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Negotiated Masculinities in Contemporary American Fiction

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Abstract: *This paper is an exploration of the representation of revised masculinity in texts that represent progressive and conservative ideologies within the United States. John Irving's representation of masculinity in his 1970s The World According to Garp and The Cider House Rules marks a continuation of progressive postwar politics that resists the backlash to feminism in the 1980s. His representation of the male doctor who stands for both the power producedthrough knowledge and science and his masculinity is revised in both novelsrevealing a progressive approach to masculinity. Brian J. Gail's, more recent, dystopian novel, however, reflects a more heteronormative approach to representing masculinity.Therepresentation of masculinity inChildless (2011) suggests the shift towards conservative politics in the United States in the twenty first century. This conservative representation, however, is disrupted though discursive ironies within structuring the image of the superhuman. Theutilization of modernist revision of technology becomes the source of the revised masculine sovereign in Childless. What is structured to be a threat through dystopiabecomes the revised version of post-modern superhuman who threatens conservativeperceptions of traditional masculinity.*

Key Words: *masculinity-Irving- Dystopia-Gail-American fiction-superhuman*

I. INTORDUCTIOION

The representation of masculinity in American fiction reflects both conservative and liberal attitudes to approaching power. These representations do not fall into one category or the other as the nuances of representation interfere in reflecting imagery about masculinity that do not reflect the overall ideology of the fictional text. What Bakhtin calls a dialog e of discourses is revealed through these representation reflecting aspects of masculinity that are not congruent with sovereign ideological structures. Narrating the masculine entity in the American context is formed through a conservative history of representation and challenging feminist waves (particularly the second and third waves). This background to representing masculinity makes its marks on the representation of the male archetype in both potentially conservative and liberal texts. The history of revising masculinity in texts, like *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) by Marge Piercy and *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) by Ursula K Le Guin,where masculinity falls into a realm of blurred gender boundaries represents a revolution in the approach to masculinity.

This revision to approaching masculinity that took place in the 1970s, however, is countered with a backlash to Second Wave feminism and the accompanying revision of masculinesovereignty and attached power structures. This backlash is encouragedwith the rise of neo-conservatismwhich started during the Nixon years and is considered to be cemented during Reagan's years when the AmericanSupreme Court had more conservative judges than any time in history since the 1930s. Perceptions of masculinity moved to more traditional American structures and were perceived as part of a larger system of moral traditional values where sovereign masculinity reigned supreme. The image of the masculine ideal becomes an emblem of conservative approaches to gender where maleness is sovereignty and the ultimate power.

In spite of the changing attitude to perceiving masculinity, which historically moves towards conservatism as time progresses, revision of the image counter the dominant conservative discourse like Irving's work published in the 1970s and 80s. His work revises the masculine ideal in the American context. This paper will present a reading of the masculine image in two John Irving novels, *The Cider House Rules* (1985) along with *The World According to Garb* (1978). The main text revises the masculine image on the representation of Dr. Larch, an obstetrician and abortionist who stands for the ultimate power over the female body structured through the role of the male doctor. Standing between women and the actual application of abortion decision, he represents the ultimate power of the doctor over the body. His choice of performing abortions during abortion prohibition years in the 1920s through the 1950s positions him as above the law. His sovereignty, thus, becomes ultimate,placing him above both the power of state (prohibiting of abortion) and women's bodies because of his medical knowledge and the decision to do abortions. The second Irving novel that represents a revised masculine ideal is *The world According to Garp* where femininity confiscates masculinity of its most valuedasset, the phallic power of penetration rendering masculinity to lowerposition and revising the structures of its power. But in order to illustrate the regression into conservative politics I will read his work along a dystopian work published in 2011. Both works, Irving's and Gail's, published by male authors, and reflecting contrasting ideological approaches to masculinity, revise masculinity as a result of the changes in the American social context. Being historically closer to the Trump years where perceptions of threatened family values

(including masculinity) are popular, *Childless* by Brian J. Gail highlights the threat to family values and underscores this threat as an environment for a dystopian society. The novel narrates the story of an evil plan of a criminal mastermind who intends to control the world through controlling reproduction. Siliezar in Gail's novel stands as the arbiter of scientific knowledge. He represents a threat to family values and traditional modes of masculinity and femininity through inventing a super-human, grown in an artificial womb and forcing the Americangovernment to enforce birth control. The threat to traditional gender roles and the image of the super-human in Gail's novel highlight conservative ideologies in the novel. However, the dialogue of discourses within the representation suggests a revision of masculine sovereignty in traditional social/political structures.

Irving and the Restructured Hero

The representation of Larch's character serves to suggest a quasi-feminist perspective to *The Cider House Rules* where masculinity is revised by revising the image of the hero. Larch is a modern-day hero who helps women to carry out decisions concerning their bodies. But, he does not represent sovereignty and heroism in the classical sense. He has his own set of peculiarities. This revision of the representation of the sovereign might be a consequence of the realistic representation of modern-day heroes. Bakhtin in 'Epic and Novel' (1981) describes the difference between the hero in the epic and in the novel. His diagnosis of the modern day hero revises representations of the classical hero. Bakhtin writes, the transferal of the image of the individual...to the zone of contact with the inclusive events of the present (and consequently of the future)result in radical re-structuring of the image of the individual of the novel...It's first and essential step was the comic familiarization of the image of man. Laughter ...began to investigate man freely and familiarly, to turn him inside out, expose the disparity between his surface and his center, between his potential and his reality. (Bakhtin,2008:35)

Bakhtin's theorization of the restructured modern hero in realistic fiction suggests the impact of realism on representing the modern day hero. Being depicted in relation to the present (and future) entails what he calls the aspect of *familiarization*where the modern-day hero in fiction becomes everyman. This realistic representation of man includes the comic effect, as suggested by Bakhtin. The disparity between masculine expectations and reality are exposed producing ironies within representation. This restructuring of the modern-day hero includes the revision of his masculinity. The image of the classical all-powerful hero is revised where the foibles of man are exposed producing a comic effect targeting representations of masculinity and disrupting them.

We see this comic effect exposing Larch, as a modern-day hero, in many instances in *The Cider House Rules*. Larch's addiction and obsession with the Ramses Paper Factory are a few examples that serve to realize Larch as a contemporary hero. Larch detests the Ramses Paper Factory. He thinks it's the root of all evil in St. Cloud's, the hospital and orphanage where women abandon their children.His character believes that the factory workers bring prostitution and consequently more orphans into the world. When one of their trucks pulls up in front of the hospital to bring Homer home, Larch thinks that it's one of their injured employees. The doctor is shocked at the audacity of a trucker seeking help at *his* hospital. In an attempt to reduce the profit of The Ramses Paper Factory, Larch tries to write his *A History of St. Cloud's* 'in a small, cramped hand, on both sides of the pages...Dr. Larch was not a man for leaving margins'.(Irving,1986:17)Moreover, as Larch thinks that his addiction to ether is not detected by anyone. However, Melony points out the extent of his, fairly obvious, addiction to Homer when she says '[y]our favorite doctor smells like he's got ether inside him-like he's got ether instead of blood'.(Irving,1986:117) These examples approach the reader with a 'comic familiarization of the image of' Larch, a contemporary hero with many foibles.

This revision of the hero also entails a revision of his masculinity. Larch's sexual abstinence as a result of a painful infection he received from his first sexual experience with a woman has its implications regarding social hierarchies. It is suggestive of a repositioning of Larch at a lower level when it comes to his masculinity as a passive male. Kaja Silverman alludes to this model of the inferior passive male in her *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*. In her analyses about where the feminine aspects reside in the homosexual body, she suggests an ancient Greek social structure that 'organized sexuality around phallic penetration, which providing the erotic correlative of social superiority'. Silverman cites David Halperin's comment about this social structure who states that 'the receptive partner is construed as a sexual patient, whose submission to phallic penetration expresses sexual "passivity"'. (Silverman, 1992:341)Although Larch is not the subject of penetration by a male, he is represented as a subject of penetration by a female. Larch in his ether haze is 'surprised by the sudden pain in his chest; Mrs. Eames's savage daughter was stabbing him with the sea-gull feather again'. (Irving,1986:72). The repeated stabbing by the female character is suggestive of penetration. She is not begging. She is aggressive to the man who is supposed to give her help. This suggests a strong point about the feminist perspective of the novel. This image suggests that the sovereign, Larch, can be relegated to a lower position when it comes to gender hierarchies. This representation introduces the female as a sovereign over the sovereign. It is an attempt to liberate women who are bound by social restrictions.

Irving provides a more extreme scenario of the revision of masculinityby disrupting the image of the male sovereign in *The World According to Garb* published in 1978. A role reversal is applied to revise the social structure of women as a subject and the male as a sovereign. In one passage Irving represents the treatment of sexually transmitted diseases applied to males. The other peter treatment was local and also required a lot of fluid...sometimes, in fact, [the patient] needed to be held. It was a simple procedure that could force as much as one hundred cc's of fluid up the penis and through the surprised urethra before it all came back, but the procedure left everyone feeling a little bit raw...-an appropriate punishment for a lover. (Irving, 1998:19)

The imagery of the irrigation treatment process is an implied reversal of the female reproductive role by applying it to males. The male patient is held down. He is violated and subjected. It starts with penetration. The fluid and pain connote birth or abortion. Consequences of pleasure become a scene of shame and pain for a male. Jenny Field's conception process is another reversal of gender roles that assume the male authority to the female. Jenny. Jenny, specifically, assumes the authority of the phallus to herself. Gunner Garp loses parts of his brain due to an accident during the Second World War. His mental capacity is reduced to that of a child's. As a result, His consciousness shifts back to a very early stage of his mental and psychological development. His language deteriorates to the point where he loses letters from the only word he can pronounce. The word starts as 'Garp' then it becomes 'Arp'until it is reduced to nothing. Garp is placed back into the stage of the real where language does not exist (35). Jenny epitomizes his mother in that stage. This is illustrated when Jenny 'offered him her breast, where he sucked inexcusably and didn't seem to mind there was nothing to be had there'(36). As a result of this regressive stage in Garp's psyche, which is the stage of the real, he identifies with the mother. He does not conceive where she starts and he ends. This identification includes Jenny's appropriation of the phallus. Although Jenny wants to conceive it is unthinkable for her to be subjected to male authority(18). Finding Gunner Garp in his regressive psychic stage is the perfect opportunity to assume, an otherwise impossible role, of the sexual authority attributed to the phallus. Although Gunner Garp had the penis, Jenny clearly owned the phallus, during their, single, sexual encounter. Jenny 'took hold of his erection and straddled him'(37). The authority and the choice are Jenny's. It is her performance that completed the intercourse with the authority of a male who guides the 'erection' and consequently controls the phallus. Such reversal of the sexual performative roles of the male and female promotes a revolutionary perspective of gender in Irving's work. This post-war text delineates the warrior who is a symbol of masculinity and who stands for the power of penetration through his command of artillery only to confiscate these symbols and associations by reproducing him as the invalid who surrenders to the power of the female nurse. Through the, former, warrior's encounter with the nurse, his masculinityis revised and restructured.

Conservative Dystopia and the Resistance of Discourse

The representation of masculinity in *Childless* stands in total contrast to the revised images of masculinity in *The Cider House Rules*. Calvin Thomas in 'Reenfleshing the Bright Boys' raises the question about the representation of gender specific roles by male authors. Thomas writes, the repression of the abject vulnerability of the male body- a repression necessary for the construction of heteronormative masculinity- demands a displacement of that vulnerability, and all that it materially entails, onto the feminine. Here is where the matter of writing emerges as a "scene of visibility" in which male subjectivity can be led to confront its effaced embodiment, its constructive otherness, the femininity that has always functioned as "the bearer" of its "meaning"... the question is ...of writing itself as a "bodily function" carrying the potential to alienate, to abject, to "feminize," to "de-mean"'(Thomas,2002:63).

What Thomas suggests is a displacement of masculine vulnerability unto the female body is reversed through righting about masculinity. Abjection and alienation then return to the masculine through writing when authors are faced with the details of a realistic representation of masculinity. Although Gail's writing succeeds in associating vulnerability and the 'abject' with females, his writing in *Childless,* also, deploys the 'abject' to a male body in order to glorify another. *Childless* specifically contrasts masculinities according to the classical pattern of protagonist vs antagonist to produce a clear-cut distinction of two contrasting masculinities. The protagonist, in that respect, represents the unquestionable patriarch; but the protagonist's masculinity is interrogated in light of the protagonist's traditional model of masculinity. This classical model of masculinity is what Robyn Wiegmancalls in his 'Umaking Men: Men and Masculinity in Feminist Theory' as the 'assumed normativity of masculinity'. It entails a 'seeming naturalness of adult masculinity-heterosexuality, fatherhood, family governance, solidarity, and citizenry' (Wiegman, 2002:43). Michael Burns, the protagonist, emerges as a leader and savior, not only for his family, but his society. His pastor refers to his indestructability by calling him the Phoenix of Philadelphia (Gail, 2011, 19). When confronted by the economic crisis, People resorted to rural life to secure food directly from farms. Michael Burns, the former publisher, buys a 'twelve hundred acre dairy and grain farm'(155) to provide an efficient safe haven for his community. Burns includes the Gilliespies along with other friend and family members in his project to save as many people as he can from the economic crisis in the United States. Not only does he provide food for them, Burns also puts a roof over their head by building

houses in the farm. He buys the farm and sets the infrastructure for this new community without the help of anyone. When his status as a leader is established he enlists the help of his sons and other males in the community to start production to sustain themselves. His status as a patriarch is inflated by situating a large numbers of people for which he represents the classical provider and bread-winner.

Burns's masculine patriarchy is contrasted with a devastating failure of the female sovereign in the novel. The economic failure causing the erection of Burns as a patriarch of his community is caused by the female president. She is subjugated by Siliezar's power in spite of her position as the president of the United States of America. The following extract from *Childless* illustrates a number of assumptions about the female in a position of power.

Graham Forrester stirred. "Tell us again Madame President, what Mr. Siliezar is proposing?"

Simpson distrusted Forrester. She had been effectively coerced into retaining his services by the prior administration, and she regarded him as a Siliezar plant. She knew Siliezar would know the details of whatever agreement was reached in this office well before the U. S. Congress.

"He ... they...are asking for...ah...several things,"(234).

The conversation implies, besides the failed leadership of a female president that led to an economic crisis, the female tendency to be a submissive subject rather than a sovereign. The female president, simply, admits to being 'coerced'. Another assumption about the female in a position of power here is delineated by her manner of speaking to her staff. The hesitation connotes fear, lack of confidence and confusion which do not correspond with her position as a sovereign of a powerful country. The delineation of the female president in *Childless* equates femaleness with defeat and subjugation.

The representation of the superhuman in *Childless*, however, makes him the emblem of revised masculinity. The theme of the superhuman suggests the idea of the superman which is a critique of the state masculinity. Nietzsche's superman as implied in *Childless* renders the maleness of powerful male characters in novel to lower position. Also, contrary to Burns's status as a patriarch, Siliezar's masculinity is questioned in *Childless* by a number of factors when applied to a classical model of masculinity. Unlike Burns' s character, Siliezar'sis childless. He does not function as a classical patriarch in a family context. His only daughter is raped and killed 'just below his window as he lay sleeping'(339).This signifies his inability to protect his family, let alone a whole community. However, the essential point of contrast that contrasts Siliezar's to Burns's masculinity lies within the utter emasculation of challenging his human existence with the existence of his project of the superhuman. Zylinska suggests in 'A different History of Bioethics: The Cybernetic connection' that the union between technology and man 'called into question not only humans' ontological status as skin-bound, sovereign beings but also their kinship with, and dependency on, other species and material forms'(Zylinska, 2009:35-6). Robyn Wiegman relates the effect of this union on perceptions about masculinity when he states that because of the use of 'technology as a prophylactic for male bodies...the authoritative norms of conventional masculinity where everywhere in a flux'(Weigman, 2002:31). Siliezar's project of producing a superhuman to replace him and the rest of human kind dilutes his sovereignty as the leader of this scheme of world control. It is a confession of an inefficient existence. Burns, on the other hand, endows himself with self-efficiency by working the farms with his own hands to provide for his community. Burns's ability is powerful enough to produce and reproduce to fill the earth with the bounty of human power. Siliezar, on the other hand, emasculates himself by declaring that his abilities are not enough. According to Siliezar's project, humanity needs more than his meagre abilities to make it prosper.Siliezar, 'the premiere architect of the new age of man' (Gail,2011:340), leads a program 'packaged around the utopian promise of the Life Sciences Revolution'(340) to produce a new man. But, to pave the way for the prosperity of this new man, Siliezar pressures the American government to inforce a birth control program to stop natural reproduction. The new man is 'Icarus Redux'(346), grown in a glass bubble. The scientists in Siliezar's team promise that this new man, by age twelve will have the strength of ten men, the speed of a swift animal, and the intellect of a chess champion neurologically powered by a main frame ...At eighteen he will be fully prepared to lead a new age of men, similarly endowed. They will conquer fear and ignorance and want. They will have the power to reverse climactic trends two centuries in the making. They will integrate humanity behind a common purpose and rule with tranquility. And they will fill the earth with unimagined wisdom that will redound to the benefit of all and will direct its luminescence to the outer edges of our universe and beyond, which will come to know intelligence for the first time. (345)

The marriage between technology and the human body, in Siliezar's proposed project of the superhuman, stands as a critique of the current state of masculinity. The representation, although conservative, suggesting that Siliezar is tampering with nature and is hatching a plan to control the world are reversed through the critique of the masculinity of other male characters in the novel by suggesting that they are not powerful enough. the potential of improving their power through technology revises the ideology of the dystopia rendering characters represented as powerful, like Burns and even Siliezar, to be weak. They are not as strong as the superhuman. Bioethics and traditional morality are placed in equal positions as each operates according to an

ethical system of its own. They are represented as equal to social systems that protect family values. Siliezar's plans stands in this conservative twenty-first century conservative representation as legitimate because of the right granted to science to improve life. Siliezar's position can be supported by what Joanna Zylinska in *Bioethics the Age of New Media* describes as 'bioethics' in the quest to achieve superhuman abilities by utilizing technology. She cites the claims of philosophers like Leroi- Gourhan and Stiegler who suggest that man is '(not-yet) human'. Thus, he 'reaches for what is not in him..."For to make use of his hands, no longer to have paws, is to manipulate –and what hands manipulate are tools and instruments"'(Zylinska' 2009:44-5).This irony revealed through representation reverses the effect of the conservative ideology of Gail's dystopia. He suggests that his powerful masculine figures in the novels are not as powerful as they could be through the representation of his superhuman.

The representation of the superhuman in Gail's conservative novelresists the discourse of the novel. It questions heteronormative perceptions of masculinity through bestowing more power on the superhuman as compared to the male characters in the novel. The legitimacy of the conservative discourse about masculinity is shifted unto a more progressive discourse about masculinity where the (technologized) male sovereign reigns supreme. Zylinska cites the philosophy of Potter whose writings might also be used to read into the representation ofSiliezar'ssuperhuman. Potter hopes for a new age when bioethics is embraced by the political authority in *Bioethics: Bridge to the Future.* He hopesthat 'from such a pooling of knowledge and values may come a new kind of scholar or statesman who has mastered what I have referred to as "bioethics"'(46). Potter challenges notions of 'human-centered versions of moral theory'. He thinks that a 'human is"an information processing, decision-making, cybernetic machine whose value systems are built up by feedback processes from his environment"'. Monod, a biologist cited by Zylinska, is another supporter of the idea of a challenged human morality when facing the bioethics of issues like genetic modification. Monod suggests that the 'organism is a "self- constructing machine" which calls for cybernetic system governing and controlling the chemical activity at numerous points"'. Zylinskasuggests that a this position entails a radical revision of an earlier, one-dimensional machinic view of the human, a view implying "the enslavement of the human being by technology and technological determinism". In the cybernetic view...the human is not seen to be lavishly adapting to the requirements of technology; instead, human adaptation, a positive and necessary characteristic of survival, is a case of the interaction of variables within a system...significantly, technology is not positioned here as a dangerous "other" which threatens the original purity and innocence of "man." On the contrary, human "origin" and being are understood as always already technological (47).

This contrast between a modern and post-modern representation of the relation between technology and man suggests that the representation of the superhuman in *Childless*reveals post-modern aspects. Although it is related as a threat, the super-human's masculinity is more of a threat to traditional masculinityrather than to humanity. The conservative discourse in the novel that suggests that this new, technologically improved, human is a threat reflects him as an improvement to humans. The superhuman in *Childless* becomes a threat to the heteronormative modes of representing masculinity in the novel.

II. CONCLUSION*:*

In spite of the contrast between Irving's progressive and Gail's conservativerepresentation of masculinity, both texts reveal aspects of revision to traditional modes of representing it. What is suggested as a modern day hero in John Irving's work is restructured through genre. The realistic representation of the hero in Dr. Larch's character stands as a disruption of heteronormative perceptions of masculinity attached to the character of the male doctor. This representation stands out from the conservative social and political environment of the 1980s that is produced through the backlash to progressive postwar politics like Second Wave feminism. Although Gail's representation suggests a more conservative trend of representing masculinity, the representation of the superhuman in the novel suggests a resistance to the heteronormative discourse about masculinity in the novel. What is framed as a dystopian representation of the new technologized human produces a revised version of masculinity that is more powerful. This produces an irony within Gail's representation of masculinity that resists the shift towards more conservative politics in 21st century America.

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