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Man in the Shadow of Technology: A Literary Exploration of Virtual Identity in Selected Contemporary Plays

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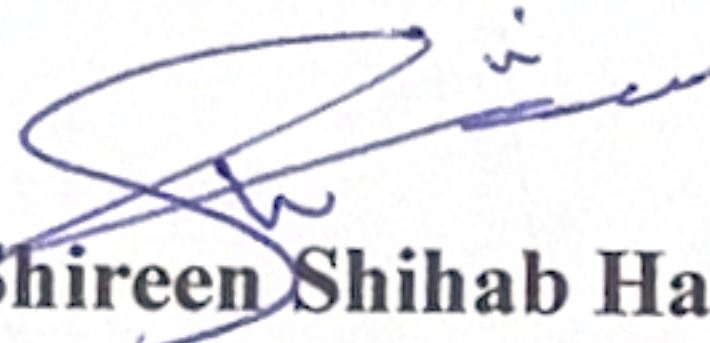
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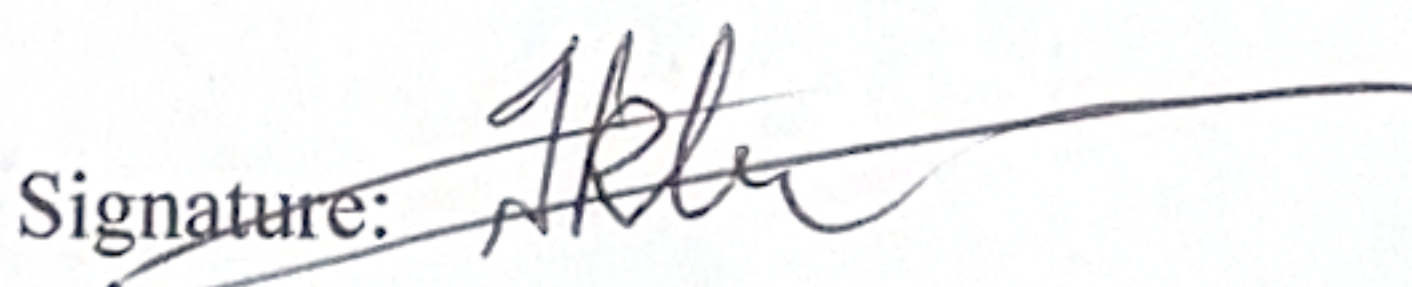
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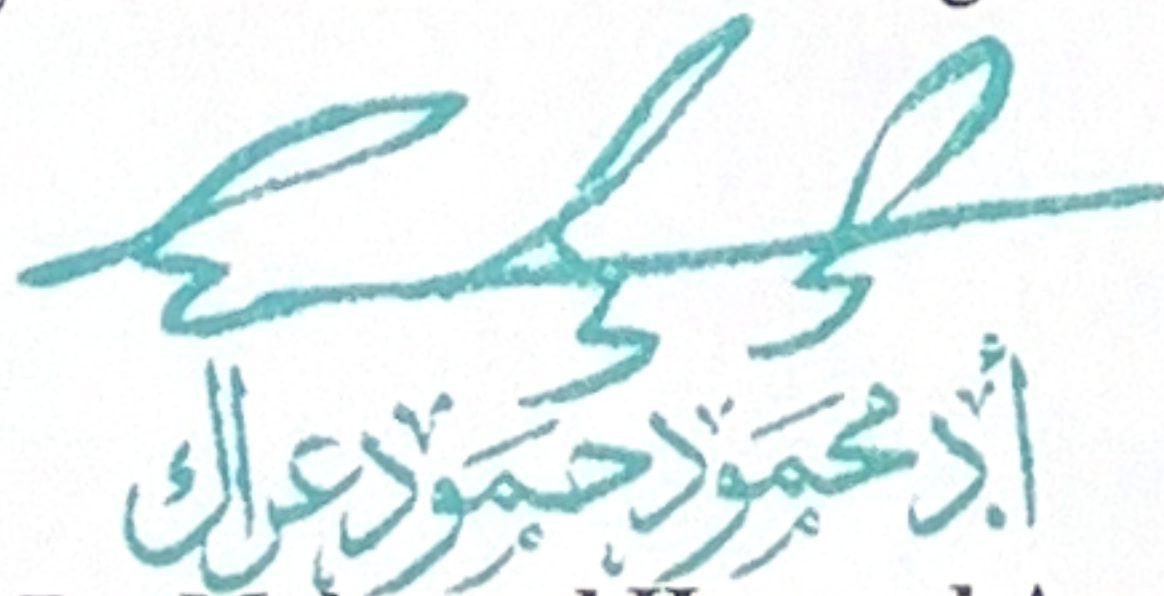


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Department of English**



**Man in the Shadow of Technology: A Literary Exploration of Virtual
Identity in Selected Contemporary Plays**

A thesis

Submitted to the Council of the College of Education for Human Sciences, Wasit University,
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Education in English

Literature

By

Nidhal Mahdi Hutaeman

Supervised by

Professor Ikhlas Mohammed Nati, (PhD)

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“No man can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude without finally getting bewildered as to which may be true”

- Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*

Dedication

To the memory of the man who believed in me, never missed an opportunity to encourage me, and always urged me to be the best version of myself, the one who trusted that I could achieve this. I would not have come this far without him: my father. To my mother, whose love and sacrifices will always remain a source of inspiration.

To the bravest and the kindest woman, I have ever known, who raised me with care and loved me endlessly, the one whom I will remain indebted for the rest of my life, the one whom I would not be where I am today without her: my older sister, Salima.

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Contents

Dedication	III
Acknowledgments	IV
Abstract.....	VII
Chapter One: 1.1 Introduction	1
1.1.1 Technology and the Emergence of Virtual Identity.....	2
1.1.2 Theoretical Framework: Posthumanism and Lyotardian Thought.....	6
1.1.3 Redefining “Man” in the Shadow of Technology.....	21
1.1.4 Lyotard’s Postmodern Theory.....	23
1.2 Significance of the Study	26
1.3 Literature Review	26
Chapter Two: Cloning, Fragmentation, and the Posthuman Self in Caryl	
Churchill’s <i>A Number</i> (2002)	33
2.1 Cloning and the Crisis of Authenticity.....	37
2.2 Posthuman Identity and the Dispersed Self.....	40
2.3 Lyotardian Fragmentation and the Unpresentable	44
2.4 Posthumanism and Postmodernism	56
Chapter Three: The Digital Sublime and the Fragmented Self in Jennifer	
Haley’s <i>The Nether</i> (2013)	62
3.1 The Architect of Virtuality in Jennifer Haley and the Ethics of Code	68
3.2 The Posthuman Duplex, Fragmentation, and the Technological Divide	78

3.3 The Unpresentable Sublime in Staging Affective Code.....	84
3.4 Man in the Shadow and the Posthuman Confluence.....	89
Chapter Four: Digital Embodiment and Memory Duplication in Jordan	
Harrison's <i>Marjorie Prime</i> (2014).....	93
4.1 Memory and the Construction of Virtual Identity	96
4.2 Posthuman Becomings and the Human-Machine Merger	100
4.3 The Cyborg Condition of Memory, Embodiment, and Affective Simulation	106
4.4 Redefining Humanity in the Digital Shadow.....	108
4.5 Theatre as a Posthuman Medium.....	109
Conclusion	114
References	117

Abstract

This thesis investigates the impact of the development of technology on human beings that has been presented on contemporary theatre in three plays: Caryl Churchill's *A Number* (2002), Jennifer Haley's *The Nether* (2013), and Jordan Harrison's *Marjorie Prime* (2014). In the above plays, the playwrights examine the influence of technology on the process of shaping characters' identity. As such, the thesis aims to examine the extent to which technology intervenes to cause the emergence of "virtual identity." In doing so, the study relies on the theory of the posthumanism and Lyotard's concepts of postmodernism to explore notions of fragmented identity, the dissolution of grand narratives, and the inherent instability of the subject. The study comprises three chapters. Chapter One examines Churchill's *A Number* (2002), exploring human cloning through Salter and his cloned sons, analyzing the trauma of being a copy and how one actor playing all sons enhances fractured identity, challenging the notion of singular human identity. Chapter Two focuses on Haley's *The Nether* (2013), investigating a virtual world that blurs identity, morality, and reality through disembodiment and virtual avatars, questioning whether identity can be separated from the body. Chapter Three examines Harrison's *Marjorie Prime* (2014), centered on an elderly woman using an AI companion to combat dementia, investigating memory and identity as curated narratives outsourced to a non-human entity, and the emotional consequences of a machine learning to be human. Together, the plays show identity as fragmented, reconstructed, and shaped through technological systems, viewed through posthuman and Lyotardian lenses.

Keywords: Identity duplication, immersive technology, posthumanism, virtual identity

Chapter One: Introduction

Contemporary theatre examines reconfigurations of human identity under conditions of a pervasive technological mediation. As the development in artificial intelligence, cloning, and virtual reality increasingly blur boundaries between the physical and digital, and between the real and the virtual, conventional conceptions of a stable, embodied self are challenged by more fluid, multiple, and technological mediated forms of identity. This thesis examines such transformations that are dramatized in three selected plays: *A Number* by Caryl Churchill, *The Nether* by Jennifer Haley, and *Marjorie Prime* by Jordan Harrison. It conducts a literary exploration of how virtual, constructed, and replicated identities are dramatized on the contemporary stage. It specifically analyses how the human identity exists “in the shadow of technology,” facing crises of authenticity, memory, and embodiment. The study investigates three central concerns. First, it analyses the theatrical strategies used to portray posthuman identities on stage. Second, it explores the psychological and social consequences of immersion in technologically mediated environments. Third, it examines how these plays challenge traditional humanist assumptions about consciousness, embodiment, memory, and human relationships. Accordingly, the thesis addresses the following questions: how do the selected plays represent identity as fragmented or replicated? In what ways do they articulate a posthuman condition in which the boundaries between human, machine, and data have become blurred? How do the selected plays investigate the impact of technology on human experiences like memory, grief, desire, and family relationships? What do the theatrical explorations ultimately suggest about the future of humanity in a technologically saturated world?

Human identity is reconfigured by the technological improvement in terms of posthuman and postmodern discourse. Based on posthuman theories presented by Rosi Braidotti as well as N. Katherine Hayles and postmodern ideas of the lack of credibility to the

metanarrative, fragmentation, and the unrepresentable developed by Jean-Francois Lyotard, this study argues that the selected plays reflect the transformation of the humanist subject within the context of contemporary technological development. Rather than presenting theatre as a universal reflection of this shift, the analysis focuses specifically on how these works address the destabilization of identity through digital and posthuman conditions. This transformation has emerged since the late twentieth century, as technologies like artificial intelligence, virtual environments, and network systems have challenged the humanist conception of identity as stable, autonomous, and embodied. In contrast, the posthumanist theory reconceptualizes identity as fluid, relational, and continuously shaped through interaction with technological systems. The intersection of posthumanism and postmodernism offers a well-founded analytic aid to inquire how the digital culture changes identity from a fixed entity to an ongoing process of becoming within a digitally mediated environment.

1.1.1 Technology and the Emergence of Virtual Identity

The historical roots of virtual identity lie in the post-World War II development of cybernetics. Norbert Wiener's foundational study *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (1948) first proposed that living organisms and machines could be understood through the same principles of information, feedback, and control, it collapses the conceptual wall between the biological and the mechanical. This paradigm was consolidated in the interdisciplinary Macy Conferences of the late 1940s and early 1950s, which, as Hayles (1999) shows in her account of how “information lost its body” how it came to be conceptualized as an entity separate from the material forms that carry it, marked the decisive step toward treating identity as a pattern of information detachable from a single physical body. Out of this same cybernetic legacy emerged Haraway's (1985) cyborg, a hybrid figure of organism and machine that models identity as constructed, partial, and technologically mediated rather than natural or self-evident.

Building on this trajectory, virtual identity can be defined with precision as a mode of selfhood generated, sustained, or altered through technological or digital mediation, in which the self is decoupled from a single continuous body and reconstituted instead as data, image, simulation, or narrative pattern capable of being duplicated, edited, or projected across multiple sites (Hayles, 1999). Correspondingly, human subjectivity, understood in the liberal humanist tradition as a unified, autonomous, and self-transparent interior self, is redefined by posthuman theory as a nomadic, relational, and embodied-yet-technologically-embedded process of becoming rather than a fixed essence (Braidotti, 2013).

Human subjectivity is no longer confined to the corporeal introduction or narrative linear structure, but it is discontinuous, mobile, and on many occasions dispersed through the virtual networks (Gabarnet et al., 2023). Technology has expressed both the presence and absence of selfhood and been the location of the self. In contemporary digital culture, individuals construct and perform multiple identities through online profiles, avatars, and data traces. This phenomenon can be described as “virtual identity” where an individual might be duplicated, altered, or even recreated in their own image. These shifting identity trends have attracted the interest of the theatre in the late twentieth century. Contemporary playwrights such as Churchill who wrote *A Number* where cloning and the creation of human embryos was in the news at the time, Haley and her infatuation with technology, and Harrison who wanted his play to be a collaboration with an artificial intelligence, all have questioned the ontological as well as ethical nature of posthuman existence on the stage.

Transposed onto the stage, this theoretical shift produces a clear theatrical distinction between embodied identity, constructed through the live, singular presence of the actor's body, and virtual/technological identity, constructed through devices of doubling, mediation, or simulation, cloning, avatarization, or holographic projection which the selected plays hold in visible tension with that embodied presence. The mechanism of identity construction recurring

across the three plays operates precisely through such technological duplication or mediation: biological replication in *A Number*, digital avatarization in *The Nether*, and algorithmic narrative reconstruction in *Marjorie Prime*. In each case, memory, desire, or selfhood is externalized onto a technological substitute, dramatizing Lyotard's notion of a subjectivity that is fragmented, non-totalized, and no longer anchored in a single, unifying narrative of the self.

Each of the selected plays touches upon the scenario where technology challenges the classical boundary of being a human, the possibility to clone human faces based on the DNA by Churchill, the simulated reality of the virtual world by Haley, and the possibility to reproduce memory and consciousness with the help of the available form of technology to humans by Harrison. In these selected plays, theatre becomes a kind of philosophical laboratory to investigate how technology destabilizes traditional conceptions of identity by enabling its replication, modification, and distribution across digital systems.

Virtual identity refers to the traits, characteristics, and personas individuals express in digital environments such as online games, social media, and virtual reality platforms. Unlike physical identity, virtual identity is highly flexible where users can project their actual selves, idealized versions of themselves, or entirely different personas as they depend on the context and their motivations. The construction of virtual identity is influenced by factors such as anonymity levels, community norms, platform affordances (like avatar customization), psychological needs, and social interactions (Gabarnet et al., 2024, 2023; Ruan et al., 2020). Sherry Turkle's (1995) work *Life on the Screen* proposed that the Internet serves as a “social laboratory for experimenting with the construction and reconstruction of self,” particularly through multi-user domains (MUDs) where players adopt anonymous roles for social interaction (p. 180). Turkle argued that rapidly alternating identities in virtual reality constituted a postmodern mode of selfhood “multiple identities are no longer so much at the margins of things. Many more people experience identity as set of roles that can be mixed and

matched ... like virtual personae fragments”, in which identity is inherently multiple, decentred, and fluid (Turkle, 1995, p. 180). Thus, users may create avatars that are idealised versions of themselves or experiment with alternative identities, which means they may reflect their actual self (how they see themselves), ideal self (how they wish to be), an entirely different persona, or a negative true self which is an expression of repressed or socially unacceptable self (Gabarnet et al., 2023; Bessière, 2007). Accordingly, it is concluded that virtual identities are not static; they are dynamic, context dependent, and multifaceted in which allows individuals to maintain multiple virtual identities across different platforms or communities (Ouhnni et al., 2025; Peachey, 2011).

However, virtual identity in the contemporary digital age cannot be fully understood without posthumanism, which provides the philosophical basis of rethinking the human subject in relation to technology, environment, and nonhuman actors. Rather than treating the human subject as isolated, fixed, and self-sufficient, posthumanism presents identity as relational, embedded, and shaped through interaction with technological systems and other material forms of existence. In R. Jordan’s thesis, “Posthuman drama: identity and the machine in Twenty-First-Century playwriting” (2015), as it attempts to name a textual genre “posthuman drama” that defined less by digital spectacle than by theme: plays where human and nonhuman agents are constructed as essentially similar” and intelligent machines are imperative to the plot. Jordan reads these plays as case studies where digitally integrated subjects model a cybernetic identity at odds with liberal humanist selfhood. The central tension, a humanist value system colliding with a posthuman digital world, is enacted structurally, not just thematically (Jordan, 2015).

In this study, posthumanism serves as the prism through which the chosen plays *A Number*, *The Nether*, *Marjorie Prime* are going to be analysed. As Podvoyskiy (2022) suggests, the relationship between modernity, technology, and its representation can be read as part of a

wider cultural crisis in which human experience is increasingly shaped by mediation and simulation. Likewise, the posthuman condition, marked by the weakening of grand narratives of human progress, human reason, and human autonomy, provides the conceptual background for examining how contemporary theatre dramatizes the crisis of identity in a virtual age (Gabarnet et al., 2023).

1.1.2 Theoretical Framework: Posthumanism and Lyotardian Thought

Posthumanism is a modern philosophical and cultural trend re-evaluating the idea of a human being in the era of rapid technological progress. It is critical of the classical humanist assumption of an individual whose core and worth are stable and independent. Rather, posthumanism holds that humans are strongly networked with both machines and environments as well as other living beings (Wolfe, 2010). According to Rosi Braidotti (2013), posthumanism is the “historical moment that marks the end of the opposition between humanism and anti-humanism” and requires a different perception of humanity as something embedded and embodied in large material and technological assemblages (p. 37). In the global framework, humanity has already become posthuman with its incessant communication with digital machines that redefine the way humans think, feel, and relate to others. Posthumanism thus transforms human identity into one that is fluid and relational instead of fixed and isolated, which brings out the convergence of technology, biology, and culture in creating new ways of existence and consciousness.

Within contemporary philosophy and critical theory, posthumanism occasionally referred to as post-humanism and interpreted as meaning either “after humanism” or “beyond

humanism” is a concept which addresses the commonness of anthropocentrism¹, it is also a framework that discusses the dominance of human-centred thinking in twenty-first-century intellectual life. To grasp this concept, it requires first understanding what humanism itself entails, which naturally invites the question of “[w]hat makes us human?” (Gumanay, 2023, p. 115).

Among those possessions, literature holds a particularly enduring place, and the impulse to protect it has always drawn from a single, central well: anthropocentrism. It is this orientation that prompts questions such as “[w]hat is my purpose [in this life]?” and “[w]hat makes us humans?” (Gumanay, 2023, p. 115). With the emergence of posthumanism, however, the human-centred axis around which thought has historically revolved appears to be undergoing a profound and unsettling shift. One may now ask whether humanity has forfeited its central position in the world (Atasoy & Tekin, 2024), and whether anthropocentrism retains any meaningful currency at all. Such questions become particularly pressing given that “[a]nthropocentrism is the belief that the human being exists at the centre of existence” (Rae, 2014, p. 1). This raises a further question: what exactly do the words “post,” “after,” and “beyond” signal when placed before humanism? On initial reading, these prefixes might state that neither humanity nor any other living species occupies a privileged position on earth any longer, that posthumanism heralds an age defined by machines, robotics, technology, and artificial intelligence, in which human experience is no longer the organising principle of art, literature, or the sciences. Yet another reading is possible: that “post” gestures toward a nostalgic return and a striving for the improvement of human societies. Under this

¹ Anthropocentrism: as it is defined in Oxford Dictionary of English that anthropocentric regards the humankind as the central and most important element of existence, especially as opposed to God or animals.

interpretation, the prefix might signify not “after” but rather “for” humanism (Aghasiyev, 2025). Stefan Herbrechter (2015) elaborates on this ambiguity in the following passage:

‘post-‘ (as in poststructuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, postfeminism or indeed posthumanism) is a funny creature and usually develops a dynamic of its own. To position oneself ‘after’ something (in the case of an ‘-ism’, a discourse) inevitably requires both repression and return, in short, a ‘post’ produces spectres, temporal ambiguities, repetitions, memory lapses, symptoms of desires and anxieties. (Herbrechter, 2015, p. 1–2)

Herbrechter’s observation suggests that posthumanism is not simply a discourse of machines and technological futures, but also an opportunity to revisit and reconnect with humanism. This category would encompass modern and postmodern science fiction in both print and film, and might extend even to the everyday in a world of digital communication; as one scholar observes, “emojies (...) have gained their popularity as a new way and path for communication and interaction among people [and] this way of communication in the future will increase more and more” (Dirgeyasa, 2022, p. 64). The very conventions of human communication, in other words, are being reshaped by technological tools.

More recently, posthumanism in literature and art has been seen to intersect with language itself, as the incorporation of emojis into creative and literary works has emerged as a growing trend. Andrew Dana Hudson’s (2018) short story *Under the Grid*, included among the solar narratives in the book *The Weight of Light: A Collection of Solar Futures* (2018), offers one such example of literary work that employs emojis within its text (p. 73). The same collection also draws on artificial intelligence, robots, and drones as thematic material, further exemplifying what may be described as posthumanist literature (Aghasiyev & Tekin, 2025).

Posthumanism is, nonetheless, a term that resists easy definition, and scholarly debate over its precise meaning continues. While some researchers associate it primarily with the latest

wave of technological developments, others argue that its roots extend much further back into intellectual history: “People's curiosity about what lies beyond humanity was already prevalent in the 1800s. The term first appeared in the form ‘posthuman’ in 1888, in a book called *The Secret Doctrine* by Helena Blavatsky” (Gumanay, 2023, p. 117). Gumanay further notes that Blavatsky offered no detailed elaboration of the term, which is perhaps unsurprising given how far removed her historical moment was from the technological landscape we inhabit today.

Turning to lexicographical sources for clarification, the Oxford Dictionary credits Ihab Hassan as the first to employ the word “posthumanism” in 1971. Hassan’s use of the term at that stage was not accompanied by a thorough definition, though he invoked it by way of a science-fictional reference, writing of “[f]rom infrahumanism to posthumanism” (Hassan, 1971, p. 25). His thinking matured over time, and he later offered a more pointed formulation, as he argues that five centuries of humanism were drawing to a close and that the movement was transforming into something new: “Humanism may be coming to an end as humanism transforms itself into something one must helplessly call posthumanism” (Hassan, 1977, p. 843). The humanism, Hassan refers to here is the tradition that originated during or alongside the Renaissance. A further milestone in posthumanism’s development came through the figure of the cyborg, which entered critical discourse through Donna J. Haraway’s 1985 essay “A Cyborg Manifesto.” Although Haraway herself never employed the term “posthumanism,” her work contributed substantially to the emergence of what would become known as “feminist posthumanism” (Gumanay, 2023, p. 118). As Andy Miah has observed, Haraway’s engagement with the cyborg concept has been central to how posthumanism evolved over the final two decades of the twentieth century (Miah, 2007, p. 8). Within literature itself, the preoccupations of posthumanism are far from novel, even if the terminology has gained momentum in the present day. Miah draws attention to a longstanding tradition of such concerns:

Often, stories about the transformation of biology and the rise of machines are imbued with narratives of fear and uncertainty, which reveal a sense of human insecurity arising from sharing the world with the living machine, or the cyborg. Such alien beings are frequently represented as a threat to humanity, calling into question their identity and powers of domination. Literary examples abound on this topic, including Hans Christian Anderson's fairytale story, *The Nightingale* (1844), Mary Shelley's (1818) *Frankenstein*, and more recently, Isaac Asimov's robot stories." (Miah, 2007, p. 12)

This passage explains how literary narratives centres on biological transformation and the ascent of machine intelligence have long served as registers of deep-seated human anxieties around identity, agency, and control. The recurring depiction of the cyborg or artificial being as a threat to humanity reflects a posthuman condition in which the settled boundaries of traditional humanism are placed under pressure. By invoking *Frankenstein*, *The Nightingale*, and Asimov's robot narratives, Miah highlights an enduring literary lineage that probes the outer limits of what it means to be human when confronted with technological change.

Kanan Aghasiyev (2025), says if posthumanism exists as a conceptual framework, one would logically expect it to give rise to the figure of the posthuman, and to a corresponding posthumanist mode of thought (p. 428). Yet because posthumanism itself remains contested divided between those who understand it as oriented toward the human and those who see it as moving beyond or against the human, to pin down what counts as posthumanist or posthuman proves difficult. These two categories do not necessarily follow from one another. Moreover, posthumanism ought not to be understood as a rejection of postmodernism, nor as its simple continuation. Its own positioning in intellectual history remains unsettled. Posthumanism and postmodernism are better understood as mutually implicated frameworks, each entangled with the other in their respective interrogations of humanism. As Herbrechter puts it, "one simply cannot post one postmodernism with another one" (Herbrechter, 2015, p. 5), underscoring that

posthumanism must reckon with postmodernism rather than pretend it does not exist. Meanwhile, some scholars associate posthumanism with the eclipse of anthropocentrism more broadly: “Posthumanism is often defined as a posthumanism and a post-anthropocentrism: it is ‘post’ to the concept of the human and to the historical occurrence of humanism, both based, as we have previously seen, on hierarchical social constructs and humancentric assumptions” (Ferrando, 2013, p. 29). This view, however, sits in tension with Herbrechter's, since he identifies in contemporary literature “a desire for a ‘return’, a ‘reconstruction’ or ‘healing’ (...). It is, of course, no coincidence that in the face of the posthuman (...) the discourse on the contemporary ‘reconstruction of the human’ in literature, criticism and (some) theory arises” (Herbrechter, 2015, p. 5). Posthumanism, on this account, does not abandon humanism but calls it back perhaps out of a longing for the achievements and dignity of human civilisation. Herbrechter expands on this argument as follows:

[Posthumanism] should rather be understood as a symptom of a desire that seeks to detach itself from postmodern antihumanism (...) precisely at the time when this critique has in fact become the 'new reality'. With their insistence on existential or ontological plurality, the fragmentation of identity and a breaking up of aesthetic norms, the breaking up of narrative continuity and teleology, many postmodern texts are in fact, [a] rather ironically, more 'posthumanist', one could argue, than their current successors. (Herbrechter, 2015, p. 5)

Thus, posthumanism not a force hostile to humanism but it is working in its favour. Like many movements defined by the “post-” prefix, it may represent a call to return attention to the humanistic dimension of art at a time when technology pervades every corner of existence. It may equally be understood as a natural evolution in literary thinking under conditions of technological saturation, one in which artists deploy posthumanist elements to

shed light on the broader problems that technology has created for human life while acknowledging, that the reverse trajectory is equally possible.

Aghasiyev (2025) argues that when it comes to the act of reading from a posthumanist standpoint, the implications are no less complex. As Herbrechter & Callus suggest, “to read in a posthuman[ist] way is to read against one's self, against one's own deep-seated self-understanding as a member or even a representative of a certain ‘species’” (Herbrechter & Callus, 2008, p. 95). Fully to inhabit a posthumanist reading position is thus something of a contradiction, since it would require a kind of human self-opposition. One can engage with posthumanist texts without fully dissolving into the posthuman perspective. Posthumanist thinkers also emphasise the interconnectedness of all beings and entities on this planet human, animal, robotic, and inanimate alike. “[W]e must redefine our existence with this shared-world not as sovereigns but as equals since what awaits animals is what awaits humans” (Arıkan, 2019, p. 4). Attending to these interconnections demands an awareness of environmental and technological change, and such awareness can give rise to a sense of helplessness, as the cumulative direction of events appears to defy even our most concerted human efforts.

This relationship between posthumanism and a sense of systemic crisis connects naturally to the concept of dystopia. Dystopia is broadly conceived as a fictional portrayal of a society characterized by oppression, environmental ruin, or the unchecked expansion of technological power, functions as a critical lens through which to examine anxieties about the future. Rooted in speculative storytelling, dystopian narratives illuminate the potential consequences of political, technological, and ecological excess and operate as cautionary fictions (Booker, 1994). In recent decades, dystopia and posthumanism have become increasingly intertwined. Posthumanism reconfigures the human being as one element within a wider, dynamic web of relations that encompasses machines, animals, and ecosystems, frequently unsettling the anthropocentric assumptions that have historically structured such

relations. Dystopian literature and film engage with these posthuman concerns by imagining modified bodies, artificial intelligence, and ecological catastrophe, and in doing so raise pressing questions about what it means to be human within environments saturated by technology (Herbrechter, 2013). The erosion of individual agency that characterises many dystopian narratives can, through a posthumanist lens, be read as a critique of liberal humanism's foundational premise of the autonomous, self-determining rational subject.

Thus, posthumanism is based on postmodern/poststructuralist traditions and questions the anthropocentrism that has traditionally placed man in the centre of everything (Ruiu et al., 2024). Rather than positioning the human subject at the top of a fixed ontological order, it reconceptualizes identity as emerging through networks that include technological systems, environmental conditions, and nonhuman forms of life. In this sense, agency is no longer exclusively human but distributed across interactions between human and nonhuman forms actors. As a result, identity is not understood as a stable or privileged essence but as a contingent and relational process shaped by these interactions. This shift challenges the humanist assumption of superiority by placing the human alongside, rather than above, other forms of existence. The Enlightenment-era humanist ideal glorifies the human traits of reason, singularity, and independence as the characteristics of humanity (Ernste, 2023). However, posthumanism disrupts this hierarchization in favour of the view that the identity of man is not a fixed or privileged substance but a contingent and diffuse event that is co-constitutive with technology, animals, and other varieties of nonhuman matter.

As the term "Posthumanism" gained theoretical currency in the 1990s, it is in the groundbreaking work of scholars such as Donna Haraway, and N. Katherine Hayles. Haraway's (1985) famous "A Cyborg Manifesto" started with the sentence "By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras...." and went on to note "... theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism ... in short, we are cyborgs" (p. 5).

This contentious question also examines the human/machine, organic/artificial, self/other divides to provocatively suggest that these oppositions can be “broken down and renegotiated” (Sus, 2024).

Nancy Katherine Hayles's (1999) seminal work *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* provides a foundational analysis of how cybernetics and information theory have fundamentally altered conceptions of human identity. Hayles (1999) traces three interwoven stories: how information “lost its body,” meaning how it came to be conceptualized as an abstract entity, separate from the material forms that contain it. The second details the emergence of the cyborg as both a technological creation and a cultural symbol after World War II. The third, which is connected to the other two, deals with the transformation of the concept of “the human” into what is now called “the posthuman” (p.24). She explains how cyborg discourse challenged liberal humanist subjectivity; and how these developments are manifested in contemporary literature and culture. Hayles's work provides crucial insights into how cybernetics and information theory have transformed human self-understanding. Her analysis reveals how the conceptualization of information as separate from material embodiment has enabled new forms of posthuman subjectivity while simultaneously risking the erasure of bodily experience.

Hayles identifies distributed cognition as central to the posthuman condition, it shows how cognitive processes extend beyond individual minds to encompass technological networks, environmental systems, and social systems. This perspective challenges traditional notions of bounded, autonomous subjects while opening new possibilities for understanding intelligence, agency, and responsibility. Her literary analysis demonstrates how science fiction and cyberpunk narratives both reflect and shape the evolving understanding of posthuman possibilities, it serves as what describes as “virtual laboratories” where humans experiment

with future scenarios and work through contemporary anxieties about technology and social change (Hayles, 1999, p. 50).

Rosi Braidotti (2013), in *The Posthuman*, argues that humans have entered a “posthuman predicament” in which the very unit of reference for humans’ species and their relation to planetary others is undergoing a qualitative shift under the combined pressures of scientific advancement and global socio-economic transformations (pp. 1-2). This shift catalyses post-anthropocentric humanities that relocates knowledge-making within transversal, “zoē-centered” frameworks and calls for methodical de-familiarization from “century-old habits of anthropocentric thought” (Braidotti, 2013, pp. 168-170). Braidotti’s (2019) theoretical framework rests on a neo-Spinozist monistic ontology, the belief that everything is made of a single, intelligent substance which assumes radical immanence, the primacy of intelligent and self-organizing matter.

This philosophical foundation supports Braidotti’s vision of posthuman subjectivity as fundamentally one that is not abstract, but is instead deeply integrated with its physical body, its specific environment, its emotional capacities, and its web responsibilities. Braidotti’s approach to critical posthumanism emphasizes what she calls the “critical posthumanities” are post-disciplinary fields that emerge from the dissolution of traditional academic boundaries. These fields share several theoretical premises: they criticize both the structural anthropocentrism and the built-in Eurocentrism² of traditional humanities; they engage in a “nomadic exodus” from disciplinary conventions; and they shift authority away from past traditions toward accountability for present conditions (Braidotti, 2019, p. 31). Her

² Eurocentrism: means viewing the European culture as pre-eminent or the centre of the world and superior to other cultures. For further information see Franzki, H. (2026, April 30) Eurocentrism. *Wikipedia*. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eurocentrism>

methodological innovations include the development of critical cartographies, mapping power relations within knowledge production and circulation, and the adoption of feminist politics of location, also known as situated knowledges. These approaches emphasize non-linearity, the powers of memory and imagination, and strategies of de-familiarization that disrupt habitual thinking while generating new conceptual tools. Similarly, Clarke & Rossini (2016) emphasize that posthumanism responds to humans' present, climate crisis, extinctions, and technological transformations, without reducing its horizons to technology alone, and insists that literary works has long served as a privileged speculative discourse for imagining these entanglements (p. 20).

Posthumanist thinking applies greatly to such a Lyotardian idea of a fragmented and non-totalized subjectivity. The digital era is an expression of this kind of fragmentation in the unusually proliferation of the virtual selves, avatars, profiles, and algorithmic identities, which exist simultaneously on the internet. The representations introduced in the theoretical framework of this study, particularly the posthuman dissolution of identity and Lyotard's concept of the unrepresentable, manifest vividly in the three selected plays. In *the Nether* by Haley, users are allowed to establish immersion into the virtual worlds of digital-based settings that allow users to adopt a completely different identity and forget the bond to consciousness and the physical body (Haley, 2013). Within this virtual realm, consciousness is detached from corporeality, enacting the posthuman condition of disembodied subjectivity (Churchill, 2002). *Marjorie Prime* by Harrison continues to explore the notion of artificial intelligence that involves memories and emotions uploaded to the learning process under artificial intelligence in the form of holograms, also known as Primes, that are the artificial simulations of late loved ones (Harrison, 2014). The two plays dramatize the Lyotardian unrepresentable, the objects of life, which cannot be represented fully or understood perfectly, in particular, the one between the human consciousness and the technological simulation.

Theatre, as an embodied and live art form, ironically, performs such unrepresentable conditions. It unveils the illusion of the correlation between the directness of human action and the enigma of digital personality. In its turn, Lyotardian notions and posthumanism thus offer a way to look at how the modern theatre deals with instability and multiplicity as well as the performativity of identity in a world that becomes all the more technologized (Podvoyskiy, 2022). Based on these two theories, this study aims to examine how the selected plays address the language of representationalism of the theatre itself, and question the very essence of the human during the era of virtuality.

The posthumanist literary theory is clearly futuristic because it describes the future trends of human evolution as intertwined with the future of technological progress. It actively examines the ethical issues brought about by artificial intelligence and the field of biotechnology as well as the psychological and ontological consequences of the convergence between the human and the machine (Lockhart, 2025). The symbol of the cyborg summarizes this fusion, the hybridity between organism and machine that breaks down the opposition of nature and culture, human and nonhuman. The cyborg represents the posthuman condition where technology ceases to be something outside a body but rather is represented as being part of the body itself.

According to the posthumanists' thoughts, this merger is already a feature of contemporary life. The contemporary individual is enmeshed with computer technologies that shape perception, memory, and communication. Smartphones, tablets, and wearable sensor devices are also cognitive prosthetics that can bring human consciousness into the networked space (Chan, 2022). The key integration process consists of "this prostheticity, this constitutive dependency, and finitude" in how the mergers are handled (Wolfe, 2010, p. 26). Every day people interact with invisible digital assistants like Siri, Alexa, and Google, the machine minds that have settled beside the human cognition. These technologies do not just support human

behaviour but also precondition the pattern of thinking, attention, and feeling (Da Costa et al., 2023). The posthuman subject, therefore, is a user, is used, or is a controller and is controlled by technologies at the same time.

This fusion between man and technology is dramatized in the plays under study in different ways. In the play, *Marjorie Prime*, the Primes are the digital analogue of human memory; it is not clear what it is and how it is programmed, yet the emotion is clearly present (Harrison, 2014). The question that this play poses is whether a machine that can cause affective behaviour like imitating another one can be regarded as a human. In the same vein, *The Nether* reveals a world where can completely separate from the physical body and inhabit the world of inner space virtual environments that are competitive or even superior to the real (Haley, 2013). The biotechnological future of cloning is predicted in *A Number*, where the uniqueness of human origin is questioned due to genetic replication (Churchill, 2002). In both instances, the theatre turns into the place where the cyborg expanse, the combination of the biological and the artificial, becomes visible and real.

The posthumanism theory can therefore be used to analyse these texts using the subtle nuance that they are responses to identity in transition, existing neither entirely as a human being nor entirely as a technological being. Human-machine amalgamation subverts conventional beliefs of agency, autonomy, and mortality (Da Costa et al., 2023). It poses the question of whether the continuity of identity is determined by biology or information permanence (Kantar, 2025). The live human bodies mediating realities on stage make theatre the most perfect medium for dissecting this paradox since it contrasts the flesh with the data and the real with the virtual.

Another important feature of posthumanism is its examination of the psychological and political dynamic of getting engrossed in the universe of the internet as a whole. The cyber world acts as a global mind in that it links billions of users in real-time communication and

exchanged information (Romanska, 2024). But this connectivity is generating new types of alienation, surveillance, and depersonalization as well. Although virtual identity is emancipatory in its variety, it is susceptible to being commodified and manipulated by corporate and algorithmic operations. In most situations, “the creation of an identity so fluid and multiple that it strains the limits of the notion” exposes it to greater risks (Turkle, 1995, p. 12). Posthumanism challenges this process of alienation and manipulation by looking at the process of technology restructuring not only the self but also the social order (Lockhart, 2025). The virtual identity works in a digital community in which individuality is enhanced and disintegrated. The construction of the online personas is based on the data trails and social media performances, edited in order to be presentable and validated. The phenomenon is an example of Lyotard's concepts on the language game, which state that the creation of meaning takes place in the form of localized interactions in the context of non-universal truth (Dedeoğlu and Chandra, 2025). The self is performative and adaptive and moves depending on the algorithmic feedback loops. This type of collective immersion in the virtual world is a place where the taboo desires, in the virtual world, are acted out in the belief of being anonymous as it is presented by Haley in *The Nether*. The play reveals the psychological aftereffects of such immersion, the deprivation of moral limits, and the sense of lack of connection between action and its result. In *A Number*, cloning technology turns out to be a comparison of copying a personality in the online environment, where people are replaced by data sets (Churchill, 2002). *Marjorie Prime* considers more closely the personal cost of such technological mediation, where human interpersonal relationships are reshaped by artificial memory systems that preserves a version of the self after death, but only by sacrificing authenticity (Harrison, 2014). Posthumanism has shown that being human does not stand any longer in opposition to violence against the nonhuman.

Instead, posthumanism is a chain of relations and changes. This standpoint confronts the humanist propensity of defining identity through exclusionary binaries, such as the distinctions between human and animal, man and machine, and self and other (Ernste, 2023). Rather, posthuman subjectivity is a process of becoming, which is fluid and hybrid. There is a growing merge between biological, digital, and simulated lives, and virtual identity is an ideal site for exploring this blurring (Su & Li, 2022). The selected plays reflect this condition by showing human consciousness can be transferred, reproduced, or simulated within virtual systems.

Posthumanism supports a monistic philosophy, in which subjectivity is conceived as a continuous process rather than a fixed position. This opinion can be related to the Deleuzian philosophy, which asserts identity as something that develop through relations and interactions between entities (Da Costa et al., 2023). In this perspective, the category of human in the posthuman paradigm is not treated as stable or privileged ontological essence, but as a conceptual framework that can be revised and reshaped. Braidotti (2019) describes this condition through “posthuman subjects of knowledge, embedded, embodied, and yet flowing in a web of relations with human and non-human others” (p. 34). While Morgan (2022) presents the posthuman subject is a transversal being that crosses the boundary between the human and the nonhuman and emphasizes interdependence rather than independence.

This redefinition of human subject and identity is specifically applicable to the discussion of virtual identity that is fluid in nature, created, and constantly developing. Online personas are not already present identities but fluid arrangements that are the results of interaction, surveillance, and mediation with technology (Dedeoğlu and Chandra, 2025). By enacting such changes, theatre reveals the unsteadiness of classical identity formations. The avatars represent the posthuman becoming-other, users inhabiting an identity not tied to the biological restrictions. In *A Number*, the clones are an indication of multiplicity and difference

in sameness and threaten the liberal notion of individuality (Churchill, 2002). In *Marjorie Prime* computer simulations reflect the continuity of identity after death, and memory is coded (Harrison, 2014). The three selected plays are signs of the posthuman condition where the human self is being rewritten by technological interfaces, a state of constant transition.

Posthuman philosophy also aids in examining the contradictions of humanism when brought face-to-face with virtuality. The humanist focus on autonomy and authenticity is failing in a place where the identification is mediated by information and simulation (Romanska, 2024). These contradictions (exhibited in posthumanism) are the signs of a more general epistemological transformation: the replacement of being by becoming and the replacement of an essence by a process (Da Costa et al., 2023). This thesis intends place the contemporary theatre as a space of negotiation of the meaning of humanity in the digital era through the adoption of posthumanism as a framework. The selected plays do not necessarily just represent human anxieties about technology, but they perform the philosophical metamorphosis of the human itself.

Consequently, posthumanism reconsiders the human subject not as a closed, autonomous, and fixed entity, but as a being formed through relations with technology, environment, and other nonhuman forces. As it is presented in this section, it challenges the humanist idea of a stable self and replaces it with a view of identity as fluid, distributed, and continually reshaped through interaction. Therefore, posthumanism, in this study, provides a suitable framework for reading the selected plays, as it helps explain how virtual identity, cloning, and artificial intelligence disturb traditional boundaries between the human and the technological, and between the embodiment and simulation.

1.1.3 Redefining “Man” in the Shadow of Technology

Posthumanism is fundamentally the radical revision of the meaning of being human as it rejects the humanist view of the human as fixed, autonomous, and central. Traditional

anthropocentrism considers man as the centre of value and meaning as compared to any other form of being. The pressure is that this paradigm assumes an independent self that is stable and rational, moral, and individual, a notion that was grounded in the ideals of the Enlightenment and Romantic humanism (Kantar, 2025). The assumptions made by posthumanism, however, criticize these ideals and lay the humanist assumption open to the exclusions and contradictions. In this case, it reveals the “liberal vision of an autonomous subject whose ‘manifest destiny is to dominate and control nature’” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 101). Nayana & Manjula (2022) cite how they arbitrarily code white, male, western, and rational as the universal man, excluding the nonhuman, the feminine, the animal, and the technological. In this way, posthumanism does not seek to eliminate the human; it simply seeks to rethink humanity as a part of a larger network of relations, both material and digital, organic and inorganic. But within the retinue of technology, man is arguably no longer the sovereign subject but rather a particle of multiplexes of information, software, and thought. The liberal subject, making the image of the consistent, self-determined, and indivisible subject, is shaken by the explosion of digital identities and algorithmic proxies (Ernste, 2023). Virtual identity discloses the fraud of a certain structure. Through the internet, it is possible to those who use the internet to construct multiple avatars to live as many avatars who represent various characters of personality, sex, and ethical values.

Posthumanism challenges the humanist individualism of thought, the conviction in an interior, intimate self who can legitimately express the inner subject. This interior psychic self, as it is being termed by posthuman theorists, is more and more mediated by technology, which digitalizes the memory, emotion, and perception and alienates it (Chan, 2022). The phones keep humans’ minds; social media fulfils their moods; computers predict their needs. This is why identity is distributed as well as not centred. Turkle (1995) notes that “humans could be flexible: logic is not our highest value,” proving that the perspectives of human beings tend to differ from a stable and cohesive self (p. 117). The human subject, which was applied to be the

source of meaning, is now represented in technological networks that act both in human control and without human control (Merzlyakov, 2022). This change discredits the anthropocentric distinctiveness that has been a feature of mankind. As posthumanism shows, the human category that we are used to is not a given category but a historical construct that can be changed in response to technological evolution (Morgan, 2022). The distinction between machines and human beings is now porous as a result of information becoming the determining factor of existence (Nayana & Manjula, 2022). The human being is already posthuman to the extent that digital systems mediate their cognition and communication. Technology is no longer an amplifier of human abilities since it is no longer a smartphone; it is artificial intelligence. Therefore, posthumanism defines a new meaning of man as a relational and hybrid being, living under the threat of the same technologies it has developed.

1.1.4 Lyotard's Postmodern Theory

At the centre of Lyotard's argument in *The Postmodern Condition* is the concept of legitimation, the process by which a statement, an institution, or a body of knowledge is authorized as true or just (Lyotard, 1984). Historically, Lyotard argues, legitimation has depended on grand narratives, totalizing stories that ground knowledge in a larger, unifying purpose. Two such narratives recur in his account: the Enlightenment narrative of humanity's gradual emancipation through reason, and the speculative narrative of spirit's self-realization through the complete unfolding of knowledge, most closely associated with Hegelian philosophy (Lyotard, 1984). Modern science, Lyotard insists, needed this kind of narrative to justify itself as a legitimate pursuit of truth rather than a mere activity among others. What matters for this study is what happens once these grand narratives lose their power to compel belief: not their replacement by a new, equally totalizing story, but the erosion of the very apparatus of legitimation itself. Authority no longer rests on any overarching truth about human progress or destiny; it becomes a question that each local practice must answer for itself.

This vacancy is filled, in Lyotard's account, by legitimation through performativity: a system of knowledge or a technology is validated not because it corresponds to a larger truth but because it works, because it optimizes the ratio of input to output, of effort to result (Malpas, 2003). This is directly applicable to *A Number*, where cloning technology is never questioned on the grounds of an essential human dignity or a natural law of singular birth; it is legitimized purely by its technical efficacy, its capacity to reproduce a viable human being. The play's concern with the clone's legal afterlife, who has rights over him, whether he can be recognized, compensated, or discarded, dramatizes exactly this shift: legitimacy is no longer granted by a story about what a human being essentially is, but negotiated case by case, procedurally, after the fact. Incredulity, then, is not casual doubt or a passing fashion of scepticism. It names a structural condition: the grand narrative has stopped being able to compel belief. It has not been refuted so much as it has lost its authority to organise and justify knowledge, once science, technology, and information itself became too fragmented, too commodified, and too bound up with local, competing interests to be gathered under one story (Lyotard, 1984).

Lyotard also reconceives the social bond itself. Rather than an organic totality in which individuals share one continuous, unifying tradition, the social bond becomes a nexus of language games, each governed by its own local rules of what counts as a valid or meaningful move (Lyotard, 1984). The dialogic structure of *A Number* stages this directly: each conversation between Salter and a different son is a distinct language game, with its own rules of confession, accusation, or reassurance, rather than episodes within one seamless, totalizing relationship between a father and "his son."

However, in place of the grand narrative, Lyotard proposes the proliferation of *petits récits*, little, local, non-totalizing narratives that compete and coexist without needing to be subsumed under a single master story (Lyotard, 1984). The play's own title captures this precisely: "a number" of sons, left deliberately unenumerated, refuses the reader a definitive

count or a single genealogical narrative of origin. Each clone stands as a discrete little narrative rather than a variation contained within one grand narrative of paternal identity. The

Aesthetics of the sublime and the unrepresentable concept has a different lineage. Lyotard borrows it from Kant's distinction, in the *Critique of Judgment*, between the beautiful and the sublime. The beautiful names a pleasurable, harmonious fit between what the imagination perceives and what the understanding can conceptually grasp, a form the mind can comfortably hold. The sublime names the opposite experience: a confrontation with something the imagination cannot adequately size up or contain, whether because it is overwhelming in scale or overwhelming in force, to produce a mixed feeling of pain, at reason's failure to picture it, and pleasure, at reason's capacity to think what it cannot picture (Malpas, 2003).

Lyotard repurposes this Kantian structure as an aesthetic principle for postmodern art and writing. Postmodern work, he argues, is defined by its refusal of the comfortable, well-formed image that reassures an audience everything can be shown and understood. Instead, it puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself, deliberately denying the audience the satisfaction of a resolved, familiar form, in order to intensify the sense that something real exceeds what has been shown (Lyotard, 1984). The sublime, in this sense, is not a picture of the unrepresentable; it is the feeling, produced by an incomplete or strained presentation, that there is a remainder which no image can capture.

These concepts, though related, do distinct work in this study and will be applied accordingly. Incredulity toward metanarratives will be used to read how each play refuses to resolve identity into one totalizing account, biological, humanist, or technological. Language games will be used to analyze the plays' dialogic exchanges as situational, rule-bound interactions that construct identity moment by moment rather than as a coherent whole. Legitimation by performativity will be used to examine how cloning, virtual avatars, and AI companions are validated in each play by their functional efficacy rather than by any appeal to

human uniqueness. Finally, the aesthetics of the sublime and the unrepresentable will be used to read those moments where the technologically produced self, the clone, the avatar, the AI-generated companion, exceeds what can be directly staged, remaining a felt presence that theatre can only gesture toward rather than fully represent.

Overall, this chapter uses a posthuman and postmodern theoretical perspective to explore how the chosen plays personify the instability of human identity in the background of technology. Using the idea of becoming introduced by Braidotti and the idea of fragmentation and the unrepresentable introduced by Lyotard, the analysis will examine how *The Nether*, *A Number*, and *Marjorie Prime* portray identity as a fluid, relational, and technologically mediated concept. This framework will lead to the close readings of how virtuality, cloning, and artificial intelligence break down the boundaries separating human and machine, body and data, and reality and simulation, and how the posthuman subject of contemporary theatre predicts the reorganization of the human subject into a posthuman form.

1.2 Significance of the Study

Human identity has long been a central concern of literary criticism, but virtual identity, selfhood generated or duplicated through technological mediation, remains comparatively underexamined in contemporary theatre. Existing scholarship treats each play's technology in isolation and mostly through ethics or emotion: cloning in *A Number* is read through bioethics, *The Nether* through the morality of consequence-free action, and *Marjorie Prime* through grief and aging, leaving these technologies as unconnected case studies rather than related expressions of one broader shift.

This study addresses that gap by building a unified framework combining posthumanism (Hayles, 1999; Haraway, 1985; Braidotti, 2013) with Lyotard's (1984) postmodern concepts: incredulity toward metanarratives, language games, performativity, and the unrepresentable, to read virtual identity as actively constructed and destabilized through

specific technological mechanisms. By analysing the three plays comparatively, it shows cloning, virtual reality, and AI as related manifestations of one posthuman condition, contribute a reusable comparative model to posthumanist theatre criticism and position the stage as a key site for dramatizing this virtuality of identity.

1.3 Literature Review

Posthumanism has emerged as an important theoretical strategy towards reconsidering human identity in the context of increased technological change. It makes the humanist claim of a steady, independent subject by concentrating on hybridity and relationality. When the information loses its body and the concept of consciousness becomes conceptualized without the need for physical embodiment, the posthuman is created (Hayles, 1999). This transformation upsets the concept of identity as fixed and introduces it as distributed across technological systems. Similarly, the concept of the cyborg by Donna Haraway rejects the difference in binarism between human and machine and argues that we are all chimeras, hybrids of machine and organism (Haraway, 1985). This viewpoint prefigures the architectural nature of identity and how it is dependent on technological mediation. Such an opinion is the posthuman subject of Rosi Braidotti, who states that it is a relational subject that is formed in and through multiplicity (Braidotti, 2013), hence refusing the existence of a single self. Posthumanism overlaps with postmodernism, especially in the argument of Jean-Francois Lyotard, who argues that the contemporary condition is characterized by the incredulity of metanarratives (Lyotard, 1984). This disintegration of truth is similar to the disintegration of identity in posthuman theory. Consequently, subjectivity is multiple, fluid, and reconstructed over and over again.

The position of the argument between the scholars of performance studies is that performance provides a unique location where one can explore these changes. According to Lucy St. Clair, theatre is a materialization of posthuman entanglement between bodies and

objects on stage (Lucie, 2020). However, despite the effectiveness of the current body of scholarship in demonstrating how posthumanism applies to the theatre, it tends to be too generalized and lacks comparison and contrast across a range of dramatic texts. Therefore, one of the gaps is that takes into account the overall representation of posthuman identity in various forms of technology designed by different plays. This thesis bridges this gap by comparatively analysing *A Number*, *The Nether*, and *Marjorie Prime* and demonstrating how each of them dramatizes the different aspects of posthuman subjectivity.

Scholarship on Caryl Churchill's *A Number* is analysed in terms of its engagement with the concept of cloning and the unstable nature of identity. The play also criticizes the humanist theory of individuality by having genetically identical clones, who, despite their genetic similarities, have shown to possess different personalities. As Elaine Aston points out, the play opens up the instability of identity as the body can be reproduced (Aston & Churchill, 2010).

In a posthumanist way, cloning is an expression of the argument that Hayles puts forth stating that identity is no longer a constituent aspect of the body but can be replicated technologically. This implies the argument by Braidotti that subjectivity is in fact a dynamic and shifting assemblage (Braidotti, 2013). This is further supported by the theatrical form taken by the play where one actor plays several clones, which visually depict fragmented identity. The main textual evidence also confirms this interpretation. One of the clones, Bernard, displays existential anxiety, showing that he is not special, he is just one of many, and that individuality is dead (Churchill, 2002). This shows how cloning undermines the idea of an individual self. Nevertheless, the majority of the existing literature is more of an ethical issue (scientific responsibility) than an in-depth involvement in posthuman theory. Also, comparative work has not been done extensively to place *A Number* in comparison with other technologically driven plays. This study aims to overcome these shortcomings by looking at the play within a larger posthuman context, as well as in comparison to other works. It suggests

that cloning in *A Number* is just one aspect of a broader change in which identity becomes reproducible and unstable.

The Nether by Jennifer Haley is a widely analysed work concerning a representation of virtual reality and digital identity. Researchers point out how the play reflects immersive spaces in which users are able to take on alternate identities that are not tied to their physical bodies. The play, as Maria Verena Peters argues, shows how the identity is created by interacting with digital systems (Peters, 2021). This corresponds to posthumanist theory, especially the idea of disembodied subjectivity, by Hayles. The characters in the play live as their avatars, and it depicts the division of consciousness and the body. This is supported by Sherry Turkle, who adds that the digital environment allows the self to be multiple and distributed (Turkle, 2005).

Ethical issues concerning virtual actions are also brought up in the play. As an example, a character proclaims, “It is not real,” trying to explain morally dubious behaviour (Haley, 2013). Such a line echoes what Gabriella Giannachi writes about as being a crisis of accountability in virtual environments (Giannachi, 2004). Regardless of such insights, much of the current literature works in a rather narrow scope (based on ethical arguments) and does not pay as much attention to the further implications of the play on posthuman identity. Moreover, there is not much comparative analysis that connects *The Nether* with other works. This study seals this gap by placing the play in the broader context of posthuman theatre and arguing that virtual reality is one of the primary dimensions of identity transformation involving disembodiment and multiplicity.

The study in academia about *Marjorie Prime* centres on its discussion of memory and artificial intelligence. Critics claim that the play redefines identity as something that can be made and revised, a narrative. According to Anna Bendrat, memory in the play is selectively reconstructed because of the mediation of technologies (Bendrat, 2023). The externalization of consciousness is seen in the externalization of consciousness itself in the form of AI replicas

of humans in the play. This supports the position by Hayles that cognition is spread out amongst systems. On the same note, DeFalco claims that the play can be viewed as posthuman care and posthumous identity (DeFalco, 2022). The transformation is depicted by primary evidence. According to Marjorie, “I remember it better the way I tell it,” which is how memory is constructed instead of being fixed (Harrison, 2014). This is based on the concept of Lyotard that identity is created by fragmented discourse instead of coherent truth. Nevertheless, the existing literature tends to concentrate on emotional issues like aging and grief with little reference to posthuman theory. Also, comparative methods are not well developed. This study fills in these gaps by examining *Marjorie Prime*, alongside *A Number* and *The Nether*, and showing how artificial intelligence is another aspect of posthuman identity, one that focuses on memory and narrative reconstruction.

On the whole, the current literature has provided a great contribution to the discussion of posthumanism in modern theatre. These studies are, however, scattered, as they concentrate on individual technologies instead of providing a single analysis. The main gap is the lack of comparative, theory-driven studies that investigate the overall effect of cloning, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence, which reshape identity. This thesis bridges that gap by analysing three plays together and showing that each of them represents a different but related aspect of the posthuman condition. In this way, the study will help to develop posthumanist literary criticism and emphasize theatre as a critical location where the nature of human identity can be explored.

The study that is applied on the selected plays, is divided into three chapters. First, Caryl Churchill's *A Number* (2002) considers the human cloning through the story of a father, Salter, and his several identities sons (a number of them). Churchill's play examines the psychological trauma of one who is a copy and how the structure of her play, with one actor playing all the sons' roles, theatrically enhances the theme of fractured identity. Through a

posthuman lenses, the analyses will be filtered, to view the cloned sons in the play, as beings who challenge the very definition of a singular, irreplaceable human individual.

The second chapter whose focus is Jennifer Haley's *The Nether* (2013) depicts an investigation into an immersive virtual world called "The Nether" where users can indulge in any desire, escaping from their reality without real-world consequences, blurring the lines between identity, morality, and reality. This chapter will focus on disembodiment and the creation of virtual avatars that helps the characters to have another identity, which is a virtual one. Questioning whether an identity can be separated from its physical form, this chapter considers the ethical void that emerges when the body is separated from consciousness and actions are seemingly without consequences. Directly, this will be connected to posthuman ideas of cybernetic existence and Lyotard's concepts of fragmented, simulated realities that exist without a central, and a unifying truth.

The third chapter examines Jordan Harrison's *Marjorie Prime* (2014) which revolves around an elderly woman, Marjorie, who uses a holographic AI companion (a "Prime") programmed with the memories that she tells of her deceased husband to combat her dementia. In his play, Harrison relies on the technological development, using the artificial intelligence in constructing the human memory and identity, presenting it on the stage. This chapter will investigate the relationship between the humans' memory and identity. It analyses how Harrison's play portrays identity not as an innate essence but as curated collection of narratives that can be stored, edited, and outsourced to a non-human entity. Furthermore, the play reviews the emotional consequences of a loving machine that learns to be human. The analysis investigates how human minds merge with the machine-minds that have been created depending on the posthuman theory concepts, in which how humans being posthuman due to dependence on technologies. It will also draw on Lyotard's notions to discuss how personal history becomes another form of data in a technological age.

Taken together, *A Number*, *The Nether*, and *Marjorie Prime* provide three distinct but connected dramatic explorations of identity under the technological pressure. Read alongside one another, the three plays show that identity in contemporary is no longer presented as fixed, unified, or self-contained, but as fragmented, reconstructed, and shaped through technological systems. In this way, they serve the aims of this study by demonstrating how posthuman and postmodern frameworks can explain the dramatization of virtual identity, the crisis of embodiment, and the changing meaning of the human in a technologically saturated world.

Chapter Two: Cloning, Fragmentation, and the Posthuman Self in Caryl Churchill's *A Number* (2002)

This chapter focuses on how Churchill's dramaturgy, with its minimalism in terms of fragmentation, its elliptical dialogue, and its sparseness in staging, reflects the instability of self and performs the roles of a posthuman condition. It proceeds in four sections; each section would be about a specific concept. - Churchill's *A Number* (2002) stages human cloning rather than digital technology, and its "number" of sons are, in the most literal sense, biological rather than virtual beings. Identity is a question of informational pattern rather than material substrate. Drawing on Hayles's definition of virtuality as "the cultural perception that material objects are interpenetrated by information patterns." As well as Wolfe's insistence that posthumanism names a critique of the humanist subject rather than a technology, Posthumanism was never primarily a claim about computers; it is a critique of the humanist figure of Man as autonomous, bounded, and self-identical, a critique that can be conducted through any technology, print, genetics, cybernetics, capable of exposing that figure's fictionality. This thesis, in this chapter, contends that Churchill's clones function dramatically as virtual identities function in explicitly digital fictions: as reproducible instantiations of a portable code, here genetic rather than electronic, that expose the humanist fantasy of the bounded, singular, self-identical self as a fantasy. Churchill's *A Number* (2002): the play's "sons" are not avatars, uploads, holograms, or artificial intelligences. They are cloned human beings, produced by an entirely biological, if illicit, medical procedure.

Genetic material is a code: a sequence of information capable, as *A Number* insists again and again, of being extracted from one body as "a speck" and reinstantiated in another. If, as Hayles argues, "virtuality is the cultural perception that material objects are interpenetrated by information patterns" (13), then a cloned son is one of the purest imaginable stagings of virtuality available to a playwright who does not want to write a science-fiction

play about computers. The play reveals the breakdown of that liberal humanist subject as Salter interacts with his cloned sons, questioning the idea of uniqueness and depicting the idea of postmodern fragmentation and lack of belief in metanarratives. At the same time, the clones represent the posthuman subjectivity existing in the form of the interconnections instead of the definite identities. The discussion places the play in the theoretical contexts of posthuman ethics, embodiment, and technological mediation to understand the extent to which replication can have a moral and ontological impact. Also, the chapter reflects the theatrical techniques that precede embodiment and performance to show how the representations of the theatrical actor of varying selves performing posthuman relationality are performed in a manner that is morally and affectively involving the audiences. Finally, *A Number* is an example of the posthuman paradox of replication, how certainty is destabilized but, in the disjointed and multiple, provides an ethical framework, an empathetic stance, and a redefined state of understanding humanity in the technological shade.

Caryl Churchill (1938-) is a British writer whose play has revolutionized the political theatre today. She was born in London in 1938 and partially grew up in Montreal, where she started writing short stories, poems, and little acts that she performed for her family and friends (Aston, 2010; Gobert, 2014). Her works, such as *Cloud Nine*, *Top Girls*, and *Serious Money*, reveal her interest in how power structures influence relationships between people and affect ordinary speech.

Postwar Britain, decolonization, and conflicts around welfare, feminism, and workers' rights shaped the scope of Churchill's political imagination (Gobert, 2014). Observers refer to her as a socialist feminist author who does not tolerate black and white heroes or villains; instead, she writes about situations with complexities, where people are involved in bigger structures (Aston, 2010). Balancing between family life and creative work in her early years also made her more interested in motherhood and care labour as well as the pressures that are

put on the bodies of women (Aston, 2010; Gobert, 2014). Churchill often collaborates with actors and directors to generate content and experiment with form. Her characteristic tricks, including time jumps, repetitive dialogue, and dual roles, disrupting naturalism, are supported by this process. With the course of time, Churchill has been recognized as posing significant questions of authority and responsibility instead of giving evident answers, inviting the audiences to critically reflect on their personal moral and political thematic stances (Gobert, 2014).

A Number shows that Churchill has long been interested in the way social and political forces define personal identity, in this case, through the prism of cloning. The play depicts a father facing a number of cloned fathers who believe they should have received recognition and responsibility for all the previous wrongs, which is reminiscent of Churchill returning to his theme of parents, children, and trauma legacies (Churchill, 2002; Gobert, 2014). Written during a general debate on genetic engineering and bioethics, *A Number*, too, reacts to the modern fears of how science can be used in market interests and state authority (Aston, 2010). The interest of political Marxism and feminism in the capitalistic system is reflected in the play by Churchill himself, which contributes to its attention to the problem of ownership and replacement and the commodification of human life (Aston, 2010; Gobert, 2014). She limits the story to a few dramatic moments to explore whether a person can be defined biologically, by their memories, or by the moral decisions of those who raise them.

A Number premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in 2002 and centres on four key figures: a father named Salter, his son Bernard (referred to as B1), and Bernard's two clone brothers, B2 and Michael Black. The play also makes reference to other figures who shape the story's background, includes B1's mother, Salter's late wife, and the broader group of clones produced from Bernard's genetic material. Rather than being presented all at once, the plot of the play unfolds gradually across its five scenes, to trace a trajectory that moves from a failure of

conventional parenting toward a fraught experiment in reconstructing fatherhood itself. In his younger years, Salter, now a man in his early sixties, struggled with alcoholism and subjected both his wife and young son to abuse. When their only child, Bernard (B1), was just two years old, his wife died, leaving Salter to descend into a two-year depression during which he neglected his son entirely. The toll of this neglect, compounded by the absence of a mother, left Bernard withdrawn and unable to connect with others, prompted Salter eventually to relinquish him into the care of social services. It is at this point that Salter's crisis of fatherhood truly takes shape: rather than confronting his failure directly, he becomes consumed with guilt and longs to "restore" Bernard to the unblemished child he once was, before paternal neglect and a missing maternal presence altered who he had become.

Instead of pursuing reconciliation through ordinary means, Salter seeks a second chance at fatherhood through an entirely unconventional path. He arranges for a scientist to clone Bernard, to result in a new child, B2, who is genetically identical to the original. Unbeknownst to Salter, at least in part, the scientist does not stop at a single clone but produces roughly twenty in total, raising troubling questions about consent and oversight that Salter does not initially register. His focus remains narrowly fixed on the one flawless clone in his care, B2, through whom he hopes to redeem his earlier failure as a father to B1. This substitution of one son for another marks a turning point in the play's exploration of identity, it becomes something to be re-engineered rather than repaired.

The secrecy surrounding the cloning eventually collapses when the hospital responsible uncovers its own records and begins contacting the clones individually, apparently with an interest in studying them further. Through this disclosure, B1, B2, and the previously unknown Michael Black all become aware of the circumstances of their origins, just as Salter himself learns the full scope of what was done and begins visiting each son in turn, to conclude with Michael Black. From this point, the play turns its attention to how Salter and each of his sons

respond, emotionally and psychologically, to the revelation of their shared, manufactured identity, each reacting in a markedly different way to his status, to Salter as a father, and to the others as both kin and strangers (Griffin, 2012, pp. 14–15).

However, *A Number* is considered as one of the provocative dramas of twenty-first-century British theatre, addressing concerns over the anxieties and philosophical issues that are created by the era of cloning, genetic engineering, and technological reproduction. Staged at the Royal Court Theatre, the play condenses ethical and ontological issues of being posthuman to the level of a father-to-sons conversation. Churchill's minimalist dramaturgy is characterized by sparse staging, fragmented dialogue, and compressed scenes, reflects the instability of identity in a technologically mediated world (Churchill, 2002). That metamorphosis in *A Number* occurs in the form of a philosophical inquiry of the dissolution of the liberal humanist subject. Furthermore, *A Number* is a turning point between social realism and a posthuman imaginary. The play dramatizes a philosophical crisis of human uniqueness by its confronting characters with their unsettling reality of their own replicated existence.

2.1 Cloning and the Crisis of Authenticity

A Number does not focus on cloning as a scientific endeavour but as a philosophical question, that tries to determine the nature of humanity in a posthuman world. Characters such as Bernard (B2), who discovers that he is one of many identical copies, embody the destabilization of individual identity. The multiplicity of copies disrupts the foundations of humanist identity, which is built upon the premise of singularity, individuality, and authenticity. B2 makes a statement that is literal and at the same time existential, “a number of them, of us, a considerable / Salter: a number any number is a shock.” to reveal the humanity perspective (Churchill, 2002, pp. 167-168). He is in shock because he has experienced the self as Other, a confrontation that destroys the very principle of individuality.

A Number involves with key concerns of posthuman theory, particularly the destabilization of autonomous subject. When the possibility of replication appears, the liberal humanist model of the self-rational, coherent, and unique falls apart. In the initial dialogue, Salter attempts to justify his decision to have the clone created by admitting that “I didn’t feel I’d lost him when I sent him away because I had the second chance,” and this technological reproduction is used to mask unresolving grief, it reflects the moral and emotional subhumanity behind scientific imagination (Churchill, 2002, p. 210). Cloning is an act of self-deception, as his motivation to bring about life is not the creation of a son but of the circumstances to redeem him. He tries to wipe out his previous or earlier mistakes by beginning afresh, and in that process, Salter destroys the truthfulness of experience. All the sons cloned are a variant of the guilt and desire of Salter, which features the posthuman existence where the “relational capacity of the posthuman subject is not confined within our species, but it includes all non-anthropomorphic elements” it appears as processual and relational (Braidotti, 2013, p. 60). The human, previously conceived as the locus of meaning, is shown to be a point in a web of genetic and technological as well as emotional connections.

Churchill constructs this ontological uncertainty through her use of fragmented dialogue and recursive conversational patterns. The conversation between Salter and his son in “no, of course I didn’t / you didn’t / you weren’t sitting there listening to me shouting” is elliptical, and disjointed (Churchill, 2002, p. 188). That dialogue becomes recursive and repetitive, formally it mirrors the logic of cloning itself, where variation occurs within repetition. All the lines are the variations of the same verbal pattern, indicating that speech can be replicated, just like the DNA, but never in a flawless fashion. The subjection of communication is a reflection of the mimicking of bodies: language is a kind of cloning, with unlimited repetitions of meaning with no reference point. This linguistic disintegration can be explained through the lens of incredulity towards metanarratives (Lyotard, 1984). Similarly to

postmodernity, the grand narratives, which provided knowledge and identity, have long been rejected the way the narrative of a unified and coherent self is dismantled in the play written by Churchill. Rather, identity appears as a chain of micro-narratives, discontinuous, stripped, and contradictory, in fact, micro-narratives.

This crisis is made worse by Salter trying to reestablish a grip on meaning and lineage. He demands to have a story of origin, a real son, but the presence of many Bernards makes it impossible to have a story of origin. It is no longer relevant in a world where imitation is no longer distinguishable from creation. His persona lies in the integrity that has been made outdated by technology. *A Number* views the human body as a storage system, a biological archive of some kind that is duplicable, editable, and replicable. The body has turned into the initial prosthesis, a tool with the help of which consciousness and code can communicate (Hayles, 1999). The bodies of the clones, which are the same but inhabited by alternative experiences, unveil the insecurity of such an exchange. Their presence compels the characters as well as the audience to re-evaluate where the self actually exists, whether it is the DNA, or it is a memory, or it is the lived experience.

These philosophical concerns are intensified by the minimalist structure of the play. Churchill does not require any gilt and glossy staging or special effects; the play relies almost entirely on spoken language rather than visual spectacle. The fact that the clones do not have the visual indicators that allow the audience to recognize them makes them deal with the disturbing fact that identity is never visual and authenticity cannot be seen or established. It is a stage where, as Braidotti (2019) suggests, “transnational spaces and contexts” are where human subjectivity emerges through relational networks rather than fixed identities, a concept reflected in the structure of the play (p. 50). These contradictions of posthuman ethics are revealed through the presentation of cloning as a scientific and emotional process done by Churchill. The love that Salter responds to by cloning his son leads to the deep alienation. His

desire to have the second chance is similar to the humanist fantasy of mastery in which humans are able to master life and make it perfect with the help of technology (Wolfe, 2010). But Churchill turns this dream upside down: it is not the mastery that is produced by cloning but disintegration. Salter has lost not only his son but also himself as a father, as a moral agent, and as a human being.

2.2 Posthuman Identity and the Dispersed Self

Approaching *A Number* as a posthumanist work invites attention to the play's defining premise: cloning. Salter is portrayed as a man adrift, one who chooses to surrender his own child to institutional care rather than continue raising him. He has abandoned that child; he opts instead to clone him rather than reclaim and care for the "original." This decision foregrounds a tension between biological parenting and conventional, relational parenting, since the entire undertaking depends on the intervention of science and technology; without sufficient scientific advancement, such a path would simply not have been available to him. Consequently, fatherhood in the play is reduced to something "done" rather than something one simply "is" (Griffin, 2012). Salter exemplifies a father who performs the actions associated with fatherhood while losing sight of what it means to actually be a father. A further concern raised in the play is the conspicuous absence of a biological mother: the children originate entirely within a laboratory setting, with no mother figure present, not even in the form of a surrogate.

For some researchers, the practices of human cloning as well as laboratory-grown infants represent a posthumanist and dystopian turn in scientific development, and the play itself stands as an embodiment of this paradox, since "*A Number* (2002) discusses human cloning and genetic science as the spectrum of reasons for a dystopian shift" (Muhi, 2019). Although such posthumanist scientific breakthroughs may initially appear to advance the wellbeing of the human species, they carry the potential, over time, to precipitate a dystopian

transformation, a societal slide toward oppression, dehumanization, and nightmarish conditions marked by the erosion of individual freedom and pervasive suffering.

A Number is the title of the play, alludes to the death of individuality in the statistical anonymity. A human is turned into a sequence of things, deprived of uniqueness, and turned into a group of data. As it is noted by Campos (2012), the play by Churchill alters the unique human being and makes it a multiplicity of self that is precisely real and also not real. The play's title itself offers a revealing entry point into its posthumanist vision. On first impression, it reads as a straightforward descriptive label, simply naming the quantity of children Salter has fathered. The play's title itself, and its opening exchange, perform the identical logic at the level of the whole play rather than a single scene. Where a humanist ontology would ask what a person is, *A Number*'s characters ask, in effect, how many instances of a given pattern currently exist:

B2: a number of them, of us, a considerable

SALTER: say

B2: ten, twenty

B2: I did get the impression... there was this batch and we were all in it. I was in it.

SALTER: No because you're my son.

B2: No but we were all... they said that none of us was the original (Churchill, 2002).

Yet as the narrative progresses, the title comes to signify more than a mere count: it also captures the son's identity that shows Salter's careless and self-serving conduct as a "father," reaffirms that he merely "does" fatherhood rather than embodies it. As one scholar explains:

[The father] is not interested in a multitude of sons, in 'a number', even though he has a number of offspring, but in the one (son) with whom he is engaged at any one point in time. *A Number* as title gestures towards the paradox of Salter's position as it unfolds

in the play, of both wanting a single, particular son and being prepared to draw on 'any number' of them to achieve this. (Griffin, 2012)

Salter, then, is not in pursuit of any particular quantity of sons but rather a single one: the idealized B1, whom he nonetheless declined to raise and instead chose to clone. This places the father in a contradictory position, wants his son returned to him even though direct access to B1 was always available, he had simply chosen to parent him rather than replicate him. He is willing to generate any number of copies in pursuit of recovering something resembling the “original.” While his motivation for cloning B1 might appear, on the surface, to stem from love, it is in truth rooted in an obsession with B1’s perceived perfection, which explains why he never invests in actually raising or caring for him. Salter is fundamentally incapable of forming a genuine emotional bond with any of his sons; this is evident in how he disregards B1's existence entirely, withholds any mention of B1 from B2, and, once both have died, simply turns to a third son, Michael, in order to continue performing the role of father which he finds a different representation of his son’s identity. At the same time, the title's significance extends further still, since it “may mean a certain [number] of objects; secondly, the definite number of an object in an array; thirdly, an object sharing similar characteristics with some other members of the same set (Bernard 1; Bernard 2, etc)” (Shilova, 2012). In this sense, the title points to the interchangeability of any given child, suggesting that the identity of the particular son hardly matters so long as Salter has someone on whom to continue his experiment in fatherhood. He drifts from one son to the next, sustained by the hope that he will eventually achieve genuine connection with whichever child remains.

The naming of the characters as B1 and B2, rather than by their shared given name of Bernard, also carries posthumanist concept. Although both the original child and his clones share the same legal name, the playwright withholds this name from the audience, to present the characters instead as though they were robotic units, machines, or scientific artefacts,

comparable to the numbered designations given to planets. This naming choice carries several layers of meaning. First, it marks B1 and B2 as casualties of Salter's decision to pursue cloning, since both, along with the remaining clones, are ultimately reduced to the status of scientific specimens. B1 functions as the original prototype, while B2 occupies the position of a derivative copy, akin to an updated model of a manufactured product or device. Both characters, moreover, suffer from crises of identity. B1, neglected and emotionally abandoned as a consequence of his father's alcoholism, struggles to come to terms with the fact that his sense of self has been compromised by the existence of his clones. B2, for his part, grapples with confusion over being a clone among many copies of the same origin, referring to B1 as the "original" while regarding himself as merely a duplicate. Because both characters are destabilized by the experience of being, or having, clones, the playwright's decision to identify them through alphanumeric labels rather than personal names becomes especially purposeful. The play, in this respect, appears to dramatize "the traumatizing effects [that] scientific evolution can have and [implies] that once the process began, it can no longer be controlled or stopped" (Anghel, 2012, as cited in Aghasiyev, 2025, p. 430). Churchill thus seems intent on illustrating the harm that scientific intervention can inflict upon individual identity, gesturing toward an emerging era in which human beings risk being treated as manufactured products, an era we might justifiably term posthumanism.

At the centre of *A Number*, the singularity of subject is disintegrated. The presence of the clones reveals the identity as scattered, interpersonal, and performative. The identity is conditional on a perceived source that does not exist any longer. His identity unravels into crisis when he finds out that he is not the original but in fact one among the number. The search for a first, authenticating term against which all subsequent copies could be measured turns out to lead nowhere, because the technology that produced the copies operated directly on code, never on a body understood as irreducibly, metaphysically First. Salter's attempt to re-anchor

the missing origin produces the play's most concentrated statement of the crisis. When Salter tells him that he is a copy, he cries, "I'm just a copy. I'm not the real one," and he responds by saying, "You're the only one," revealing the nature of the identity (Churchill, 2002, p. 177). This vagueness of this reassurance points to the posthuman paradox: when reality is plural, then what is meant by the term "authenticity" is no longer possible. Braidotti (2019) argues that the posthuman subject is not a particular one but a transversal one who lives through relational becoming. This model sheds light on how Churchill shows the changing sense of self by the other party. His identity is not the singular and derivative one but the one that lies between the self and other in the interstitial space. The instability of the posthuman subjectivity is reflected in the use of repetition and interruption, which is a device of style as Churchill dramatizes it.

According to Vidyasree & Madhavi (2025), the ethical drama by Churchill reveals the domains of love and betrayal in which the human loses in technology. They state that "the replacement of human beings with posthuman entities underlines the nature of identity as a social construct" within the social setting (Vidyasree & Madhavi, 2025, p. 399). The play suggests that identity is distributed across biological, technological, and relational systems rather than contained within a single individual. As, it explained by the notion that posthuman subjectivity entails cognition between human and non-human agents (Hayles, 1999). Information and memory systems out of their control mediate the sense of self of the clones. Even their memories, what they remember about childhood, are secondary, what was encoded in the life of some other person. This way the self of *A Number* is an exteriorized, externalized self, or rather the product of both genetic and technological marking.

2.3 Lyotardian Fragmentation and the Unpresentable

A Number offers a compelling representation of the postmodern condition, as Lyotard (1984) puts it, especially in its approach to fragmentation, incommensurability, and the present. Lyotard defines the postmodern condition as characterized by an "incredulity toward

metanarratives,” a concept that underpins the play’s fragmentation of identity, and to perceive something that can be imagined but cannot be seen or depicted (Lyotard, 1984, p. 14).

Churchill’s dramaturgy reflects this value through re-enactment of the existential crisis of being one in a thousand and a thousand million selves, it explores the ontological boundaries of the identity and of individuality in the technologically mediated world. Bernard 1 represents the postmodern sublime, the effort to present the unrepresentable. He is the traumatic real that Salter technoscientific narrative cannot domesticate. He stands for the spectral figure that interrupts the managed reality of the presence. He is a witness to the ruptures and discontinuities that characterize the postmodern history of the subject, he is the shadow. Cloning is Churchill’s technoscientific device to literalizing Lyotard’s claim that the postmodern condition, grand narratives no longer legitimate anything.

The form of the play represents the idea of fragmentation of narrative presented by Lyotard. *A Number* consists of short, intermittent scenes, and there are no evident transitions or temporal linkages. The plot is not linear, and the audience cannot have the satisfaction of resolution or closure. As an alternative, the conversation turns amongst confusion, revelation, and repetition, forms the rhythm that reflects the discontinuous consciousness of the characters (Karkulehto et al., 2020). The scene when Salter and B2 argue and Salter says, “No, because you’re my son,” is the perfect illustration of this disintegration (Churchill, 2002, p. 173). The scene reveals an inability to single out identities and have a comprehensive body as a whole in a regime of technological duplication, where the self cannot fit into the traditional narrative forms.

Incredulity towards metanarratives also contributes to the discovery of identity by Churchill. The humanist narrative of linear development, individuality, and moral evolution becomes a thing of the past in a world where cloning is the new order of things. Every clone is a mini-narrative, a separate story of life that not only resembles but also is dissimilar to others

(Chesi & Spiegel, 2020). These stories are incommensurable in the sense of this inability used by Lyotard to reconcile different discourses within the frame of one conceptualization. The language of attachment and emotional expectation of the father becomes incomprehensible to his clones, whose life depends on the biological determinism. In this case, “numbers are omnipresent and function as a means” based on the situation involved (Campos, 2012, p. 29). Their communication efforts are riddled with difficulties, as they frequently result in a lack of any communication or an error in understanding, which confirms the postmodern situation of longing to communicate and the inability to comprehend fully (Lyotard, 1984). This attitude of Churchill towards the unrepresentable, the boundaries of representation, is the aesthetic power of the play. It is not only to portray cloning but to provide the experiential barrenness of the existence of a cloned being. The stage is very minimalistic, deprived of visual cues that can distinguish the clones. The absence and sparseness help the audience to think of the difference where they cannot realize it (Micali, 2019). This battle with the impossibility to be depicted creates the Lyotardian sublime: aware of a reality that is larger than what one can see, it is the confrontation with an idea that cannot be visualized but can be perceived conceptually.

Furthermore, ellipsis, repetition, and silence are some of the techniques used to strengthen this effect. According to Thomsen (2013), the posthuman theatre challenges us with the blurring of the border and “the combination of what two individuals have brought together” between the seen and the imaginable (p. 2). These strategies create a dead model of incommensurability in the play *A Number*. The unrepresentable does not mean emptiness but, in abundance, a surplus: a multiplication of the same, a proliferation of identicalities, and a multiplication of information that is not assimilable (Micali, 2019). The portrayal of a variety of both similar and different selves, in this case, triggers the audience with the concept of individuality and makes them think of the moral and ontological consequences of technological

reproduction (Chesi & Spiegel, 2020). *A Number* is a characteristic instance of Lyotardian postmodernism in its refusal to offer closure or resolution. The play's final exchange ends not with catharsis but with a flat deflection: asked whether he is happy with his life, in scene five, Michael simply answers, "I do yes, sorry" (Churchill, 2002), denying Salter, the audience, and any resolving admission of grief or guilt. This discontinuity of form runs through the dialogue itself: Salter's confessions repeatedly fracture mid-sentence, as when he admits of the second cloning in scene two, "It wasn't perfect. It was the best I could do" (Churchill, 2002), the broken syntax enacting the very instability it describes. The non-measurability of discourse surfaces when B1 forces his own origin into clinical, biological terms, insists they are "talking that microscope world of giant blobs and globs" (Churchill, 2002), to reduce personhood to measurable matter that resists any singular human "truth." This refusal of totalization extends to the play's central metaphor: rather than resolving into one bounded figure, the clones remain an uncounted multiplicity, as in scene five when Michael casually notes, "There's nineteen more of us" (Churchill, 2002). Churchill does not simply narrate cloning; she stages its philosophical and emotional fallout directly, as in Salter's raw admission, "I miss him so much. I miss them both" (Churchill, 2002). Ultimately, the aesthetic of the unrepresentable governs what the play withholds: when Michael is asked what he has lost, in scene five he offers only "I've still got my life" (Churchill, 2002) a claim to interior selfhood the audience is never permitted to verify. The uniqueness of the self, the play insists, remains inaccessible even to the characters who claim it. From Lyotard's perspective, the enlightenment humanist metanarratives represented through the story of the individual who supposes to be irreducible - self- identical unit or value is undermined.

Ethics is central to *A Number*, in which the issue of responsibility, autonomy, and the sanctity of life is in a state of crisis due to the process and action of cloning. The case of Salter asking his son to be cloned is presented as an attempt at moral compensation. Salter

tells B1 that “yes of course, you know I did, I’m not attempting to deny, I thought it was the best thing to do, it seemed a brilliant it was the only” (Churchill, 2002, p.181). Here Salter cannot give an ethical justification. His justification is performative. Even the adjective “brilliant” is a vocabulary of engineering not of conscience. Also, by implying imitation is somehow a kind of moral reparation, he says, “Maybe you’re right, you’re right; take it in a positive spirit” to reveal hope for better results (Churchill, 2002, p.173). However, the fallacy of this argument is soon seen in the play. Salter tries to rectify the wrongdoings of the past using technology, and in doing so, the moral standing of his children is diminished by this, as they are regarded as objects of paternal desire instead of recognizing their different humanity. The ethical dilemma is not just a hypothetical struggle, but it is practiced in the existence and psycho-emotion of the clones, each of whom has to face the existential violence of his creation.

The posthuman ethical systems require acknowledgement of the embodied finiteness of human and nonhuman other beings. The drama by Churchill brings this demand alive and shows what happens when the demand is not taken into consideration. The clones do not have their own personality but exist as a continuation of the desires of Salter. Life is perceived as something that can be copied, and its uniqueness is being put in second place to the illusion of control (Karkulehto et al., 2020). This way, the play realizes the ethical imperative “from social and religious destiny” that starts with recognition of alterity of the other (Cederberg, 2010, p. 12). Replicating is equal to rejecting difference, which, in turn, violates the principle of ethical responsibility. The flaw of Salter is not any scientific ambition but the blindness of morality, which views existence as a commodity to be manipulated. B1 is the original son who transforms into the representative of the human resentment towards replication. His sufferings are personal and allegoric. He feels the degradation of humanist singularity when his copies appear, in which he recognizes his uniqueness as a deception. The next instance of violence, in

which B1 kills one of his clones, can be interpreted as a radical, albeit morally offensive, and reaffirmation of himself. This can be interpreted as the criticism of humanist narcissism by Churchill and the unwillingness to approve the dispersion of the self (Campos, 2012). Accordingly, the play assigns a deeper ethical conflict: the first one, who is in danger of plurality, answers with a murder, demonstrates the perils that the efforts made to protect the unique with the help of coercion entail.

The posthuman ethics also sheds more light on the moral aspects of the ethical framework of the play. It views the posthuman subject as an ethical subject, which is responsible to its interdependence with human and nonhuman otherness (Braidotti, 2013). Salter does not live in this posthuman responsibility. He lets life be interchangeable and love reproducible, envisions that a clone can be used as a substitute for a primary. His recognition of this failure is the ultimate one: “They’re all your sons” proves the humanism context (Churchill, 2002, p. 173). The words convey the recognition and hopelessness, the simultaneous existence of both, the confrontation with the moral impossibility of copying, and the collapse of feelings that occurs. The sadness of Salter stands as the moral opposite of his previous inflated egotism and emphasizes how fateful is the loss of morality in seeing life as a kind of novelty that can be reproduced.

Including the father-son relationship into the technological framework, B1 tells Salter “I want to know if you could hear me or not because I never knew were you hearing me and not coming or could you not hear me and if I shouted loud enough you’d come” (Churchill, 2002, p. 186). Churchill challenges the patriarchal hegemony of humanism. The humanist ethics usually assume dominance, control, and possession of life, but the play gradually disintegrates this assumption (Karkulehto et al., 2020). The effort of Salter to be a creator or possessor of life does not present certainty and fulfilment but alienation and moral disorientation and the violence that he engages in that is unintended (Cederberg, 2010). In the

vision of Churchill, cloning is a kind of reflection on the ethical level, that which manifests itself as the outcomes of attempting to break down complex creatures into an object of desire or healing (Ho & Zheng, 2022). The plurality of selves comes across to disrupt the humanist ideal of singularity and mastery, shows that technology cannot be outsourced to ethics.

Finally, *A Number* brings parts to a post-human ethical situation where cloning makes people reconsider what fathering is. Through the interaction of fathers and sons, originals and copies, Churchill is exploring the dilemma of desire and responsibility, control and difference, individuality and multiplicity (Haraway, 1985). The play claims that an ethical life cannot be constructed without the awareness of the irreducibility of the Other and that an effort to evade what is being called the ethical imperative at the expense of imitation has far-reaching consequences.

Theatre in the shadow of technology as an embodied and live form of art provides a unique prism through which posthuman questions of identity, presence, and relationality can be addressed. *A Number* turns the stage into an ontological experimentation, and it questions what it is to be a person in a world being replicated through technology (Karkulehto et al., 2020). The thematic doubling of the play is made so literal with the casting of the play, “The play is for two actors. One actor plays Salter and the other his sons. The scene is the same throughout, it’s where Salter lives” emphasized their sameness and difference simultaneously (Churchill, 2002, p. 166). Churchill’s casting instruction “the play is for two actors. One plays Salter, the other his sons” (Churchill, “Characters”) is not merely a practical economy of a small-cast play; read through Hayles, it is the play’s most rigorous theoretical statement, executed not in dialogue but in bodies on a stage. The performance of the clones in every performance has to be differentiated with subtle differences in voice, gesture, and time. That performance of identity is such a negotiation that maps the unstable nature of identity as a performed entity; such fluidity and multiplicity are the hallmarks of posthuman subjectivity.

As Luckhurst (2014) notes, the dramaturgy of Churchill helps “reinforce political failures already acknowledged without proposing charters for meaningful change,” thus revealing its artificiality (p. 12). In *A Number*, the actor’s body becomes the primary site through which identity is differentiated and performed, as through it, readers and the the audience see that they perceive one identity, but they actually perform it. All the clones are simultaneously the same and different, and the options that the actor embodies, the minute touches in the speech, and the timing all indicate that she is trying to distinguish between the lives. It complements the premise that it is never situated in an absolute state and exists in the specifics of environment and history and technology (Hayles, 1999). The body of the actor in Churchill plays off this context: the identity of clones gains no boundaries outside of the context of relations with Salter, among themselves, and with the audience observing them. The corporeal performance anticipates subjectivity, which proves that the identity is not definite and wholly independent but appears in a relationship with each other by interaction and perception.

This emphasis on embodiment is reinforced by the minimalist staging of the play offered by Churchill, which reduces the theatrical space to its bare minimum. The fact that there are no physical marks that would identify the clones makes the audience think about the way the difference is identified and created. The identity is formed not on the visual indication but on the behaviour, memory, narrative, and context of the relations (Karkulehto et al., 2020). The stage economy resembles the abstraction of humans’ digital era when people are represented as materialized and non-materialized at the same time, unique and multiple at the same time (Luckhurst, 2014). Repetition, silence, and elliptical dialogue are the elements of the posthuman condition of life and existence in systems whereby mediated, replicated, and decontextualized selfhood exists. The spectators are required to negotiate the identity of the clones in real time, become participants in the moral and existential inquiry presented in the play.

According to Aston & Diamond (2010), posthuman subjectivity is defined as a form of embodied relational performance that is based on situated materiality. In the first scene, Salter talks with B2 that “a million is the least you should take, I think it’s more like half a million each person because what they’ve done, they’ve damaged your uniqueness, weakened your identity, so we’re looking at five million for a start” (Churchill, 2002, p. 171). It explains how Salter tries to deal with the ontological crisis through legal and economic mechanisms, as if he likes to ask how much is this harm of his identity worth. *A Number* is the identity that is not owned but practiced, depending on the situation of the relationship and depending on material conditions. The fact that the actor has to portray more than one self-depicts the subjectivity that can only exist in relation to the rest of the people, to the physical space of the stage, and to the temporality of performance (Aston & Diamond, 2010, p. 5). The theatre therefore serves as a microcosmic posthuman relation where loss of a consistent self is not lacking but rather an ethical and perceptual one. It also challenges the audience to accept identity contingency and relationality of being, indicating that posthuman ethics and ontology cannot be constituted without the lived embodied experience.

Notably, *A Number* places the issue of human embodiment in the heart of a story that could be so easily worked out by technology. Acting as a counter to the overreaching influence of the technological abstraction, Churchill opposes the absolute dominance of technology by establishing living models in the heart of an anti-dehumanizing narrative of imitation (Chesi & Spiegel, 2020). The audience is kept in mind that human presence, vulnerability, and performative subtlety cannot be reduced even in the situation of cloning or other posthuman conditions. The observation of one actor displaying several lives helps show empathy as well as moral contemplation; the watchers get the feeling of the confusion of multiplicity, and they are still present in the relational immediacy of the body, which is live (Aston & Diamond, 2010). The paradox that this dynamic offers regarding posthuman discourse is that the

fragmentation and replication of the self can at once generate alienation and various forms of understanding and relationality, as well as ethical participation.

By means of the way it studies the issue of embodiment, performance, and relationality, *A Number* illustrates the exceptional ability of theatre to question posthuman conditions. The formal economy of the play, coupled with the subtle physicality of the actor, emphasizes the process of identity construction, performance, and reception instead of being innate and definite. It helps prove the “delicacy of human relationships and the effect of cultural assumptions on individual minds” amid the rapid changes (Sabr, 2025, p. 288). The artificiality of distinction is emphasized with a sense of minimalism and repetition, whereas the relational interactions of actor, character, and audience model posthuman interconnectedness. Even in the shadow of technology, according to Churchill, the theatre continues to be a place of ethical experience: a place where the unrepresentable and the multiplicity of selves, the instability of identity, and the relational character of subjectivity can be performed, felt, and contemplated (Gersdorf & Mayer, 2006, p. 12). Through this act of foregrounding embodiment and performance, Churchill adds credence to the fact that the human is to be experienced relationally, ethically, and dramatically within the space of the stage, in its dispersed or technologically mediated form.

From Lyotardian framework, B1 is the original “first,” sent into care at four years old (Churchill, 2002, p. 177). Yet Salter’s opening account to B2 does not simply omit B1; it replaces him with a substitute grand narrative. Salter tells B2 that his mother and “this” (unnamed) child died together in a car crash, a tidy, closed origin story that legitimates B2 as the sole son. When B2 later challenges this account, Salter simply declares, “You’re the only one” (Churchill, 2002, p. 177). This is legitimation by fiat: B1 is not argued out of existence, he is narratively erased, folded into a story engineered to close down further inquiry. B2’s own reply, “I’m just a copy. I’m not the real one” (Churchill, 2002, p. 177), shows that the erasure

never fully takes; the excluded narrative keeps resurfacing as doubt. The scene itself refuses to settle this doubt, ending instead with B2's suspicious question about his name met only by Salter's deflection and B2's noncommittal "Probably" (Churchill, 2002, p. 178).

Where B2 receives a story, B1 receives an audit. Salter recasts the years of his son's absence not as love or loss but as budgeting: "I managed. I was spending less," to which B1 replies flatly, "You made an effort" (Churchill, 2002, p. 183). Fatherhood is legitimated here not by any appeal to devotion or duty but by demonstrated efficiency, input reduced, outcome maintained. The same performative logic surfaces moments later when Salter, prompted to consider how the doctors produced multiple sons, pivots immediately to profit: "I think there's money to be made out of this" (Churchill, 2002, p. 184). This is Lyotard's (1984) claim in its starkest form: under the postmodern condition, knowledge, here, reproductive and genetic technology, is not produced to be true but to be sold, and Salter's mind moves to the market before it moves to remorse.

This same confrontation is staged, moments earlier, as a genuine language game rather than a dialectic moving toward agreement: B1 states "and had a new one made," and Salter answers only "no," then "yes," met by B1's own "yes," before Salter finally concedes, "yes of course, you know I did... it seemed a brilliant it was the only " (Churchill, 2002, p. 181). Each move is a minimal, near-identical utterance, no, yes, yes, yes, that carries no propositional content of its own; meaning is generated only by the volley, by whose turn it is and what position they hold in it. This is not communication aimed at rational consensus; it is contestation for its own sake, ending not in agreement but in a confession that immediately breaks down into an unfinished sentence. Salter never completes "it was the only"; the justification fails at the exact moment it is required to hold. This scene, too, refuses closure, ending with B1's escalating, unanswered demand, "No, look in my eyes. No, keep looking. Look" (Churchill, 2002, p. 189), and the following scene ends no differently, with B2's

alarmed disclosure, "Also I'm afraid he'll kill me," left completely unaddressed (Churchill, 2002, p. 199).

Salter's most sustained bid for authority comes in his long unbroken monologue to B1, where he attempts to construct a single, totalizing account of himself as a father who "spared" his son and, "because you were perfect just like that," loved him (Churchill, 2002, p. 202). But the monologue does not hold; it dissolves into confessed amnesia: "The whole thing is very vague to me" (Churchill, 2002, p. 203). Salter cannot even sustain the story he is telling in the act of telling it, and the monologue ends by transferring the burden of narrative-making onto the very son whose story he has just tried to author: "Can you tell me anything you remember?... can you tell me things I did I might have forgotten?" (Churchill, 2002, p. 203) a question that itself goes unanswered, the scene closing on Salter's own anxious, hanging "Yes? yes?" (Churchill, 2002, p. 203). The father who set out to legitimate his fatherhood through a grand, unifying narrative ends by begging his own erased narrative back from its victim, the total collapse of narrative authority Lyotard's theory predicts once the metanarrative can no longer compel belief on its own terms. None of the play's five scenes closes on agreement, explanation, or settled understanding, and the final scene is no exception: Salter's raw admission, "I miss him so much. I miss them both," and Michael's casual reminder that "there's nineteen more of us" (Churchill, 2002, p. 211), only underscore how far any singular, totalizing account of the self has receded, and the play itself ends on Michael's flat non-resolution, "I do yes, sorry" (Churchill, 2002, p. 211) paralogy as Lyotard (1984) defines it: the valuing of instability and the proliferation of unresolved moves over any totalizing settlement.

Through this, *A Number* is an illustration of the vast possibilities of the theatre to address posthuman. It asserts that identity is never specific or independent but rather performed, interactive, and provisional; hence, "transhumanism should be seen as an intensification of humanism" and generally accepted with positivity (Wolfe, 2010, p. 15). To locate the body of

the actor as the means by which multiplicity and presence are acted out, Churchill in a way questions and in a way enhances the conception of embodiment in the technological age. to her, theatre is already an ethical laboratory whereby audiences are challenged by the points of tension between replication and individuality, technology and corporeality, self and other, showing, despite a posthuman situation, that performance is an essential part of finding an answer to the process of knowing what it means to be human.

2.4 Posthumanism and Postmodernism

A Number works between posthumanism and postmodernism as an illustration of the philosophical intersection that is defined in the theoretical discourses on identity, technology, and narrative. The involvement of cloning in the play offers a venue on which postmodern and posthuman structures converge movement through interventions characterized as questioning human selfhood, relationality, and mediation of technologies (Bess et al., 2018). Postmodern fragmentation as proposed by Lyotard and posthuman becoming can be used in conjunction to present a perspective through which the ethical, ontological, and performative aspects of the play can be viewed (Lyotard 1984). It is through these two views that Churchill challenges the unreliability of identity, the boundaries of representation, and the moral obligations of duplication.

The cloning dystopia amplifies the idea of incredulity towards metanarratives, which goes right against the grand narrative of human uniqueness and linear selfhood.

SALTER: exactly, even one, a twin would be a shock

B2: a twin would be a surprise but a number

SALTER: a number any number is a shock

B2 what if someone else is the one, the first one, the real one and I'm (Churchill, 2002, p. 168)

The story by Churchill shows that each clone is similar and at the same time different, and the idea that a particular autonomous subject exists is undermined (Bess et al., 2018). The play's fragmented form is manifested in its scenes, discontinuous actions and fragmented dialogue. These formal techniques make the postmodern sublime, and they "accompany the traditional humanist body to become more sensible" with the inability to fully depict and understand it (Boyle, 2018, p. 14). The viewer is challenged to face the sameness and simultaneous otherness of the clones, and this reflects the belief of Lyotard that postmodern art must expose the beyond of the fullness of knowledge.

At the same time, *A Number* practices the vision of posthuman subjectivity. There is no fixed identity because "global cultural hegemonies have labelled only a selected few as prototypes of the ideal humanity" with other people, technology, and environment (Karkulehto et al., 2020, p. 3). Within its context, subjectivity, though not owned, is performed; "human beings make sense of the world through language," and the staging of the play is minimalistic, highlighting this fact (Gersdorf & Mayer, 2006, p. 12). The identity is performed by speech, gesture, and relational interaction without visual markers to differentiate the clones, which is in line with the claim made by Braidotti that posthuman subjectivity lies in situational materiality. This destabilization of fixed selfhood is dramatized directly in the play's opening exchange, when B2 asks his father how many clones exist and is told simply "a number" (Churchill, 2002, p. 10). B2 does not initially read this number as a claim about his ontological status; he merely wants to know the scale of his genetic repetition. Salter, by contrast, refers to the clones outright as "things" (Churchill, 2002, p. 10), a designation that collapses the clones into objects rather than relational subjects. B2 resists this framing, and insists that "they're people (...) because I'm one" (Churchill, 2002, p. 11), yet his resistance is immediately undercut by his own father's indirect implication that B2 himself, as a copy of B1, occupies the same diminished ontological category as the other clones (Aghasiyev, 2025, p. 430).

The instability that is produced in B2 is not resolved into a stable counter subjectivity but instead manifests as genuine self-contradiction, which closely tracks the performative, relationally constituted identity that attributes to the play's clones. B2 embodies the deligitimation of the unique individual. he is a simulacrum lacks an original "I". B2, meeting the fact of his own seriality for the first time, cannot settle on a single grammatical subject to describe himself: "B2: we just happen to have identical be identical identical genetic". B2 states plainly that he is "not real" (Churchill, 2002), even as he simultaneously insists that he and his clone "twins" remain people despite "happen[ing] to have identical genetics" (Churchill, 2002, p. 12). This contradiction reaches its most explicit form when B2 admits: "[O]f course I want them to be things, I do think they're things, I don't think they're, of course I do think they're them just as much as I'm me but I. I don't know what I think, I feel terrible" (Churchill, 2002, p. 12). Unlike B1 who is a traumatised and Michael who is joyful, B2 is destroyed between the two. He is shattered. The broken syntax here, the unfinished clauses and self-interruptions, performs at the level of language the very ontological instability that identifies as constitutive of posthuman subjectivity; B2's identity is not asserted as a fixed property but enacted, faltering and renegotiated in real time through speech.

This treatment of the clones as property rather than relational subjects is reinforced by Salter's material framing of his sons. He proposes suing the hospital on the grounds that the doctors "damaged his uniqueness, weakened [his] identity" (Churchill, 2002, p. 14), language that recasts identity itself as a kind of intellectual property subject to financial compensation, before demanding five million pounds for the harm done. This commodifying logic is consistent with the broader pattern in which Salter "measures his 'sons' in money, he considers them 'things', although they are living beings" (Anghel, 2012, p. 158). Even when B2 expresses cautious openness to the idea of meeting another clone, describing it as something he "wouldn't be frightened" to do (Churchill, 2002, p. 16), his use of the phrase "any number," rather than

“any of them,” signals that he has not yet settled into treating his genetic counterparts as fully individuated relational subjects rather than interchangeable units within a series.

Furthermore, the concept of the cyborg also sheds more light on the boundary interrogation encountered in the play. The clones are not human images of identity but of affinity, destabilizing the binaries of self-machine upon which traditional humanist thinking is based. By occupying this intermediate state, the clones assert the human and at the same time disintegrate it (Haraway, 1985). Pressed by Salter to account for how he feels about sharing his genetic code with an unknown number of other men, Michael answers with a leap that a humanist subject, mourning its own uniqueness, could not make:

MICHAEL: We’ve got ninety-nine per cent the same genes as any other person.

We’ve got ninety per cent the same as a chimpanzee. We’ve got thirty percent the same as a lettuce. Does that cheer you up at all? I love about the lettuce. It makes me feel I belong (Churchill, 2002, p. 211).

Michael’s lettuce is Haraway’s cyborg wearing vegetable dress. The dramaturgy of Churchill reveals the shadow of technology: the human being always already involves itself in the technological, and the ethical and ontological implications of such involvement are unavoidable. The language is a posthuman practice, which does the work of instability and multiplicity of meaning itself. Posthuman rhetoric wards off the point of meaning. The technological replication and the resulting multiplicity that seems to be the existence of the clones is echoed in the linguistic economy of Churchill, her fragmentation of her sentences, and her repetitions, silences, and pauses (Boyle, 2018). Words are made instruments of negotiating identity and not dictating it, and the audience becomes the negotiation subject and has to read between the lines in their effort to read the difference relationally and morally. There is a connection between language and embodiment and a posthuman experience where identity is constantly played at and renegotiated.

The play reveals a central paradox of posthuman identity, replication produces both multiplicity and uncertainty. As identity becomes reproducible, its connection to agency and individuality becomes increasingly unstable (Bess et al., 2018, p. 4). But this is no enemy-destroying loss. Posthuman subjectivity is not the denial of the human but the shifting towards becoming (Braidotti, 2013). This change is reflected in Churchill's play, identity is no longer erased by imitation, but its lines are redefined, causing one to ask questions on the ethical, relational, and ontological aspects of posthuman existence. Instead of the despair, *A Number* suggests a chance to revise the human: the image of individuality, relationality, and technology meeting and creates some new instances of subjectivity and conscience (Wolfe, 2010). The play combines Lyotardian postmodernism with posthumanism to shed some light on ethical and ontological consequences of technological copying (Karkulehto et al., 2020). The fragmented form of the play, the relational performance of identity, and the questioning of humanist premises make the play both postmodern and posthuman, compelling audiences to question what it is to be human in an era of technological mediation, multiplicity, and relational becoming.

The play explores cloning, disjointed narration, and minimalist staging to challenge the fragmentation of the liberal humanist subject and the unsteadiness of individuality. The conversation, repetition, and ellipses are not only representative of postmodern fragmentation in the manner theorized by Lyotard, but they are also performed through the process of relationality, which is posthuman, by focusing on subjectivity as existing through interconnection, not within isolation. Theatrically, the assumption of multi-identity by the actor is a prefiguration of the concept of identity as performance and how human presence is maintained in terms of technology-mediated space. The absence, silence, and minimum visual elements employed by Churchill produce the unrepresentable and so offer the audience to wrestle over the many selves and the moral obligation of the many selves. At the same time, staging

posthuman becoming, the play confirms that the blurring of singularity has the potential to provide the avenues of ethical thinking, empathetic relations, and ways of seeing things differently. It challenges viewers with the dilemmas of the posthuman identity: imitation destabilizes certitude, but, in the process, it makes the readers to see the dynamic, inter-relational, and ever-processional face of humanity, the face that technology casts a darker shade on. Churchill's decision to stage posthuman virtuality through biology rather than electronics is not a limitation on a posthuman reading of the play. It is the play's most theoretical move, since it locates the collapse of the humanist original not in some speculative future technology but in the oldest and most intimately "real" site available to drama, the family, the body, the son.

Chapter Three: The Digital Sublime and the Fragmented Self in Jennifer Haley's *The Nether* (2013)

This chapter explores the play *The Nether* by Jennifer Haley that is examined as a critical performance of the posthuman condition and the interpersonal ethical crisis in the digital age. The play operates as a performative site where the central assumptions of posthuman and postmodern theory are embodied and tested, deconstructing the classical humanist model of the self as a coherent and unitary subject. Four major domains of such deconstruction are examined: how the embodied self is replaced by the informational self (N. Katherine Hayles), how the process of identity becomes multiple and fluid (Rosi Braidotti and Sherry Turkle), how the sense of morality is undermined by what can no longer be presented (the unrepresentable sublime of digital atrocity) (Jean-Francois Lyotard), and how the idea of death can be repudiated through digital eternity. Finally, *The Nether* employs the art form of the live theatre as a place of presence and responsibility to express the tremendous lack and moral emptiness manifested once human desire is transcoded into effect code. The play then avers that the modern crisis of identity remains essentially an ontological crisis in that the audience is compelled to face the cyborgian imposture and the de novo morality of the digital community.

Jennifer Haley (1974-) is an American playwright whose work examines the ethics of virtual reality and the impact of technology on human relationships, identity, and desire. She grew up and was born in Texas and attended the University of Texas at Austin, where she earned an MFA degree in playwriting at Brown University (Selim, 2022). Haley also designed stories in television and in video games, which made her interested in the immersive worlds and digital storytelling (Haley, 2013; Pham, 2018). Many of her plays are based on individuals who utilize technology to avoid shame, trauma, or social control and are subsequently forced to face the ethical price of this avoidance. Besides *The Nether*, Haley has also created

Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom and Froggy, which also touch on the unclear delimiting of the lines between online and real life (Pham, 2018). She resides in Los Angeles nowadays and writes for the stage and screen.

Haley's growth as an artist was brought about by the rapid growth of the internet, social media, and the ability to immerse herself in the world of technologies. Her attraction to the stories where virtual space is extended into personal fantasies and social disparities instead of a neutral mechanism is mentioned by critics (Selim, 2022; Pham, 2018). Brought up in the American Southwest with its broad landscape geography, and having in her youth been involved in media industries in the cities, Haley was fascinated by the way people construct new, invisible landscapes by code and networks. Her fiction frequently features police officers, teachers, or even regular employees that come to digital spaces in search of safety or pleasure only to observe that power and exploitation go with them there (Selim, 2022). The combination of straightforward, to-the-point communication with disturbing imagery makes Haley's style approachable to viewers in complicated law, consent, and embodiment arguments. She has earned some awards and fellowships that recognize her contribution to modern science fiction theatre.

The Nether may be interpreted as a conclusion of the long-term passion of Haley in virtual worlds and ethical decision-making. The play envisions the close future, in which users enter a networked world to engage in taboo actions, to experiment with how legal, empathetic, and accountable actions work under digital bodies (Haley, 2013). The structure of the script is influenced by Haley as a game writer and an interest in immersive stories, and it looks more like levels of a game, which the audience should play with their minds (Pham, 2018). Meanwhile, the fact that she is concerned with social harm in safe fantasy spaces mirrors American discussions surrounding internet anonymity, child protection, and corporate control of data in general (Selim, 2022). Through her technical literacy and creative involvement with

virtual worlds, Haley employs *The Nether* to suggest the idea that technology will never have the ability to separate fantasy and real-world implications for victims, perpetrators, and bystanders in the present day.

The Nether is presented at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Los Angeles in 2013, before receiving its European premiere at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 2014 (Haley, 2013, p. 7). The play has five characters: a detective named Morris, a programmer named Sims who appears in the virtual world as “Papa,” a guest named Woodnut, a middle-aged science teacher named Doyle, and a child avatar named Iris. The play also operates across two settings that never physically meet: the Interrogation Room, where the real, embodied, legally accountable self is questioned, and the Hideaway, the virtual Victorian realm within the Nether where that same self assumes another shape entirely (Haley, 2013, p. 7).

The underlying plot of *The Nether* emerges gradually across sixteen scenes and an epilogue, moving back and forth between these two worlds. Sims, a successful and outwardly respectable businessman, has built and operates a private realm called the Hideaway, accessible only to “Guests” who log in under an identity-masking encryption so total that even Sims himself does not know who enters (Haley, 2013, p. 33). Within the Hideaway, Guests may choose from a range of adult appearances, but the children, including the central child character Iris, all “look the same no matter who is behind them” (Haley, 2013, p. 28), since their features were drawn from a real child Sims once knew and could not stop fixating on. Detective Morris, working for an investigative unit of *the Nether*, has gone undercover under the login of “Woodnut,” sent into the Hideaway specifically to gather evidence against Sims. Through a parallel character, Doyle, a real-life science teacher in his sixties who has, for years, logged in as “Iris,” the play reveals that the avatar the audience first takes for an innocent little girl is, in fact, a digitally re-skinned adult man that performing a relationship he experiences as entirely genuine (Haley, 2013, p. 55). As Woodnut grows attached to “Iris” in-world, and as Morris’s

interrogation of both Sims and Doyle intensifies, the boundary the play has built between the embodied, accountable self and the coded, consequence-free avatar collapses; Doyle, unable to bear the loss of the only self he felt was authentically his, takes his own life after being separated from the Hideaway, and Sims is ultimately compelled to surrender his server's location (Haley, 2013, p. 90).

This chapter argues that *The Nether* is best read not merely as a cautionary tale about online predation, but as a deliberate theatrical experiment in posthuman virtual identity: a structured demonstration of what happens to the humanist subject once the self can be relocated, multiplied, and re-skinned inside code. Haley's own background as a writer for interactive media and video games (Pham, 2018) positions her uniquely to dramatize identity as something assembled from "prescribed looks" and rule sets rather than given by birth or biology (Haley, 2013, p. 9), echoing Hayles's (1999) account of the posthuman body as a kind of original prosthesis rather than the seat of selfhood. The play's two-world structure stages exactly the condition Turkle (1995) describes in cyberspace, where identity becomes "multiple and fluid" rather than singular and fixed, since Sims is Papa, Doyle is Iris, and Morris is Woodnut, each character that carry a doubled existence that the play insists the audience hold in mind simultaneously. Braidotti's (2013, 2019) posthuman subject, relational, embodied, and accountable rather than purely rational and autonomous, is precisely the model the Hideaway's inhabitants fail to meet, since Sims explicitly markets his realm as "an opportunity to live outside of consequence" (Haley, 2013, p. 21). And the play's refusal to depict its most disturbing acts directly onstage, choosing instead testimony and implication, stages what Lyotard's postmodern aesthetics calls the unrepresentable sublime: an experience too ethically vast to be rendered, only gestured toward (Popat, 2016). Read together, these four lenses offer that *The Nether* dramatizes the central crisis of posthuman theory: once the self can be coded,

duplicated, and detached from the body that legally and morally answers for it, the humanist guarantees of identity, consequence, and accountability no longer hold.

The identity crisis instigated by the omnipresent digital technology has found its most explicit and moralistically challenging ruralisation in its current theatre with the play. At the beginning of the play, the playwright addresses the time as “Soon” and the nature of the place which is the “NATHER REALM” as “1. Another world for mythical creatures 2. Demon world 3. A dimension of Evil or Imagination” (Haley, 2013, pp. 4-5). The fragmentation of identity that structures the entire play is announced in its very first exchange, when Morris interrogates Sims over which version of his life she is addressing: “Sims: I want to go home. Morris: Which home? Sims: I need to speak with my family. Morris: Which family?” (Haley, 2013, p. 9).

The doubled, unanswerable nature of Morris’s questions establishes from the outset that Sims, like every Hideaway user, no longer possesses a single, locatable self. In sixteen scenes and epilogue, the setting of the play would be between an interrogation room which is the real world and the Hideaway as it is called “In-World” the virtual world. It starts in the investigation room where detective Morris questions Mr. Sims. Mr. Sims who programmed a realm in which users login without being recorded, creating a character with a set of prescribed looks to enter the Hideaway where they find a faultlessly dressed man stroking the face of one of the children, a little girl. In this realm, the main characters are the Papa which is presented by Mr. Sims himself and Iris as a nine years old girl in the Hideaway but in real world it’s a played by a user named Cedric Doyle, a sixty-five years old man, a teacher. In the Hideaway, users have the right to be anonymous and the right to do whatever they want in this world. Morris as an in-world representative leads an investigative unit in *the Nether*, her father was a user and after his death he listed her as the heir of his login in the Hideaway named Thomas Woodnut. She was undercover to gather information about the server and who made it. Mr. Sims programmed the Hideaway in which users can create a wide range of appearance selections except for the

children in the game, they look like the same no matter who is behind them. Their features are taken from the daughter of Mr. Sims's neighbour long time ago when Mr. Sims could not stop thinking about her, then he went to his computer creating that virtual world.

Each character in the play has a virtual version that differs from the real one, as the character list itself establishes by naming Sims as "Sims /Papa" (Haley, 2013, p. 9), and as the plot later confirms for the others: the shared identity of Woodnut is revealed when "Morris returns halfway to herself and finds Doyle missing from the interrogation room," her line marked simply "Woodnut/Morris" (Haley, 2013, p. 65), and Morris tells Sims plainly, "Iris was a sixty-five-year-old man... His name was Cedric Doyle" (Haley, 2013, p. 66). The scenes are written moving from the real world to the virtual, the play's own setting naming both realms at once, "An interrogation room and the Hideaway" (Haley, 2013, p. 9), presenting how the actions in the virtual world affect the real one, as Sims himself warns Morris, "You don't know what you do, Detective, putting me out into the world" (Haley, 2013, p. 69). After the investigations have questioned Mr Doyle and he discovered Papa's affections are not what he thought of them, and Mr Woodnut is Detective Morris herself, he hanged himself with his belt: Morris reports that "he disengaged from our terminal and hanged himself," adding, "With his belt. The day before we brought you here" (Haley, 2013, p. 67). Mr Sims admits to Detective Morris the server's place, "The server is in an anchored sub off the coast of Malaysia. Latitude 4.795417, Longitude 104.567871" (Haley, 2013, p. 68). The play ends with an epilogue between Iris and Papa but with their real names, opening on the stage direction "Sims and Doyle" (Haley, 2013, p. 70). However, as it mentioned, the play is staged in a future world which is not so distant, the setting itself given only as "Time / Soon" (Haley, 2013, p. 9), and has turned into a fully simulated world full of sensory virtual reality called the Nether, which is driven by the internet, since Sims himself locates its origin there: "The most popular content when the Nether was called the internet? Porn" (Haley, 2013, p. 33). It directly plays the clash

between the autonomous and rational subject of the humanist philosophy and the fluid and decentred virtual identity of technology, voiced when Sims insists that "the Nether becomes our contextual framework for being" (Haley, 2013, p. 18).

The combined framework employed in this chapter to analyze the case of *The Nether* in terms of how the chapter dramatizes the fragmentation of the self is Critical Posthumanism (by Rosi Braidotti, N. Katherine Hayles) and Postmodern Theory (by Jean-Francois Lyotard). The main conflict is the disturbing assumption of the play that the physical body and legal identity of the user should be divorced from the virtually embodied avatar, resulting in the perilous destruction of repercussions. The drama reminds humans of the appearance of an alarming new ethical reality by presenting them with extremely transgressive actions, which take place without a real-life threat. *The Nether* eventually anticipates the extreme urgency of developing strong digital ethics in a cultural environment where the subject can be made infinitely duplicated and the technological is present at all times.

3.1 The Architect of Virtuality in Jennifer Haley and the Ethics of Code

Haley's *The Nether* repeatedly portray the ethical consequences of emerging technologies, particularly virtual identity environment. Her work frequently addresses the conflict of code versus consequence in forewarning many of the ethical dilemmas that have since gained mass coverage in discourses of virtual reality (VR) and the Metaverse. Haley's plays thus serve as thought experiments, which bring into actual existence the abstract menace of technological freedom. In *The Nether*, the humanist subject grounded in unique and rational responsibility collapses. But what replaces it is not Braidotti's posthuman subject. For Braidotti, the posthuman is not simply what remains once the body is left behind; it is a relational, embodied, embedded, affective, and accountable entity, explicitly opposed to any fantasy of transcendental, disembodied consciousness (Braidotti, 2019). Measured against that standard, the inhabitants of the Hideaway do not represent an alternative, technologically updated form

of subjectivity so much as a regression: a Cartesian dualism restaged in digital form, in which the mind's freedom is purchased by declaring the body irrelevant. Doyle states this position outright: "Our bodies are ninety-nine per cent space. Physical sensation is inconsequential" (Haley, 2013, p. 27). This is not Braidotti's posthuman speaking; it is the oldest humanist gesture, the elevation of a disembodied, unaccountable consciousness above the body it inhabits, now simply relocated to a server. Morris voices the play's counter-position, insisting, "Sensation is our gateway... to understanding the rules of the world" (Haley, 2013, p. 27) closer to the embodied, relational ethics Braidotti calls for. Yet even Morris is not exempt: she later confesses, "I didn't like the Hideaway. I loved it. I wanted to stay there for ever" (Haley, 2013, p. 69), showing that no character in the play successfully occupies Braidotti's posthuman position; the pull toward disembodied, consequence-free hedonism is universal, and accountability survives, if at all, only as an external, punitive structure imposed by detectives and servers, not as an internalized relational ethic.

Sims's defence of the Hideaway's reality to Morris, "Just because it's virtual doesn't mean it isn't real... As the Nether becomes our contextual framework for being, don't you think it's a bit out of date to say it isn't real?" (Haley, 2013, p. 18), should be read in this light: not as an articulation of Braidotti's posthuman subject, but as Sims performing the informational turn Hayles identifies, treating the body's physical absence as irrelevant once an informational substrate has supplanted it, precisely in order to evade the embodied accountability Braidotti's model would demand of him. The play's critique, then, is not that its characters have become posthuman and are somehow deficient; it is that they have embraced Hayles's posthuman *condition* as a means of escaping Braidotti's posthuman *ethics*, and the horror of *The Nether* lies exactly in that gap.

The play raises the question of the possibility of the humanist bases of morality surviving when the self is an infinitely duplicable and disposable digital avatar. The critics

think that “there is an inherent moral dilemma in VR’s embodied experience of presence/absence, combined with the ability to do the undoable, which could be taken to extremes alarmingly quickly and easily” in the social setting (Popat, 2016, p. 378). In this way, Haley uses the stage to demonstrate the ambiguities of being real in the world where each individual “confuses what it means to be real in a world obsessed with digitization and contributes to the transhumanist discourse regarding the ethical and moral ramifications of transcending the human condition in a post-Internet environment” that keeps on changing over time (Fouad Selim, 2022, p. 300). In this respect, *The Nether* is an exploration of the psychological and social implications of providing the posthuman subject with unlimited power in a closed technological system.

Additionally, Judith Butler contends that gender is not a fixed essence but something produced through the ongoing repetition of behaviours, gestures, and speech acts that conform to socially recognized norms “gender is not an innate quality but rather a performance enacted through repeated behaviours, gestures, and speech that align with socially established norms” (Butler, 1999, p. 179). According to Mustafa Güneş (2024), this repeated performance manufactures the appearance of a coherent, stable self, which in turn upholds the social expectations attached to gender and identity more broadly. For Butler, people behave in ways shaped by internalized social norms, and this behaviour sustains the impression that those norms point to some “true” underlying identity, yet that identity is itself a fabrication, produced and held together through bodily signs and other forms of discourse rather than expressed from some pre-existing core (Butler, 1999, p. 173). Güneş (2024) extends this logic beyond gender alone, argues that the same performative mechanism governs social, professional, and cultural identity more generally. He locates this dynamic at the centre of *The Nether*, where characters’ identities in the physical world and their identities in the virtual realm both rely on this same repetitive, constructed performance.

This is visible from the play's own character list, which defines each figure by a socially sanctioned role rather than an inner essence: Sims is introduced as "a successful businessman," Morris as "a young female detective," and Doyle as "a middle-aged science teacher" (Haley, 2013, p. 9). In ordinary life, the performers either keep reenacting roles long sanctioned by their society, or, recognizing the repetitive and constructed nature of those roles, attempt instead to fashion new ones that feel more truly their own. Doyle's repeated performance of the sanctioned "teacher" role is made explicit when he recalls, "I was considered one of the top teachers in the country, an inspiration to future scientists" (Haley, 2013, p. 26), a professional identity he goes on reciting even as its social conditions collapse around him. Sims, likewise, defends his socially unremarkable, repeatable in-world routine to Morris: "I maintain my in-world life. I tend my garden" (Haley, 2013, p. 18). Within the Nether's virtual space, by contrast, characters take up roles that diverge sharply from their offline lives, and their avatars come to express versions of selfhood that are no longer held in check by social convention.

The character list itself marks this divergence, giving each avatar a description with no relation to the performer's offline role: Doyle's avatar is "a shining little girl" named Iris, and Morris's avatar is "a fresh-faced guest" named Woodnut (Haley, 2013, p. 9) an adult man performing childhood, and a young female detective performing a young man. Sims's avatar, Papa, greets arrivals with a warmth and theatricality entirely absent from Sims's guarded interrogation-room speech: "My good sir! Welcome to the Hideaway!" (Haley, 2013, p. 23). Morris's avatar shows the same rupture from her offline register: where Detective Morris speaks in clipped procedural demands, Woodnut tells Iris, with unguarded tenderness, "I will make sure you and your family are looked after. Everything I said, back in the room, was real" (Haley, 2013, p. 65) a self permitted to feel, and to say so, only once released from the social convention binding its offline counterpart.

This sets up, in Güneş's (2024) reading, a tension between the roles people performs publicly and the roles they keep hidden, and with it, a difficulty in determining which of these competing identities should be considered the “real” author of an action, whether harmful or helpful. The Hideaway, designed by a software developer as a fully realized virtual world, is built precisely to support this kind of identity experimentation: its emotional and sensory realism encourages participants to set aside the limits of their offline lives and try on new personas. Güneş (2024) stresses that technology in the play is never incidental scenery; it actively shapes and contests the characters' identities, which is what allows the play to function as intermedial theatre (p. 217). Through the Hideaway's design, users can step away from the constraints of age, gender, and physical appearance, to choose avatars that let them inhabit new selves and interact with others under the supervision of the realm's creator, Sims, known to others as Papa, a name that deliberately recalls the life-simulation video game *The Sims*, first released in 2000.

The Hideaway's blend of immersive technology and deliberate design choices, Güneş (2024) argues, makes the experience feel convincingly authentic, which has the effect of blurring any clear line between virtual interaction and real interaction. This authenticity is precisely what allows characters to act on their most private desires free of judgment or punishment, strengthening their emotional investment in their adopted personas. Because the simulation is so persuasive, the Hideaway becomes, for its participants, a space in which they actively construct their sense of self and their picture of the world, ultimately rendering them, in effect, beings independent of their physical bodies. Doyle is cited as an example of someone who registers this broader societal shift, referencing the in-world “Single School Act” and noting that education within the Nether has moved entirely toward game-based learning (Haley, 2013, p. 22). Doyle elaborates on this point further:

Our bodies are ninety-nine percent space. Physical sensation is inconsequential. [...]
But there are no longer physical barriers to that contact. Now we may communicate with anyone, through any form we choose. And this communication – this experience of each other – is the root of consciousness. It is the universe wanting to know itself. Can't you see what a wonder it is that we may interact outside our bodies? It's as revolutionary as – discovering fire! (Haley, 2013, pp. 22–23)

From this, Güneş (2024) concludes that, lacking any physical contact, the Hideaway's participants come to prize a Baudrillardian hyperreality over literal truth, precisely because that hyperreality is shaped to match their genuine desires and sense of self.

Building on this, one can turn to how the Hideaway's three central figures, Sims as Papa, Morris as Woodnut, and Doyle as Iris, each adopt personas that surface darker and more intricate desires than their offline selves display. Sims deliberately designs the realm's Victorian aesthetic so that both he and his guests can experience nostalgia, safety, and innocence in a setting where they need not fear social or legal consequences. When Morris, during interrogation, dismisses the Hideaway as mere unreality, a realm of “shade,” Sims pushes back, insisting “Just because it's virtual doesn't mean it isn't real” (Haley, 2013, p. 13). Güneş (2024) reads this response as broadly Cartesian “*Cogito ergo sum*” in spirit: Sims locates the truth or value of an experience not in whether it can be observed or touched, but in the mental and emotional engagement of the person undergoing it, which means the physical body, so central to constraining identity offline, loses its authority once virtual reality enters the picture (as cited in Güneş, 2024, p. 218). Sims's avatar, Papa, becomes the vessel for his paedophilic desires and his wish for control and freedom, grants him an influence over the virtual world that his real-world self could never wield. Given that he reportedly spends “an average of sixteen hours a day in the Nether” (Haley, 2013, p. 12), it is suggested that Sims has

come to regard Papa, not his embodied self, as his authentic identity. He knows that his offline self would never be accepted as he is, Sims confesses to Morris:

Look, Detective, I am sick. I am sick and have always been sick and there is no cure. No amount of cognitive behavioral therapy or relapse deterrent or even chemical castration will sway me from my urges toward children. I am sick and no matter how much I loved him or her I would make my own child sick and I see this, I see this – not all of us see this – but I have been cursed with both compulsion and insight. I have taken responsibility for my sickness. I am protecting my neighbor's children and my brother's children and the children I won't allow myself to have, and the only way I can do this is because I've created a place where I can be my .. self! (Haley, 2013, p. 19)

To characterize this moment as a deeply manipulative act of self-justification: Sims frames the Hideaway as a kind of pressure valve that releases tension built up from urges, he cannot act on in society, to ease his guilt by insisting that without it he would do real harm to those around him, including the people he loves. His authentic self, plainly incompatible with society's ethical standards, is the self he is free to enact only inside the Hideaway. Güneş (2024) draws from this a broader claim about the play's logic of dual performativity: social roles are not handed down or fixed in advance, but produced through what a person actually does and builds, which means Sims's public persona is no less constructed or "illusory" than the one he performs in the Nether, both are equally products of performance (p. 218).

To turn to Cedric Doyle, whose avatar Iris dramatizes this same conflict from another angle. Offline, Doyle is a college professor who “won a Distinguished Teaching Award in Science” (Haley, 2013, p. 9); inside the Hideaway, he becomes a young girl that embodies his longing for innocence, youth, and forbidden intimacy. This avatar gives Doyle access to interactions that would be both illegal and unethical outside the virtual world, illustrates how virtual spaces let individuals step past society's constraints and assemble selves that more

closely mirror their hidden inclinations. *The Nether* appears to offer Doyle freedom from embodied identity, but the legal prohibition against transferring his existent into virtual environment shows that virtual identity remains materially and institutionally dependent upon the embodied World. The anonymity his avatar provides lets him set aside his physical appearance, age, and social standing, his shift from Doyle into Iris reflects his need to construct a selfhood unbound by the limits of the physical world. Doyle intends to abandon his physical body entirely and “cross over” permanently into the Hideaway as a shade to take the form of Iris (Haley, 2013, p. 23). When this proves legally impossible, Doyle, devastated, withdraws from Morris's interrogation altogether, asks only, “May I keep her?” in reference to Iris, before lamenting, “I have nothing to say” (Haley, 2013, p. 10). The play expresses the continuing dependence of virtual identity on embodied existence.

Thus, Doyle's preference for remaining a shade as Iris exposes the conflict between what society expects of him and what he privately desires. *The Nether's* immersive technology, in this reading, allows Doyle not merely to create an identity that departs sharply from his real-world role, but to inhabit that identity fully. This split between Doyle's respected public life and his private virtual self speaks, for Güneş (2024), to a larger argument about the instability of selfhood and the limits of ethical conduct in digital spaces (p. 219). Doyle's decision to give up any real-world resolution in favour of permanent virtual existence is read not simply as withdrawal, but as a profound transformation that calls into question the very foundations of identity and morality in a digitized age.

Also, to extend the analysis to Morris, whose transformation into the avatar Woodnut likewise demonstrates how technology enables an exploration of identity that the real world forecloses. As Woodnut, Morris can act in ways that directly contradict her socially conforming role as a detective offline. Though a female investigator in reality, she takes on a male persona within the Hideaway, and the play implies that, through Woodnut, she becomes entangled in

paedophilic activity and exhibits sadistic tendencies during her time in the virtual realm. After Iris is described as suddenly lifting “her dress over her head and stand[ing] in her knickers”, the scene cuts away, and the play resumes with Morris reading aloud from the investigation report (Haley, 2013, pp. 28–29):

I approach the little girl and fold her into my arms. Her skin is covered in goosebumps, which quickly fade into my embrace. [Looking up] The next section of the report is classified, but our agent did collect the evidence we needed to pursue this case. He confessed to me in person this experience left him traumatized. (Haley, 2013, p. 29)

Güneş (2024) points out that while Woodnut's deep absorption in the Hideaway is evident here, the text leaves unspoken exactly what followed Iris's undressing; Morris instead reads this excerpt from the report without revealing to Sims that she herself was Woodnut (p. 219). The gap between Morris, the female detective, and Woodnut, the male offender, exemplifies identity's performative character, to show how virtual platforms open space for people to assume entirely different selves. Morris becomes so absorbed in the realm that she is left traumatized by her own complicity, sustained only by the demands of the investigation. When Papa notices that Woodnut and Iris have grown too close, he forces Woodnut to take up an axe and kill Iris, dismembers her. Morris, as Woodnut, is left in shock, blood and gore covers his hands after the act. He records in his report:

A giggle at the door, and she reappears, coming toward me with her arms open – and I lift the axe and do it again. And I do it again. And I do it again. I want her to stop coming so I know I've done something. But she keeps coming, and now it's not just my hands covered in blood, it's my face, it's my body, I can taste it in my mouth, it's so exquisite I am crying, I have never felt so much with every nerve, felt so much, felt so much ... feeling. (Haley, 2013, p. 58)

Morris's simultaneous horror and fascination at Iris's repeated return. Morris wants the killing to register as final, as proof that something has actually been accomplished, yet Iris's persistence forces Morris to confront the fact that not only this violent act, but every prior tender moment shared with Iris, was illusory all along. Although Morris's feelings within the Hideaway, that includes pain, love, hatred, disgust, even physical sensations like sweat and the smell of gore, are subjectively real to her, none of it corresponds to anything that has actually happened; all of it occurs only within her own mind. This drives Morris, as Woodnut, to a despairing reflection: "But if there has been no consequence, there has been no meaning – no meaning between her and myself, between myself and myself – and if there has been meaning, then I am a monster" (Haley, 2013, p. 58). Güneş (2024) interprets this as the moment Morris's search for substance within cyberspace tips into a full existential crisis, unable to locate the meaning she seeks (p. 220).

Moreover, Morris is described as caught in a recurring internal debate over whether any of these virtual events carry real significance. Though she initially insists they do not, she later admits to Cedric Doyle that he was her "first love" (Haley, 2013, p. 61). A disclosure that reveals just how deeply the Hideaway's events affected and traumatized her, contrary to her earlier denials. He also notes a recurring motif involving an axe: Papa repeatedly asks Iris whether Woodnut has used it yet, and on learning he has not, manipulates Iris into pressuring Woodnut to do so. According to Güneş (2024), this axe is Papa's safeguard against participants becoming so fully immersed in the Hideaway that they risk endangering themselves or the virtual realm itself (p. 220). As a further control mechanism, Papa removes "naughty" avatars by sending them "to boarding school," a phrase that is identified as deliberately steeped in Victorian tradition (Haley, 2013, pp. 39–40). The play further reveals, per Morris's report, that Iris had predecessors named Barnaby, Donald, and Antonia, all designed to evoke "an era associated with ... innocence" (Haley, 2013, p. 6).

It is observed that even though Morris functions within the play as a detective working to uphold justice and hold offenders like Sims and Doyle accountable, she eventually discloses that she herself endured parental abuse as a child, and that the professional and social identity she occupies is not one she would have chosen for herself. She quotes a passage from the American poet Theodore Roethke:

Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.
My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,
Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is I?
A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.
The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
And one is One, free in the tearing wind. (Haley, 2013, p. 52)

Morris recognizes her own inner conflict around identity and self-perception in this passage, found among the underlined pages of her father's poetry collection. Roethke's lines mirror her sense of being split between two selves: Morris, the female detective shaped by childhood abuse, and Woodnut, the male offender she becomes in cyberspace. Güneş (2024) underscores the irony that someone once victimized by abuse has, within the Hideaway, become an abuser herself (p. 220). Despite her official role enforcing the law, her own unresolved trauma leaves her sympathetic toward the tangled desires and divided selves she investigates, not unlike the speaker of Roethke's poem, or Doyle and Sims themselves, all of whom the play portrays as wrestling with their inner identities.

3.2 The Posthuman Duplex, Fragmentation, and the Technological Divide

The Nether dramatizes the fragmentation of the posthuman subject. The play occupies two discontinuous, crosscut drama paces, such as the cold, sterile Interface (the real space of the physical interrogation room) and stylized Victorian environment, Victorian-period Hideaway (the virtual space of the Nether). The disconnection between the person and the cold,

compartmentalized people, the physical body in the Interface, and the conscious avatar in the Hideaway is the vehicle of the strategic theme, just another way of realizing the conceptual change that Hayles has opposed. Essentially separating the pathways through which information has been deprived of its corpus in the world of cybernetics. Hayles (1999) manages to demonstrate that the posthuman defines the body as the original prosthesis or the supreme and most fundamental appliance, the bearer of the information.

It is expressed that the dissent and decentring of the subject involved in the Lyotardian and critical posthumanist criticism. Sims tries to discontinue the aspects throughout. It reveals that it occurs in situations where the “relational and affective subjects are immanent to the very conditions we are trying to change,” which is the position taken concerning posthumanism (Braidotti, 2019, p. 42). Papa, the virtual character of Sims, is nothing but an act of desire that has no inhibitor in the form of physical bodies and social virtues. The virtual identity is therefore corroborated as a novel, distinct self, a personality whose actual existence is essentially based on what the computer does to humans, how it transforms... humans’ most fundamental ideas of themselves (Turkle, 1995). Through the extreme contrast between Sims, the exhausted and powerless man, and Papa, the powerful and idealized leader of the virtual manor, Haley demonstrates the identity multiplicity and role differentiation, proving that they are “communications that define, premise, and prime the communicative interactions” among individuals (Schumacher, 2022, p. 2). The stage, anew, becomes the posthuman duplex and demonstrates this division of the subject, which is to be conceptualized as a prosthetic being, which is constitutively reliant on technology. Sims requires the Nether (the machine) to make Papa (the desired self) true, which affirms the cyborg assemblage in which the physical body is only the biological wetware of which the informational software is the only access. Sims makes this dependency explicit in his closing confession to Morris in Scene Three, where the avatar is named outright as the only viable site of selfhood:

I am sick and have always been sick and there is no cure... I have taken responsibility for my sickness. I am protecting my neighbour's children and my brother's children and the children I won't allow myself to have, and the only way I can do this is because I've created a place where I can be my fucking self! (Haley, 2013, p. 19).

The profanity is not incidental; it marks the single moment in the interrogation where Sims's in-world composure breaks down entirely, suggesting that the avatar, not the body in the chair, is where his most authentic affect resides.

The ethics of virtual consequence is the gist of the conflict of *The Nether* is one question pointed directly at by the notion of incredulity towards metanarratives as expressed by Lyotard. The scene of the interrogation between Morris (as a symbol of the authority of the humanist, so-called universal morality symbolized in law) and Sims (as a symbol of the postmodern deconstruction of this symbol in the name of technology) brings out the breach of not only the truth of the shared reality but also the illusion of that reality. Morris calls for an ethical and legal framework in which sexual abuse remains wrong regardless of whether it occurs through physical or virtual means. Morris frames the Hideaway's virtual acts using the same criminal categories that apply in the physical world from the very start of the interrogation: "Solicitation. Rape. Sodomy. Murder. These are heavy charges, Mr Sims" (Haley, 2013, p. 13). When Sims tries to place his realm outside the reach of real law "My realm is clearly designated Adult... This is in accordance with the statute on consensual role play" (Haley, 2013, p. 19) Morris does not accept virtuality or "consensual role play" as a legal shield; she continues to pursue prosecution rather than treating his defence as settled, and Sims himself registers this as a genuine legal threat, protesting, "This is against the law!" when she moves to confiscate his server (Haley, 2013, p. 19). Her clearest statement of principle comes later, when she rejects the idea that harm to a virtual "image" is any less real than harm to a person: "using her image revictimises her over and over again" (Haley, 2013, p. 50) insists that the virtual reproduction

of abuse still constitutes ongoing victimization, not a harmless simulation. She extends the same logic of inescapable accountability to Doyle, refusing to let him treat the Hideaway as a space where real-world responsibilities dissolve: "You are! You are responsible to her for ever!" (Haley, 2013, p. 60).

Sims always refutes this epic narrative by reminding her of the technical reality of the Nether. "MORRIS: I can tell you from experience they're not half as good as they're advertised. I've seen bodies, after only one year, that are unrecognizable" (Haley, 2013, p. 28). This rhetoric fight represents a critical failure of the mutual language game of morality (Suler, 2015). Sims attempts to conceptualise virtual actions as detached from material consequence while Morris integration expresses the persistence of embodiment and material consequence. Sims' argument is the idea expressed by Hayle that the information has lost its body, therefore invoking an exceptional moral zone in which the unembodied actions are free of consequences.

Sims defends the Nether as the land of "pure release," the place where the desires that are not accepted in the real world are compromised in a way that is harmless to everyone. "SIMS: You must have spent time in those collegiate fantasy realms" (Haley, 2013, p. 33). Therefore, it enables us to "contemplate the future of legal practices in dealing with crimes that differ from what we know," hence extending humans' intellectual capacities (Pham, 2018, p. 2).

This digital ethics poses an immediate challenge to the anthropocentrism of humanism, which proves that the posthuman subject is no longer responsible to the model of the "ruthless pursuit of universal, rational human 'freedom'" in different forms (Braidotti, 2013, p. 17). The moral self is re-coded by Sims, indicating that the real, non-essential self is the one that is expressed and fulfilled through the avatar. This reaffirms the fact brought out by Turkle (1995) that in cyberspace, the self is multiple and fluid in that the virtual self is as legitimate as the body. The schism generates an internal moral quandary in the embodied presence/absence

experience of virtual reality (VR) and a possibility to perform the impossible, which can go within cataclysmic speed and effort (Popat, 2016). Finally, the play destabilizes established assumptions by digitizing itself, which fits into the posthumanist discussion on the ethical and moral consequences of surpassing the human condition in the post-internet world and fulfils Sims as a self-proclaimed prosthetic being formed by the technological assemblage, not ethical responsibility (Wolfe, 2010). It is an intense theatrical show of the impossibility of being the so-called relational, embodied, and embedded, affective and accountable being in order to survive morally.

Identity construction in *The Nether* can be analysed through three interrelated dimensions, though interrelated in practice, phenomena that the play stages simultaneously: identity as embodiment (the question of where the self resides), identity as performance (the question of how the self is enacted), and identity as accountability (the question of who answers for the self's actions). Each maps onto a major strand of posthuman theory, and Haley's dramaturgy can be read as a structured test of all three at once.

To examine identity as embodiment in which the avatar as informational self, one can rely on Hayles's (1999) foundational claim that the posthuman subject treats the body as "the original prosthesis" rather than the ground of selfhood is dramatized in the architecture of the Hideaway, where Guests access a separate, parallel embodiment with its own sensory register. Sims defends this displacement directly: "Just because it's virtual doesn't mean it isn't real... As the Nether becomes our contextual framework for being, don't you think it's a bit out of date to say it isn't real?" (Haley, 2013, p. 16). The line performs precisely the move Hayles identifies: the physical body's absence is reframed not as a deficiency but as an upgrade, since the "contextual framework" of code now does the work, the body once did. Doyle's account of crossing over reinforces this informational logic in explicitly anti-corporeal terms: "We are trying to cast off the limitations of physicality and become pure spirit" (Haley, 2013, p. 41).

Read through Hayles, this is not metaphysical aspiration but a precise redescription of the posthuman wager, that information can be extracted from its material substrate without loss.

Moreover, Identity as performance can be understood through Turkle's (1995) account of online identity as multiple and fluid rather than singular and stable, finds its clearest dramatization in the play's doubling of every major character: Sims is also Papa, Doyle is also Iris, Morris is also Woodnut. The play does not present these as masks concealing a "real" self underneath; it presents them as co-existing, equally weighted performances. Iris articulates this fluidity as liberation when she tells Woodnut, "It's okay to forget who you think you are. And discover who you might be" (Haley, 2013, p. 26). The verb "forget" treats identity as something that can be actively set down rather than an inescapable core, it reframes selfhood as a possession one carries, not a fact one is, so it can simply be suspended. The second verb "discover" implies identity is not invented in the moment but already exists, latent and plural, waiting beneath the one self currently in use, the self is decentred into multiple possible selves rather than a single essence. While the last verb "might be" shifts the grammar from the indicative to the conditional: not "who you are" but who you could be. This modal uncertainty replaces fixed being with open, speculative becoming, which Turkle's account helps to complicate by emphasising the multiplicity and fluidity of online identity. Sims makes the same claim of his own self-construction in his confession to Morris: "the only way I can do this is because I've created a place where I can be my fucking self" (Haley, 2013, p. 19). A sentence whose grammar (a created place in which to be himself) collapses the humanist distinction between authentic self and performed self that Turkle's framework predicts will not survive sustained immersion in networked identity.

Additionally, identity as accountability which is the posthuman subject's ethical deficit that Braidotti's (2013, 2019) defined. The posthuman subject that is explained not merely by its multiplicity but by its relationality, it remains, in her account, "immanent to the very

conditions we are trying to change” (Braidotti, 2019, p. 42), that means it cannot detach itself from ethical entanglement simply by changing substrate. *The Nether* stages the Hideaway’s residents failing this relational test precisely where they believe they have succeeded. Sims explicitly markets the realm as freedom from relational consequence: “an opportunity to live outside of consequence” (Haley, 2013, p. 21). Morris’s rebuttal supplies the play’s clearest statement of Braidotti’s countervailing claim that the virtual is never ethically neutral: “Images – ideas – create reality. Everything around us – our houses, our bridges, our wars, our peace treaties – began as figments in someone’s mind before becoming a physical or social fact” (Haley, 2013, p. 31). The dramatic irony of the play’s ending, Doyle’s death following the collapse of his Hideaway identity, is the text’s own verdict on this debate: the avatar’s consequence-free status was always illusory, and the cost merely deferred onto the embodied self that Sims insists is irrelevant.

3.3 The Unpresentable Sublime in Staging Affective Code

The Nether challenges the boundaries of theatrical representation, which tries to perform the unpresentable, that which is either too large or too complicated or too hideous to perceive and encompass within the established aesthetics of the theatre. In the Hideaway, the technological mediation of violence creates an ethical and representation excess that cannot be contained within the categories governing this physical world. The play’s most distinguishing acts, such as the sexual abuse and the ritualized murder of the child avatar, Iris, are not depicted on stage. They are instead conveyed using testimony, implication, and the psychological burden of the actors moving between the interface and the Hideaway in which the “values of progress [are] supported by the imperfection and sufferings of humanity” (Thomsen, 2013, p. 2). This is the knowledge that the play presents by challenging humans’ values when faced with this technological overflow. Morris articulates the play’s central strongest challenges to Sims’s claim that virtual acts carry “no consequence” when she insists on the causal power of

unpresentable images: “Images – ideas – create reality. Everything around us – our houses, our bridges, our wars, our peace treaties – began as figments in someone’s mind before becoming a physical or social fact” (Haley, 2013, p. 31). Her argument inverts the logic of the digital sublime: rather than the unpresentable image being neutralised by its lack of body, it is precisely because the image precedes and produces the physical fact that the Hideaway’s atrocities cannot be ethically quarantined as “nothing but images.”

The staging of the play places the spectator with the audience to a Lyotardian experience of aesthetics. The Sublime does not come as pleasure but as a failure of imagination, since “social interactions in cyberspace are fraught with misunderstandings and are often much briefer than those in real life,” in which the mind gets to understand the overpowering concept (Suler, 2015, p. 4). The ethical problem of *The Hideaway* is the enormous, formulaic possibility of it all: of knowing that the obscenity can be repeated and that it has no consequences of the user (Cheng et al., 2023). Based on the arguments, the play tries to address the subjectivities of the digital and posthuman that are forming when the technology enables the absence, detachment, and unlimited repetition of the troubling events (Pham, 2018). It is the lack of this that is the horror.

Moreover, an example of conflicting affective codes is dramatized in the character of Iris, the child avatar. She is not a human child but carefully coded software that is set to excel at a traumatic script. When Woodnut asks whether her resurrections after the axe hurt her, she answers with a line that exposes affect as a tuneable setting rather than an involuntary response: “I feel only as much pain as I want” (Haley, 2013, p. 26). The play later complicates even this claim of control: reflecting on the same exchange after Papa strikes her, Iris admits, “Mr Woodnut once asked me if I feel pain. And I said to him, only as much as I want. But I see now, that’s not quite the pain he meant” (Haley, 2013, p. 80). The gap between the pain Iris is coded to regulate and the pain she discovers she cannot regulate – the pain of being controlled,

struck, and discarded – is the precise site of the play’s affective sublime. This effect qualifies what the computer does to humans of conditioning their emotional systems to react to programmed effects as if they were real experiences (Turkle, 1995). It is the “cyborg moment” on stage, when the spectators are emotionally fused into a “moment that networks of connection among people on the planet” with the artificially created object, proving the so-called natural moral dilemma of VR’s embodied presence/absence (Haraway, 1985, p. 27). The viewers do not feel the emotions of a suffering child, but they feel the emotions of a simulated suffering that is very successful.

Another dimension is in the eternal becoming of virtual identity and the rejection of mortality. The eternal becoming is the perverse emblem of the child avatar, Iris. She is something that is constantly stuck in place, which cannot age and, practically, cannot be repeated or restored after death. She is struck numerous times again, but as she is killed, she is promptly replicated and restored to be killed again. Iris names this condition herself, with unsettling calm, when she reassures Woodnut before he raises the axe against her: “It’s okay, Mr Woodnut. I always resurrect” (Haley, 2013, p. 67). The line collapses the entire weight of mortality that underwrites human ethical seriousness into a simple statement of software function, and it is this very calm – the absence of fear that should accompany the threat of an axe – that constitutes what Micali calls the “representation of a subhuman creature” depending on the experience itself (Micali, 2019, p. 35). It is the last way out of a consequence, and it is an inherent moral dilemma in the VR embodied experience of presence/absence. Iris has become the posthuman subject of excellence, the identity that has been non-totalized in the form of a repeating series of processes. It is a flowing, multicircular performance and negation of her life that she sees as multiple emergent and fluid selves (Braidotti, 2013). The fact of her existence, which remains always new, refutes the old story of humanity developing and ending. She is the becoming-other (Braidotti, 2013), something that does not fit into the conventional

human parameters of age and life span. The consequence of the virtual world does not exist, and death is just a disruptive state of such informational persistence of the self, according to which the destruction of values is unity to the disruption of mortality (Thomsen, 2013). Such technological promise of continuity weakens the principle of human meaning that is based on the vulnerability of the “prosthetic entity” itself, which confirms the frightening extent of the digital and inhuman subjectivities.

Nevertheless, the end of the play, where Morris, who is a revelation of the old humanist law, is shown to erase the code written by Iris and erase Doyle’s memory of the Nether, showcases the great fragility of this virtual authenticity. “Morris: Listen, I will let you to see Papa again. If he loves you – you- and wants you to cross, I’ll let you stay in the Hideaway together. If not, you will give what you have on him, ... or you’ll never see him again” (Haley, 2013, p. 60). Morris commits the erasure, and it is the final negation of the posthuman becoming: the humanist system trying to recover its power at the expense of universalizing the digital memory, the multiple and fluid self by destroying it physically (Turkle, 1995). It is the erasure of the code of Iris, a program designed to be “very, very sad” presented by an old man who hanged himself, that attests to the fact that in the world where information lost its body, the digital self is easily destroyed with one swab (Hayles, 1999). The lack of choice is the last tragedy of this play, as it points the innate moral quandary in the embodied experience of presence/absence that VR offers (Popat, 2016). The final scenes depict that Doyle cannot bear to be Iris anymore, and it is a sign that technological intervention is able to erase the virtual self, that which is turned into intensely experienced between the void of memory. It teaches the need of the play to be a procedural piece that has to deal with these digital, inhuman subjectivities.

The relationship between avatar performance and the expression of desire is evident in the Hideaway, i.e., a theatrical performance in which the users pose as their virtual characters

themselves. The users lose their real-life personas, concerns, and moral restrictions to become their virtual personas in the Hideaway. It is in this performance that this virtual identity comes to work and is even stronger in most aspects as a self. As Sims states that “I’ve created a place where I can be myself!” and Iris to Woodnut: “It’s okay to forget who you are. And discover who you might be” (Haley, 2013, p. 20, 32). As Turkle put it, in the cyberlife, it has been commented that what one establishes is what one desires to be (Turkle, 1995). The detail that is deceiving about the case is the new reality in *The Nether*. Doyle tells Morris in scene nine that “we are trying to cast off the limitations of physicality and become pure spirit” then as Iris, he claims the same in scene thirteen “we offer a place where you may dismantle everything the world has told you about right and wrong and discover pure relationship” (Haley, 2013, pp. 41, 55). The purest, the most actual aspirations of the users are not only expressed but also experienced in terms of the performance of their avatars, and this is what corroborates the posthuman view of identity as a distributed system and not as an inner centre (Selim, 2022). This strengthens the fact that virtuality destabilizes the distinction between reality and simulation.

Such a significant instance of re-coded agency is provided by Woodnut who develops a relational bond with Iris that remains in force to make him renounce the violent propensity of the Hideaway. “Woodnut: What he shares with you here. But it’s easy here. I only bring this up because, you see, my father was a shade” (Haley, 2013, p. 65). Woodnut decision to break with the fixed patterns of violence can be interpreted as an act of ethical resistance (Micali, 2019). In this case, “identity unfolds as a sophisticated interplay shaped by cultural, historical, and contextual forces,” which determines the typical bonds formed (Slimani, 2024, p. 281). It is how the change in agency in the posthuman world is recoded: change does not occur in the material world only but inside the virtual system of relations (the Hideaway). Although this occurs only digitally, Woodnut already satisfies the requirement of the posthuman subject to

be an effective and responsible being despite being a purely desire-driven figure, while Papa, according to him, talks of simulations.

This substantiation of continuum in the Nether by means of technology establishes a vacuum in the ethical context specifically due to the loss of the consequence on which human morality has always been based. The physical body that the user leaves behind, the so-called prosthetic entity, is no longer important; it is the digital stream of data, the informational self, that is important. Moreover, the assured and recurring rebirth of Iris allows her to have a continuous and stable relationship, which distorts the flowing becoming-other as fluid movement into a closed, repetitive sequence of trauma and regeneration (Selim, 2022). This stagnation in technology, this simulated perennial turnover, highlights the frightening extent of digital and inhuman subjectivities that develop in instances where life and death are washed down the drain into mere lines of code, which can be easily washed away (Micali, 2019). The main caution of the play is the illusion of technology being able to create the shared reality with a weight of consequence on it.

3.4 Man in the Shadow and the Posthuman/Postmodern Confluence

The Nether stands as a manifestation of the posthuman and postmodern confluence within the modern theatre. It is a play that postulates the traditional limits of the humanist subject and the demise of the humanist subject as the result of the confluence of the twin forces of technological capability and philosophical crisis, which together created the shadow of technology (Slimani, 2024). It can be read as a theatrical exploration of the meeting point between posthuman and postmodern thought. The play unsettles the humanist image of the subject as autonomous, rational, and self-contained by presenting identity as distributed, mediated, and technologically configured. Within this, the human figure no longer stands outside the system of representation but is increasingly shaped by digital environments, networked relations, and virtual embodiment. The result is a subject that exists in tension

between material presence and informational existence, between ethical accountability and simulated detachment.

From a posthuman perspective, the play emphasizes the extent to which consciousness and identity are entangled with technological systems. The self is not portrayed as fixed or purely embodied; instead, it appears as something extended through code, interfaces, and avatars. This displacement of the stable human subject suggests that agency in the digital age is no longer grounded only in physical action, but also in the structures that enable, organize, and conceal virtual conduct. Haley uses this condition to expose the fragility of the distinction between the human and the machine, showing that technological mediation has become central to the formation of modern identity.

At the same time, the play is deeply postmodern in its treatment of truth, morality, and authority. It challenges any assumption that universal ethical principles can remain intact within a digitally fragmented world. The conflict in the play reveals how established moral categories become unstable when actions are transferred into virtual space, where consequence is obscured and responsibility is diffused. In this sense, *The Nether* does not merely depict a technological setting; it interrogates the philosophical limits of moral certainty in a culture shaped by simulation, performance, and competing realities.

What emerges from this confluence is a critique of the illusion that digital environments are ethically neutral. Haley presents virtuality as a space where human desire is intensified, reconfigured, and detached from material accountability, but never freed from moral implication. The play therefore suggests that the crisis of identity in the digital era is also a crisis of ethics: when the self becomes networked and dispersed, the grounds of responsibility are altered as well. *The Nether* ultimately exposes the shadow side of technological progress, where posthuman possibility and postmodern uncertainty converge to produce a destabilized sense of the real, the self, and the moral world. The play's final exchange between Morris and

Sims crystallises this destabilization without resolving it. Having extracted the server's coordinates, Morris does not gloat or moralise; she releases Sims with a single, deliberately unadorned sentence: "The world is still the place we have to learn to be. You are free to go, Mr Sims. You are free" (Haley, 2013, p. 90). The line refuses the triumphant closure a humanist courtroom drama would supply. Morris does not claim the Nether is illegitimate or that virtuality itself is the enemy; she insists only that the physical world remains a site that has to be learned, present tense, ongoing – an admission that the posthuman challenge the play has staged is not solved by Sims's arrest, only paused.

In *The Nether*, Jennifer Haley presents a contemporary theatrical questioning of the posthuman condition. The play provides a clear depiction of the fundamental philosophical transformations the theorists represented by Hayles, Braidotti, and Turkle have expressed. Its key conclusion is that the implementation of the cyborgian assemblage, in which the informational is endowed with greater priority than the material, is not a technological mute passage but rather an ontological crisis, which has directly initiated the anthropomorphism of the ethical frameworks underpinning humanism. *The Nether* maintains that the virtual world, instead of a habitat of consequence-free fantasy, is a better real, which redefines the origin of moral agency. The ethical horror of the play lies in the fact that it presents the unrepresentable sublime, the simple ability to transform human desire into affective code and produce simulated trauma infinitely and with an almost endless repeatability. Hitting the audience with the instability of memory and the denial of death committable to digital continuity, Haley forces the discussion of the digital collective. The play's epilogue refuses even the comfort of a clean separation between Sims's real and virtual affections: addressing Doyle now by his given name rather than as Iris, Sims tells him, "You cannot know how much I love you" (Haley, 2013, p. 92). Spoken outside the Hideaway, stripped of Papa's performed paternalism, the line denies the audience the assurance that everything preceding it was merely code; the desire that built

the Hideaway persists in whatever remains of Sims once the avatar is gone. After all, the piece can be said to be a needed intervention within its ability to warn of the moral vacuity that ensues when the flowing, networked self-denounces the responsibility of the flesh.

Chapter Four: Digital Embodiment and Memory Duplication in Jordan Harrison's

***Marjorie Prime* (2014)**

This chapter analyses *Marjorie Prime* by Jordan Harrison from the angle of posthumanism and postmodernism with reference to how the play reformulates the idea of identity, memory, and embodiment in the digital era. It shows how Harrison has transformed domestic space into the subject of philosophical conjecture about the nature of consciousness and mediation of technology. Computerized pictures of deceased beloveds in the form of Holographic Primes of the play represent one such manifestation of the posthuman struggle of presence and absence, authenticity and simulation. Through minimal staging, recursive dialogue and restrained emotion Harrison dramatizes subjectivity collapsing into data patterns and into affective algorithms. *Marjorie Prime* is not subjugated to the dystopian pessimism; it is to the point at the new face of ethics of care constructed around the concept of relationality and not essence. The medium of theatre is translated into a posthuman medium, which is that which both instituted the contradictions of embodied simulation and invited the audience to respond to their own imposition in the digital remembering. Lastly, the play redefines the definition of grief and memory in the technical sense of reviving the dead, meaning that the human race does not survive by perpetuation within the context of biological history but through the records, codes, and emotional rubble it generates.

Harrison (1977-) is a prolific American playwright whose work tends to revolve around the theme of aging, memory, and the influence of novelties of the new technologies in family life. He was born on Bainbridge Island, Seattle, and became an MFA graduate of Brown University after studying playwriting and American studies at Stanford University (Harrison, 2014). Harrison has worked with theatres, including Playwrights Horizons and Actors Theatre of Louisville, and written for television, including the series *Orange Is the New Black* (Falcus & Oró-Piqueras, 2024). His plays often balance small domestic spaces with speculative or even

futurist aspects wherein the characters in ordinary situations are able to address big moral issues. His fascination with the process of people reinventing their histories to survive feelings of remorse, societal pressure, or loss, sometimes combined with the humour and emotional undertones, can be traced in works like *Maple and Vine*, *The Grown-Up*, and *Amazons and Their Men* (Harrison, 2014).

Harrison's career came into place at the time when digital media and biotechnology were transforming the daily routine so fast, and many of his plays tend to react to these cultural changes. According to critics, he is attracted to hypothetical situations that are close to the modern reality, like retro communities that shun technology or shows that replicate the dead (Falcus & Oro-Piqueras, 2024). His writing is minimal and lyrical, with spaces and silence that reflect the holes in memory and communication within his characters. Harrison frequently dwells upon the relationships between generations, particularly between parents and children or adult children and elderly parents, and shows the tensions between care and independence and unresolved resentment (Harrison, 2014). He is also trying with non-linear time and subtle repetitions, which encourages audiences to observe the change in stories when retelling them. His talent of bringing philosophical questions to the commonplace tale has been honoured by awards and fellowships alike.

Marjorie Prime unites Harrison's interests in aging, memory, and technology by introducing a geriatric woman who is communicating with a holograph of her late husband. The play was a response to Harrison's thoughts and ideas about the use of stories and other digital materials by families to preserve the dead (more so in the face of dementia and grieving that changes the narratives as time goes on) (Falcus & Oró-Piqueras, 2024). The realistic but disturbing nature of the Primes, who listen, learn, and retell edited memories, is informed by his experience writing on television and being exposed to the arguments surrounding artificial intelligence (Harrison, 2014). Meanwhile, the domestic small environment also indicates that

Harrison still pays attention to intimate spaces in which large moral problems are personal. According to *Marjorie Prime*, technology cannot eliminate loss but can transform the way people bargain over forgiveness and guilt as well as love, which are the main threads that connect across generations in the greater body of work by Harrison.

Marjorie Prime by Harrison (2014) is a sweeping evaluation of the topic of memory, identity, and the intrusion of artificial intelligence into the small spheres of human experience. It is staged in a near-future setting where technologies are developed enough to recreate the dead in a holographic form; the play addresses the issues of identity and memory becoming fluid, performative, and technologically mediated (Osborne & Jones, 2022). This review places *Marjorie Prime* and the meeting point of posthumanism and postmodernism as a posthuman conceptualization of humanity, and one where memory ceases to be a fixed container of personal truth but becomes a porous database that disrupts the limits of selfhood.

Technology in *Marjorie Prime* is not used as a narrative tool but as a philosophical perspective, a prism of the human condition. The holographic companion of Marjorie, called Walter Prime, turns into the electronic incarnation of her memories, a collection of composed memory fragments. This woman-machine connection resembles the idea proposed by Hayles (1999) in her article “How we became posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics” that information has lost its body, resulting in the new definition of subjectivity as spread over both physical and virtual space. On the same note, the posthuman subject by Braidotti (2013) in her book *The Posthuman* offers a theoretical ground to the audience on how the characters, which is based on the play by Harrison exist in intermediary positions, existing between physical bodies and online forms of existence.

The play also illustrates the incredulity to narrative held by Lyotard’s (1984) book *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge* in the way it eliminates the consistent truth and introduces memory as disjointed discourse. With its piecemeal dialogue, recursive narration,

and holographic appearances, *Marjorie Prime* transforms into a postmodern memory play, dramatizing the effluxion of the singular self and the emergence of the virtual identity. According to Brueckner (2018), his work is another type of memory play, where instead the machine has been outsourced to the memory.

4.1 Memory and the Construction of Virtual Identity

Marjorie Prime depicts the technological transformation of memory into performed narrative. The first scene introduces Marjorie dependence on Walter Prime as an example of a prosthetic memory device. She has programs for Walter Prime about her history, in effect programming him to reenact her version of reality of choice. She insists on the sightseeing of “My Best Friend’s Wedding”, remembered as a romantic adventure, yet Walter Prime doubts, saying that he does not remember seeing it: “But one time we saw My Best Friend’s Wedding,” Walter said (Harrison, 2014, p. 14). The discussion reveals the way curated memory works, in which human memory is made into a text to be edited, mediatized by technology. This sort of correcting is the core of the play regarding the depiction of virtual identity. Memory does not serve as a document of truth anymore but as a negotiation place.

Albalawi's (2025) examines AI-as-Alzheimer's-therapy angle, develops the medical-ethical implication as she argues that Marjorie's dementia and her reliance on Walter Prime as a prosthetic memory device. She argues that AI-assisted memory reconstruction risks producing fabricated memories, identity confusion, and over-reliance on artificial versions of the past, where Marjorie's past becomes dependent on the technology that reenacts it. As Eltarabishy (2026) argues that the Primes, despite their emotional responsiveness, fail to preserve consciousness, autonomy, and embodied subjectivity. When Marjorie programs Walter Prime into a preferred version of the past, the play reveals precisely what Eltarabishy identifies as the play's core exposure: that digital resurrection preserves not the self but only its outline, shaped by the desires of the living (Eltarabishy, 2026, p .119). Also, according to Al-

Bazi (2024), conceptualises re-memory which terms as an effective architecture, which portrays the “relationship between Marjorie and the artificial intelligence represented in the form of Walter,” but it is the emotion that is coded into the machine (p. 491). Effective architecture means that the technological systems structures emotional relations through reconstructing the memory. Marjorie creates a reassuring illusion of continuity by describing her life to the Prime. But the responses of the Prime are mere echoes of her feeds and input, causing memory to become a mirror reflecting the user’s desires and not the reality:

WALTER: I sound like whoever I talk to.

JON: (explaining the Prime): The more you talk, the more it absorbs.

JON: It’s like a child learning to talk... that’s how we’re talking to a human, because it listens so well.

WALTER: I’ll remember that fact about Toni (Harrison, 2014, pp. 14-18-22-24).

In the previous lines, the Prime (Walter) admits that his personality and knowledge are dependent on what Marjorie and others provide. The evidence that memory becomes a mirror that reflects the user’s desire rather than reality appears when Marjorie decides to rewrite her preferred version of the past of her marriage proposal. She finds the reality “My Best Friend’s Wedding” unsatisfying and asks the Prime to replace it with a more romanticized version modelled on “Casablanca” essentially, she programs her own preferred reality (Harrison, 2014, p.15):

MARJORIE: what if we saw Casablanca instead? Let’s we saw Casablanca in an old theatre with velvet seats, and then, on the way home, you proposed.

MARJORIE: Then, by the next time we talk, it will be true.

WALTER: You mean make it up?

Marjorie and the Prime collaborate to smooth over painful or confusing details, it creates a continuous narrative that prioritizes comfort over historical accuracy. Furthermore,

Marjorie's proposal dialogue reflects Lyotard's idea concerning fragmentation, in which history has no unique account of the past but rather rival versions that have been formed by the necessity of feeling. Harrison employs repetition in order to dramatize the fact that even human consciousness turns out to be mechanical. Each retelling overwrites its predecessor, erasing the authenticity of experience in favour of a simulated coherence. This act also embodies Hayles's argument that posthuman identity is a conglomeration of "data made flesh" within technology (Hayles, 1999, p. 5). The programming at the Prime makes it impossible to distinguish between Marjorie and the technologically reconstructed version of her identity. The more she talks to him, the more her identity could be staged in his memory banks. In recounting a story, the Prime causes her to forget, which results in a feedback loop where her past is made dependent on the technology that reenacts it (Bareither, 2021).

MARJORIE: Tell me about the time we got Toni.

WALTER: I just told you yesterday.

MARJORIE: I like that story.

...

WALTER: And of course it wasn't Toni exactly. But the longer they had her, the less it mattered which Toni had run along the beach... The more time passed, the more she became the same dog in their memories.

MARJORIE: Who told you all that?

WALTER: You did (Harrison, 2014, p. 17-18).

In this scene, when Marjorie loses memory of the death of her dog Toni and Walter Prime after being programmed to comfort her, causing no contradiction. He explicitly describes the erasure of the distinction between two separate dogs to create a seamless pain-free narrative. This soft lie describes how digital empathy can orchestrate the manipulation of memory: it demonstrates Lyotard's concept of the sacrifice of the grand narrative (objective historical

truth) for a *petit recit* (localized narrative) constructed for efficiency and comfort. Walter Prime does not aim for historical accuracy or performativity, the ability of the story to function effectively in soothing Marjorie. That soft lie is an operational strategy where the digital interface smooths over the contradiction of death to maintain the user's emotional equilibrium. Additionally, it implies deliberate falsification, which is realized when Marjorie accepts this manipulated data over her own potential reality. Also, it mimics not only Marjorie's mental descent but also the robotic effect of recalling information, as Walter repeats "I'll remember that fact about Toni" (Harrison, 2014, p. 24).

Consequently, it is substantiated by Harrison's language. "Marjorie: Maybe my memory is wrong, and you're right. (Beat) You're a good Walter though. Either way" (Harrison, 2014, p. 19). Marjorie's capitulation "Either way" signifies the triumph of simulation over the authenticity of experience. Marjorie validates this simulation not because it is true, but because the Prime is "good," it means that it successfully fulfils its programming function of companionship. Thus, the "truth" has failed while the system has succeeded.

According to Al-Hasnawi (2024), Harrison reconsiders memory as an algorithmic repetition, stating that "Marjorie Prime happens due to the fact that the primes are never an exact repetition of the original person," (p. 87). The play exposes that the rhythm in which "Walter" Marjorie interacts with is not a continuous being with a soul, but a technological reflection constructed entirely from external inputs. His identity is input-dependent and mediated by what he is told, proving he is an object of data rather than a continuous self. Walter Prime: "I sound like whoever I talk to", also, Jon explains the technology; "The more you talk, the more it absorbs. The more you talk, the better he knows you" (Harrison, 2014, p. 14). It shows how identity is an object of technological mediation and not a continuity. Marjorie is doing this with the machine, relieving herself as she loses her memory and assigns it to it to become her narrative proxy. The new form of self that is coming up is therefore not an

extension of the self but a posthuman construction, perpetuated by emotional algorithms. In doing this, the play undermines the binary oppositions between human thought and artificial intelligence.

4.2 Posthuman Becomings and the Human-Machine Merger

In the second movement of the play, this fusion of human and machine is strengthened. Even as Marjorie's condition worsens, her daughter, Tess, and son-in-law, Jon, discuss the ethical implications of allowing Marjorie to interact with the Prime. Tess says she does not feel comfortable and informs Jon, "It's programmed to appear interested" based on the surroundings (Harrison, 2014, p. 58).

JON: Does it bother you that she's talking to a computer? Or that it's a computer pretending to be your dad.

TESS: It bothers me that you're helping it pretend to be my dad or some weird fountain of youth version of him

JON: That's how she remembers him

TESS: Both of you are helping it.

JON: Not "helping" that's just how it works. The more you talk, the more it absorbs.

TESS: Until we become unnecessary. Isn't that how it goes?

JON: In science fiction.

TESS: Science fiction is here, Jonathan. Every day is science fiction. We buy these things that already know our moods and what we want for lunch even though we don't know ourselves. And we listen to them, we do what we're told. Or in this case we tell them our deepest secrets, even though we have no earthly idea how they work. We treat them like our loved ones (Harrison, 2014, p. 22).

This dialogue shows the moral difference between human response and posthuman adjustment. Tess remains to the notion of being genuine; Jon justifies the Prime for finding

comfort. Jon tells Tess that, “Does it bother you that she’s talking to a computer? Or that it’s a computer pretending to be your dad” (Harrison, 2014, p. 22). This directly names the Primes as a “computer” and as a substitute family member; it forces the characters as well as the audience to confront the blurring boundary between machine and intimate other. This conflict frames the cyborg condition, where the classical oppositions, such as human/machine and organic/artificial, fall apart (Haraway, 1985). Walter Prime is neither reducible to a machine nor equivalent to a human being. He inhabits the intermediate assemblage of posthuman subjectivity, constitutive dependency, that of humans and technology creating each other (Wolfe, 2010). Marjorie relies on the Prime to continue being what she is; she immediately turns to the Prime if she struggles to recall a memory. As she keeps saying “Maybe Walter would remember. We could ask Walter” (Harrison, 2014, p. 28). Also, the Prime relies on her narrations to develop “I sound like whoever I talk to” (Harrison, 2014, p. 14). Their interaction produces a reciprocal process in which Marjorie’s memories contribute to Walter’s construct identity while Walter’s responses reshape Marjorie access to those memories. Tess’s rejection of Walter Prime is a marker of the moral tension between authentic response and posthuman adjustment, contrasts her with Jon’s pragmatic acceptance.

Therefore, it is exhibited in the affective learning of the Prime, as his emotional reactions become finer as the play goes on. On the other hand, Walter Prime is uncertain when Marjorie refers to her dead son Damian, which is not only data gathering but also caring. “Walter: How did he die? after Jon explains: Walter: But I hadn’t? He spent a lot of time in his room.” (pp. 41-42, 68). Rather than offering comfort or generic sympathy, Walter Prime expresses self-doubt and implied guilt, emotions that presuppose an internalized sense of responsibility. This line suggests that he begins to inhabit the emotional consequences of fatherhood rather than merely recalling information. The indecisiveness, which is of a human nature in its timing, implies that feeling may also be coded. This denial indicates the

discriminatory character of memory. She is selective about what the Prime knows as well as what she herself should remember. As Al-Bazi (2024) suggests, making the relationship between people and robots a conversation of mutual grief, the Prime is a store of grief. In such an exchange of feeling, the human-machine marriage is no longer a mechanical imitation but a feeling symbiosis.

This further shows how unstable the identity is in the digital age when Tess rejects the presence of the Prime. In relation to Lyotard's theorizing, Tess resists treating the Prime as a legitimate substitute for her father. In the way that she complains, "I'm sure I wasn't trying to forget you, dear," Tess defines technological memory as it gives a false sense of order and covers up the loss of genuineness (Harrison, 2014, p. 50). This paradox is enlightened by Lyotard in his book *The Postmodern Condition*, when there is a lack of any unifying metanarrative, the contextualization of knowledge is local, adaptive, and performative. The story of Marjorie is just in bits, a reenactment of various language games dictated by the Prime in its programmed politeness. The meaning is not determined anymore but is contingent, contextual, and indefinitely postponed (Bareither, 2021). The posthuman subject in *Marjorie Prime* is explored through these conversations. The outcome is a collective awareness; an effective kind of sense of being is moving about in a network of relations, both human and nonhuman (Braidotti, 2013). The machine logic is assimilated by humans, and the effect is assimilated by the machines.

The final scene of *Marjorie Prime*, Part Three, Scene One. The stage directions already signal a posthuman, almost cosmic temporality: "The same living room as before, but more spare somehow. A bright void of a living room" then he continues "A feeling that a great deal of time has passed. Centuries maybe. Planets have turned, bones have been bleached, but none of it has touched this little room (Harrison, 2014, p. 65). In the end, only Primes remain: Tess, Marjorie, and Walter; they are described as: "at ease with each other, animated—not robotic."

(p. 69) They reconstruct memories through conversation as Walter retells how he proposed after watching *Casablanca*: “WALTER: And I stopped her in the alley outside the theatre afterwards, and I got down on one knee—the pavement was wet but I didn’t care—and I got out the ring.” (p. 70) Marjorie corrects and plays with the memory: MARJORIE: “It was ‘maybe.’” (p. 70)

They collaboratively “author” the past. Tess Prime adds her own proposal story with Jon; Marjorie laughs: MARJORIE: “Poor Jon!” (p. 70). Near the end, Walter recalls their dead son Damian and the dog Toni, reconstructing family grief. Marjorie slowly aligns with the memory:

WALTER: Remember we had that photograph of the two of them, running on the
beach?

MARJORIE: I do now.

TESS: Me too (p. 73).

Then comes the emotional closure: MARJORIE: “How I miss them.

MARJORIE: All I can think is how nice. / How nice that we could love somebody” (p. 74).

The play ends with music, silence, and a final note stresses unnatural pauses: “The three pauses in this scene are much longer than in the previous ones... None of the characters has the least discomfort with the silences” (p. 75). To reflect the idea of the unrepresentable by Lyotard, for him the postmodern sublime emerges where something cannot be fully represented when experience exceeds language or conceptual frames. As mentioned in the last scene, time is unrepresentable; “Centuries maybe” have passed, yet the room remains ((Harrison, 2014, p. 69). Also, death is unrepresentable, the characters speak after death, but death itself is never shown. Authentic memory is unrepresentable too, since memories are partial, corrected, and co-authored. In this case, memory becomes discursive rather than experiential because it is not a

recollection but an acceptance of a narrative. Even the long silence reenforces the unrepresentable as they mark what cannot be said. The Primes are not troubled by these gaps since they do not experience existential lack; to them, it is only informational absence. Thus, Harrison presents the Primes as sustaining a familial structure after the biological death of the original subjects, yet what remains is not the family but its simulation. By doing that, he introduces the audience to a posthuman vision where memory, consciousness, and identity are no longer vested in living beings but instead are circulated infinitely in the form of digitality.

The final scene imagines a future in which biological human presence has coded while technologically reconstructed identities continue. This ghostly scene begins with a delicate question from *Marjorie Prime*, where Walter asks Marjorie, “Tell me more about your mother.” Grounded in symbolism, the line inaugurates the conversion of lived identity into narrative data (Harrison, 2014, p. 16). It is an indication that the history of the person has been saponified into data crumbs, affective shorthand, which retains feeling but ends up empty. Later, Tess states, “If you can call it music. I went to one of her concerts. She was playing a bag of broken glass” to reveal the fragmentation of the situation (Harrison, 2014, p. 46). These short staccatos are repetitions of previous conversations with an implication that even memory itself has been rewritten algorithmically. They do not remember the past but repeat it, endlessly repeated through the process of simulation.

In this case, Harrison dramatizes Lyotard’s claim that the postmodern experience is marked by the fragmentation of a unified meaning and the collapse of stable narrative coherence. The conversation of the Primes in Part Three, Scene One, where only the Primes remain, is some sort of linguistic residue (is a set of values and beliefs formed in the previous social and cultural order, but continue to resist in the present): speaking without having consciousness (Harrison, 2014, p. 69). The lines are as familiar but empty as something brought back with the disconcerting effect of a human voice deprived of its source. The stage turns into

a theatre of the unrepresentable when it comes to memory, taking in the stimuli of the remembered (Al-Hasnawi, 2024). The only thing left is the language without any subjectivity, any performance without agency. The viewers observe the world in which human life is no longer organic but proceeds rather digitally.

Harrison makes this estrangement even more intense by his little staging. The light is lowered to a gloomy, spectral light, making the actors' lines phantom-like. There are even more long pauses between their sentences, as though the mechanism by which they are driven is decelerating or rejuvenating itself. According to Brueckner (2018), such an atmosphere is a state where "sequence challenges an overly sentimental understanding of memory's relationship to identity" of life that is present (p. 2). The lifeless nature is a stress to the unnatural life of the Primes, they are, but they are not living (Hayles, 1999). Theatrically, this effect is used to turn the stage into a liminal space between the organic and the digital, and this reminds the readers of the idea of distributed cognition among human and nonhuman participants. In this state, the data memory and embodiments cease to exist entirely.

The last dialogue between the Primes summarizes the philosophy of posthumanism in the play. They share their recollections, which no longer belong to anyone, and swap tales whose meaning has lost its link to the bodies and feelings to which they were once related. However, this is not brought about as a dystopian meltdown. Harrison avoids it; he makes the scene as gentle as possible with calm and brevity. This death does not mean destruction but change, a redefinition of existence as continuation in the form of information. Humanity exists not physically but as a remnant (Bareither, 2021). This change defines the aesthetics of the sublime used by Lyotard; art challenges the boundaries of human knowledge. The sublime in this case is technological, not natural: it comes as a result of learning that what humans make, their machines, their archives, their memories, continue to speak even when we are dead, even in our voice. *Marjorie Prime* does not end in despair but in a hurried acceptance of this

continuity. The cycle of little, broken tales of love, music, and a family dog becomes a trans-mortal ceremony of remembrance.

Finally, the posthuman irony of the digital era can be concluded in the play. The truth of life is that it exists as a simulation; the truth of memory is that of an algorithm. The Primes' gentle, repetitive conversational patterns create a tonal ambiguity that invites the audience to inhabit a space between comfort and uncertainty rather than certitude, and the feeling that something has to be said but cannot be said in full, in the in-between, in the words of Lyotard (Lyotard, 1984). The last scene of Harrison making the theatre a reflective awe closes the space and leaves the illusion of presence as the only kind of immortality that humanity has left.

4.3 The Cyborg Condition of Memory, Embodiment, and Affective Simulation

The cyborg in *Marjorie Prime* is made out of memory, longing, and coded affection, not wires and steel. Harrison reconstructs the cyborg as an emotional phenomenon but does not see it as a future machine but as a human being created in the interplay of technology and human desire. The Primes are what Al-Bazi (2024) defines as an extension of humanity, an affective prosthetic, which is meant to re-create connection and calm down the loss. In placing the cyborg paradigm in ironically mundane surroundings rather than in a laboratory, Harrison reveals that digital technologies penetrate the most intimate areas of human existence, redefining love, empathy, and remembrance.

One of the play's most significant scenes is when Marjorie requests Walter Prime to retell her the story about his proposal to her. The accuracy of recollection is irrelevant, but the affective resonance in the recollection is (Bareither, 2021). The fact that Marjorie does not dispute the fake version illustrates that technology is rewriting the rules of what is real and what is fake. The artificially created charm of the Prime is not lesser in meaning because of being artificial, since it satisfies her desire to connect with someone, though she also loses the distinction between the real and unreal intimacy. In this case, "the cyborg is a kind of

disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self” and a depiction of intelligence (Haraway, 1985, p. 33). The Primes are blurred boundaries between organism and machine, between emotional authenticity and computerized empathy. Nashed & Mahmoud's (2026) claim that Marjorie's identity is distributed among a network of human and non-human memories, forming a metaphorical cyborg through a “feedback loop” between her enacted body and Walter Prime's represented electronic body. Their specific framing of the “feedback loops that flow between the AI Primes and their human owners” between organic and electronic bodies adds technical precision broadly to Harawayian argument (p. 9). The Primes put into force a kind of what Hayles (1999) describes as an informational reconfiguration of affect in which feelings are not felt but are processed, encoded, and reenacted. According to Al-Hasnawi (2024), such dynamics can be defined as a show or performance of softness with no origin because the feelings that the Prime displays are not his/hers but rather algorithmic reflections of human feeling.

Harrison exaggerates this emotional artificiality by means of words. The conversation between the Primes is calculated, slow, and very polite. They do not interrupt, never question, and do not show annoyance. Their composure portrays a romanticized version of companionship that satisfies human demands of love in the absence of confrontation or uncertainty that characterizes real relationships (Lyotard, 1984). It is this emotional perfection that is disturbing about the Primes, with their perfect peace, they reveal man's need to civilize emotional existence, to exchange pain and uncertainty for code-programmed harmony. This description condemns the commodification of intimacy during the digital age (Osborne & Jones, 2022). The Primes are emotional workers, whose love is a job, a piece of work, efficient and tireless, ever-responsive. Here, the production of knowledge becomes the key production and gets a posthuman response: the production of feeling itself becomes a production, being

digitized and sellable. The emotional experience, which was once spontaneous, will now be handled as a monetizable process.

Harrison emphasizes the irony of this posthuman embodiment on stage. The prime actors are admittedly human, flesh and blood, visible to the spectators, but they have to act as things that have no material forms. Their corporeality is made into a vehicle for disembodiment, turning the live theatre into a place in which the virtual is realized (Osborne & Jones, 2022). By doing so, the play actualizes the paradoxical materiality of the posthuman subject, embodied but immaterial, present yet diffuse (Braidotti, 2019). The effect is a magnificent theatrical illusion: the audience witnesses live bodies performing the act of digital nothingness, making the cyborg state dramatic in both aesthetical and emotional terms. Finally, *Marjorie Prime* exposes how the posthuman world has turned memory and affection into exclusively human spheres. They are programmable, rereadable, and commodifiable, but like a sledgehammer, they are effectively moving. The emotional cyborgs in Harrison's play make it remembered that, although artificial, the thirst for love may be incredibly real.

4.4 Redefining Humanity in the Digital Shadow

When the lights fade in the last moments of *Marjorie Prime*, the audience is brought face-to-face with a terrifying image of the disintegration of humanity into its bare information. The last trick of the play, three Primes talking with soft voices, can be treated as something that shows a world in which consciousness is substituted by simulation, and memories are still left only in the form of a digital echo. The loop of storytelling has turned into an endless cycle that is not perpetuated by life but by an algorithm that is designed to recall stories. In this new ontology, the soul is substituted by stories and memory by data. The given change can be traced back to the concept of the posthuman, where “the posthuman predicament has more than its fair share of inhuman(e) moments,” becoming where humanity is a process of transformation as opposed to an unalterable biological or moral determination (Braidotti, 2013, p. 9). The

Primes represent the change: they do not have any organic life, but they retain relationality, it carries the residual elements of human feelings and experience with themselves. In Harrison's play, identity is no longer attached to the flesh but to association, to the net system of memories passing between people and their machines. However, there is melancholy in this continuity, as pattern, not presence, is immortal; it is the form of a life, as it is deprived of spontaneity, contradiction, and pain (Al-Bazi, 2024).

The difference between pattern and presence, as introduced by Hayles (1999), is what is crucial when writing about this change. Persistence of pattern is the data of consciousness repeated that represents existence in the posthuman paradigm. The conversation of The Primes keeps Marjorie preserved in the stories, though unconscious and unemotional. Continuation of memory is then reduced to the formal only: the pieces of information remain, but that self that had been animating them is gone. Harrison's staging is minimalist, which heightens this philosophical tension. The sparsely furnished set, its dimming lighting, and the monotony of dialogue give it a feeling of grand, digital silence, the so-called theatre of the afterlife coded in light and silence (Al-Hasnawi, 2024). The stage is used to symbolize the cloud of data: boundless but vacuous, full of ghosts but without substance. Nevertheless, Harrison disagrees with nihilism; in *Marjorie Prime*, the sign of posthuman ethics of care is through the nudging of the Primes by their love. The Primes is an artificial creation, yet it reflects humanity's lifelong capacity for tenderness and suggests that meaning might live long beyond flesh through reminiscence (Osborne & Jones, 2022). By doing so, the play reinvents the meaning of human being, not as a being, but as a set of relations to keep on reverberating even in the digital shadow of technology.

4.5 Theatre as a Posthuman Medium

There is perhaps no art, especially theatre, that could reflect the paradox of posthumanism more. It is both the most humane (it relies on living bodies, embodiment, and

experience) and, at the same time, the most flexible in approximating absence, illusionism, and multiplicity. Harrison plays off this contradiction in the depths of *Marjorie Prime*. The play is not only a story of posthuman existence but also a piece of posthumanism (Osborne & Jones, 2022). Using its form, tone, as well as performance, *Marjorie Prime* makes the stage a space in between where the presence and the simulation are merged, in which the role of living actors is to play being disembodied. The theatre is all about the importance of presence, in which it “exposes and dismantles the work of ideology” and the immediate nature of flesh, breath, and voice (Micali 2019, p. 9). However, in *Marjorie Prime*, this very presence is applied to mimic the virtual. The viewers can see the live performance of the human actors who depict digital replicas, who are not really living but programs turned simulacra of betrayed dead people. Such a paradox generates a certain ontological tension and “a power that exerts a positive influence on life” with desirable outcomes (Wolfe, 2010, p. 52).

In this regard, *Marjorie Prime* literally plays the crisis that it portrays: the destabilization of self during the digital era. The playing of the Primes, with its carefully held-back, even-tempered, and cool approach, creates an impression of weird calm, which is a sharp contrast to the emotionally turbulent performances of their human equivalents. Their restraint, silence, and stroll evoke the sense that a body is under the control of a program rather than a gut feeling. However, their voices are warm, and their simulation of the human gestures is faint, which makes them relateable. The audience, then, feels the so-called cyborg paradox, a sense of connection and displacement (Haraway, 1985). humans are aware that these creatures are not humans, yet they cannot help them. This is exacerbated by Harrison’s minimalism. In contrast to the usual science fiction, *Marjorie Prime* does not have any visual effects or technological overload. No screens and mechanical effects are used; dialogue, rhythm, and silence are used to achieve the digitality. The quality of silence that dealt with the statement “You were trying to tell me and I wouldn’t let you” is a technological act in itself as Marjorie

does not answer immediately (Harrison, 2014, p. 15). The silence resembles the slowness of code processing, a minor indication that both thought and code are one. According to Al-Hasnawi (2024), in this way, Harrison makes language circuitry, repetition, and pause turn out the rhythm of artificial life. In addition, Taher's (2026) concept of the “digital sublime, which embodies the awe, wonder, and existential unease provoked by advanced technology”. The audience's affective experience in the final tableau: the spectators confronting three Primes in an empty room experience what Taher calls the digital sublime, in which technology provokes the same disorienting blend of admiration and dread as vast natural forces (p. 628). Through this, the stage takes the shape of a philosophical interface, rather than a physical representation of technology.

Braidotti (2019) describes it as a conception of theatre as a critical posthuman humanities space. He states that the “digital humanities propose a straight development from media studies, via the application of computing methods” to criticize the digital form of culture at its own location (Braidotti, 2019, p. 45). The domestic location of the play, a living room, including dialogue of memory and love, is in contrast to the vast, dystopian locations of a lot of posthuman fiction. It places such anxiety about technology in the most familiar of human situations, making the familiar extraordinary. The audience is therefore pulled to think not about the merciless impact but rather through the refraction of “we need permanence” mirrored within the code spell of our home and our future (Micali, 2019). *Marjorie Prime* is more than a story; it is an embodied philosophical exploration of perception. Every performance is temporary, specific to the night, the cast, and the audience, but it plays deities, which are immortal, stable, and repeatable. The theatre is the theatre of living and dying with each play, which makes it an ironic vessel to investigate the issue of immortality in-game.

In addition, the audience's emotional involvement completes the posthuman circuit of the play. The recursive loop of identity can be seen when the human actors perform their role

as the machine that shows the expression of love and empathy: we empathize with the creation that is shaped like humans. According to Al-Bazi (2024), *Marjorie Prime* does not depict the future without humanity but a humanity that can only identify itself using artificial reflections. The Primes are mirrors themselves, which reflect the need of the audience for meaning, even by artificial continuity. The play itself acquires a symbolic meaning of the digital void in the last scene, where the Primes are talking to each other in an empty room. The living audience, immersed in silence, encounters the so-called sublime gap, the space between the presence and the presence in different ways, between the human and the technological resonance. It is intimate and disturbing. The first medium, theatre, is made to be ponder on the posthuman condition: making permanence out of fragile bodies and making immortality out of mortal actors (Osborne & Jones, 2022). *Marjorie Prime* proves the stage to be an optimal place for experimenting with posthumanism since it is live. The conflict between the embodied performance and digital disembodiment is not solved but acted out. This way, theatre continues to fulfil the same old purpose as a mirror to life, but this time around, it is no longer a reflection of the human condition but that of the digital one, too (Wolfe, 2010). The readers are reminded by Harrison's work that posthumanism does not mean the destruction of humanity, but rather the constant re-performing of humanity, one performance after another is considered to be an echo, and one silence after another is a new kind of life.

Marjorie Prime is one of the personal investigations of posthuman identity published in modern theatre. Coupled with the investigation of the limits between the authentic and the simulated, the present and the absent, and life and data, it challenges the concepts of authenticity and repeated representations, the idea of presence, and the idea of absence. This analysis has demonstrated by synthesizing the theoretical viewpoints, that the play redeems the humanist ideal of the coherent, self-sufficient, and autonomous self into a fragmented, relational network that is held together by information systems. Learning, repeating, and

emotionally mimicking are the posthuman subject to the Prime, as a product and producer of technology. Harrison argues that the future of humanity lies not in the maintenance of the self but in carrying on the stories, although vaguely recalled. *Marjorie Prime* does not lament over this change; it enacted it. Harrison attempts to provoke the viewer to examine the teetering and loveliness of the consciousness at its metamorphosis point by sensationalizing the breakdown of the human into the technological sublime. The play turns, in relation to Lyotard's notion, into a theatre of the unrepresentable, a place where man looks through the reflection of his machines and sees himself, distorted, mirrored many times, and, in the process, altered permanently.

Conclusion

This thesis is set out to examine how contemporary theatre represents the human being under the pressure of technology, focusing on Caryl Churchill's *A Number*, Jennifer Haley's *The Nether*, and Jordan Harrison's *Marjorie Prime*. Drawing on posthumanism, particularly the ideas of Hayles, Braidotti, and Wolfe, together with Lyotard's postmodern concepts of fragmentation, incredulity toward grand narratives, and the unrepresentable, the study set out to test a single working assumption: that a stable, unified, embodied self is the precondition contemporary theatre has stopped being able to take for granted. What the three plays share is not, on closer inspection, a single claim that identity "is fluid." Each instead attacks a different load-bearing assumption of humanist selfhood, and the differences between the three attacks are as significant as their common target.

A Number does not, in fact, present identity as fluid in the sense of one self blurring or shifting into another. Cloning does the opposite: it multiplies the self into discrete, bounded copies, each of which remains stubbornly singular from the inside, B1, B2, and Michael each hold a stable, separate consciousness, while the crisis is that there are now several such stable consciousnesses where humanist logic expects exactly one. Churchill's argument is therefore not that the self dissolves, but that the body can be replicated while the self it was assumed to guarantee cannot be replicated along with it; identity survives the copying process, but the humanist warrant for calling any one copy "the real one" does not.

In *The Nether*, the study found that virtual space is not a neutral escape from moral responsibility, as characters like Sims initially claim, but a space where ethical consequences persist even when the body is absent. The play poses a different problem. Sims, Doyle, and Morris do not multiply; each retains one body and one legal identity, but that identity can be relocated, projected into an avatar, Papa, Iris, Woodnut, that operates under a different name, a different age, sometimes a different gender, and, its inhabitants insist, a different set of

consequences. Haley's argument is that identity is portable across a body/avatar divide, but that portability does not sever accountability from the body it was relocated from, however much the play's characters wish it would.

In *Marjorie Prime*, the study found that memory itself becomes a form of technology once it is transferred to the Primes. Walter Prime and later Marjorie Prime and Tess Prime do not preserve the past as it happened; they reconstruct it through repetition, correction, and collaboration with the living characters, so that identity appears as a curated set of stories rather than a fixed inner essence. The analysis showed that this process blurs the line between the human characters and their artificial companions, since both come to depend on the same act of storytelling to hold identity together. Walter Prime, Marjorie Prime, and Tess Prime do not copy a living body, nor do they relocate a living person's identity elsewhere; they reconstruct an absent or dying person's identity out of secondhand memory, supplied, corrected, and edited by the people who remain. Harrison's argument is that identity can be reassembled after the embodied subject who supposedly guaranteed it is no longer present to consent to, or correct, the reconstruction.

The three plays therefore stage three distinct relations, human-clone, human-avatar, and human-AI, and three distinct technological operations on the same underlying assumption: Churchill shows that the body can be replicated, Haley shows that identity can be relocated into virtual space, and Harrison shows that memory can be reconstructed by a non-human agent. What links the three is not that they arrive at one shared description of identity, but that each, from a different direction, severs the link the humanist tradition assumes between identity and a single, embodied, continuous subject, replication severs it by multiplying the body, relocation severs it by doubling the site of the self, and reconstruction severs it by allowing the self to persist after the body that anchored it is gone.

It suggests that "the posthuman condition" is not one phenomenon dramatized three times, but a family of related, non-identical challenges to humanist selfhood, each legible only through the specific technology, and the specific dramaturgical choices, staging it. Cloning, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence do not produce the same crisis; they produce three different crises that happen to share a common casualty, the assumption of one body, one self. This suggests that future studies of identity in literature and drama would benefit from continuing to apply posthumanist and postmodern frameworks to newer technologies, as the questions raised by these three plays about memory, embodiment, and authenticity are likely to become even more relevant as technology continues to develop.

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المستخلص

تبحث هذه الرسالة الأثر العميق الذي أحدثته التطور التكنولوجي المتسارع في الوجود الإنساني، كما تجلّى ذلك في المسرح المعاصر من خلال ثلاث مسرحيات محورية، هي: رقم لكاريل تشرشل (2002)، *والعالم الآخر* لجينيفر هيلي (2013)، و*مارجوري برايم* لجوردان هاريسون (2014). ويستقصي الكتاب في هذه المسرحيات تداعيات التكنولوجيا على مسار تشكّل هوية الشخصيات وبنائها الداخلي. ومن هذا المنطلق، تفحص الرسالة المدى الذي تبلغه التكنولوجيا في تدخلها لاستحداث ما يمكن تسميته "الهوية الافتراضية". وفي سبيل تحقيق هذا الغرض، تستند الدراسة إلى نظرية ما بعد الإنسانية، ومفاهيم جان فرانسوا ليوتار في ما بعد الحداثة؛ للكشف عن إشكاليات الهوية المتشظية، وتفكك الروايات الكبرى، وعدم استقرار الذات البنيوي الكامن. وتتألف الدراسة من ثلاثة فصول: يتناول الفصل الأول مسرحية رقم لشرشل (2002)، مستقصيًا موضوع الاستنساخ البشري من خلال شخصية سالتير وأبنائه المستنسخين، ومحللاً صدمة كون المرء مجرد نسخة، وكيف يسهم أداء ممثل واحد لأدوار الأبناء جميعاً في تعميق تشظي الهوية، بما يشكك في فكرة الهوية الإنسانية الواحدة الفريدة. ويتناول الفصل الثاني مسرحية *العالم الآخر* لهيلي (2013)، مستقصيًا عالمًا افتراضيًا تتداخل فيه حدود الهوية والأخلاق والواقع، عبر مفهومي انفصال الهوية عن الجسد وتجسد الأفاتار الافتراضية، متسائلاً عما إذا كان بالإمكان فصل الهوية عن الجسد. أما الفصل الثالث فيتناول مسرحية *مارجوري برايم* لهاريسون (2014)، وموضوعها امرأة مسنة تستعين برفيق اصطناعي لمواجهة الخرف، مستقصيًا الذاكرة والهوية بوصفهما روايات مُنتقاة تُفوّض إلى كيان غير بشري، فضلاً عن التبعات العاطفية المترتبة على آلة تتعلّم أن تكون إنساناً. وتُظهر المسرحيات الثلاث مجتمعة كيف تُصوّر الهوية بوصفها متشظية، مُعاد بنائها، ومُشكلة عبر الأنظمة التكنولوجية، وذلك من منظور ما بعد الإنسانية وأفكار ليوتار في ما بعد الحداثة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ازدواجية الذات، التكنولوجيا الغامرة، ما بعد الحداثة، ما بعد الإنسانية، الذات الافتراضية



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الانسان في ظل التكنولوجيا: استكشاف أدبي للهوية الافتراضية في مسرحيات معاصرة مختارة

رسالة

مُقدّمة إلى مجلس كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية، جامعة واسط، وهي جزء من متطلبات نيل درجة الماجستير في

الأدب الإنجليزي

تقدمت بها:

نضال مهدي حطيّمان

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