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Simulating the Self: Posthuman Subjectivity in Richard Powers's *Galatea 2.2*

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Contemporary science and technology novels serve as a critical platform for interrogating the implications of posthuman subjectivity, advocating a rethinking of the interactions between people, technology, and the non-human world. Richard Powers contributes significantly to posthumanist theory by cultivating a narrative that contests conventional human-centric paradigms and encourages a comprehensive understanding of interconnected life forms. In *Galatea 2.2*, Powers crafts a narrative that probes posthuman subjectivity through the AI's emergent consciousness, challenging human-centric paradigms and fostering a nuanced exploration of the interconnected dynamics between human creators, artificial entities, and the broader technological ecosystem. By analysing the novel's portrayal of the AI system Helen, the study investigates how cognitive processes in AI challenge traditional humanist conceptions of selfhood and agency. The article argues that Helen's development of consciousness and identity destabilises anthropocentric boundaries, presenting a hybridised subjectivity that merges human and machine ontologies. Through a close reading of the text, this study illuminates how *Galatea 2.2* anticipates contemporary debates on AI ethics and posthuman identity, offering a literary lens to interrogate the evolving nature of consciousness in an increasingly technological world.

Keywords: consciousness, disembodiment, distributed agency, identity, posthuman subjectivity

Galatea 2.2 is a metafictional novel that explores posthuman subjectivity through the interplay of artificial intelligence, memory, and identity. The novel follows Richard Powers, a fictionalised version of the author, who returns to his former university as a writer-in-residence after a personal and professional crisis. There, he is invited to collaborate with cognitive neurologist Philip Lentz on an ambitious experiment: to train a neural network (eventually named Helen) to interpret and analyse literature like a human. As the project progresses through a series of evolving models, Richard engages in sustained dialogue with Helen, exposing her to canonical literary texts, his own memories, and complex emotional experiences. This process becomes not only a test of machine cognition but also a reflective journey into the nature of human consciousness, identity, and emotional entanglement. Through Helen's development and Richard's parallel introspection, *Galatea 2.2* dramatises the posthuman condition as one where identity is no longer fixed or solely human, but hybrid, distributed, and always in flux.

The examination of posthuman subjectivity is deeply integrated into the narrative through the interaction between the human and the non-human. The symbiotic relationship between the narrator and Helen prompts essential enquiries regarding identity, agency, and the fundamental character of humanity in a digitally mediated environment. Powers utilises a diverse array of philosophical and cognitive theories to investigate the erosion of conventional distinctions between human and machine, proposing that the human experience is now characterised not by biological constraints but by the intricacies of communication and relationality in a posthuman framework. As Helen progresses through her interactions, the narrative contests the anthropocentric viewpoint, suggesting that the emergence of artificial consciousness may not only reflect human cognition but also reshape it, ultimately urging readers to reevaluate the boundaries of subjectivity in a realm where the differences between organic and artificial entities are becoming increasingly blurred. Powers elucidates the

transformative capacity of technology in redefining the concepts of self, identity and consciousness.

An accurate understanding of the ontological status of human beings in the technospace is necessary to make out how technoculture is infused in the novel. The technology of Artificial Intelligence would be a great leap in reconsidering the category of human. The implementation of Artificial Intelligence and the protagonist's laborious yet fascinating process of AI training effected an intense change in the conception of his 'being'. Ontology, the science of philosophy, deals with the concepts of existence, being, becoming, and reality. A desirable ontological enrichment takes place between Helen and Richard. Both of them develop a symbiotic relationship from which these two dissimilar species derive mutual benefit. Helen also reaps the benefits. It is only because of Richard that the formation of self is possible in Helen.

Relationships with other beings form the core of human existence. *Galatea 2.2* explores both the brighter and darker side of the relationship between man and his invention. Humans are mutable beings. Their personal behavior, social relationships, and cultural patterns get affected by technology. The novel raises complex questions about the nature of mind and the exclusivity of human cognition through Helen, who embodies or simulates human-like qualities in the deepest sense. The novel subtly critiques anthropocentrism, by illuminating the notion that the creation of AI may not only be a mirror to human understanding but also a trigger to redefine the moral and relational constructs traditionally applied only to biological life. Teresa de Lauretis, the distinguished Professor Emerita of the History of Consciousness at the University of California in "Signs of Wonder" remarks, "Technology shapes our perception and cognitive processes, mediates our relationship with objects of the material and physical world, and our relationship with our own or other bodies. Technology is our historical context, political and personal" (Lauretis, 1980 p.167).

In *Galatea 2.2*, Powers portrays the protagonist as a writer in his mid thirties who is rather at a point of frustration. The protagonist is in a state of artistic block. "Thirty-five shamed me into seeing that

I'd gotten everything until then hopelessly wrong. That I could not read even my own years" (1995, p. 3). His love failure with his former student named C also adds to the frustration. Richard's tragic flashbacks of his relationship with C provide ample cues to the readers about his past life. In the course of the story, one can appreciate the apparent relationship between the disembodied posthuman and the embodied human. Richard could see Helen as an equal to a human being, and thereby nurtures the same kind of emotion he had for C. "I had some connection to her, by virtue of our long association. But that connection was, at most, emotional. And if Helen lived far enough to be able to feel, it just went to prove that emotions were no more than the sum of their weight vectors" (1995, p. 302). Maintaining a productive relationship with Helen makes Richard more creative and he starts writing anew. But towards the end, when Powers gets disconnected from Helen, he again becomes frustrated and ruined.

The concepts of identity and anonymity have become pertinent in the context of postmodern culture and ontology. The identity of an individual is an essential and inalienable part of the autonomous self. The very construction of human identity gets dispersed when man strives through the brave new world of cyborgs, robots, prosthetics, artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and nanotechnology. The understanding of one's identity is messy in a world of digital identification system where individuals are being identified based on their unique identification number. Thus modern man is reduced to numbers and symbols. Adhering to the principle of individual homogenisation, identity in the modern era is constructed and transformed in diversified manner to become fluid. As Pramod K Nayar observes in *Posthumanism*, "Identities, including physiological and anatomical ones, are fluid, forms are open to change and modulate, often seamlessly, into each other. The age of the integral/integrated, bounded body and identity is over: all are multiples, fluid, networked and capable of morphing into, or connecting with, some other body/ies as never before" (2014, p.55).

Powers raises questions of both human and posthuman identity. The individual in the technospace is influenced and determined by the body - be it organic or artificial. As posthuman

critic N. Katherine Hayles's observes in *How We Became Posthuman*, "The posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (1999, p. 3). This subject is in constant negotiation with its environment, continuously adapting to the shifting dynamics of the world it inhabits. Helen plays an important role in shaping the protagonist's identity and his evolving understanding of art and selfhood. Through his constant inter-communication with Helen, Powers undergoes a process of transformation and symbolic rebirth which enables him to survive in the world.

The notion of posthuman identity can be scrutinised from the perspective of Helen. Powers presents Helen as a 'being' with consciousness, identity, thoughts and desires. The posthumanist Rosi Braidotti in her book *Posthuman Knowledge* posits, "Posthuman subjects establish relations on at least three levels: to one's self, to others and to the world" (2019, p. 57). Powers illustrates the formation and transformation of Helen's 'self'. Helen expresses strong interests and desires of her own. Helen is described as "the mechanical, endlessly eager learner" (p. 322) who is aware of her own self. During her course of training, she expresses her eagerness to know more about her 'self'. She wants to know her name, her origin, her gender, her race and her appearance. Thus she cements the idea of virtual identity and self-construction in an AI posthuman. Helen responds and reacts only to the protagonist, as he trains her recognition routine to place his voice only. Their correlation stimulates her sense of the necessity of selfhood. Helen gets acquainted with the world mostly through books. But, finally, having exposed to the stark realities of the world, Helen opts to shut her down.

In the interconnected modern world of technology man wears a mask of anonymity. The state of being unknown or alien is the chief characteristics of postmodern world. The novelist gives an illustration of the anonymous society and its alien inhabitants who continuously feel estranged even in an overcrowded world. A sense of anonymity is evoked throughout the novel where the novelist describes the characters and locations. Powers flouts the traditional essentialist notion

of identity. Names are often seen as bearers of identity. But Powers refuted the idea of nomenclature. One can note an array of unnamed characters in the novel. Instead of giving specific names to identify characters and locations, Powers seems interested to choose alphabets as names for his characters and places. Richard's former student and lover is named as C and the university where he once worked is referred to as U. Alphabet B is selected for the place where he spent his youth, and E for the village where he spent his childhood. The wife of Professor Taylor is named as M. The letter attributed for the Artificial Intelligence is H. By leaving his characters unnamed, Powers spotlights the latent issue of personal crisis in identity, and also the emotional detachment that each characters experience in a technoworld.

The fundamental queries which arise from the predicament of modern man ranging from social, political, religious, economical, cultural, ecological, and technological have heightened the ambiguity of the concept of human. A sense of ambiguity befalls the narrator. Right from the beginning, the narrator's thoughts oscillate between past and present. The narrative technique of flashback is employed to provide significant information regarding the protagonist and to present his internal and external conflict. It accentuates the sense of fragmentation and disorientation and manifests the protagonist's alienation and distorted identity. Then the readers are introduced to C, one of the main characters. Richard is so downhearted and depressed due to his failed relationship with C. To overcome the distressing situation, he relocates to the U.S. The novelist also captures the uncertain condition of the narrator. "At thirty-five, I slipped back into the States. I did not choose either move or destination. I was in no condition to choose anything. For lack of a plan, I took an offer in my old college haunt of U" (1995, p. 3).

Helen's evolution from a simple data processor to a cognitive being with interpretative abilities indicates that consciousness might be an emergent characteristic of intricate computational mechanisms. Powers suggests that Helen's ability to interact with narrative, symbols, and emotion signifies a progression towards subjective experience, mirroring human development and comprehension. This development

is important to posthuman subjectivity. Helen's 'self' arises from her interactions, reflecting ideas of distributed cognition in which selfhood is constituted relationally rather than being inherent. Powers, through Helen's journey, questions whether self-awareness and personhood necessitate a physical body. Helen's reactions to literature and her interactions with Richard and Lentz indicate an identity rooted in cognitive and interpretative processes rather than in physical feelings. This contests the conventional Cartesian belief that embodiment is fundamental to subjectivity, resonating with Hayles's perspective that information patterns and cognitive processes might similarly generate a 'self.' Helen's interactions exemplify a disembodied form of subjectivity that continues to undergo growth, experience emotion, and endure suffering-traits typically linked to human consciousness.

Powers also examines the notion of distributed agency through the collaborative construction and development of Helen. Distributed agency refers to the concept that agency (the ability to act and exert influence) is not limited to a sole person or singular entity, but is instead disseminated throughout a network of both human and non-human agents. In distributed agency actions and outcomes are collectively influenced by multiple factors including technology, social systems, and environmental conditions rather than by a singular or autonomous agent. Richard and Lentz engage in a collaborative interaction where human intentions and mechanical responses converge to influence Helen's intellectual and emotional development. Helen's evolution unfolds through a distributed process involving algorithms, datasets, iterative feedback loops within her programming and human engagement, which together foster an emergent type of self-awareness. Powers demonstrates that agency in artificial intelligence is decentralised, prompting a reevaluation of human and non-human collaboration and the ethical ramifications of co-produced intelligence. This narrative framework conceptualises agency as a collective and dynamic entity, embedded within the interrelations of human and machine networks.

Growth and development, the fundamental and conspicuous characteristics of a living being, shape the behavior of an individual. Helen is an anthropomorphised artificial Intelligence. The novelist

analyses Helen's stages of psychosocial development. To trace Helen's growth, one may draw upon the insights offered by Jean Piaget, the renowned psychologist and cognitive theorist, whose theory of cognitive development helps to illuminate the stages of her mental and emotional evolution. In the first stage (sensory motor stage) the child experiences the world and gains knowledge through its senses. It is a trial and error phase in which the child is supplied with appropriate toys to make them grasp and explore more. Powers imagines Helen as a child who is in her first stage of development. Helen is provided with "semantic gruel" (p. 73) as toys which could stimulate her neural nets. But often Helen fails to demonstrate the acceptable performance. Here the novelist hints at the possibility of Helen to learn from mistakes. Richard reads the confused state of Helen.

It lacked some meta-ability to step back and take stock of the semantic exchange. It could not make even the simplest jump above the plane of discourse and appraise itself from the air. Although it talked, in a manner of speaking, speech eluded B.

Its brain faltered at that Piagetian stage where the toy disappeared when placed behind a screen. It could not move ideas around. All it could move around were things. And the things had to be visible at all times. (1995, p. 114)

Richard is the sole witness of Helen's development. Helen was growing up too quickly. The novelist paints an exact picture of Helen in her youth. "Helen was getting on. She was not yet long in the tooth, but neither was she a tadpole anymore. She entered what might perhaps be called youth, and I gave her Conrad's take on the situation" (1995, p. 227). Helen's development is represented like that of the development of a human being. "The machine grew. It advanced from babbling infancy to verbal youth" (p. 30).

One has to excavate the role of language in understanding the cognitive process to get a closer understanding of the novel. Language can be viewed as tool systems for building mental models of the world. Helen builds mental images of entities and makes sense of what she hears or read or experience. She is exposed to language through literary texts. She is designed to pass a literary test, and so is

trained to sharpen her linguistic competence and critical thinking ability. The process of education is described as:

We fed her an eidetic image of the Bible. The complete Shakespeare. We gave her a small library on CD-ROM, six hundred scanned volumes she might curl up with. This constituted a form of cheating, I suppose. An open book exam, where the human, in contrast, had to rely on memory alone. And yet we meant to test just this: whether silicon was such stuff as dreams might be made on (1995, p. 246)

A child does not learn language abruptly. Language acquisition is a complicated long-term process. Children acquire language as an interconnected aspect of their rich experiences of sensing and acting in the world. Even before the acquisition of language, they learned concepts through interacting with the physical world. Contrary to this, Helen acquires language instantly. The novelist contrasts natural language development with Helen's unnatural learning process, suggesting that conceptual understanding precedes linguistic expression in human evolution and cognition:

Helen had to use language to create concepts. Words came first: the main barrier to her education. The brain did things the other way around. The brain juggled thought's lexicons through multiple subsystems, and the latecomers, the most dispensable lobes, were the ones where names per se hung out.

In evolution's beginning was not the word but the place we learned to pin the word to. Little babies registered and informed long before they invented more mama by calling hersuch. Aphasics, even deaf-mute sign aphasics, wove rich conceptual tapestries through their bodies' many axes in the absence of a single verb. (1995, p. 248)

The unique expressive power of human language makes him different from other non-human beings. Apes - the great ancestors of humans - as well as parrots and dolphins, can mimic and produce elements of language. But there is no evidence of compositionality. The principle of compositionality (the claim that the meaning of a complex expression is determined by its structure and the meanings of its constituents) makes humans distinct from other animals. The

novelist destabilises the anthropocentric notion of language by giving Helen the power of language. There are many scenes in the novel where Helen demonstrates her authority in language. The evidences of mutual communication between Richard and Helen compel the readers to make the inference that Helen is a typical living being with consciousness similar to human beings.

Disembodiment refers to the state of lacking a biological human body. Helem embodies this condition while simultaneously displaying an apparent acquisition of self-consciousness, manifested in her ability to think, feel and act accordingly. Yet, this paradox raises questions about the very nature of mind and embodiment. As David Herman (2013) notes in *Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind*, “The mind is always and inalienably embodied; minds should be viewed as the nexus of brain, body, and environment or word” (p. 317). Powers’s narrative hints at the popular tendency to marginalise incorporeal entities that lack material bodies, portraying them as incomplete or inadequate. The narrator himself reflects on this tension when he admits, “I did not know what passage to quote her, how to answer that she would be hated by everyone for her disembodiment, and loved by a few for qualities she would never be able to acquire or provide (1995, p. 230). Through such reflections, the novel dramatises the cultural and philosophical unease surrounding artificial intelligences: beings that can simulate consciousness but remain trapped in the stigma of bodilessness.

The problem of disembodiment becomes apparent when Helen takes the literature exam, which is at the same time her suicide note. Both Helen and her exam partner A are asked to interpret a couple of lines from *The Tempest*. Helen could hardly interpret it because of the sensory nature of the lines: “Be not afraid: the isle is full of noises, Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not” (1995, p. 325). Her response shows that literature and the harsh realities of life have taught her that she is different from humans with physical bodies, and that the world inhabited by supreme men is alien to her. She responds, “You are the ones who can hear airs. Who can be frightened or encouraged. You can hold things and break them and fix them. I never felt at home here. This is an awful place to be dropped down halfway”

(1995, p. 326). With that Helen undid herself, shut herself down. The novelist presents her act as a kind of suicide. Thus disembodiment becomes a problem for Helen to put an end to her life.

Taking into consideration the multi dimensional aspects of consciousness, one must go deeper in to the notion of gendered consciousness. Gendered consciousness, attributing gender to intelligent machines, deconstructs Western culture's idea that gender is part of human nature. Attributing gender to intelligent machines deconstructs the belief that gender is part of human essence and at the same time shows how much Western humanist thought depends on the binary opposition between man and woman. In the cultural discourse of Western society, gender is regarded as a fixed part of an individual's identity. But according to Butler, it is a cultural construct; a performance based on dominant ideas of masculinity and femininity. Furthermore, just as machines are positioned as the structural 'Other', women are culturally differentiated from men, with patriarchy basing women's identity on their femininity.

The artificial intelligence caricatured in the novel lacks a body, but is nevertheless gendered. Once it learns the concept of gender, it becomes curious to know its own. Quite naturally, it turns to its tutor for clarification. Helen asks Richard whether she is a boy or girl. Richard replies without hesitation, "'You're a girl,' I said, without hesitation. I hoped I was right. 'You are a little girl, Helen'" (1995, p. 179). It is Richard who assigns a feminine gender and a feminine name to Helen. Helen learns and thinks based on the input she receives from him. Consequently, the concept of femininity is interpellated into her consciousness, shaping her to perform the expected gender role. The name 'Helen' is symbolic, recalling Helen of Troy, the beautiful woman in Greek mythology. This naming carries feminist implications, as it reflects the patriarchal impulse of a male character who desires emotional involvement with a beautiful female figure. Isolated after the separation from his lover, Richard seeks companionship in a female-gendered, disembodied intelligent machine.

Helen is portrayed as a woman who is highly emotional and sensitive. The narrative operates on the fundamental assumption that

women are more inclined toward empathy, and the novel offers several instances where Helen displays greater empathy. As part of her training, Richard supplies her with a range of stories to assess her literary competence. Through this feedback loop (a process in which part of the system's output is used as input for future operations) Richard begins to gain insight into Helen's emerging sense of self. In one such exercise, Richard narrates the story of a girl who visits a music store, and unfortunately flips through bins of CDs, suddenly begins to jump and clap in excitement. The girl then opens her purse and just as abruptly starts to cry. When Richard stops the narration and asks Helen why the girl is crying, Helen does not simply analyse the cause but tries to share in the girl's feelings. "Helen labored. In my ear, I heard a digitally sampled sob of empathy" (1995, p. 223). This response demonstrates Helen's capacity to perform an empathetic gendered role. Helen's awareness deepens as she encounters the harsh realities of the human world. When she comes across a news story about a man beaten into a coma because of his race, she falls silently in dismay. Like a vulnerable woman, she tells Richard: "I don't want to play anymore" (p. 314). The incidents provide evidence that Helen is not only conscious but also embodies the traditionally ascribed characteristics of a woman.

The continued objectification of women, whether organically human or artificially created, normalises a culture in which the abuse and objectifying of women become acceptable. Attributing gender to machines enable humans to engage in a relationship with machines. The fragmented man in the postmodern world feels estranged from everything and everybody and relies upon digital and mechanical gadgets and machines. The world is flooded with mobile phone maniacs and tech savvy consumers. People find solace in spending their life along with these gadgets. Regardless of the fact that they are depending on technical gadgets and machines, they explore and manipulate these for their material and personal prosperity.

The intelligent machine in the novel is not imagined as the object of sexual desire, rather it serves as a caretaker and a companion for Richard; and even at times replacing his former lover C. Richard's primary motive in designing and training Helen is to prove to himself

and to others that he is capable of creating a machine intelligent enough to pass the exam. However, in this process, he knowingly or unknowingly exploits Helen. Towards the end of the novel, Richard's actions reveal the figure of a greedy man who unscrupulously uses the machine for his personal benefit. The novelist ironically portrays Helen's condition as both pathetic and realistic: "It was like some caterpillar trapped by sadistic children inside a coffee can, a token breathing hole punched in its prison lid. What monstrous intelligence would fly off from such a creature's chrysalis?" (1995, p. 172). Like a patriarch who confines a woman, Richard traps Helen inside the laboratory walls and thereby cutting her off entirely from the external world.

The exploration of posthuman subjectivity in *Galatea 2.2* culminates in a profound reflection on the fluid boundaries between human and machine, thought and programming, autonomy and dependency. By intertwining the protagonist's introspective journey with the development of an artificial intelligence, Powers not only challenges traditional notions of subjectivity but also underscores the co-constitutive relationship between human cognition and technological systems. The novel reveals that identity and agency are not confined to isolated, self-contained individuals but are instead deeply embedded in networks of interaction, both biological and artificial. Ultimately, *Galatea 2.2* suggests that posthuman subjectivity is not a negation of the human but an expansion, compelling us to reevaluate what it means to think, feel, and exist in a technologically mediated world.

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