

SEM9. New gender perspectives in the literary Anglosphere: A more inclusive view of the ‘human’

9A 11 September h. 11.00-13.00, S2 Moro

9B 11 September h. 16:00-18:30, S2 Moro

Convenors

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Abstract

Since the publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* by Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792, feminist thought has developed over the centuries not only as a response to gender inequalities but also to assert a concept of ‘human’ and ‘human nature’ all the more inclusive and multifaceted. Gender equity is the process of being fair to women and men. Equity leads to equality. Where gender inequality exists, it is generally women who are excluded or disadvantaged in relation to decision-making and access to economic and social resources. More recently, gender studies have connected the term ‘gender’ to the economic, social and cultural attributes and opportunities associated with being male or female. Gender thus differs from sex in that it is social and cultural in nature rather than biological. While emphasizing the masculine bias in scientific culture, Donna Haraway back in 1985 dismantled the ‘antagonistic dualisms’ or dichotomies that order western discourse, among which male/female, self/other, culture/nature, human/nonhuman, with the metaphor of the ‘cyborg’, which rejects rigid boundaries, even that between human and machine. Judith Butler (2006) has offered a further critique of any binary division by seeing gender as a reiterated social performance rather than the expression of a prior reality and Rosi Braidotti (2021) claims that feminism is one of the precursors of the present posthuman turn. Finally, gender is inflected according to race, ethnicity and religion in contemporary multicultural societies and postcolonial countries. Non-western cultures and ontologies include different paradigms in gender relations and issues. The seminar will include papers dealing with new inflections of feminisms, new gender representations, and new gender perspectives that redefine the concept of ‘human’, in English and postcolonial literary works.

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SEM9. Papers

9A 11 September h. 11.00-13.00, S2 Moro

- *Women scientists in the contemporary fictions of the anglosphere* (Carmen Concilio, Università di Torino)
- *Posthuman feminism in Alisdair Gray’s Poor Things* (Paola Della Valle, Università di Torino)
- *Women characters in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s Theft (2025) between female agency and neocolonialism* (Costanza Mondo, Università di Torino)
- *Neo-Victorian metafiction of affliction: Inclusive feminist reflections on female disability* (Enrica Zaninotto, Università di Verona)

9B 11 September h. 16.00-18.30, S2 Moro

- *“Oh Cassandra [...] let us devise a method by which men may bear children”: Virginia Woolf’s and Angela Carter’s perspectives on humanness between androgyny and the cyborg* (Savina Stevanato, Università degli Studi Roma Tre)
- *Gendered labour and double colonisation: Women in the textile industries of Biella and Bombay* (Harjot Banga, Università di Torino)

- “*Until to atoms I dispersed be*”: *The human and the non-human in Hester Pulter’s poetry* (Alessio Mattana, Università di Torino)
- *Love as action: Women as negotiators of conflict and promoters of progress in Pakistani Anglophone fiction* (Daniela Vitolo, Università di Napoli L’Orientale)
- *The cost of living: Upward mobility and migration in Anglophone women’s writing between the Caribbean and USA* (Federica Zullo, Università di Urbino Carlo Bo)

SEM9. Abstracts

Gendered labour and double colonisation: Women in the textile industries of Biella and Bombay

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This study investigates the intersection of gendered labour, postcolonial critique, and inclusive conceptions of the ‘human’ through a comparative analysis of women’s experiences in the textile industries of Biella (Italy) and Bombay/Mumbai (India). Although rooted in distinct historical and industrial trajectories, both contexts reveal how women have navigated and resisted overlapping structures of patriarchy and capitalism. Through the literary lens of Kiran Nagarkar (1994), the oral histories collected by Neera Adarkar and Meena Menon (2004), and the interviews with women workers in the woollen mills discussed by Simonetta Vella (2004), the research foregrounds women’s embodied practices as sites of negotiation and agency.

The framework of “double colonisation,” as articulated by Gayatri Spivak (1994), guides the analysis of women’s dual oppression under colonial-capitalist regimes and patriarchal constraints. Drawing on Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity (1988, 2006), the study considers how everyday acts within both millwork and domestic life constitute subtle forms of resistance. In Nagarkar’s portrayal of Bombay’s *chawls*, women’s experiences complicate the binary of oppression and emancipation, echoing Donna Haraway’s (1985) dismantling of antagonistic dualisms.

At the core of this analysis lies the figure of *Ardhanarishvara*, a Hindu deity embodying the synthesis of masculine and feminine energies. Reinterpreted through Jaina C. Sanga’s work (2004), this non-Western paradigm offers a fluid, hybrid conception of gender that challenges fixed Western constructs. By bringing Biella’s industrial heritage into dialogue with Bombay’s postcolonial realities, the study engages with diverse ontologies of embodiment and labour.

Employing an interdisciplinary methodology—combining literary analysis, oral testimony, and feminist theory—this research highlights women’s strategies of resilience and transformation. The findings suggest that, despite enduring structural marginalisation, women have carved out spaces for autonomy, redefining the human as a porous, adaptive subject. Their dual labour, both industrial and domestic, becomes emblematic of a cyborg-like negotiation of roles (Haraway, 1985), merging survival with subversion. Ultimately, this research contributes to postcolonial and posthuman feminist discourse by positioning women’s textile labour as a critical lens through which to reimagine pluralistic and inclusive understandings of gender, embodiment, and the human condition.

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Women scientists in the contemporary fictions of the Anglosphere

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Gender equality is not only one of the Sustainable goals of the 2030 Agenda, it has become a heated debate in these latest years, in Italy, as well as elsewhere. The role of women scientists, in particular, is therefore crucial in demonstrating the multifaceted functions of women in contemporary society as wives, mothers, scientists, scholars and sometimes public figures and activists for the rights of women and of minorities. In this contribution, I would like to analyze the role of women scientists in contemporary novels from the Anglosphere, trying to compare the fictional characters to their real counterparts and historical models (i.e. Jeanne Baret, Rachel Carson, Suzanne Simard), and to understand how they are represented by writers such as Richard Powers, Amitav Ghosh, Doris Lessing, Jane Urquhart and Anne Michaels. Botanists, marine biologists, entomologists, historians, and medical doctors will be shown in their real and symbolic role and scrutinized under the lens of ecofeminism and environmental humanities (Haraway, Akomolafe, Barad, Ghosh). Last but not least, this contribution aims at detecting recurrent or new patterns of empowerment, emancipation or else failure, as a projection of scientific commitment into a future of climate change and climate action, to foreground also didactic choices and practices.

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Posthuman feminism in Alisdair Gray's *Poor Things*

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In the last two decades there has been a radical shift in the humanist perspective, which has found its way into the philosophical debate in favour of a posthuman vision. Rosi Braidotti is among the promoters of such a transformation as attested by her trilogy *The Posthuman* (2013), *Posthuman Knowledge* (2019) and *Posthuman Feminism* (2022). Posthumanism explicitly calls into question the anthropocentric biases of humanist thought and human exceptionalism, the optimistic belief in technological progress, and the hierarchical categories of culture and nature, self and other, human and nonhuman. Feminist posthumanities, in particular, can be described as a re-negotiation of “the human” in a manner that questions all hierarchical conceptualisations of the term, first and foremost its androcentrism in gender relations, which separates all that is Other than rational (white) heterosexual man — that is: woman, the non-heterosexual, the colonized and the enslaved, the marginalized and the non-citizen, and the non-human animal species. Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* (1992) offers a good terrain for a reading in posthuman feminist terms. The novel honours Mary Shelley's masterpiece *Frankenstein* in exploring the consequences of the creation of a new being by a Victorian scientist, Godwin Baxter, whose name is, significantly, often abbreviated as “God”. The “creature” is obtained by bringing back to life the corpse of a pregnant woman, who committed suicide to escape a despotic husband, and transplanting the brain of her foetus into her. The result of the experiment is an unpredictable “posthuman being”, Bella Baxter, with no past prejudices, memories or experiences, and with a psychological tabula rasa. The creature, at first presenting an unbalanced adult body and infant mind, will grow up into a complex and highly educated woman that progressively emancipates herself from her creator, asserting her own identity and independent will. Most importantly, Bella is devoid of moral restrictions and can unmask the hypocrisies that characterize her time, demonstrating how these norms are not only arbitrary but also harmful. She explores sexuality with a freedom that challenges the views of her age and overturns any possible expectation. By refusing to be sexually and socially defined, Bella Baxter shakes the confidence of all people around her, especially men. The novel therefore provides a powerful insight into gender issues, questioning the binary gender system and the traditional notion of body, destabilizing the unitary vision of the subject and ultimately opening up to multiple belongings and complex reconfigurations of diversity.

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“Until to atoms I dispersed be”: The human and the non-human in Hester Pulter’s poetry

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This paper focuses on woman poet Hester Pulter (1605–1678) to examine the ways in which her poetry establishes a structural continuity between human and non-human entities.

Since the discovery of the manuscript in the University of Leeds Brotherton Library in 1996 containing Pulter’s unpublished poetry dating back to the 1640s and 1650s, scholars have identified some of the main themes running through her poems, including alchemy (Archer, 2005), astronomy (Hutton, 2008), atomism (Eardley, 2012) and religious devotion (Hatton, 2022).

By building on this scholarship, this paper makes the two-fold argument that within Pulter’s poetic universe, human and non-human entities are to be considered as two parts of the same whole. On the one hand, it will be shown that Pulter’s poetry portrays human death as a form of transmutation into natural elements. By conflating the common trope of the body being a cage to the soul with scientific knowledge about astronomy and alchemy, Pulter conceives of death as a chemical transformation back into “atoms”, meant as the first constituents of nature. On the other hand, attention will be given to the way Pulter personifies rivers, trees and animals as part of her contention that nature has the same sensitivity that is ascribed to human beings. As will be finally argued, Pulter’s belief that human beings and the rest of nature share a common structure was based on some of the natural philosophy ideas then current in mid-seventeenth-century Britain.

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Women characters in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Theft* (2025) between female agency and neocolonialism

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Women characters emerge vividly from Abdulrazak Gurnah’s literary production, from *Dottie* (1990) all the way to *Afterlives* (2020). Nonetheless, the portrayal of gendered relationships and feminist perspectives conveyed by such female characters are issues that have been mainly left unexplored by literary criticism, with some exceptions (Berman, 2023; Boparai, 2021; Callahan, 2023). In line with Donna Haraway’s (2016) encouragement for feminism to tackle kin-making practices, this paper focuses on the female characters in Gurnah’s latest novel *Theft*, by analysing their “female agency” (Uwakweh 2023) and disruption of gender roles for an equitable conception of ‘humanity’ within the Swahili culture of 1990s Tanzania. By taking a closer look at the narrative dynamics in the novel, I will show that Gurnah’s multi-layered women characters destabilise the narration in a karstic way and offer rhizomatic reflections on the meaning of being ‘human’ in the story, whose main focus addresses the brotherly relationship between two young men, Karim and Badar. The first section will examine the character of Raya, who divorces her husband and remarries, thus asserting her freedom and, later, dismantling normative assumptions about motherhood. The second section is concerned with the specular figures of Geraldine – a European tourist who recklessly begins an affair with Karim – and Fauzia – Karim’s wife. Geraldine’s patronising attitude towards Fauzia echoes Karim’s paternalistic behaviour and represents a Western woman’s condescension towards another fellow woman, thus adding a neocolonial edge to societal colonial-driven conceptions of

gender in Africa (Òjó et al., 2020). Notwithstanding Geraldine and Karim's vocal and reiterated condescension, Fauzia's rhetoric of endurance and silence eventually leads her to experience freedom and happiness, as happens in Badar's narrative arc. In *Theft*, the polysemic profusion of female characters and different ways of being 'human' offer a fascinating example of feminism in Gurnah's oeuvre and encourages further examinations of gendered relationships in his earlier novels.

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“Oh Cassandra [...] let us devise a method by which men may bear children”: Virginia Woolf's and Angela Carter's perspectives on humanness between androgyny and the cyborg.

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Although no explicit aesthetic or ideological lineage appears to link Virginia Woolf and Angela Carter, both authors engage in daring forms of sideways thinking and feminist commitment that reveal commensurable and inclusive perspectives on humanness.

Drawing on a theoretical framework informed by posthumanism, posthuman feminism, and eco-ethical criticism, this paper explores a shared “sensitivity in posthuman feminism” (Braidotti, 2022) between the two writers. It examines and compares key aspects of their discourses on the intersections of gender/culture and sex/biology, beginning with a subtle yet resonant echo between Woolf's short story “A Society” and Carter's novel *Passion of New Eve*. By referencing the myths of Cassandra and Eve, Woolf and Carter point to a gender-biased condition regarding fate and free will, while simultaneously exploring these figures as “tropes for possibilities” (Gustar, 2004) for transcending both gender and sex boundaries. In this context, Carter's New Eve can be seen as fulfilling the aspiration voiced by Woolf's Cassandra. My analysis will focus on selected textual excerpts from these writings, with relevant cross-references to other works, including “The Introduction”, *Orlando*, and *Nights at the Circus*. Despite historical, aesthetic, and perspectival differences, Woolf and Carter both contribute significantly to a critique of humanism and its dualistic ontology. Their respective visions not only adopt a gendered perspective but also move beyond it, proposing diverse correctives that challenge rigid boundaries—between genders, between human and non-human, and across the natural and technological realms. In doing so, both authors promote a vision of humanness grounded in metamorphic interconnectedness.

Finally, the paper addresses the tension in Woolf's suggestion that women should actively renew society while remaining “outsiders”. As Woolf herself foreshadows and as Carter will later critique, this aspect remains problematic in a contemporary society that continues to struggle with valuing difference and relational interdependence as foundational to an inclusive conception of humanness.

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Love as action: Women as negotiators of conflict and promoters of progress in Pakistani Anglophone fiction

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Contemporary English-language fiction by Pakistani women depicts the gendered experience of navigating a highly patriarchal society. Fiction written in English, the language of the cultured elite, speaks from and to the upper and middle classes, to which both writers and readers belong, and elaborates progressive ideas. At the same time, Anglophone women's narratives show that the female experience in Pakistani society is varied, depending on several factors, mostly related to the socio-cultural environment in which they live. While the authors reveal the intersectionality of power dynamics, they also show that patriarchal mechanisms of force affect women across the entire social spectrum, even if with different degrees of coercion. Agentivity, a shared characteristic of the novels' protagonists, reveals and questions the structures that weigh in on women while it invites them to take action. The writers provide their readers with resolute female models pointing out that a positive social transformation is possible through personal acts of resistance. Particularly, the intervention examines how women writers portray the clash between tradition and modernity reflecting on the role that women can play as moderators in conflict situations. Female sensibility to fostering interpersonal relationships, understanding and empathy becomes a means of social progress when arranged marriage is rejected by young people who want a love marriage that their families do not approve of.

In the novels *Salt and Saffron* (2000) by Kamila Shamsie and *How It Happened* (2012) by Shazaf Fatima Haider, the female protagonists fall in love with a man whom they would not be allowed to marry for social reasons because of their class and religious differences. This marks the beginning of a period of crisis in which the characters must come to terms with the fact that they do not want to disrespect their families and traditions, but they also refuse to accept the limits imposed on individuals by conservative logic. The positive resolution of the stories is made possible by the protagonists' ability to let love prevail over an impersonal reproduction of social norms. In fact, while the news often tells of women killed for honour after a love marriage, the novels depict women who are able to find a way to open a space for dialogue with their intransigent families. Because they are able to make their positions and desires understood by their relatives, they also contribute to social change by showing that extreme positions can be moderated when the human dimension prevails over logics of propriety and class and religious segregation.

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Neo-Victorian metafiction of affliction: Inclusive feminist reflections on female disability

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The present paper, inspired by my doctoral project, surveys non-freak female disabled corporeality in Neo-Victorian works of fiction. It draws primarily on the conceptualisation of Neo-Victorianism as both a reconfiguration and a reflection on the Victorian Era, holding great socio-historical awareness and critical potentiality. Analogously, it bears its foundation on the proliferation and actual delineation of disabled characterisation in the nineteenth-century English novel. Framed within an interdisciplinary framework, this research specifically reviews portraits of disabled women through a Feminist Disability Studies lens, an inclusive perspective scarcely acknowledged by both Disability Studies (e.g., the Social Model) and mainstream Feminist Theory. Despite the pervasiveness of Critical Disability Studies research within Victorian literature, Neo-Victorianism has not sparked the same scholarly interest, aside from studies devoted to Neo-

Victorian freak characterisations of disability. Out of the broader body of Neo-Victorian literature, the research focuses on Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* (1992) and Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) as primary texts which embody Neo-Victorian cultural and disability consciousness. Early findings demonstrate that, compared to the Victorian past, Neo-Victorian narratives include significantly fewer disabled characters. Nonetheless, when disabled characters are included (as for the above-referred novels), they take centre stage in a way that is more prominent and pervasive than in their nineteenth century predecessors. To conclude, this study fills the gap in research by examining the intersection of disability, gender and Neo-Victorianism, while finding practical application in contemporary disability culture, as in matters of activism and representation of disabled womanhood. Analogously, it paves the way for new venues of research that can further reflect on the influence of literature on the current representational patterns of disabled women.

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The cost of living: Upward mobility and migration in Anglophone women's writing between the Caribbean and USA

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In my paper I investigate different female characters' attempt to reach upward mobility within the complexity of postcolonial societies and the experience of migration, trying to establish bonds and communities across borders and languages. The women protagonists in the stories written by Edwidge Danticat (Haiti and USA) and Alecia McKenzie (Jamaica, USA, Singapore and France) locate themselves on the borderlines of the present, in the "beyond" space formulated by Homi Bhabha, which now represents "the trope of our times", where there is "a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction" (Bhabha, 2000). These women make efforts to move away from the singularities of class and gender as primary and organizational categories, since they elaborate strategies of selfhood that initiate new signs of identity, innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. Their troubled and painful experiences of migration mirror the difficult negotiation that affects the process of identity formation, since they belong to the generation who witnessed the transition from the colonial period to the ideology of independence, grew up with the language of it and then recognized that there were neocolonial processes within the new nation, regarding, for example, race, gender, and economic inequalities. In the collection of stories *Everything Inside* (2020) by Danticat and *Stories from Yard* by McKenzie (2005) I explore the way authors create elsewhere worlds and places and consciousness, to participate, as Boyce Davies asserts, in a "growing collage of uprising textualities" oriented to articulating presences and histories across a variety of boundaries imposed by colonizers, but also by the men, the elders and other authorized figures in their various societies. (Boyce Davies, 1994)

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