Lover’s Dictionary* (2011); Steve Brezenoff’s young-adult novel *Brooklyn, Burning* (2011); and Anne Garréta’s French novel, *Sphinx* (1986, Trans. 2015), translated by Emma Ramadan.

Arnold’s and Kemp’s books differ from the other works in the sense that the latter reveals the gender of Tyke at the end of *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler*, and the former begins gendering the characters from chapter 14. Despite the authors’ choice to reveal their characters’ gender, both works fall under the category of ungendered narrative because, following the definition of the ungendered narrative given above, the characters’ gender is kept hidden in a significant portion of each book. Another reason for selecting Arnold’s and Kemp’s works, in which a character’s ambiguous gender is revealed at some point, is that the sudden revelation of gender works as an eye-opener for readers, who may tend to misgender the characters based on gender stereotypes and gender roles, whereas narratives in which the characters’ gender is never disclosed do not give readers a chance to discover that their stereotypical reading is false. More specifically, in Kemp’s book, “the protagonists’ [Tyke’s] gender is kept hidden from the reader until the very end, but, through the use of certain coded behaviours, readers are led to the assumption that the protagonist is male” (Bittner 202). At the end of the book, Kemp’s disclosure of a character’s gender “tells us that our notion of her gender is based on our deeply ingrained ideas of how boys and girls are generally perceived to behave” (Vickery 192).

The number of works selected is limited to seven because these are probably the only works with ungendered characters in realistic fiction written or translated into English. While many such characters may be found in science fiction, they are

not considered here because the characters featured in such fiction are neither relatable, nor are they a real-life representation of queer individuals.<sup>1</sup>

Through its analysis of these literary works, this paper seeks to understand how the ungendered narrative can help encourage the building of an inclusive society for people with non-normative genders and sexualities. The contention underpinning this analysis is that the ungendered narrative demands attention from critics as well as readers, and this paper is offered as a step in that direction. Ramadan's observation, written in reference to Garréta's work, highlights the importance of both creating and studying ungendered narratives:

Why did Garréta decide to write a genderless love story? Why this constraint? By omitting the supposedly ever-present phenomenon of gender, Garréta both reveals and undermines sex-based oppression, demonstrating that 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" 123)

Arnold's *The Cook and the Carpenter* is based on a real-life incident in which a group of women activists in 1970 seized an uninhabited building in New York City and turned it into a center for women escaping violence. They ran it for thirteen days, only to be compelled to vacate by the police. One of the activists who took part in the movement was June Arnold, who wrote a fictional account of this event in the form of this novel. Duffy's *Love Child* revolves around the ungendered precocious child Kit's extreme jealousy of their mother's affair with their father's secretary, who is also an ungendered character named Ajax. *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler*, by Kemp, is a story of bosom friends, the ungendered Tyke Tiler and a gendered boy named Danny Price, and their notorious and hilarious adventures at Cricklepit Combined School. Winterson's *Written on the Body* is a heart-wrenching tale of the blissful relationship between Louise, a married woman, and the unnamed ungendered narrator—a relationship which is later marred by the treacherous scheming of Louise's doctor husband, Elgin. *Sphinx*, by Garréta, is a genderless love story in a true sense as the reader is at no point given any idea of the gender of either member of the couple in love, one of whom is a cabaret dancer named A\*\*\*,

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<sup>1</sup> Agender writer Andy Connor analyzes prominent science fiction works and puts forward a question that certainly demands answers from science fiction writers: "How come the only agender characters I ever encountered were aliens?" (n. pag.). See Connor.

the other being a nameless narrator who is a scholar in theology. In Brezenoff's *Brooklyn, Burning*, too, the reader is not informed of the gender of either of the homeless teenagers in love, named Scout and Kid. Their tender love for each other and their ability to find solace and familial comfort in people with whom they are not in a blood relationship are highlights of the book. In *The Lover's Dictionary*, Levithan presents a love story between the male narrator and his ungendered lover in the form of dictionary entries. The entry for each word forms part of a non-chronological narration of their alternately sad, happy, and tragic relationship.

### Use of First- and Second-Person Point of View

The preferred modes of narration in ungendered narratives are first- and second-person point of view. In English, the third-person "he" and "she" are gendered pronouns, while "I" and "you" are non-gendered pronouns. Thus, it is possible to write, "I read five books last summer" without revealing the gender category to which the narrator belongs. This is due to the uniqueness of the English language, and other languages may not have this characteristic.<sup>2</sup> Hence, it is no surprise that the writers under discussion prefer first- and second-person narratives.

While first-person point of view is widely used in fiction, second-person has had limited usage until now and is mostly found in experimental fiction. When second person is employed, readers feel that the narrator is addressing them and that they are part of the plot, thus increasing readers' involvement in the story. Levithan (*The Lover's Dictionary*) and Brezenoff (*Brooklyn, Burning*) use first-person narrators to describe events, but they address their lovers in the second person. The advantage of this is that the author is no longer required to use names or the pronouns "he" or "she," elements that may divulge the gender of the characters. "Her hair" or "his hair" becomes the ungendered "your hair." To give a textual example, in *The Lover's Dictionary*, the lover is unnamed and is referred to as the ungendered "you," as in the following passage: "I noticed on your profile that you said you loved *Charlotte's Web*. So it was something we talked about on that first date, about how the word *radiant* sealed it for each of us" (Levithan 9). Brezenoff's technique differs from Levithan's in that Brezenoff gives his character a unisex name, Scout, but in most of the narration, Scout is referred to as "you." In fact, Brezenoff explains what "you" stands for in *Brooklyn, Burning*'s dedication: "For Beth, the 'you' in my love story—S.B." (n. pag.).

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<sup>2</sup> Ramadan admits in an interview how difficult it is to write ungendered narration in first person in French because that language is also gendered. See Emma Ramadan, "A\*\*\* and I."

Reading passages filled with the ungendered “you” can make readers feel that “you” is not just a mere pronoun but also that it takes the form of something greater. That is, it represents the soul of the character. The “you” is like the breath that enlivens an inanimate character whose existence is reduced to black letters printed on paper. It gains an identity of its own, stripped of gendered divisions and a binary nature. It rises above “he” and “she” and receives a remarkable stature at the hands of the author. Reviewer Marlon Balraj, referring to *The Lover’s Dictionary*, has stated that this phenomenon is applicable to other ungendered narratives written from a second-person point of view as well:

[It] exemplifies one of the most powerful devices Levithan employs in the book. The use of the Second Person point of view . . . can feel subtle at times but it’s huge. It immediately draws you into the story, makes you feel a part of it, forces you to think about how your actions affect another human being. It forces you into the general shoes of a lover, but also of someone with familial problems, with alcohol problems, and infidelity when your partner and you have clearly set boundaries against that. In this way, it helps enormously with the characterization. (n. pag.)

Balraj’s observation is limited to the way the use of “you” facilitates the reader’s understanding of the mundane problems of daily life like infidelity and a broken home. We can take this point further to say that the second-person point of view helps readers realize the struggle that sexual minorities face. The reader gets to know how it feels to be different from the rest of the world. Being in “the general shoes of” a character certainly helps readers in understanding queer individuals.

### **Gender-Neutral Pronouns or a Pronoun-Free Narrative**

Closely connected with point of view is the approach of using gender-neutral pronouns, such as “I,” “we,” “you,” “they,” and “it,” or to use invented pronouns in these narratives to suggest a character’s gender. Although names can sometimes help readers determine a character’s gender, authors sometimes use unisex names, which can cause confusion about a character’s gender. In discussing gendered pronouns, the focus is primarily on “he” and “she.” In the past, “he” was widely used when the gender of the subject was unknown or when referencing a generic

individual. Feminist critics have debated the use of “he” as a universal pronoun that represents a human being, regardless of whether that person is a man or woman.

With non-binary gender identity gaining public visibility, the need for gender-neutral pronouns has been noted. As a result, in addition to the familiar pronouns mentioned above, there have also been attempts to create such pronouns, although none of them have yet found a permanent place in the English language, as discussed in Dennis Baron’s “The Epicene Pronoun: The Word That Failed,” which charts a series of unsuccessful attempts to bring non-binary pronouns into daily use to address and refer to non-binary people. Among the ungendered narratives considered in the present paper, Arnold, in *The Cook and the Carpenter*, employs “na” for “he/she,” “nan” for “his/her,” and “nanself” for “himself/herself.” Julia M. Allen and Lester Faigley agree that though “her new pronouns did not catch on in general usage,” Arnold’s inventive pronouns manage “to introduce notions of determination of subjectivity” (148).

Attempts at inventing gender-neutral pronouns in the literary realm have typically met with failure because they can hinder the reading experience. The following lines from Arnold’s novel reflect the difficulty in reading a text with invented pronouns: “The carpenter knew *na* had foolishly wasted most quarter-hours on the same quarter-acres, not even counting the disproportionate time allotted to the milli-mile, *nan* bed; *na* had failed to prepare *naself* at all for the cook’s assumption” (3-4; emphases added). This passage gives the reader a sense of how uncomfortable and awkward the reading experience can become when such pronouns are used. It takes time to grow accustomed to invented pronouns. In the introduction to *The Cook and the Carpenter*, Bonnie Zimmerman argues that “those pronouns were there to bring us to attention and to counter our lazy reading habits. And indeed June Arnold makes us work against the grain of all our complacencies” (xxiv). This is perhaps a reason why endeavours to bring such pronouns into wide acceptance have never succeeded. Frequent complaints from non-binary individuals that others fail to respect their preference for being addressed using a particular pronoun stem from the same careless attitude to which Zimmerman is referring.<sup>3</sup>

However, whatever difficulty a reader or speaker may face, the inclusion of such pronouns in language is a must, because gender-neutral pronouns serve to validate the identities of gender-nonconforming individuals. For a man, there is “he,” and for a woman, “she,” but what about an individual who identifies as neither male nor female and falls outside the gender binary? The words of Luce

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<sup>3</sup> According to Denise Burke, “90% of trans people report harassment and discrimination at work” and one of the common types of harassment is “misgendering pronouns” (162). See Burke.

Irigaray underline the importance of incorporating gender-neutral pronouns into our language: “no sexual liberation can come about without a change in the linguistic laws relating to gender” (qtd. in Livia, “Pronoun Envy” 33). Sabine Sczesny, Magda Formanowicz, and Franziska Moser provide a critical review of “how GFL [gender-fair language] contributes to the reduction of gender stereotyping and discrimination” (1). One way of making English a gender-fair language is through the inclusion of gender-neutral pronouns, which would encourage social acceptance of non-binary persons. The day the use of non-binary pronouns becomes common, it will be demonstrated that gender-nonconforming individuals are accepted and respected. As Zimmerman opines, “language both shape[s] and reflect[s] social norms; therefore, if we change the ways in which we speak and write, we can change society itself” (xxiii).

In addition to the use of gender-neutral pronouns to hide a character’s gender, there are ungendered narratives in which the writer, to avoid disclosing the gender of a character, shuns the use of third-person singular pronouns by repeating that character’s name. This strategy makes it unnecessary to find appropriate replacements for the pronouns “he” and “she.” Garréta employs this technique in *Sphinx*, in which she never uses a pronoun for the character A\*\*\*. Instead, we find the text full of repetitions of A\*\*\* across the pages:

What I was feeling for A\*\*\* needed its own embodiment; the pleasure I took in A\*\*\*’s company demanded its own fulfilment. I wanted A\*\*\*, it was true, and all my other desires, needs, and plans paled in comparison. Suddenly, the obsessive clamour for amorous possession took hold of me. I was surprised to find myself desiring, painfully. In a sudden rush of vertigo, I was tantalised by the idea of contact with A\*\*\*’s skin. (39)

Adam Mars-Jones aptly comments on Garréta’s skilful avoidance of pronouns:

Almost every page amounts to tightrope-walking, whether nonchalant or fraught, but the most obvious consequence of the gender-withholding principle is that A\*\*\*’s name must be constantly repeated, never allowed to soften into a betraying pronoun. Those recurring rows of asterisks give the book’s pages a slightly scratchy visual quality. (9)

Similarly, in Winterson's *Written on the Body*, the ambiguously gendered narrator is simply "I," with the frequent use of the word "I" in the novel making it appear as if "I" is the name of the character. Winterson dexterously evades gendering the "I." For instance, when Louise says to the narrator "I thought you were the most beautiful creature male or female I had ever seen" (*Written* 84), the use of "male or female" allows Winterson to maintain the ambiguity of the narrator's gender.

Despite some of these authors' attempts to create a genderless universe, two works among the seven discussed here stumble when the usage of pronouns is examined closely. In Winterson's novel, for example, she genders the sky as feminine, which ruins the impact of the novel: "The sky is clear and hard, not a cloud, only stars and a drunken moon swinging on her back" (*Written* 184). It is difficult to fathom her writing an entire novel without revealing the central character's gender, to apparently prove that love is beyond gender and that gender is insignificant, while simultaneously gendering the sky when the simple use of the pronoun "it" would have sufficed. Alternatively, perhaps the redirection of gender, in the context of the novel, from the human to the cosmic order points to an acknowledgement of how difficult transcending gender may actually be in practice.

Levithan, in *The Lover's Dictionary*, is likewise guilty of the same error when he uses "he" as a gender-neutral and universal pronoun. The author goes to great lengths to keep readers guessing about the gender of the narrator's love interest, but falters when he uses "he" for "someone," a person of unknown gender: "Who came up with the term *cheating*, anyway? A cheater, I imagine. Someone who thought *liar* was too harsh. Someone who thought *devastator* was too emotional. The same person who thought, oops, he'd gotten *caught with his hand in the cookie jar*" (*Lover's* 135; emphasis in original). Works such as those by Winterson and Levithan advance us a step forward in our mission to erase gender-based stereotypes, but also take us backward by making errors such as gendering the sky or using "he" as a gender-neutral pronoun. In the end, we ultimately find ourselves right back where we started, without having made any progress whatsoever. However, we should keep challenging language that supports only a binary gender identity and leaves no room for gender nonconformity. For that task, we can use the same weapon used to divide people into masculine and feminine: language. In Ramadan's words, we should, like Wittig, "use language to fight back against language" ("Crotches" n. pag.).

## Gender-Ambiguous Common Nouns

How do these authors handle common nouns, such as “girl,” “boy,” “man,” “woman,” “lady,” and “gentleman” in creating an ungendered narrative? They may make use of common nouns that do not convey a specific gender to prevent readers from identifying a character’s gender. For instance, in *Written on the Body*, Louise tells her lover, “I thought you were the most beautiful creature male or female I had ever seen” (Winterson, *Written* 84). This sentence appears at the point in the novel when readers are the closest to learning the gender of the character. If this sentence had been gendered, it could easily have read, “You were the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.” Yet, by using the non-gendered term “creature,” Winterson is able to convey that the character can be “male or female.” Moreover, although we do not know the character’s specific gender, we are at least assured that the narrator falls into a binary gender category and is not a non-binary gender-nonconforming individual. In another instance, the narrator is referred to as “a lover or a child,” with both nouns being gender-neutral: “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” (Winterson, *Written* 80).

Other authors also employ this strategy. In *Brooklyn, Burning*, readers move close to knowing Kid’s gender when Kid’s father complains, “I’ve got the only kid I know who doesn’t know whether to be straight or gay or a girl or a boy or what” (Brezonoff 121). This statement makes it clear that Kid is gender-nonconforming. In *Love Child*, Duffy’s ungendered child character, Kit, asks, “But did I kill Ajax? What am I anyway, monster or just a precocious child—as you were perhaps?” (3). A monster is a “malformed animal or human creature” (“Monster” n. pag.), and a “child” in this case could be of any gender. Kemp, in *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler*, also uses the gender-neutral word “child” to hide Tyke’s gender when Tyke’s mother talks with the headmistress about Tyke’s mischief (118). In addition, Tyke’s teacher always refers to Tyke as a “child.” In Garréta’s *Sphinx*, A\*\*\* is referred to as an “animal,” a “child,” and a “person,” as seen in the following passages:

For a week now they’ve been coming to me to complain that you’re mucking around, that you’re out of your mind. That you’re foolishly running after that attractive animal there [gesturing toward A\*\*\*].

I think she feared for A\*\*\*, not knowing anything about her child's life, and what she imagined or heard of it did not reassure her in the least.

This woman was the mother of a person who had been very dear to me, who had died nearly seven years ago. (37, 60, 104)

Although A\*\*\* is an adult, the narrator's constant use of "child" in place of "son" or "daughter" is due to the gendered nature of the latter words.

### **Unisex or Nameless Characters**

A character's name can reveal that individual's gender. To avoid doing this in an ungendered narrative, an author may assign a character a unisex name that can belong to either a man or woman. As has been observed, another way of hiding gender is by keeping characters nameless and using "I" or "you" in place of a name. Garréta goes a step further by naming her narrator simply A\*\*\*. This is an effective strategy because a unisex name may still connote a particular gender in a certain region or state, but may be linked to the opposite gender somewhere else. Another advantage is that the name A\*\*\* provides readers with a blank slate, as the only clue given to them is the first letter, A. Lauren Elkin describes her reading experience as it relates to interpreting A\*\*\*'s name and gender: "As I read, I couldn't keep from mentally filling in the unisex name Alex, though I can appreciate that Garréta was trying to leave room for a sex beyond unisex, beyond anything as recognizably part of our culture as a lover called Alex. (And others will note that A\*\*\* is also close to Anne)" (n. pag.). The title of Garréta's work, *Sphinx*, itself denotes "a monster . . . having the head and breast of a woman, the body of a lion, and the wings of an eagle" ("Sphinx" n. pag.), which also symbolizes the gender-ambiguous nature of the characters.

Another advantage of keeping the narrator unnamed and non-gendered is that a reader of any gender and sex can relate to that individual. Readers may thus feel close to the text and can build a warm relationship with the characters, even to the extent of seeing the fictional characters as a reflection of themselves. As the book reviewer Kate says regarding the impact that the narrator and the unnamed character in *The Lover's Dictionary* have, "The narrator and his lover's names are never revealed but somehow that just makes you feel more connected with the story. They could be anyone. They could be you. And I felt incredibly involved" (n. pag.).

In *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler*, Kemp uses the unisex name “Tyke” until the end of the novel. She teases readers and keeps them in suspense. The utterance of Mrs. Somers on the last page of the novel—“Get down at once, Theodora Tiler, you naughty, disobedient girl!”—reveals Tyke’s full name and gender (Kemp 145). Brezenoff, in *Brooklyn, Burning*, and Duffy, in *Love Child*, similarly use unisex character names: Scout and Kid in Brezenoff’s novel, and Kit and Ajax in Duffy’s narrative. Arnold also gives us a series of unisex names in *The Cook and the Carpenter*. With few exceptions, all the characters in this novel are genderless and are referred to with gender-neutral pronouns. The central characters in fact are named “cook,” “carpenter,” and “Three.” Naming characters based on professions that commonly gender cooking for women and carpentry for men is a guaranteed way to mislead readers into believing that a cook is a woman and a carpenter is a man. Another important character is named Three, a name that, again, is based on a word that does not designate gender.

### **Androgynous Characterization**

The characterization presented in non-gendered narratives can break down gender stereotypes and encourage readers to reconsider their preconceived notions about gender, such as that women have smooth, hairless bodies, while men have rough, hairy bodies. The long-existing division between how a man looks and how a woman carries herself is constantly being eroded. For instance, Brezenoff begins *Brooklyn, Burning* with an apt comment that subverts the classification of attire based on gender: “‘Here comes Dick, he’s wearin’ a skirt. / Here comes Jane, / ya know she’s sportin’ a chain.’ / —‘ANDROGYNOUS,’ THE REPLACEMENTS.” These writers make an enormous effort to ensure that they do not give away their characters’ gender through their physical descriptions.

Readers often take notice of how a character is portrayed in terms of physical appearance to discern that individual’s gender. They look for gender clues in the narrator’s characterization. Clothes, hairstyle, body type, accessories, physical attributes, and body hair are among the factors that readers consider when making inferences about a character’s gender. Monika Fludernik elucidates how readers construct sex in a narrative:

Biological human sex (male, female) is constructed in narrative texts in explicit and implicit manner: explicitly by graphic physical description and masculine/feminine gender (pro)nominal expressions

(he vs. she; gendered first nouns); implicitly by the paraphernalia of our heavily gendered culture (handsome vs. beautiful, shirt vs. blouse) and by the heterosexual default structure (if A loves B, and A is a man, then B must be a woman). (155)

As evident in the above quote, predicting a character's gender with the help of gender stereotypes puts readers on shaky ground. It is not valid to assume that characters donning a shirt and jeans are men alone, or that long hair is a clear sign that a character is a woman. A transgender female character could have undergone breast augmentation but not sex reassignment surgery. Hence, a vivid description of breasts does not guarantee that a character is a woman (unless the character clearly identifies herself as a woman).

Stephanie Hayes's observation reflects every reader's dilemma: "Reading *Sphinx*, I found myself constantly searching for clues as to the lovers' genders . . . A\*\*\* was particularly slippery and ambivalent, described as having hips 'narrow and broad at the same time,' and a 'cat-like or divine' body with 'musculature seemingly sculpted by Michelangelo.'" Had Garréta used only "broad hips," Hayes might have concluded—on the basis of French fashion designer Christian Dior's widely popular ideal physical standard that "emphasized a prominent bust and nipped-in waist" in a woman (Pound n. pag.)—that A\*\*\* is a woman. The point is that there is no scientific evidence available that helps in predicting the gender of a character by the size of their body parts. Rather, they are physical standards that society expects of women. An ideal female body shape, Cath Pound remarks, is "a malleable entity, something to be moulded according to the dictates of complex social codes or the fickle whims of the fashion industry" (n. pag.). Garréta thus questions such bodily stereotypes and expectations through her androgynous description of A\*\*\*, which successfully frustrates readers' attempts to attach a gender to the character.

Winterson's *Written on the Body* similarly attempts to undermine conventional gender standards. Alex MacFarlane fittingly observes that "the only point . . . where the narrator's gender is raised" is when Louise tells her lover, "I thought you were the most beautiful creature male or female I had ever seen" (n. pag.). This demonstrates that the narrator's gender is "left not only unknown, but a non-question. No one mentions it, talks about it, wonders about it" (MacFarlane n. pag.). Gender in fact warrants no significance at all. An androgynous characterization is a way to drive home the point that gender does not matter, and thus it is futile to gender a character based on stereotypes and gender roles.

Another advantage of the androgynous characterization is that it subverts the male gaze, “leaving a gaze that gives itself over, loses itself inside what is gazed on” (Smith). For example, the description of an intimate moment between the narrator and Louise in Winterson’s novel reads as follows: “I took her hand and put it underneath my T-shirt. She took my nipple and squeezed it between finger and thumb” (162). Here, the author avoids referring to a breast, a female body part, and through the unisex word choice of “nipple,” the male gaze that puts a woman’s body on display in a narrative for the voyeuristic pleasure of male readers is removed. Thus the objectification of women that reduces them to people who are to be feasted on for sensual pleasure and to passive objects that must surrender to active male dominance is discarded. What could have been an assured mode of enjoyment for male readers becomes instead a complex and confusing erotic scene, as a person with nipples can be either a man or a woman. In a similar vein, Levithan in *The Lover’s Dictionary* mentions the chest, an androgynous body part, thereby perplexing the reader about the gender of the narrator’s love interest: “Even the sound of the word *nape* sounds holy to me. That and the hollow of your neck, the peek of your chest that your shirt sometimes reveals. These are the stations of my quietest, most insistent desire” (177; emphasis in original).

However, despite an author’s attempt to keep a character’s gender identity ambiguous, critics and readers may put unnecessary effort into gendering the character. A list entitled “17 Pathbreaking Non-Binary and Gender-Fluid Novels,” compiled by Jonathon Sturgeon, includes *Sphinx*, *Written on the Body*, and *The Cook and the Carpenter*, three works with characters whose gender is not revealed. To assume that ungendered characters are gender-fluid and non-binary is a grave mistake on the writer’s part. Unless characters explicitly come out as non-binary or gender-fluid in the novel, they should not be labelled as such. To quote an article titled “Fictional Depictions of Nonbinary Gender,”

A character whose gender is never explicitly stated *could* be nonbinary, especially if their gender expression involves going to great efforts to make sure nobody knows their gender. However, they *could* just as likely be female, or male. What makes someone nonbinary is if they identify as nonbinary. However, in this case the viewers don’t get to know how that character identifies. (n. pag.; emphasis in original)

Thus, the misgendering of a character with undisclosed gender on the basis of their characterization is erroneous that readers should be wary of.

Surprisingly, certain critics and readers have turned the ungendered narrative into a puzzle that the author has offered them to solve. They may painstakingly read a text in search of clues and draw a conclusion about a character's gender that is incorrect. Such a reading, however, constitutes a betrayal of the author's intention of spreading a message regarding the insignificance of gender in daily life and in relationships, and fuels gender stereotypes and assumptions.

What is even more unfortunate is that these critics and readers may not only fail to praise the author for breaking the gender binary, but also write poorly about the work. Proof of this response can be seen in an English Adviser's reaction to Kemp's novel *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tiler*, quoted in *Teaching English*:

I think *Tyke Tiler* is a cheat. I think she wrote it as a boy and then thought it would be a good idea to change it to a girl at the end. The trouble with *Tyke Tiler* is [that] it gives a very odd message. The main character is a boy. At the end she says it is a girl but everything that she describes about that character are [sic] actually predominantly male characteristics in our society, so in a sense it seems to underwrite those values. (qtd. in Brindley 219)

Brindley provides explanation for above-quoted and numerous other examples cited in her book that "with characters and structures so stereotyped, it is not surprising that it is with a feeling of somehow being made fools of that readers greet the 'twist' at the end" (219). It exemplifies readers' persistent refusal to do away with gender stereotypes. One reason for such reluctance could be deep-rooted notions about gender that make it difficult for readers to comprehend that a girl can be strong, can save her meek and fearful male friend Danny Price from bullies, and can gain notoriety for being the most troublesome student in school, as seen in this novel. There is nothing "odd" about the book as the reader claims in the above-quoted passage; rather, what is strange is the notion that supposedly male characteristics are only suitable to boy characters and that that is how they should be portrayed.

Levithan calls the genderless characters in his works a "string of (for lack of a better term) bodiless characters" (Levithan, "Interview" n. pag.). He also clarifies that he "didn't do [it] consciously" (Levithan, "Interview" n. pag.). His use of the word "bodiless" signifies how a body without gender loses its value in a society that puts the utmost significance on gender. Trans individuals consequently face discrimination and stigma because the gender with which they are born does not

match how they feel. Gender-ambiguous characterization thus plays a vital role in generating awareness and sensitizing readers, as explained by Jan Hokenson: “We scrutinise each character for gender clues . . . knowing we should not need them but needing them [sic] desperately in order to apprehend ‘character’ in any elemental way. We constantly apply to the text . . . ‘is it female? Is it male?’ face to face with every shred of our own sexism” (67).

### Love beyond Gender

Ungendered narratives are thematically different from other fictional works in that they do not have the common and widely popular “boy meets girl” plot element. Instead, ungendered narratives give this phenomenon a major twist, as we may not know the gender of one member of a couple (as in *Written on the Body*, *The Lover’s Dictionary* and *Love Child*) or both members of the couple (as in *Sphinx*, *Brooklyn*, *Burning* and *The Cook and the Carpenter*). *Sphinx* is a genderless love story in which the genders of both the narrator and the narrator’s beloved, A\*\*\*, are not disclosed. Likewise, in *Brooklyn*, *Burning*, readers do not know the genders of the lovers, Kid, and Scout. Writing a love story between two individuals of unknown gender is a tricky task but not impossible, as proven by *Sphinx* and *Brooklyn*, *Burning*. *Written on the Body* features an ungendered narrator who falls in love with a married woman named Louise. Levithan’s *The Lover’s Dictionary* contains a male narrator who is in love with a gender-unspecified nameless character. Duffy, in *Love Child*, portrays an extramarital affair between Kit’s mother and the ungendered Ajax. In the same work, it is noteworthy that the gender of the precocious child Kit, one of the central characters, is also kept hidden. In *The Cook and the Carpenter*, Arnold creates a genderless world in which cook, carpenter, and Three form a love triangle, and all three of them remain non-gendered until chapter 14. It can be said that what these authors attempt to convey through this approach is that love cannot be restricted by gender. Love has no boundaries and does not follow the so-called commandment that a person without breasts always falls in love with a person with breasts. Genitalia become insignificant in the face of love. Brian Finney puts it well, writing that by not gendering a character, an author is encouraging readers to realize that love cannot be divided along the lines of a male-female binary opposition. The ungendered narrative, he says, “is a deliberate attempt to dispense with distinctions of gender and to meditate on the nature of love stripped of its specifically hetero- and homosexual features” (23).

Closely connected with love is the lovemaking. As the characters in these novels have no gender identities, narrating their intimate moments becomes complex. In *Sphinx*, the author presents a wonderful description of genderless lovemaking: “Crotches crossed and sexes mixed, I no longer knew how to distinguish anything. In this confusion we slept” (Garréta 55). In an interview, Levithan contends that the ungendered narrative not only transcends male-female relationships but also improves upon them. This type of narrative goes beyond same-sex relationships, too, and highlights the futility of gender when two souls are in love. In Levithan’s words, “it [*The Lover’s Dictionary*] was to explore how relationships aren’t as defined by gender as they used to be—that in a certain circle, a male-female and a male-male relationship could be indistinguishable” (Levithan, “Interview” n. pag.).

Because the lovers in the ungendered narrative are not of opposite genders, this type of narrative questions the heteronormative way of thinking. It destabilizes ideals such as the institution of marriage, reproduction, family, and gender roles, such as men as breadwinners, and women as nurturers. Ungendered narratives give these ideals a queer twist. For instance, in none of the novels discussed here does the question of marriage arise; moreover, none of the lovers get married. In fact, Winterson’s narrator pokes fun at the tradition of marriage: “Marriage is the flimsiest weapon against desire. You may as well take a pop-gun to a python” (*Written* 78). There is no talk of having children or of the continuation of lineage. It can be said that until now, the master narrative has been dominated by heteronormativity. However, this is no longer the case because “queer undermines heterosexuality. It plays with gender roles. Queer gains its theoretical strength from the postmodern aim of deconstructing master narratives. Queer is interested in the dismantling of one particular master narrative, that is heteronormativity” (Farkas 44). The characters in the ungendered narrative experience numerous failed relationships. They do not pretend to be in love or marry due to societal pressure. In *Written on the Body*, the narrator has both male and female ex-lovers and has no qualms about ending relations when matters become difficult. Zita Farkas states, “The ungendered narrator of *Written on the Body* opens up the space for Winterson to experiment with the clichés of gendered love” (36). Levithan aptly calls *The Lover’s Dictionary* “a story about love, in all its messy complicated reality” (qtd. in Neary). Love may not look perfect, but it is delineated in a realistic manner devoid of run-of-the-mill plot devices such as “boy meets girl” and “happily ever after.” There is no idealistic glorification of love. This approach questions the notion that love is socially and legally valid only if it involves partners of the opposite sex, and

it teaches us that in love, it is the genuineness of the commitment that matters, not the gender of the lovers. It invites the question, “isn’t it about time we let go of” gender and “stop[ped] thinking about the people and start[ed] thinking about the love [that] drives them” (Carter n. pag.; Kasakitis n. pag.)?

### **Readers in a Quandary**

What sets ungendered narrative apart from other types of narratives is an active involvement of readers while studying the texts. Hence readers’ responses to the narrative are among the significant elements demanding our attention.

Readers’ reactions to the ungendered narrative may be marked by bewilderment and confusion. One reason for this is the use of gender-neutral pronouns with which readers are completely unfamiliar, such as Arnold’s use of the pronoun “na” instead of “he” or “she” in *The Cook and the Carpenter*. It may take readers a considerable amount of time to get used to this approach. According to Anna Livia, readers feel uneasy because “[a]uthors have experimented with non-gendered protagonists in both the first and the third person. Although these literary experiments have an effect on our reading of the novel, it is the lack of pronominal reference, not the lack of gender markers *per se*, which causes disturbance” (“One Man” 157).

In addition to the gender-neutral pronouns, another major obstacle for readers can be characters who are portrayed without gender identifiers. From the beginning of this type of narrative to the end, readers may be confused, searching for clues to ascertain the gender of the characters. It can be unsettling for readers to know that characters are human like themselves, but that they are not gendered. When a love story is added to the mix, the confusion can be compounded. The question of whether the narrative tells a same-sex love story, a heterosexual one, or an altogether different type of tale may trouble readers. Irritation can mount when the characters make love. Scenes intended to arouse readers’ senses instead create difficulties when physical acts involve one or more genderless characters (Richardson 4). The following passage illustrates how Levithan in *The Lover’s Dictionary* narrates a lovemaking scene between the male narrator and his gender-ambiguous lover: “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” (63). This description may fail to meet readers’ expectations. Instead of providing a blissful reading experience, then, the narrative becomes a nuisance. Readers witness their own stereotypes and

assumptions collapsing and their futility exposed. With reference to Garréta's *Sphinx*, Terry Pitts notes,

Her refusal to assign gender to the two main characters in her book forcibly changes the traditional relationship between reader and text. As a tactic, it calls into question time-honored assumptions about how readers might internalize, visualize, and identify with fictional characters. Every page of *Sphinx* becomes a reminder of our insistent desire to gender-ize people and objects.

Some readers may find an ungendered narrative revolting. But for others, especially those who are gender-nonconforming, it could be a blessing, because the number of books featuring a central character of alternative sexuality is significantly lower than the number of books with a more traditional approach. Characters without a specified gender are open to endless interpretation. Transgender individuals reading such a text may find a reflection of their own selves in the text. People of any gender can project their emotions and feel aligned with such characters. From a cisgender woman to an asexual transman, all gender identities are implicitly validated here. Ramadan considers this quality of narrative a mark of success:

The day I felt the book was successful was the day a transgender critic wrote a review about it. This person had heard about *Sphinx* on Twitter, and she/he/they wrote that for the first time in literature, this book was a mirror for them; they were able to project themselves onto the characters because there is no gender, and they could put themselves into the characters because the character was in that in-between space. There aren't many books written like that. ("Crotches" n. pag.)

To project oneself and fill the void left by characters with undefined gender, "an active, interrogative and creative reading is required in studying such texts (Rye 531). Roland Barthes calls them "writerly texts," as opposed to "readerly texts." Readerly texts are meant for passive reading enjoyment. There is no involvement on the part of the reader in comprehending the text, as characters and situations are identifiable and easy to understand. In contrast, writerly texts demand the active involvement of readers. Readers need to put just as much effort into understanding the text as the author has invested in writing it. This kind of text is difficult to understand and poses a challenge to the reader. Ungendered narratives constitute

writerly texts because they turn otherwise meaning-absorbing readers into meaning-creating readers. As Özge Yakut remarks, “The narrator of *Written on the Body* is an anachronic subject, creating a blissful text by challenging the conventional understanding of the text. Unlike the readerly text, which does not frustrate the readers and meets their expectations, the narrator in her/his text discerns the writerly text, and violates the principles of realism” (120).

### Inconsequential Gender

Why is there a need to hide a character’s gender in a novel? What is the use of an author working within a limitation that entails making a painstaking effort to keep a character’s gender identity undefined? Ramadan has an answer: “[This] constraint is . . . a way of hammering home the point that gender shouldn’t be an important factor in our identities and our lives and our relationships” (“A\*\*\* and I” n. pag.). These narratives have the power to make the world a better place by encouraging readers to confront their own gender biases and stereotypes. These works give us hope that in the near future, society will be as welcoming of sexual minorities as it is of heterosexual individuals. Gender-based violence, bullying, and suicide among the trans community are at an all-time high.<sup>4</sup> In such an environment, the ungendered narrative can help us to look beyond the gender of human beings. It has the capability to act as a catalyst in preventing gender-based discrimination and crime. Today, Winterson says, “I no longer care whether somebody’s male or female. I just don’t care” (“Jeanette Winterson” n. pag.); and tomorrow, we will be following her path.

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<sup>4</sup> To quote an article published in *PinkNews*, “A study conducted by the National Centre for Transgender Equality found that of the 17,715 people surveyed, 40% had attempted suicide.” See Beresford.

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