“We are the lost”: Recovering the Feminist and Transcultural Complexity of Mermaids in Literature

Dreamy Mermaid by Pradip Goswami

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Abstract

Among the many fantastical creatures, the mermaid figure has fascinated writers and artists throughout the ages. The representation of the mermaid figure tends to be consistent: grounded in Western heritage, the mermaid's alluring beauty and sexualised body are overtly stressed and confine her to a place of objectification. However, such a reductive representation of her femininity and her cultural roots does not do justice to the mermaid's complexity and paints a monolithic understanding of her figure. Moreover, the connections between mermaids and women exacerbate the implications of such a reductive paradigm. Thus, this project studies the feminist and transcultural complexity of mermaids in literature. The aim is to counter the mermaid's objectification and to create more complex meanings for her figure. Therefore, this project centres on the mermaid figure in different literary genres, including *The Arabian Nights,* Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid,* Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine,* Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses,* Kamila Shamsie's *Broken Verses* and Imogen Hermes Gowar's *The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock.* This work will undertake a comparative analysis of the mermaid figure in these works, reading her through a French feminist framework. This project shows that the mermaid figure in literature challenges her objectified and monolithic representations. It is through her irrational and liminal means that the mermaid figure contests the rational, phallogocentric order. Such a feminist opposition is recurrent in all the studied primary works and thus strengthens the mermaid's transcultural place. This project aims to broaden the traditional place of fairy tales by stressing the interconnectedness of realist and fantastic fiction.

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INTRODUCTION

Barney: "Marshall, do you know how the myth of mermaids came to be?"

Marshall: "Sorry, myth?"

…

Barney: "You see every woman, no matter how initially repugnant, has a mermaid clock; the time it takes you until you realise you want to bone her. Sure, today, you see Iris as a manatee. But she ain't gonna stay that way. Marshall, your secretary's mermaid clock starts right-now." ("The Mermaid Theory." *HIMYM*, season six, episode 11[1])

In this excerpt from the popular comedy series *How I Met Your Mother*, the successful womanizer, Barney Stinson, uses the mermaid figure to illustrate his sexist perception of women. Indeed, Barney's mermaid theory perpetuates common assumptions about mermaids:

[1] Excerpt is available on *YouTube*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJC_q8OQwU4

uncommonly beautiful women who are objectified, mainly for male pleasure. This objectified image of the mermaid figure is widely disseminated in popular culture. Apart from *How I Met Your Mother,* numerous other examples in contemporary media, but also global companies, have appropriated the mermaid as an object of beauty who seduces with her accentuated female sexuality. The high costing water brand, *Evian,* used the mermaid for a print ad in 2000[2]. With pursed lips and a straight gaze into the camera, the mermaid sucks at her *Evian* bottle. Her long blonde hair sways around her head and the colour of the scales of her fishtail neatly transitions into the blue of the water. The message is clear: buy their water to unleash the beauty of your inner mermaid. The mermaid's aesthetics clearly hold a place of fascination in society and culture. Consequently, many examples in popular media limit her to a female object which visually and sexually satisfies. The mermaid is typically depicted with bare breasts concealed by her long, thick hair, a mirror and a comb; tropes which further pronounce her aesthetic purposes. The narratives that surround her seem to emerge *a priori* from a male longing. However, as a creature who resides between the realms of the human and the supernatural, one might ask what other interesting characteristics are hidden, even overshadowed by her beauty. There is, for instance, the mermaid's sonic voice which is typically understood as a means of seducing the human male. And yet, as T.S. Eliot wrote in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the mermaid's song might not be directed at the male human:

> I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.
>
> I do not think that they will sing to me. (Eliot l.124-125)

[2]"Mermaid Print Ad" *Evian.* Done by Euro Rscg London. US, 2000. Available online : https://www.coloribus.com/adsarchive/prints/evian-mineral-water-mermaid-1916355/

As Eliot suggests in his poem, the assumption that mermaids sing to humans, in particular to men, should not be taken for granted. It might even be a patriarchal approach, driven by male hubris, which appropriates everything that is female. Consequently, a certain tension persists between what the male gaze wants to see through his heteronormative lens and what the female mermaid really stands for.

The examples listed above are taken from Western culture. After the global success of Walt Disney's film, *The Little Mermaid* (1989), which is a romanticised rewriting of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale, the mermaid has often been associated with European heritage. If anything, the mermaid's statue in Copenhagen has cemented her place within Danish culture. However, the mermaid is much more transcultural than these examples might suggest. The literary scholar Nancy Easterlin, for example, has underlined the mermaid's "kinship with all water deities and spirits" which makes her a transcultural creature (258). Besides the blurred links with the sirens in Greek mythology, the mermaid's genealogical traces go back to Indian, Chinese and Japanese cultures. In Indian culture, for instance, she strongly resembles "water nymphs and fairies" who "loved singing and dancing and were prone to luring and seducing men"; behavioural patterns that are still evoked in her modern representations (Easterlin 258). In literature, mermaids can even be found in as early writings as *The Arabian Nights*: a collection of tales that "is the prime example of such a polyphonic, traveling text" (Warner, Kennedy 3). Considering this existing variety of mermaids in literature, it appears most urgent to reconsider the underlying meanings of these mermaid figures if a narrow and monolithic portrayal of an important female figure in culture is to be avoided. With a focus on literature, I aim to give different feminist meanings to the mermaid figure which have been shaped in transcultural ways and go beyond the flatly portrayed beauty that falls prey to the male gaze.

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The research question at the core of this thesis is as follows:

How do different literary genres pick up on the transcultural and feminist complexity of the mermaid figure?

This project aims to study the mermaid figure in three literary genres, including traditional fairy tales, one novella from the German Romantic period and three contemporary novels. My interest is to undertake a feminist reading of the mermaid figure through a feminist lens. The aim is to counter a monolithic perception of the mermaid figure, which is grounded in an objectified and monocultural image. Such an analysis of the mermaid figure helps to deconstruct the phallogocentric order, to challenge female suppression and to illuminate issues in gender disparity.

i. What is a Mermaid? And Where Does She Come From?

Common knowledge irrevocably states that fish reside in water and humans on land. The mermaid, though, occupies the realm between water and land. With her upper half female human and her lower half fishtailed, the mermaid is an embodiment of the liminal. She is "amphibious, being able to live (and breathe) in water and on land" even if with restricted mobility (Hayward 7). Her species is largely represented as female. Although early fantastic writings include male merfolk, such as Abdullah the Merman in *The Arabian Nights* or the father of the little mermaid in Andersen's story, one cannot deny that mermen are far less represented in culture. As Kingshill illustrates with a simple quantitative research, "a Google search for 'merman' yields around eight hundred thousand results, 'mermaid' well over twenty million. Males are, for once, the second sex" (11).

a. On the mermaid's fairy tale origins

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Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Little Mermaid* ("Den lille havfrue") is the most prominent literary version of the tale, partly due to Disney's hegemonic appropriation with the altered film adaptation in 1989. Fairy tales predominantly circulated in the oral form, until the first written versions were created in the later fifteenth century: in that sense, the fairy tale is as a literary form, datable to the medieval period. Elizabeth Wanning Harries argues in *Twice Upon A Time: Women Writers and the History of Fairy Tales* (2001) that the fantastic genre stems from a "versatile hybrid form, which draws on primitive apprehensions and narrative motifs, and then uses them to think consciously about human beings and the world" (160). Even if the social consciousness is of paramount importance in fairy tales, their place within literature distinguishes the genre from folklore. Nonetheless, the fairy tale genre appropriates "motifs, signs, and drawings from folklore, embellishing them and combining them with elements from other literary genres" to enter the literary realm (Zipes xvi). The interrelatedness between audience and story recalls the genre's oral origins. James McGlathery equally emphasises that this strong bond between storyteller and listener, respectively writer and reader, "is important for understanding and studying folktales to remember that collectors- and tellers- of folktale have particular audiences and special aims in mind, which may reflect changing structures in society and accompanying shift in social norms" (15).

In the introduction to *From the Beast to the Blonde*, Warner explains that fairy tales inevitably bring women to the fore. By applying an anti-foundational feminist framework, Warner's book is divided into two sections which reflect on women's crucial role in the fairy tale tradition: the female narrator and the female protagonist. Even if Charles Perrault is hailed as a pioneer writer of fairy tales, he was greatly inspired by the many French *conteuses* who preceded him in story-writing. According to Warner, "women writers like Marie-Jeanne

L'Héritier and Marie-Catherine D'Aulnoy mediated anonymous narratives, the popular, vernacular culture they had inherited through fairy tale in spite of the aristocratic frippery their stories make at a first impression" (*Beast* 24). Besides the female *conteuses*, in both European and West Asian tradition, women are often the protagonists of fantastic tales. According to Warner, fairy tales reflect "lived experience, with a slant towards the tribulations of women, and especially young women of marriageable age" (Warner, *Beast* XIX). Storytelling became a way of addressing themes that remained unvoiced in social discourse for women. As a "weapon for the weaponless," women's issues, such as love, patriarchy, female curiosity and desire were addressed and help to forge "potential conduits of another way of seeing the world" (Warner, *Beast* 415). Harries builds on Warner's claim by stating that in contemporary literature the genre is used for the same purposes as it was centuries ago: as a creative realm where women can express their interpretation of the world. She zooms in on the methods of women fairy tale writers who have "chosen fairy tale plots and recurring motifs as the ground for variation, experimentation, and transformation" (Harries 161). With regard to these close ties between fairy tales and society, the mermaid as a fairy tale figure embodies numerous female voices that express socio-cultural circumstances. In other words, the mermaid reflects women in society- a characteristic which even further problematises her aesthetic and sexual objectification in culture.

b. The influence of socio-cultural circumstances

The mermaid figure, along with the depiction of her aquatic world and her tropes, typically reflects the socio-cultural circumstances of the narrator. In *From the Beast to the Blonde,* Warner outlines a list of themes and tropes that surround the mermaid such as her forced muteness, sexual appeal and songs of knowledge (Warner 397-399). Warner also points out the

differences between sirens and mermaids. In Greek mythology, sirens were associated with wisdom and consequently, men's longing for them stemmed from their thirst for knowledge. The Christian tradition would give this wisdom a sexual connotation and thus, mermaids were turned into sinners, into "femmes fatales" (Warner, *Beast* 399). Yet, it is important to note that the differences between mermaids, sirens but also undines and other water women remain blurry. In general, it is helpful to follow Stuby's demarcation between the innocent- but objectified- mermaid figure, *femme fragile,* and the malicious sirens, that is the *femme fatale* (Stuby, *Kommen* 11).

Moreover, the undersea world changes its meaning in relation to the cultural audience. In Western versions, the water is often marked with danger and seduction. However, in the *Arabian Nights* the underwater world is presented as "a kind of future vision for humanity, as a utopia built on the value system of Humanism" (Marzolph 177). In that respect, "the changes to the siren's[3] voice alter the meanings she conveys; the social context of the story in which she figures, eloquent or silent, modifies the message" (Warner, *Beast* 408). Warner stresses another transcultural aspect given that Andersen's inspiration to rewrite the mermaid's tale stemmed from his reading of *The Arabian Nights*: "Andersen elaborated his disturbing story in 1836-7, from varied strands of oral and written tales in Eastern as well as Western tradition, about undines and selkies, nixies, Loreleis, and Mélusines, in which the fairy creature appears on earth and stays with a mortal as his bride only on certain conditions" (*Beast* 395). Accordingly, the tropes in the two tales "Julnar the Sea-Born" and "Abdullah the Merman," which were found in the earliest manuscripts of the *Nights,* resemble Andersen's portrayal of the mermaid.

[3] Warner uses the terms 'mermaid' and 'siren' interchangeably here. However, my thesis will exclusively focus on the mermaid figure.

However, the reading of the mermaid varies with the reader's socio-historical background; that is, with the "Kulturbrille" that the reader wears (Warner, Kennedy 5). In "Hans Christian Andersen's Fish Out of Water," Nancy Easterlin confirms that the mermaid's meaning is made by culture. Drawing on Carl Jung's definition of archetypes, Easterlin concludes that "meaning, in short, is a product of the archetypal image and its context, not of the unconscious archetypes- not, in this case, of the maiden before she is represented" (Easterlin 257). She also adds that there is more to the mermaid's meaning than the stigmatised "unmarried woman" attribute: the mermaid as a figure builds on a tradition of other sea and water relatives. Her genealogy "extends well beyond this constellation of myths, for her fishtail marks her kinship with all water deities and spirits" which go back to Indian, Chinese, Japanese and Arabic culture (Easterlin 258).

c. On being "other", liminal, and other mermaid tropes

Tara E. Pedersen argues that the mermaid's various cultural representations come together in her liminal existence: "she is deeply embedded in cultures throughout time, and she is also a figure who represents seemingly contradictory values based on the specific context in which she is depicted. What remains most historically consistent, however, is this figure's status as a hybrid creature that combines a female head (and frequently torso) with the lower extremities of an animal- most commonly a single- or double-tailed fish" (10). Pedersen goes on to suggest that these irreconcilable binaries are the shaping qualities of the mermaid as she "gains her identity through a deep incoherence" (14). In the same vein, Easterlin argues that the mermaid is marked with an emblem of "otherness". Indeed, Andersen himself was personally intrigued by the mermaid's alienated status and according to Zipes, he focused "more on the torture and suffering that a member of the dominated class must undergo to establish her true nobility and

virtues" (*Dreams* 96). According to Pederson's definition, the reading of the mermaid in this project will rely on her liminal position, placing her in a realm of irrational and unclassifiable incoherence.

The mermaid's bare breasts and often blonde, sometimes dark, mane have shaped her into a seductive temptress of the unknown. As a result, the mermaid's association "with carnal temptation" made her a synonym of prostitute in England and other European countries (Hayward 9). To stress the female/male dichotomy, Laura Sells has studied the mermaid as an embodiment of narrowed identity politics in contemporary feminism. Sells argues that her binary identity is characterised by her movement between the sphere of the feminine and the sphere of the masculine, which leads to "the costs of women's access to the 'male sphere' by vilifying women's strength and by erasing the pain that so often accompanies 'passing' from one sphere to the other" (176). It thus shows that this estranged sense of liminality and "otherness" are key defining characteristics of the mermaid. Whereas Easterlin or Zipes align her "otherness" with Andersen's own social constraints, Sells connects her internal conflict with the trespassing of gendered worlds. Inevitably, as a female and "othered" creature, the mermaid sheds light on the power relations between the aquatic sphere and the heteronormative human world. Indeed, the contemporary rewritings of the mermaid figure are based on these questions of power and "its development, acquisition, abuse, or control- and by the characteristic ambivalence borne of the fundamentally conflictive nature of human existence" (Easterlin 254).

New and old interpretations have reworked recurrent mermaid tropes. Hayward posits that Carl Jung's theory of archetypes helps to situate these tropes in the collective unconscious, where they manifest "in the dream-worlds of mythology/folklore and in interior personal

explorations" (10). The mermaid thereby corresponds to the female archetype, the *"anima,"* which "is represented by men in a range of cultural contexts" (Hayward 11). However, Hayward admiringly adds that "the mermaid appeal[s] similarly (but differently) to both men and women … and, as manifestations of the vibrant *anima,* have greater power and appeal than the more pallid *animus*" (12). One of the primary tropes is the mermaid's hand-held mirror and her stigmatised habit of staring into that mirror. Instead of accusing her of female vanity, Hayward associates this habit with Lacan's "mirror stage": "[t]he mermaid represented, is fascinated by a (fractured and partial) representation of her form that suggests it as other than it is in reality" (14). Another trope of the mermaid is her voice and/or her inability/refusal to use it. Hayward classifies this pertinent *topoi* as a key characteristic of her liminality. Her songs express a sense of duality, vocalised "outside of the terrestrial/ patriarchal order precisely because she *is* outside of it" (Hayward 76). Often appearing as a "sonic seduction," her songs accentuate the mermaid's position "between realms of fantasy, desire and material existence"; that is, outside the heteronormative realm (Hayward 89). Accordingly, she is "always Becoming, a process, never an endpoint, as a symbol for the feminine," as David Farnell and Rute Noiva eloquently conclude (61).

My thesis will study the mermaid figure as such a symbol of "Becoming," that neither belongs to the traditional masculine, nor to the normative female world (Farnell, Noiva 61). The highly sexual discourse that surrounds her figure seems to overshadow alternative possibilities. Therefore, I aim to bring the transcultural roots that inform her representation (Warner, Easterlin, Pedersen) in dialogue with a feminist reading, which aims to thwart the tendency of objectifying her. Through a feminist reading of my different primary works, I will argue for a more complex understanding of the mermaid to elevate her from the phallogocentric

order. By positively embracing her different portrayals, my theoretical framework will unite various aspects of her othered nature to recast the traditional lens on the mermaid figure and free her from a monolithic and heteronormative interpretative net.

ii. Theoretical Framework

Since this project is a feminist reading of the mermaid through a transcultural lens, my theoretical framework will primarily consist of feminist and transcultural theory. As for the feminist framework, the ideas developed by the feminist historian and mythographer Marina Warner will be used as a springboard for my project. With a certain "resistance to canonicity," Warner has done extensive research on European and Asian fairy tales (Propst 739). Through an investigative approach, Warner advocates an understanding of how feminist motifs and figures are grounded in and shaped by socio-economic relations. A pertinent characteristic of Warner's writing is her effort to affirmatively denote the traditional form of storytelling and to lay bare the progressive, feminist attributes of the genre. Her feminist paradigm does not radically undermine, but rather situates itself outside a long-standing tradition of negating patriarchy or cultural hegemony. As a historian, Warner's goal is to reconsider feminist patterns that shape the representation of women as well as to develop new feminist interpretations. Such a framework will be fruitful for my analysis of the mermaid as it allows for transcultural and thus, non-essentialist interpretations.

Moreover, the paradigms of two post-structuralist French feminists, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, will strongly influence my reading of the mermaid and her tropes. I will demonstrate how their theoretical concepts inform my understanding of the mermaid figure and how their playful poetics resonate with the significant role language plays in my primary works. Irigaray's paradigm of "parler femme" will be a substantial part in my project as it serves to

facilitate a feminist reading of the mermaid that is imbued with "fluidity, mobility and an indifference to the laws of logic" (Wilkie-Stibbs 39). Irigaray terms "parler femme" as that moment "when women speak together" without any heteronormative presence and expectations (Moi 144). Moreover, Irigaray's return to the four elements, in particular to water and the celestial realm, strengthens her significance for my project. Her concept of "parler femme" aims to eschew a phallogocentric world view by reconnecting with a female "archaic language" rooted in the four elements (Wilkie-Stibbs 41). Thus, to fruitfully read and interpret the mermaid figure, it appears inevitable to bring in Irigaray's refusal of "the binaries of male/female polarities and the paradigms of scientific linearity in language" (Wilkie-Stibbs 41). Moreover, the recurring mirror trope will be read through the concept of "specula(riza)tion," which Irigaray termed as the male, rational intervention to capture woman's body with the mirror (*This Sex* 154). As stated by Irigaray, in heteronormative discourse, the mirror functions as a "silent matrix" with which the white male can be fully represented, yet in which the "other" "has been reduced by it to the hard-to-represent function of the negative" (*This Sex* 154).

Cixous appears to be more subversive than Irigaray as she not only questions but even tries to reinvent woman as a subject besides illuminating her place that is traditionally kept in the phallic, male shadows (Burke 296). With the concept of "écriture feminine," Cixous aims to create a space for women to rewrite themselves. As a liminal creature, the mermaid exists in a realm that goes beyond the male/female binary. Therefore, it makes sense for the mermaid to express herself in ways that do not follow the human conception of *logos* and *ratio.* An important attribute to her expression is the mermaid's voice and long-term silence. Accordingly, my focus will draw on her sonic voice and her (imposed) silence which will be scrutinized in several ways in accordance with her textual representation. Her voice denotes the tension that

emerges during an encounter between the human male and the liminal creature, perceived as female. Furthermore, Cixous's theory will be applied to the mermaid's body that is split into binaries and how "she physically materializes herself; *inscribes* what she's saying because she doesn't deny her drives the intractable and impassioned part they have in speaking" (*Medusa* 420). In summary, Cixous's and Irigaray's frameworks are helpful to perceive of the mermaid in theoretical terms, as both critics have developed a theoretical realm outside the traditional boundaries that allow for liminal creatures and fluid, complex spaces in-between worlds- and to understand "how to speak them all" (Cixous, *Medusa* 427).

Apart from a feminist reading, it appears reductive, even monolithic, to limit a study of the mermaid to one culture or nation. In that regard, my project will make use of a transcultural framework. My definition of transculturality is a combination of several critics who made a considerable contribution to the meaning of transculturality. Warner and Kennedy suggest in the introduction to *Scheherazade's Children: Global Encounters with the Arabian Nights* (2013) that *The Arabian Nights* constitute a "polyphonic, traveling text" filled with a diversity of voices (3). As a literary work, they disrupt essentialist readings as such, as it is always already a construct of various cultural influences. Yet in their opening chapter, Warner and Kennedy acknowledge an obvious tension that emerges within transcultural frameworks. By focusing on the metaphor of the eye, they shed light on the conflict between a specific socio-cultural contextual reading and one that encompasses other cultural patterns. On the one hand, the eye thus renders a "perceptive reading of the original story, the subtexts of a figure the resonances of which may in fact be lost in the disruptive and variously transformative processes of translation" (Warner, Kennedy 5). On the other hand, Warner and Kennedy suggest that the eye emblematises a venturing into unknown territories. Accordingly, a transcultural framework

impacts the eye as it "changes focus in keeping with the words on the page; the Kulturbrillen, the cultural spectacles each reader brings, will be modified- perhaps corrected even- and the light of a new understanding will flood through the lens" (Warner, Kennedy 5). This tension between cultural specificity and a broader cross-cultural inclusion will be explored in this project in different ways. The readings of the mermaids will be distinct and account for specific socio-cultural contexts of the written literary works. At the same time, the feminist reading of the mermaid will be applied in all of my works, even if they are from distinct cultures and times.

Transculturality will be supported by Wolfgang Welsch's definition of the concept in "Transculturality- the Puzzling Form of Cultures Today". As Welsch alleges, transculturality has become an epistemological necessity to perceive of culture today. The outdated and essentialist concept of "single cultures" is untenable in the world we live in because it neglects the complexity and diversity within cultures as a result of migration fluxes. A traditional monocultural view is "separatory" and therefore, "descriptively unserviceable" as well as "normatively dangerous and untenable" (Welsch). To a great extent, my use of transculturality grounds in Welsch's definition, as "it *passes through* classical cultural boundaries. Cultural conditions today are largely characterized by mixes and permeations. The concept of transculturality (…) seeks to articulate this altered cultural constitution" (Welsch, [emphasis added by author]). Despite these valid definitions, Welsch demarcates transculturality today from transcultural exchanges in the past. Welsch first and foremost positions transculturality within the twentieth and twenty-first century, as "a consequence of the *inner differentiation and complexity of modern cultures*". It is only in a later supplemented chapter, in which Welsch acknowledges that transculturality "is in no way new historically". By relying on Carl Zuckmayer's water analogy and the borderless stream of rivers, Welsch brings in the occurrence

of a "historical transculturality". I agree with Welsch that Zuckmayer's eloquent description of transculturality renders a picturesque imagery for the transcultural framing: "Intermixed-like the waters from sources, streams and rivers, so, they run together to a great, living torrent" (Zuckmayer, quoted by Welsch). However, his distinction between "historical transculturality" and "cultural determinants today" that "have become transcultural" still suggests that transculturality only progressively developed in modern societies. Welsch minimises earlier instances of transcultural exchanges to sporadic incidents, rather than acknowledging them as a foundation for a trajectory that lead to the hybrid cultural circumstances we live in today.

Furthermore, from a linguistic point of view, my project uses a plurilingual corpus. While most of the works in this project will be in English, my second chapter will centre on a German novella. As for my third chapter, the hybrid and multilingual backgrounds of Salman Rushdie and Kamila Shamsie have a salient impact on their writing. In that vein, my understanding of transculturality is closely tied to the advantages of linguistic diversity. In "Comparative Literature and the Global Languagescape," Mary Louise Pratt argues for an analysis of the linguistic development in relation to a "set of planetary realignments people call globalization" (274). However, like Welsch, her focus on globalization limits her analysis to a certain time span, neglecting earlier linguistic border crossings. Crucial linguistic components, such as distribution and access, hinge on the effects of globalization, according to Pratt. Even if her study is of economic interest, I would argue that the tension between language and gender is relevant for my project. In particular, women's restricted autonomy and participation in society, due to restrained access to other languages, brings up relevant links with my project: "[m]onolingualism often keeps immigrant women in the sexual contract and out of civic life and the labour market. The restriction often gets coded positively, when women are seen as the

guardians of tradition" (Pratt 277). On a more implicit level, aligning language with the male realm picks up on the feminist stand point in this project. As I will argue, language and consequently, a phallogocentric system fails to capture what is outside this human centred world. Whereas Pratt identifies language as an "endless instrument of creativity and play" which is "ungovernable" and "will jump any borders placed around it," the tragic encounters between human male and female mermaid prove that language cannot jump *any* border. Especially, if the border is disrupted by liminality.

Methodologically, my project is grounded in close reading and a comparative analysis of the mermaid figure and her various representations in literature. Within a transcultural framework, I will determine certain feminist *topoi*, or tropes, that have accompanied and defined the mermaid from her earliest depictions in *The Arabian Nights* to recent works like *The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock*. These tropes will include her (dominantly blonde in Western representations and dark in South/West Asian) long hair, her sonic voice or/and muteness, mirrors and a fetishization of her tail, the absence of it respectively, and her elemental fluidity. Even if their inclusion in the narratives varies, these tropes will help to compare the different primary works. More precisely, each chapter will entail a specific feminist analysis of several mermaid tropes and how "the changes to the siren's voice alter the meanings she conveys; the social context of the story in which she figures, eloquent or silent, modifies the message" (Warner, *Beast* 408). Each chapter will contain a brief comparative analysis and in the concluding chapter, I will give an in-depth and overarching comparison between the different mermaid figures studied in this project.

iii. Primary Corpus

The first chapter aims to provide a better understanding of a widely disseminated, even archetypal, representation of the mermaid figure in fairy and folk tales. I will start with two tales from *The Arabian Nights (Alf Layla wa-layla),* including "Julnar the Sea-Born" (sometimes found under "Jullanar") and "Abdullah the Fisherman and Abdullah the Merman". Often only associated with Arab culture, the *Nights* are a composition of three oral cultures: Indian, Persian and Arab. The scholar Robert Irwin characterises the evolution of *The Arabian Nights* as an extraordinary one, as they developed from "[t]he notebook of a Jewish book dealer from Cairo around the year 1150 [which] contains the first documentary evidence for the Arabic title" (22). Irwin claims that the collection can be divided into three distinct parts: "(1) Persian tales that had some Indian elements and had been adapted into Arabic by the 10th century; (2) tales recorded in Baghdad between the 10th and 12th centuries; (3) stories written down in Egypt between the 11th and 14th centuries" (22). Both stories will be studied in the unexpurgated translation by Richard Burton from 1885-1886. Critics like Warner and Irwin reached consensus that *The Arabian Nights* were a paramount creative inspiration for Hans Christian Andersen and thus, an analysis of the Danish writer's tale logically follows in the same chapter. After delineating the genre of fairy tales and its origins in transculturality, the first chapter will provide a feminist analysis of a rather traditional representation of the mermaid in literature. For both "Julnar the Sea-Born" and "Abdullah the Fisherman and Abdullah the Merman," the first chapter will focus on the classic representation of the mermaid and her feminist meanings that came to inform Andersen's mermaid.

Hans Christian Andersen's *Little Mermaid* (1837) will be studied in relation to the *Nights*. Jack Zipes labelled the Danish artist as "the most significant writer of this period" whose work has been translated into numerous languages and greatly influenced the Western image

of the mermaid (14). Unlike one might expect, Andersen's story is the only of my primary works that was intended for an audience of children. Andersen established a name for himself as he is regarded to be the founding father of the modern fairy tale; he was the first one to give fairy tales "a personal touch" (Zipes 14). With strong links to Cixous's "écriture féminine," the little mermaid's silence will be compared to Julnar's silence. As liminal and therefore "othered" creatures, these mermaid figures will be studied as counteragents of phallogocentric speech through their use of a female liberated expression.

The second chapter will look back at another European representation of the mermaid figure, written down by the German Romantic Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué in his novella called *Undine* (1811). Even though Fouqué's contribution to the many mermaid interpretations was another invaluable creative inspiration for Andersen, I will show in the second chapter how his interpretation greatly varies from others. Fouqué was one of the well-known writers among the German Romantics whose rewriting of the mermaid underlines her complexity as a liminal figure. Rather than artistic entertainment, Fouqué's tragic tale aims "to address philosophical and practical concerns of the emerging middle classes and was written in defence of the imagination and as a critique of the worst aspects of the Enlightenment and absolutism" (Zipes, *Companion* xxiv). Literally born out of the inland waters, Undine falls for a noble knight, called Huldbrand. However, as a water nymph her union with the human male is doomed to fail. The story is a socio-cultural endeavour to unite apparent dual realms and to achieve unison within a split cosmos (Stuby 9). Moreover, in line with Irigaray's "parler femme" and the fluidity of sexuality, this chapter will discuss the possibility of a *ménage à trois* between Undine, Huldbrand and the latter's former lover Bertalda. The ultimate tragic ending with Huldbrand's death and Undine's transformation into a water element seems to suggest that humanity is not ready to embrace a liminal co-existence.

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Known for his high intertextuality, numerous sub-plots and dense prose, Salman Rushdie's writing is imbued with fairy tale tropes and fantastical elements. His novel *Shame* (1983) has been analysed as a feminist rewriting of the Beauty and the Beast story (Deszcz 41). Politically and religiously contested, *The Satanic Verses* (1988) equally interweaves fairy tale elements. I aim to analyse how Rushdie uses the mermaid as a female metaphor and how it contributes to the female identities in *The Satanic Verses.* In reference to Deszcz's argument that Rushdie "appropriates a fairy tale pre-text and makes it an anti-paternalistic narrative that attempts to go beyond cultural gender constructions" (40), this project will analyse how the several mermaid references are brought to bear on the female characters. Moreover, the mirror trope will help to understand the heteronormative split between the rational male and the liminal female. It is noteworthy that Rushdie's feminist stance will be delineated at the start of the third chapter. I will explicate how Rushdie's oscillation between female stereotyping and empowering women characterises his writing and helps to understand the meaning of the mermaid references in his work.

Coming from a similar background, Kamila Shamsie is a Pakistani writer based in London. Belonging to the new wave of Pakistani women writers, her book *Broken Verses* (2005) deals with living under the stringent, patriarchal Islamic laws in Pakistan and the complicit entanglement of US foreign policy (Ranasinha 135). Imbued with Shamsie's feminist and political agenda, *Broken Verses* opens with "the compelling vision of a breached mermaid (…) which proves central to the reader's understanding of [the protagonist's] hauntedness" (Clements 135). As politically charged as Rushdie's work but less known for her engagement with myth or fairy tale, my reading of Shamsie's mermaid figure will help to challenge prescribed gender categories.

The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock (2018) by Imogen Hermes Gowar is the last primary source for my thesis. Gowar's historical novel will be discussed in the last chapter because she brings together the different mermaid figures and tropes that will be analysed in the earlier chapters of this project. I will show how she not only applies but also deploys the stereotypical, patriarchal mermaid figure into plural meanings that help to elevate her figure, and thus women from a place of monolithic representation. I will therefore analyse the interconnectedness between Georgian women and mermaids, and how they are subjected to stigmatising, patriarchal discourse. I will argue that the liminal place of the mermaid helps to forge fluid female identities that do not yield to male categories.

FIRST CHAPTER: THE MERMAID'S SILENCE IN FAIRY TALES

i. Introduction

Mass-media fairy tale productions have created an image of the mermaid that dominates her representation in culture. Walt Disney's animated musical film from 1989, in particular, has cemented the mermaid's place within the fairy tale genre. Disney's narrative of the sixteen-year-old Ariel is loosely based on Andersen's story, yet with a romanticised ending adapted to American film expectations. Certain tropes remain flat or unexplored, such as the excruciating pain that Andersen's little mermaid feels with her new legs which does not cease until she undergoes another metamorphosis. In that regard, to gain a better understanding of the mermaid's representation in the fairy tale genre, this first chapter will not only look at Andersen's original tale but also study one of her earliest literary representations in *The Arabian Nights.* Through a comparative analysis, this chapter aims to undertake a feminist reading of the mermaid in its most traditional and archetypal form. Bringing insights from two tales of the *Nights* to bear on Andersen's later version is not only necessary due to the similarities in genre.

Warner, Zipes and other scholars have reached consensus that Andersen's creative inspiration sprang from being read from the *Nights* and other fairy tales. Furthermore, by providing several cultural representations of the mermaid in fairy tales, this chapter aims to eschew a narrow conception of her figure and "to make readers understand the genre as wider and more capacious than they have supposed, more open to a variety of forms and themes" (Harries 5). Before looking at the tales, however, this chapter will open with a clear delineation of the fairy tale genre by relying on Warner's and Zipes's definitions. With a stress on transculturality, it will be shown how the genre is rooted within "altered cultural constitutions" rather than within one single culture (Welsch). This chapter will specifically focus on the mermaid's physical appearance, the description and conception of the worlds she (and he) lives in as well as the act of silence that follows the crossing from the merfolk to the human realm.

ii. Fairy Tales as a Genre

Besides the resurgence in popular media, fairy tales have gained a lot of scholarly attention over the last years. The British mythographer Marina Warner and the American academic Jack Zipes have greatly contributed to creating the genre's place within literary criticism. Warner has given an extensive definition of fairy tales in her short, but eloquently written book *Once Upon a Time* (2014). According to Warner, a first and obvious characteristic is the short narrative, "sometimes less than a single page, sometimes running to many more, but the term no longer applies as it once did, to a novel-length work" (*Once* xvi). Secondly, Warner stresses the sense of familiarity that can be associated with the tales as they are "either verifiably old because they have been passed on down the generations or because the listener or reader is struck by their family resemblance to another story" (*Once* xvi). Moreover, fairy tales belong to the category of folklore which recalls their early sources in the oral tradition. In fact, as Warner has argued

in *From the Beast to the Blonde,* the literary fairy tale arose from an élite of women in the eighteenth-century and was mainly intended for an adult audience. They were written to reflect on society and cultural practices and "to think consciously about human beings and the world" (*Beast* 160). Warner goes on by making a distinction between "genuine folk tales (*Märchen)* and literary or 'arty' fairy tales (*Kunstmärchen)*" in which "the first are customarily anonymous and undatable, the latter signed and dated" (*Once,* xvii). This distinction already problematises and specifies the readings in this chapter. Andersen's tale can clearly be classified as a *Kunstmärchen* as the author and its creation are clearly dated. However, concerning *The Arabian Nights* I would argue that they correlate with the definition of *Märchen* because neither the author(s), nor the exact date can be determined. Yet, on the other hand, it was Antoine Galland's translation to French in the seventeenth century that profoundly impacted the subsequent Western literary production of fairy tales. In that regard, I would define the *Nights* as both folk tales and "arty" fairy tales.

As already mentioned, Galland's translation of the *Nights* had a great effect on how "European and American writers were to define and conceive fairy tales. In some respects, the *Nights* are more important and famous in the West than they are in the Orient" (Zipes 24). Zipes's statement implies that fairy tales were the product of early transcultural exchanges. Warner strongly agrees with Zipes, arguing that the confluence between European and Asian tales crystallized into "many of the defining features of the genre" (49). However, both critics acknowledge the existing tensions between the idea of the travelling tales and a universal, collective unconscious. The universalist paradigm emerged from Vladimir Propp's, and later Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist ideas. Their line of thought advocates a universalist, collective unconscious which gives ground to "seven stories and all the rest are variations on

them" (Warner, *Once* 62). Yet both Warner and Zipes criticised the universalist approach for its bluntness towards cultural and thematic specificities. A transcultural perspective helps to allow for differences and to "emphasize the porousness of borders" as "no frontier can keep a good story from roaming" (Warner, *Once* 62). Besides the transcultural characteristic, I already brought in the relevance of women in fairy tales. As pointed out by Warner, they were important on two levels: as narrators and as characters. In her essay "Mother Goose Tales: Female Fiction, Female Fact?", Warner explicates the gendered structure of fairy tales. The storyteller, "the near source," was female and "not aristocratic"; whereas the source of the stories was "noble, French and male" (Warner, *Mother Goose* 8). In the same vein, Zipes argues that even if narrated by women, the tales were really "scripted according to male dictates or fantasies" (Zipes, *Companion* xx). Nonetheless, fairy tales were a way for women to write and to narrate and thus, to "revise the estimation of women's talk" and to positively influence their role within society (Warner, *Mother Goose* 12). In the following chapter, I will focus less on the (male) narrators of the mermaid tales and more on the representation of the female protagonist.

iii. Julnar's Silent Agency

The two tales from the *Nights* will be studied in Richard F. Burton's translation. Burton was the first one to translate the corpus from French to English. He was known for being an Orientalist, widely travelled and fluent in over twenty languages. "Julnar the Sea-Born[4]" opens with a merchant who presents Julnar to King Shahriman. Attracted by her extraordinary beauty, King Shahriman purchases Julnar and falls in love with her. Even though he shows her his utmost affection, the beautiful Julnar remains silent for a year- until she is pregnant with

[4] "Julnar the Sea-Born" starts in the seven hundred and thirty-eighth night and is part of the earliest manuscripts from the Persian corpus.

Shahriman's son. With her silence broken, Julnar explains to the king that she is an exile from the sea. She summons her sea-family and introduces them to her human husband. Shortly after her son's birth, named after the fullest moon, Badr Básim, King Shahriman passes away. The story then continues with Julnar's son Badr Básim who runs away from home to chase after another beautiful mermaid princess, named Jauharah. His uncle, called Sálih, gives Solomon's ring to Badr which allows him to swim and breathe underwater like his mother and her relatives. After Badr's unsuccessful efforts to be married to Jauharah, he falls prey to the mischievous Queen Lab and is transformed into a fowl. The story's denouement depends on Julnar who has made a name for herself for being the most powerful on land and under the sea. She rushes to exterminate Queen Lab, saves her son and eventually, assures his marriage to the sea princess Jauharah.

Julnar's silence is a prominent trope which might recall Andersen's and later, Disney's mermaid's voiceless appearance on Earth. However, in the following section I will demonstrate that Julnar's silence can be studied as a much more powerful act of feminine self-affirmation. Firstly, as specified by Robert Irwin, I need to remark that a feminist reading of the *Nights* is a contentious and precarious endeavour and should not be used to make assumptions about Arab society as a whole. Critics like Kabbani read the tales as misogynist, while Lally-Hollbecque argues that Scheherazade's narrative frame makes them feminist ground breakers (Irwin, *Political* 161). However, Irwin stresses the difficulty of advocating either one feminist standpoint for the collection because of "its diverse constituents" (*Political* 161). The transcultural foundation problematises a one-sided feminist reading, with many of the tales not being Islamic at all: "They have been translated into Arabic and lightly Arabized and Islamicized; characters have been given Arab names; the locale has been shifted to Baghdad or

Cairo; but the structure of many of the stories and their inspiration come from elsewhere" (Irwin, *Political* 161). That being said, the feminist reading of the *Nights* in this project only refers to two tales but by no means speaks for the entire collection.

Starting with Julnar's physical description, her appearance recalls dominant mermaid characteristics, including her long hair, expressive eyes and gracious body:

> Now when Shahriman beheld the girl, he saw that she was like a Rudaynian lance, and she was wrapped in a veil of gold-purled silk. The merchant uncovered her face, whereupon the place was illumined by her beauty and her seven tresses hung down to her anklets like horses' tails. She had Nature-kohl'd eyes, heavy hips and thighs and waist of slenderest guise; her sight healed all maladies and quenched the fire of sighs for she was even as the poet cries:
> "I love her madly for she is perfect fair, o Complete in gravity and
> gracious way ;
> Nor overtall nor overshort, the while o Too full for trousers are
> those hips that sway :
> Her shape is midmost 'twixt o'er small and tall ; o Nor long to blame nor little
> to gainsay :
> O'erfall her anklets tresses black as night o Yet in her face repleads
> eternal day". (Burton 265)

The transition into verse further emphasises the significance of her beauty. Her hair is black and traditionally long, as "a symbol and manifestation of the mermaid's allure in its own right" (Hayward 15). Opposed to the overwhelming Caucasian representation of the mermaid, the black hair and "Nature-kohl'd eyes" reflect her West/South Asian beauty ideals. From a

physical point of view, her representation is an idealised image that suggests a projection of male fantasies.

Moreover, Julnar turns from being a slave girl, thus a trade object, into the "most powerful magician on face of earth" (Burton 306). In that regard, the emphasis is less on her physical metamorphosis than on her status transformation. Shortly after she puts an end to her one-year-long silence, Julnar progressively increases her agency. At her husband's palace, she orchestrates the meeting between her mer-family and the king; she even commands him to stay within the closet to ease the change on her family. Moreover, she possesses the power to fulfil Shahriman's longing for a son and even later, it is Julnar who thwarts the sea patriarch's objections against a union between her son Badr and his daughter Jauharah. Even if most of the narrative centres on Badr's adventures in the sea and his encounter with Queen Lab, the ultimate driving force behind the narrative is Julnar. Like Scheherazade's role in the overall collection, Julnar adopts a key framing role in the story's narrative. According to Zipes, such a feminist framing in an apparent patriarchal culture draws attention to women's authority; in fact, "a woman exercised more power in Moslem culture during the Middle Ages in Baghdad and Cairo than is commonly known" (Zipes, *Dreams* 54). The fact that she is not only responsible for her child's education and marriage, but also for restoring peace on Earth, elevates Julnar to the position of the divine, owing "something to Thetis, the sea deity and mother of Achilles" (Irwin, *Companion* 71). According to Hayward, who bases his argument on Irigaray's essay "Divine Women," Julnar's "compound monstrosity" is an act of empowerment which allows her to embrace "a divine entity that embodies all that is female and that can allow women to establish their own subjectivity" (Hayward 16). I would even argue that this expression of female subjectivity is highlighted by her early refusal to speak. After Julnar's arrival at the palace the

king and his servants try to provoke Julnar's speech with music and other *divertissement*, yet all in vain:

> Accordingly, they played before her all manner instruments of music and sports and what not and sang, till the whole company was moved to mirth, except the damsel, who looked at them in silence, but neither laughed nor spoke. (Burton 267)

It is only once Julnar knows of her pregnancy that she utters the first words to her husband. However, she makes clear that "had I not conceived by thee, I had not spoken to thee one word" (Burton 268). Her impregnation by the king and even more so, her bodily conceiving become the condition for her speech. Arguably, her silence is self-imposed. She refuses to communicate by language with her newly wedded husband and his concubines unless her body yields to the human realm. Her speech follows her bodily expression. At the same time, with her year of silence, Julnar prepares the ground for speech. With everyone anticipating her speech, Julnar's silence puts her into a position of control. This close bond between her speech and her body, but also her self-decisive moment of *seizing* the opportunity to speak represents her moment of "écriture féminine". Following Christie Wilkie-Stibbs, Cixous associates language with a bodily function. It speaks through the body and thus, "the *feminine* can be understood as an aesthetic of corporeality" (37). Given that the body functions as a plane of translation, Julnar depends on her pregnancy. It stands for her corporeal expression that substitutes the human *logos*. The world of the *logos* signifies in this case the world of the human male, of King Shahriman. In "The Laugh of Medusa," Cixous posits that writing the feminine starts from the acknowledgment of the female body: "your body must be heard" (419). In fact, without her body and its capacities, a woman "is reduced to being the servant of the militant male, his

shadow" (Cixous 420). Once the body has been acknowledged and its agency has been ascertained, follows "woman's *seizing* the occasion to *speak,* hence her shattering entry into history" (Cixous 420). Thus, woman can decide for herself when she wants to effectuate her entry into the logos, "to become *at will* the taker and initiator, for her own right, in every symbolic system, in every political process" (Cixous 420). Accordingly, Julnar does not enter the sphere of the *logos* when she is expected to do so, but precisely then when her body expresses the pregnancy and thus, when she is armed to enter the "Symbolic" phallogocentric world. In that regard, Julnar's silence does not emerge from a place of patriarchal oppression. Through her corporeal initiation that resembles Cixous's concept of "écriture feminine," Julnar's silence becomes a sign of feminist agency.

iv. Mermaids as Utopian Ideals?

"Abdullah the Fisherman and Abdullah the Merman[5]" starts with a poor fisherman who struggles to feed his family until he catches a merman in his net. As if he came from a parallel reflection from the undersea world, both merman and fisherman are called Abdullah. They agree to meet each other every day to exchange jewels and rubies from the sea with fruit from land. The fisherman's wealth becomes soon the town's gossip so that the king makes him his right Wazir. During another meeting, Abdullah the merman takes the fisherman underwater to give him a deposit for the Prophet's grave. Unlike Julnar the Sea-Born, Abdullah cannot undergo a metamorphosis to live on land. Instead he rubs the fisherman's body with some ointment that allows him to breathe and walk underwater. During his journey underwater, the fisherman is acquainted with the merman's family, visits different cities and even the sea king.

[5] "Abdullah the Fisherman and Abdullah the Merman" begins in the nine hundred and fortieth night in Scheherazade's narrative web.

However, their friendship abruptly ends when Abdullah the merman hears that humans mourn the death of their relatives rather than to rejoice that their souls go back to their divine origin.

Irwin terms Abdullah's sea world an "alternative society" that draws a contrasting picture in relation to the rational, human world (Irwin, *Political* 253). The merman's world stands for a utopia, as it were, that emphasises "moral as well as social concepts in order to develop the underwater world into a kind of future vision for humanity … built on the value system of Humanism" (Marzolph 117). Irwin further adds that utopian worlds are rare in Islamic writing given that the Koran outlines and prescribes social ideals (Irwin, *Political* 211). In that respect, I would argue that the representation of the mer-folk helps to elucidate one's reading and evaluation of the sea world. Abdullah is a male counter version of a species dominantly represented by females. Moreover, his first appearance in the text does not dwell on his outstanding, even seductive, beauty as it is so often for mermaids. Rather, the fisherman is astonished by the merman's powerful demeanour that bears resemblance with jinns or ifrits:

> [h]e saw a man in it and took him for one of the Ifrits of the lord Solomon, whom he was wont to imprison in cucurbits of brass and cast him into the main, believing that the vessel had burst for length of years and that the I frit had come forth and fallen into the net; wherefore he fled from him, crying out and saying,
>
> 'Mercy, mercy, O Ifrit of Solomon!
>
> 'But the Adamite called out to him from within the net and said. Come hither, O fisherman, and flee not from me; for I am human like thyself. (Burton 169-70)

Even though Julnar ends up being the most respected living being both on land and undersea, her mightiness and respect only follow her actions, whereas her beauty does not foreshadow any of these reigning qualities. In fact, her physical appearance does not differ from any other mermaids mentioned in "Abdullah the Fisherman and Abdullah the Merman". When the two

Abdullahs encounter the merman's daughter, her description almost parallels Julnar's apperance: "[t]here came to him a damsel with a face like the rondure of the moon and hair long, hips heavy, eyes black-edged and waist slender; but she was naked and had a tail" (Burton 185). The same goes for the mermaids who have been deported to "The City of Women". Again, their faces resemble that of moons, with long hair and "tails like fishes' tails". The only distinctive feature of these women is the presence of feet, which are in "their middle" (Burton 182). With their feet visible, the author implies the presence of their genitals, which even intensifies the cause for their expulsion from the rest of the mer-society. As Abdullah explains to his friend, the sea king has banished the mermaids to the city because they cheated on their husbands. They no longer conceive children, and if one of them tries to escape the confines of their city, they will be devoured by one of the beasts of the sea. Abdullah from land is astonished that no one is concerned to hide their private parts and the merman explains to him that their nudity is nothing unconventional as they are not in possession of clothing. In addition, marriage is not a must, but "everyone who taketh a liking to a female hath his will of her" (Burton 183).

Apart from the moon faces, the repetitive and almost stereotypical physical representation of mermaids perpetuates a female beauty ideal. In particular, the big kohl-coloured eyes, long hair and heavy hips are recurring characteristics in the description of the female mermaids. Yet, some details in the story like the moon formed faces of the mer-folk are of eerie quality and further forge a certain unearthly depiction of the water world. Accordingly, Irwin argues that the alternative world does not stand for a progressive future vision which needs to be emulated. It does not offer a "political programme" but "something that is wonderful because it is strange, not something that is wonderful because it is a blueprint for the ideal of life in society" (Irwin, *Nights* 212). Read as a marvellous but alternative world, the persistent beauty and the bodies of the mer-people could stem from a male fantasy projection, that is

nonetheless destined to remain within the imaginary. Moreover, if proceeding with the argument of women's dominance in Medieval Arab culture, then this alternative world of segregated women appears to confirm a male fantasy in which male desire dominates female lust. The common nudity and the free love (albeit exclusively for men) becomes "a reflection of erotica fantasy rather than of political concerns" (Irwin, *Political* 254). "Abdullah the Fisherman and Abdullah the Merman" is less relevant for empowered, female agency, but rather allows for an imaginative leap in which socio-cultural norms are overthrown by male desires. It suggests that the key attraction of the mermaid figure boils down to her physical attributes, for "[k]nowledge, prophetic or otherwise, comes a poor second, and music can be lovely, but not so lovely as a pair of breasts" (Kingshill 132).

In brief, the two tales stress different qualities and aspects about the mermaid figure and surroundings. Nonetheless, the mermaid's physical depiction is quite similar in the two tales: both Julnar and the mermaids in "Abdullah the Fisherman and Abdullah the Merman" have long hair, wide hips and dark eyes. Yet through Julnar's self-assertive silence and her later corporeal expression, she becomes a powerful creature. However, the feminist stance and affirmative action of the mermaids in the second tale are of secondary importance. Their idealised body parts and their somewhat strange moon faces reflect male fantasies. I would even argue that they form the basis for later eroticised film rewritings of the mermaid, which Hayward has scrutinised in his book *Making a Splash: Mermaids (and Mer-Men) in 20th and 21st Century Audiovisual Media:* "the complexity of the mermaid's erotic charge and symbolism, making sense of its absurdities by delivering scenarios that visualise various possibilities for the manifestation and gratification of desire both within and outside of normative heterosexuality" (Hayward 109).

v. The Little Mermaid's Aerial Empowerment

For almost seventy years, Andersen dedicated his life to writing fairy tales for children. He published four collections and became known as the founding father of the modern fairy tale. As Zipes comments, Andersen makes use of "[a]n explicit narrative voice, commenting on the event and addressing the listener" (*Companion* 14). His fairy tales resonate with everyday hardships and project the writer's own melancholic life vision: "both end tragically, thus raising the question whether children's literature must depend on happy endings" (Zipes, *Companion* 14). His characteristic melancholia stems from Andersen's dissatisfaction with society's hierarchical divisions. As the son of a fisherman and a washing woman, Andersen showed little pride in his background. Even though his success as a writer ensured him a place within the upper middle-classes and petty bourgeoisie circles, "Andersen never felt himself to be a full-fledged member of any group" (Zipes, *Dreams* 82). In line with his questioning of happy endings, Andersen wrote the story of *The Little Mermaid* which is haunted by the writer's melancholia. Apart from *The Arabian Nights,* Andersen's inspiration sprang from the Romantic poets, like Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué (whose novella will be analysed in the following chapter).

In terms of style, the story clearly reveals its intended audience: both beginning and end are written in a rhythmic pattern in which the audience is introduced to the fantastic realm. The narrative opens with an introduction of the sea king and his six daughters. On her fifteenth birthday, each daughter can swim to the surface to get a glimpse of the human world. As the youngest of all, the little mermaid must wait the longest for her turn. During her excursion to the surface, she witnesses a shipwreck and saves the young prince who falls overboard. After bringing him back onshore, the mermaid falls in love with the young prince and swims close to

his castle to observe him every night. The prince however stays unaware of her existence and believes that he has been saved by a damsel living in a temple. The mermaid's longing to gain human legs and a human soul become so overwhelming that she decides to consult the sea witch. The latter trades the mermaid's voice for a pair of legs. If, however, the mermaid fails to conquer the prince's heart, she will be turned into sea foam. As soon as the mermaid's tongue is cut off, she swims on shore and drinks the sea witch's draught. The prince soon finds the mermaid and takes her with him to his castle. Despite the sharp pain in her legs and her silence, the mermaid enjoys her days with the prince. The latter, however, falls in love with the damsel he believes to have saved him from drowning and they decide to get married on their ship. The little mermaid joins the couple and, anticipating her death, she throws herself over board. To her surprise, she is turned into an aerial fairy due to her endured suffering and sacrifice. As part of the air daughters, she is eligible to gain an immortal soul after three hundred years of good service. Again, the ending of the tale addresses its audience and implicitly contributes to moral education: the mermaid's immortal soul can be quicker attained if she visits many well-behaved children.

Like the *Nights,* the mermaid's beauty is unique and excels that of her five sisters:

> [t]he youngest was the prettiest of them all; her skin was as clear and delicate as a rose-leaf, and her eyes as blue as the deepest sea; but, like all the others, she had no feet, and her body ended in a fish's tail. (Andersen 556)

Yet, in contrast to the Arabian corpus, the story adds more detail to her psychological inner world and character. Andersen describes her as a "strange", "quiet" and "thoughtful" child who is obsessed with material gadgets from the human world. Nonetheless, the mermaid's hair, her expressive eyes and fishtail remain key physical tropes. The significance of her voice is

emphasised as it becomes a trading object for the sea witch in exchange for her legs. Besides her voice, her hair becomes another crucial object for trade. With the aim to save their little sister, the mermaid's siblings consult the sea witch and trade their long hair for a knife that would kill the prince and retransform the mermaid into her initial form. When the sisters bring the knife to the little mermaid, she is shocked to see them "pale as herself; but their long beautiful hair waved no more in the wind and had been cut off" (Andersen 583). Even if the mermaid refuses to follow their advice, these two scenes of trade with the sea witch are crucial to stress the mermaid's defining features.

In contrast to the *Nights*, Andersen's tale pronounces the "otherness" of the sea world. In "Abdullah the Fisherman and Abdullah the Merman" the merman's daughter and wife deride the human Abdullah for being tailless. In other words, the female unhuman figure is elevated to a superior position of laughing at the human male and his lack of a tail. Conversely, Andersen inverted this dichotomy. It is the little mermaid who plays the role of the "other," not only because of her strange behaviour among her sea friends but also in relation to land, as her grandmother specifies: "[y]our fish's tail, which amongst us is considered so beautiful, is thought on earth to be quite ugly" (Andersen 570).

This shift in paradigm, in which the human represents the norm and the mermaid is othered for not having a pair of legs goes back to the later entanglement with religion. According to Easterlin, the tendency of othering the mermaid is grounded in Christian mythology. Mermaid lore stems from seals that were spotted during ship voyages. Christian sailors associated seals with fallen angels and with human sinners. In that vein, Christian lore on mermaids "reflects its pronounced dualism and its attendant beliefs in sin and redemption" (Easterlin 258). From this observation, Easterlin infers that "the northern European mermaid

was always marked with the outsiderness that Andersen would so productively exploit" (Easterlin 258). Moreover, Easterlin invigorates the divine attribute of mermaids, yet by stressing the mermaid's deficiency of it. As opposed to Julnar, the little mermaid "has no special powers, including (…) powers of self-transformation" (Easterlin 262). She entirely depends on others and even then, her longing remains unfulfilled. She is not only othered for being a mermaid, but her existence is grounded in a lack. Moreover, "[s]he is depicted mostly in negative terms, for while she is not human she is defined by her desire to be so" (Easterlin 262). Nor does she conform to the sea, her natural habitat, and thus, her identity is splintered in fragments.

Finally, the little mermaid's silence accentuates her unfulfilled disposition. Like Julnar in *The Arabian Nights,* the little mermaid turns mute as soon as she enters the human realm. However, the circumstances of their silence are crucially different, almost opposed. As I argued earlier, Julnar's silence is a conscious and deliberate choice to reprobate the male sphere of logos. Her silence becomes a powerful choice to seize the moment to express herself outside the predetermined patriarchal system. Opposed to Julnar, the little mermaid's silence is not an act of feminist self-liberation. Firstly, her painful metamorphosis from a fishtail into human legs equally marks her entry into the male word of *logos,* and even more a *phallogocentric* world. Every step she walks feels "as if treading upon the points of needles or sharp knives" (Andersen 576). Even if her beauty remains, her silence accentuates her lack of a necessity in the human world. "[A]rrayed in costly robes of silk and muslin," she remains "the most beautiful creature in the palace *but* she was dumb and could neither speak nor sing" (Andersen 576 [own emphasis]). The mermaid's passing from the underwater world to land is read by Sells as a transition from the sphere of the feminine to the masculine, in which "the costs of

women's access to the 'male sphere'" are exemplified (176). Andersen's version clearly pushes the "double-binding cultural expectations of choosing between either voice or access" towards a preference of the male world (179).

Reading Cixous in relation to the mermaid's silence of "passing," the mermaid seems to be at an earlier stage in her feminist development than Julnar. Her sacrifice and loss of voice deeply resonate with Cixous's analysis of women's silence in face of patriarchy; they have been "[m]uffled throughout their history, they have lived in dreams, in bodies (though muted), in silences, aphonic revolts" (Cixous 424). Hence, the mermaid in Andersen's tale still occupies that suppressed position prior to female liberation. One can even argue that her silence and consequent outsider status in the prince's world align her with "the abject" or the mad person as elaborated by Foucault. Drawing on Foucault's connection between madness and silence, Wilkie-Stibbs explicates that the subject who refuses language, equally refuses law and thus occupies the position of "the abject": "[i]t is the inverse of all that is required to qualify for full subjectivity in the Symbolic" (Wilkie-Stibbs 72). One could however argue that the mermaid's pleasure in dancing on land exemplifies some sort of corporeal expression and, in line with Cixous, a means of making her body be heard. However, I would argue that the sharp pain of her graceful dance moves is a constant reminder of her place within the human world, or rather outside it. The metaphorical sword that passes through her as she undergoes her fatal transformation clearly delineates her position as a victim and an "Abject" in the world of *logos*. Consequently, the little mermaid's corporeal expression is belated, and she cannot reinstate her own language. Unlike Julnar, she does not start from a negation of the male world but yields to its demands.

In addition to her position on the edge of the Symbolic, Warner even takes the argument to the extreme by claiming that the mermaid's silence leads the way to her self-obliteration. From the moment the mermaid surrenders to her fate as sea foam, she becomes her own subject as one of the daughters of the air. In that regard, "[t]o be saved, more is required: self-obliteration, dissolution" (Warner, *Beast* 398). Anna-Maria Stuby's reading of the mermaid partly echoes Warner's, in particular in relation to the mermaid's self-obliteration within the male sphere. According to Stuby, the mermaid's silence is not only a suppression of her identity but more so of her sexuality that can be characterised as "absolute Domestizierung" [absolute domestication] (81). A reading of the fairy tale moves the reader not only to tears of sadness but to anger, and Stuby regards Andersen's representation as a barrier to the sexual and cultural alternative of the mermaid's liminal existence. Accordingly, Stuby does not interpret her final metamorphosis into an aerial fairy as a liberation but as a radical act of de-sexualising the feminine:

> Die absolute Stilisierung der kleinen Meerjungfrau zum Engelswesen, die Fixierung und Eingrenzung ihrer ursprünglichen Lebendigkeit in ein Ab-Bild passiv-weiblichen Martyriums, entbindet jedoch subversive Kräfte. In die Tränen der Trauer mischen sich beim Lesen die Tränen der Wut. (Stuby 81)[6]

[6] "The absolute stylisation of the little mermaid into an angelic creature, her fixation and the containment of her initial vitality into an image of the passive-female martyrium, disengages subversive forces. The reader's tears of sadness are mixed with tears of anger" (Stuby 81 [own translation]).

If complying with Stuby, Andersen's mermaid is victimised by her silence and inability to make use of the feminine, corporeal expression. As an "entleibtes, entssexualisiertes Engelswesen,"[7] one might argue that the mermaid loses her earlier physical power expressed through her extraordinary beauty and feminine sexuality (Stuby 78). As the sea witch anticipates, the mermaid's beauty could suffice to seduce the male. And indeed, Andersen renders some sexually charged descriptions of the mermaid when for instance she finds herself on shore without clothes and wraps "herself in her long, thick hair" or even when the prince "and all who saw her wondered at her graceful-swaying movements" (Andersen 576). Yet, as Stuby argued with a considerable amount of frustration, by turning the mermaid into a de-sexualised airy figure, she is forced to abandon her defining features. Her striving is closely knotted with her angelic sense of sacrifice and empathy towards the bridal couple. One cannot align the little mermaid's position with Julnar's divinity or power because, as Andersen concludes, her striving for an immortal soul still depends on the behaviour of children. In other words, if children behave well, the little mermaid's waiting time for an immortal soul dwindles. Andersen's little mermaid is robbed of her physical, possibly sexual advantages which the mermaids in "Abdullah the Fisherman and Abdullah the Merman" overtly showcase. With the enduring human-inspired striving for an immortal soul, Andersen extirpates the little mermaid's femininity. However, I would argue that Stuby's reading is short-sighted, especially within the feminist framework of Cixous. In fact, the mermaid's radical transformation into an aerial creature reinstates her way out of the phallic entrapment.

In that regard, the mermaid's transformation does not signify a complete submittal to the patriarchal system. As Cixous argues, the mermaid's absolute transformation is required if

[7] "disembodied, de-sexualised angelic creature" (Stuby 78 [own translation]).

the "Old order" is to be thwarted (292). With a "possibility of radical transformations of behaviour, mentalities, roles, and political economy," "the general logic of difference would no longer fit into the opposition that still dominates" in the phallogocentric world order (Cixous 292). The mermaid's transformation into one of the sisters of the air marks her exit from the phallogocentric system of binaries. The connections between the binaries land/sea and man/woman are too obvious and support a "dual, hierarchized opposition" which undercuts the mermaid's liminality (Cixous 287). On land, the mermaid yields to what Cixous terms "the ensembles of symbolic systems," which is orchestrated by male privilege (288). A reverse transformation into a mermaid as suggested by the sea witch and her sisters would only have proliferated the workings of the "Old order" because it would have implied the murder of the patriarch; the prince. Subsequently, her transformation and elevation into the "spirit-world" unsettles the traditional hierarchical system (Andersen 585). The almost playful, elemental concoction between aquatic and celestial realm allows for a liminal constellation outside archaic systems. Even if it takes the mermaid outside the waters, she nonetheless "disintegrates these ephemeral amorous singularities so that they may recompose themselves in other bodies for new passions" (Cixous 293). The little mermaid initiates a play between elemental archetypes, such as sky and water. It hinges on a game imbued with lightness and pure *jouissance,* "which women know and which mean fear" (Cixous, *Sorties* 293). As a liminal creature, the mermaid thus puts forward a realm that is partly about desire and partly goes beyond phallogocentric logic.

vi. Conclusion

This first chapter aimed to elucidate the complex and varied representation of the mermaid in the fairy tale genre. Even though certain tropes tend to recur such as the mermaid's outstanding

beauty and her silence in the human world, the exploration of these motifs have greatly changed and hence diversified through her feminist meanings. Even if the studied representations are both part of one literary genre, that is the fairy tale, their feminist portrayals and the use of tropes are used in specific ways. At the core of these different archetypal stories is the mermaid's silence. As discussed, Julnar's silence comes from a place of empowerment and self-affirmation. Her muteness strongly aligns with Cixous's paradigm that woman must first shatter her history of suppression in order to be heard. Accordingly, Julnar does not yield to the king's wish to hear her speak. It is only through feminine corporeality, that is through her pregnancy, that Julnar becomes the initiator of her speech. She decides for herself when she wants to enter the logos and consequently, by creating her own realm for expression she foreshadows her later mighty position. In "Abdullah the Fisherman and Abdullah the Merman," mermaids are exploited in male fantasies and turned into eroticised prototypes for later film productions. In particular, "the City of Women" seems to serve as a model for the later *femme fatale* association with the mermaid, which gained greater prominence in Christian discourse.

Andersen's mermaid's silence could not be further positioned from such an independent act of self-affirmation. As an object of the patriarchal order, her silence is grounded in a painful act of sacrifice and empathy. Progressively, she relinquishes her defining characteristics, starting with her voice and ending with her stereotypical beauty. Her martyrdom even affects her sisters who cut off their hair to save her from the final and absolute act of self-obliteration. Even if she does not end up as sea foam, Andersen's decision to turn her into a de-sexualised, celestial creature does not imply a feminine effacement. When read in correlation with Cixous, the mermaid's radical transformation marks her entry into a new domain of female purity that plays around with the grand elemental archetypes of water and sky. Such a play of poetics will

recur in Shamie's novel *Broken Verses*, with the protagonist's ambiguous name Aasmaani. Whereas Andersen pretty much transforms the mermaid's corporeal sexuality into a domain of purity, earlier German Romanticism explored "the demonic side of nature and the prevalent elements of chivalric romance" (Easterlin 265). In that regard, the following chapter will look at such a Romantic conception of the mermaid figure in Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's novella *Undine*.

SECOND CHAPTER: ELEMENTAL PASSIONS IN *UNDINE*

i. Introduction

Three years after the first publication of *Undine*, Fouqué appended a poem to the preface of the second edition published in 1814. Starting with "Undine, liebes Bildchen du[8]," the poem reads partly like a love song for his water woman, partly as if Fouqué is still coming to terms with the unexpected success of his novella. The following stanza reveals *Undine*'s impact on German literary minds:

> Grüß sittig jeden edlen Herrn,
> Doch grüß vor allen mit Vertrauen
> Die lieben, schönen deutschen Frauen;
> Ich weiß, die haben dich recht gern.[9] (Fouqué 2)

[8] „ Undine! thou fair and lovely sprite" [Laythorpe, Widger]

[9] "Greet courteously each noble knight,
But fondly every German maid" [Laythorpe, Widger]

The last two verses solidify Undine's place within German society, in particular among German women. Apart from being a tale haunted by the paradigmatic shift in the Romantic era, Undine has become an embodiment of female experience. Her prominence among German women corroborates the close ties between society and its *Märchen*, reflecting "lived experience, with a slant towards the tribulations of women" (Warner, *Beast* xix). With this versed preface, Fouqué already lays bare the novella's significance for the feminist reading I will provide in this chapter.

The following chapter will exclusively focus on the German prototype[10] of Undine and zoom in on its specific Romantic context. I will use the translation by Sandra Laythorpe and David Widger, produced in 2009. In comparison to the preceding chapter, a specific socio-cultural reading might arguably question the broad transcultural aim of this project. However, in line with Warner's and Kennedy's *Kulturbrille*, a developed socio-cultural understanding of the tale helps to open the door to unknown territory and thereby, to gain a more rounded understanding of the mermaid figure in general. In this chapter, I will undertake a feminist reading of the figure of Undine by linking her figure with the concepts developed in Hélène Cixous's "Sorties" (1975) and in Luce Irigaray's *Elemental Passions* (1992). The connection between Undine and the French feminists is twofold: firstly, the French feminist counter-heteronormative stance will serve to elucidate my reading of Undine as a character. Secondly, it is the feminist playful, post-structuralist use of language that will be brought to bear on my

[10] Fouqué's tale became an inspiration for successive rewritings of the Undine tale, in Germany as well as across the borders. For instance, the French playwright Jean Giradoux based his play *Ondine* (1938) on Fouqué's work.

reading of *Undine* as a tale. Furthermore, Irigaray's and Cixous's education was partly informed by the German Romantics, which even enforces the theoretical background in this chapter. As Conley has argued in her extensive work on Cixous, the German Romantics were part of Cixous's decisive readings (xviii).

This chapter will firstly look at Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué and contextually situate the German Romantics. After giving a summary of *Undine,* I will delineate the figure of Undine and briefly compare her to the more traditional mermaid versions found in *The Arabian Nights* and in Hans Christian Andersen's tale. As already mentioned, a more in-depth comparison between the primary works will be enclosed in the closing chapter. An analysis of Undine's complex ontology will follow, which is rendered problematic due to her ambivalent position between the human and the spiritual/transcendental world. Furthermore, I will argue that this ambivalence can also be projected onto Undine's sexuality which rejects heteronormative standards. Therefore, to gain a better understanding of her sexuality, I will analyse Fouqué's *Undine* through Irigaray's concept of "parler femme". The French feminist paradigms not only elucidate Undine's fluid sexuality but also help to grasp Undine's close connection with elements other than water.

ii. Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué : the "Don Quixote of Romanticism"

Friedrich Heinrich Karl Baron de la Motte Fouqué was the son of an aristocratic Huguenot family of emigrants to Prussia (Pollin 59). Fouqué only started his career as a writer in the nineteenth century after he had quit university to fight against the French in 1794. After his military service, he was acquainted with the great literary minds of the Romantic period, including Goethe and Schiller. Eventually, his literary career began "under the influence of A.W. Schlegel," who was one of the ring leaders in German Romanticism (Pollin 59).

Inspiration for his most famous female character Undine came from his infatuation with Elizabeth von Brautenbach. However, like the doomed bond between Huldbrand and Undine, Fouqué was married to a different girl, Marianne von Schubaert, which resulted in "an essentially loveless union" (Pollin 60). Pollin argues that his use of medieval patterns which include "gaily attired knights, suppliant ladies and wistful fairies, haunted castles, remote shores, two-dimensional characters, whimsical motives and supernatural intervents" shape Fouqué into the "Don Quixote of Romanticism" (Pollin 60). *Undine* remains his most successful work and in Germany, his prolific years did not last long. However, in Anglo-Saxon literary terrains, his work gained in popularity, even after Fouqué had "satisfied the taste of the German public" (Pollin, 60). The turn of the century was indeed a highly interesting but ambivalent time as a writer in Germany. As an alternative to the bloodshed that was happening in other parts of Europe, Romantics sought an alternative reality in art by venturing beyond rational boundaries. According to Seyhan, the Romantic period responded to "an intellectual and moral crisis that marked the end of the rationalist and Classical world view" (9). In the aftermath of the French Revolution people were forced to face the limits of human reason and subsequently, the irrefutable rationality of life was suddenly questioned with transcendental ideas. These transcendental influences allowed for irrational perspectives and thus, liminal figures such as water women increasingly popped up in the Romantic literary landscape. Suitably, *Undine* emerged as a counter example to the Realist literary tradition and is viewed as the first German "Nixenerzählung" or mermaid tale (Lillyman 2).

There is critical consensus that Fouqué found inspiration in the fourteenth-century Staufenberg legend (a tale of the union between water woman and a knight called Peter Dimringer). Fouqué is also said to have been inspired by Paracelsus's collection on natural

philosophy that dates back to the sixteenth century. In *Liber de nymphis, sylphis, pygmaeis et salamandris et caeteris spiritibus,* Paracelsus (also called Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim) wrote down the inter-species relationships between human beings and elemental spirits. His work lays bare the plot of Fouqué's tale as it centres on the fatal marital bond between water woman and human man. In line with Plato and Plotin, Paracelsus posits that everything within nature lives (Pfeiffer 24). Accordingly, there are living creatures among the elements, including "water people" (nymphs and undines), "mountain people" (gnomes and pygmies), "fire people" (vulkana and salamander) and "wind people" (sylphs and silvesters) (Pfeiffer 24). As elemental people, undines and her water relatives can go through walls and other objects, although otherwise they look like regular human beings. They are made of flesh, can bear children or fall ill (Pfeiffer 25). However, Pfeiffer notes that undines' lack of a soul entails that on God's judgment day they will be treated as cattle rather than humans. Moreover, their spiritual nature "spricht sich noch am meisten in ihrem Verschwinden aus[11]": if undines or nymphs are insulted next to their element, that is water, they will vanish (Pfeiffer 25).

Approximately seventy pages long, Fouqué's fairy tale is characterised as a novella. However, within the German Romantic context, the work can equally be studied as a *Volksmärchen.* Pfeiffer argues that the repetitive patterns in style and the traditional, even conventional opening "[o]n a beautiful evening, many hundred years ago" (Laythorpe, Widger), align the work with the traditional folk tale. Unsurprisingly, Romantics' creative interest in irrationality instilled a revived interest in fairy tales. The Grimm brothers' extensive collection *Children's and Household Tales* certainly demonstrated the relaunched interest in fantastic literature that allowed for transcendental events, figures and places. In "Prose fiction of the

[11] „is most-shown in their disappearance"

German Romantics," Anthony Phelan stresses the relevance of fairy tales in Romantic literature. The eagerness for experimental realities crystallised in the fantastic tales, with a certain inclination towards society's quest for "chance, chaos, anarchy" (57). The genre appeared fruitful to transcend human *ratio* as it functions within a realm "prior to any world," offering "the possibility of a higher order" (58). Phelan explicates that the genre created a space for more radical conceptions against the classic paradigm with an insistence "on the intractability of life," which countered Enlightenment ideals (58). Such a plane for transcendental experimentation might not only serve society's paradigm in the broader sense; on a more nuanced level, experimentation with traditional assumptions opens a space for subversive, feminist influences. However, that is not to argue that Fouqué himself was a feminist. In fact, as Ter Horst has suggested, his tale explores many conventional gender roles. Nonetheless, "by pointing to the dissolution" of some "ideals and the impossibility of maintaining a conventional marriage, *Undine* suggests some of the weak points of nineteenth-century views about gender" (Ter Horst 304). To better understand the construction of gender roles and how the mermaid figure problematises these conventions, I will provide a brief summary of Fouqué's tale.

The tale opens with the daily hardships of a fisherman and his wife, who live on a remote peninsula next to a big lake. A young knight, called Huldbrand from Ringstetten, suddenly appears out of the woods behind their cottage. The fishers' couple accommodate the young man into their cottage. Shortly afterwards, they are interrupted by their playful, adoptive daughter, Undine. The couple explains that after their own daughter was swallowed by the lures of the deep lake, three-year-old Undine appeared at their cottage. Shortly after, Undine runs away and the fisherman and Huldbrand venture outside into the storm to look for her. On a green spot,

Huldbrand spots Undine and they start their infatuation, meeting each other in an embrace. In the cottage, Huldbrand talks about his past love affair with Bertalda, for whom he went into the woods to conquer her glove. Huldbrand narrates that his horse was perturbed and driven by a white man to the fisherman's cottage. During Huldbrand's account of his travels, the storm outside increases and forces him to stay longer. The following day, the storm brings a priest to their latch and he weds the two lovers. The same white man who guided Huldbrand to the cottage observes the ceremony through the window. The bridal ritual is completed with Huldbrand carrying Undine to his bed chamber. The following day, Undine explains to Huldbrand that she is the daughter of the most powerful water count and that she belongs to the soulless water women. With their marriage, however, she takes a share in Huldbrand's soul. If he ever chooses to desert her, she will be swallowed by the waters. That same day, the waters recede, and Huldbrand and Undine travel back to Huldbrand's village. On their journey, the couple is pestered by Kuhleborn, Undine's elemental uncle and poltergeist, who can take human and animal shape.

Back in the village, Undine befriends Huldbrand's former lover Bertalda. The three become inseparable and together, they move to Huldbrand's castle in Ringstetten, which is located next to the river head of the Danube. Inspired by Kuhleborn, Undine organises a big surprise for Bertalda to tell her that she is the lost daughter of the fishers' couple. At that public announcement, Bertalda scorns in her vanity and refuses to accept her real heritage. Scolded by both her adoptive and real parents, she is ostracised. Out of pity, Undine and Huldbrand take Bertalda into their castle. It does not take long until the love triangle shifts and Huldbrand's old love for Bertalda is rekindled. Undine orders to close the fountain in their garden to suppress the ever-looming presence of Kuhleborn who increasingly threatens Bertalda and Huldbrand.

Bertalda, however, claims that the fountain's water is crucial for her skin and undercuts Undine's orders. Despite his affections for Bertalda, Huldbrand understands Undine's liminal wisdom and a stone is placed on the fountain. During a private exchange with Undine, Huldbrand promises that he is never to utter a degrading word about his still legal wife when he is close to the waters. If he breaks the promise, Undine will disappear among the waters. Out of shame for opposing the mistress's orders, Bertalda flees the household. Huldbrand follows her and the two lovers are hunted down by Kuhleborn. The latter fools them and engulfs them with water. Undine appears out of nowhere and dives into the depths to save Huldbrand and Bertalda from drowning. Reconciled, the three go back to their castle. As everyday life turns dull, they decide to take a boat tour on the river Danube. During their trip they are pestered by Kuhleborn, and Huldbrand develops contempt for his elemental wife and her entanglement with the other world. As Undine reaches into the waters to retrieve a coral necklace for Bertalda, Huldbrand loses his temper and insults Undine on the waters. Having broken his promise, Undine disappears under the waves. With her last words, she demands that Huldbrand stays faithful to her. Huldbrand has many dreams of his lost wife where Undine prophesises that she will kill him. Indeed, after their mourning for Undine wanes, Huldbrand and Bertalda get married. Servants groom Bertalda before her wedding night when she complains about the freckles on her face and alleges that only the water from the closed-off fountain would restore the beauty of her skin. Following her wish, the servants push away the stone with no effort as water splashes out and Undine appears under a veil. She strides to Huldbrand's chamber and kills him with a lethal kiss. During his burial, Undine turns into a fountain with water trickling and encircling Huldbrand's grave. Undine is remembered as the castaway and Huldbrand is encircled by her eternal embrace.

iii. The Undine Figure

When briefly comparing Undine to the mermaids in the first chapter, one notices of course a striking similarity in physical characteristics. Undine is yet another eighteen-year-old Caucasian "fair girl, of wondrous beauty" (Laythorpe, Widger). Like Julnar or the little mermaid, her eyes are extraordinarily big, and her hair is extraordinarily long. The accounts of her underwater palace, with "resounding domes of crystal, through which the sky can shine with its sun and stars" resemble the affluent, partly utopian water society portrayed in *The Arabian Nights* (Laythorpe, Widger). Another significant parallel is Undine's lack of a soul, which might have been a direct inspiration for Andersen. Yet, Undine is much more brash in character than the little mermaid and laughs at her crucial deficit: "'SOUL!' cried Undine with a laugh. 'What you say has a remarkably pretty sound; and for most people, too, it may be a very instructive and profitable caution. But when a person has no soul at all, how, I pray you, can such attuning be then possible? And this, in truth, is just my condition'" (Laythorpe, Widger).

Moreover, Undine seems to maintain her reservations about the human language. Like Julnar, Undine utilises speech but there are still instances where she envisions alternatives to conventional *logos.* When she illuminates her husband on her elemental nature as a water woman, she interrupts her explications and leaves her explanations to Huldbrand's sight because he "now actually behold[s] an Undine before [him]" (Laythorpe and Widger). Moreover, the fisher couple recounts that during Undine's first days on land, she only communicated through her gaze. When they for example change her soaked clothes, "she spoke not a word, but only turned her eyes upon [them]—eyes blue and bright as sea or sky—and continued looking at [them] with a smile" (Laythorpe, Widger). Even if not as radical as

Julnar's pregnancy, I would nonetheless argue that these momentary refusals of language foreshadow Undine's connection to a realm that transcends the world of the *logos.* This transcendency inevitably points towards the Romantic, counter-ratio mode but also ties in with the feminist analysis which I will provide in the following section. An even more explicit refusal of the Christian language is manifested through Undine's refusal of her Christian name. On her baptism, the fisher couple wants to name their adoptive daughter Dorothea. Undine, however, insists that she ought to remain Undine, the name she was given by her birth parents. Even though the fisherman thought it a "heathenish name, to be found in no calendar," Undine uses her supernatural charms to maintain her close ties with her elemental antecedents and thus stays, literally, true to her nature (Laythorpe and Widger). Etymologically, it was never proved whether Paracelsus borrowed the name from the Latin word *unda* (wave) (Pfeiffer 9). Even so, in contemporary linguistic context, it strongly resonates with *onde*, the French word for wave or flood.

In relation to the story's unfolding, the symbolic transition from water to land is omitted. Given that undines are typically depicted with legs, rather than a tail, this transition might not bear much importance for the narrative. However, I would argue that there are three recurring motifs that correlate with the previously studied mermaid tales. The first motif is Undine's opposition to the logocentric world. As already foreshadowed by her brief moments of silence, she typically announces herself with some sort of sound other than speech. Before Undine enters the door, they usually hear a "splash against the little low window" (Laythorpe and Widger). Moreover, when she elopes the cottage, Huldbrand finds her first and foremost because of the elemental voices that surround him in the woods. It is the voice of Undine's uncle Kuhleborn that urges Huldbrand to pay attention to his surroundings and to genuinely

open his eyes to nature, and thus to Undine: "'Look round you—ah, pray look round you, beautiful young stranger! why rush on death so madly?'" cried the voice a second time close by him" (Laythorpe and Widger). Sounds play a central role in the perception of the mermaid figure, exercising both irritation and attraction (Stuby, *Vom Kommen* 8). A second recurring motif is the mermaid's act of saving the male. Very similar to Andersen's tale, Undine saves Huldbrand and Bertalda from drowning inside the waves produced by Kuhleborn. Interesting however is that Undine saves both Huldbrand *and* Bertalda. It inevitably points towards their *ménage à trois;* that is, an alternative to conventional households in the nineteenth century. Therefore, I will come back to this scene and discuss it in light of Undine's sexuality. A third and final motif is the homicide of her lover. As we discussed in Andersen's story, the little mermaid is asked to kill the prince if she wants to transform back into her former *Gestalt*. Yet, she refuses to commit the murder as it would only restore the "old Order" without transcending the phallogocentric system (Cixous 292). As a reward for taking over her fate, the little mermaid is transformed into a daughter of the air and thereby joins a higher domain of purity. In *Undine,* the mermaid figure is presented no alternative and drowns her knight with a lethal kiss:

> She kissed him with a holy kiss; but she relaxed not her hold, pressing him more closely in her arms, and weeping as if she would weep away her soul. Tears rushed into the knight's eyes, while a thrill both of bliss and agony shot through his heart, until he at last expired, sinking softly back from her fair arms upon the pillow of his couch a corpse. (Laythorpe and Widger)

This tragic ending emphasises a significant trope which clearly demarcates Fouqué's tale from other versions. In fact, Undine suffers deeply from her ontological ambivalence. She is an elemental woman who nonetheless understands and shares the emotions of a human soul. To

further illustrate this ambivalence, I would like to turn to the same passage of her homicide, but in the German original:

> Bebend vor Liebe und Todesnähe neigte sich der Ritter ihr entgegen, sie küsste ihn mit einem himmlischen Kusse, aber sie ließ ich nicht mehr los, sie drückte ihn inniger an sich und weinte, als wolle sie ihre Seele fortweinen. (Fouqué 86)

The German passage reinforces the dichotomy between "himmlischen Kusse" (=celestial kiss) and Undine's endeavour to "weep away her soul" (Laythorpe and Widger). It is precisely this conflict between her elemental drives and her human emotions that create the tragic tone in Fouqué's tale. Accordingly, I will further delve into this ontological discrepancy and link it to the Romantic tone as well as to a feminist reading of her figure.

iv. Undine's Ambivalent Ontology

Throughout the narrative, Undine is haunted by her split identity which reveals itself on several levels. In "Vom Kommen und Gehens Undine," Stuby suggests that nineteenth-century tales clearly highlighted differences between the beautiful, innocent undines and the malevolent, harmful melusines (11). That is to say, water women were divided into undines (*femme fragile)* and melusines (*femme fatale).* Fouqué's Undine does not exclusively represent the typical *femme fragile*. I would even argue that Undine embodies both characteristics of the frail and the fallen, which shape her into a highly complex character. Rather than carrying her goodness to an excess like the little mermaid's final transformation into a personification of angelic purity, Fouqué's Undine possesses numerous faces. After Huldbrand's arrival at the cottage, he tells the fisher folks and their daughter about his background. When he starts to narrate his encounter with Bertalda, however, Undine suddenly fastens "her pearly teeth" into the flesh of his hand, "appearing at the same time very gloomy and displeased" (Laythorpe and Widger).

Her two-folded expression shows that Undine carries both sides in her. By flashing her pearly teeth, Undine evokes close links with the murderous, even cannibalistic, sirens. The most famous example goes back to Homer's sirens who lured men with to their death with their murderous songs. As Kingshill argues, sirens are not to be confused with the playful innocence of mermaids. Still, sirens strongly informed the tradition by merging "themes of homicide and lust" (Kingshill 21). And yet, Undine's aggressive reaction points toward the other side of her character. Indeed, after having bitten Huldbrand, she looks at him "with an expression of tender melancholy" and covers her face (Laythorpe and Widger). By hiding into a shawl, it seems as if Undine is shocked or even ashamed of the other untamed side pulsating inside of her. The sudden variability in her character brings her "ontological trauma" as a mermaid to the fore (Croutier 192). That is to say, Undine is victimised by her very existence as a liminal creature. She cannot be perceived as a complete, coherent creature as "[s]he is at once a monster and an innocent girl" which inevitably clashes with the conventional world order of clear-cut and comprehensible categories (Croutier 55). In her childishness she runs away from her adoptive parents only to be found in a womanly, seductive posture in the grass, "crouching upon its flowery turf, beneath the branches of embowering trees" (Laythorpe and Widger).

Firstly, this duality in character correlates with the overall socio-cultural tone of that time in Germany. Malzew argues that the mermaid or *Wasserfrau* resonates with the German Romantic mood that sought a certain harmony and unison by venturing into the transcendental. As I have already discussed, other critics comply with this argument as the encounter between human and non-human helps to break free from the rational paradigm that led to the bloodshed in late eighteenth-century Europe. Moreover, the tale's emphasis on liminality supports a certain "dialectical and cyclical rather than linear thinking" as well as "ideas of infinite unity

and infinite multiplicity" (Schmidt 22). However, it is equally significant to underline the irony that is created through the intermingling between the "sublime" and the "trivial"; that is, an "awareness of the contrast between idea and reality" (Schmidt 23). Irony played an essential role in Romantic art, since transcendental experimentation was never posited as a finite possibility. Rather, the unification between what is rational and what goes beyond classical ideals was presented as something unachievable due to human, rational entrapment. Accordingly, *Undine* incorporates this duality in spirit: the tale encourages a non-linear thinking about the world, yet at the same time, the story's ultimate tragic end highlights the Romantic ironic undertone. As an inconceivable, transcendental female "other," art may envision figures like Undine, but never truly embrace her existence in the real world.

Apart from being a Romantic pattern, the ironic tone can also be interpreted as a feminist pattern in relation to Undine's ontological trauma. Although her confident interjections might suggest that Undine is much more autonomous than the little mermaid, her brazen nature is only a façade to her dominated state. The narrative seems to suggest that Undine is subjected to patriarchal forces exercised by her father and by Huldbrand. Yet, according to Hateley, Fouqué contributes with his tale to the failed attempt "to domesticate a water-spirit" (Hateley 9). As Hateley accurately argues, it is a *failed* patriarchal domestication because of the mermaid's elemental entanglement. It is less a failure because Huldbrand does not succeed in dominating her elemental nature, but more so because Fouqué's poetics shed a negative light on the patriarchal values imposed on Undine. Accordingly, irony is brought to bear on patriarchal suppression that wanes in the bigger picture dominated by the elemental forces. Even though the elemental connection does not allow for an ultimate conciliation between the human and

spiritual realm, I will in a moment explicate how the elemental forces somewhat impede an absolute heteronormative suppression of Undine.

The attempted patriarchal domestication of Undine is firstly exercised by her father who wants his daughter to venture into the human world to attain a soul. Her father is the ultimate driving force behind the subsequent tragedy and implied suffering that befalls Undine. Her father's entanglement is confirmed by the wedding rings that Undine has readily sewed into her coat, to facilitate the marital bond with Huldbrand. Apart from her father's patriarchal dominance, Huldbrand holds a great deal of power over Undine. His dominance over Undine crystallises in her dependence on his human soul because it is the only way for her to attain one. Fouqué thus implements Paracelsus's laws of natural philosophy that posit that the elemental spirit occupies a developmental stage below the male human (Malzew 14). Her quest can only be fulfilled through a sacrament union and thus, if Undine yields to Christianity and heteronormativity:

> Die Wassserfrau empfängt die Seele nicht in einer freien Liebesbeziehung, sondern in der Sakramentehe. Sie wird Christin und muss sich doppelt unterwergen: Ihrem Mann wie auch Gott. Nur durch demütige Ergebenheit und Gehorsam kann sie sich das Recht auf Erlösung erwerben. (Malzew 14)[12]

[12] „The water woman does not attain her soul in a free love relationship, but through a sacrament of marriage. She becomes Christian and is double suppressed: by her man and by God. It is through abject devotion and obedience that she gains the right to redemption." [own translation]

I would still claim that the text does not entirely subscribe to such an asymmetry between mermaid and male human. Even if Fouqué's inspiration for Undine goes back to Paracelsus's laws of elemental people in natural philosophy, the Romantic ironic tone suggests nonetheless that the patriarchal domestication founders on these phallogocentric and linear ideals. Undine's extreme and unnatural changes in character help to shed a negative light on patriarchal domestication. Shortly after her wedding ceremony with Huldbrand, Undine notes the heaviness of her new Christian soul. She exclaims to the distress of her Christian companions that "heavily must the soul weigh down its possessor" as she feels overshadowed "with anguish and mourning" (Laythorpe and Widger). Undine's observation is an explicit critique of the traditional glorification of the Christian human soul. In addition, after her copulation with Huldbrand, an immoderate change in her light-weighted nature follows. Instead of her playful, childish and even brazen attitude, Undine has changed into a mild, angelic woman. The priest's "paternal affection" at her changed behaviour only furthers the idea that Undine has been tamed by the patriarchs and Christian ideology (Laythorpe and Widger). However, it is clear that this exaggerated pure female does not correspond to Undine's authentic self and subsequently, the sudden change suggests an ironic, even negative undertone to her unnatural suavity.

v. Undine, Huldbrand, Bertalda : a *ménage à trois* ?

Furthermore, Undine's ignorance of traditional eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sexuality helps to question heteronormative ideals. After the wedding, Undine does not anticipate that the nuptial evening will end in their intercourse. It is Huldbrand who carries his bride into their bridal chamber and forces his heteronormative values onto her. And yet, even after their nuptial night, Undine's sexuality remains fluid. This is emphasised by the later love triangle with Bertalda. As Ter Horst argues, Fouqué hints at the possibility of an unconventional marriage,

or a "ménage à trois among Undine, Bertalda and Huldbrand" as an "alternative to a society with rigidly demarcated gender roles and social distinctions, in that it allows the expansion of marital relationship to include a woman who is connected, through erotic and social bond, to both partners in the marriage" (Ter Horst 308). Subsequently, this *ménage à trois* offers a way out of the morally correct and conventional heterosexual relationship system.

Moreover, the shifts in affection between Huldbrand, Undine and Bertalda conceive of a sexuality that is fluid, unbound to categories and thus stands a chance to exist within the liminal. And yet, the ultimate ruin of the free model is caused by the man in their constellation. The non-binary balance is destroyed during a trip over the Danube when Bertalda's golden necklace gifted by Huldbrand, a possessive mark of their union, is stolen by Kuhleborn. As Undine wants to substitute Bertalda's necklace with a coral exemplar from the waters, Huldbrand loses his temper and interrupts their intimate exchange. His "action of placing himself physically between the two women suggests that he is trying to prevent a deeper connection between them" (Ter Horst 311). He thus illustrates that he is not ready to commit to an alternative sexuality. With this hint at the possibility of an unconventional household, Fouqué comments on the fixed values of a heteronormative society and suggests an alternative. However, in line with the ironic Romantic tone, he uses Huldbrand to show that society is not advanced enough to take such a leap into the unknown- or the liminal. In that regard, I would propose to further expand Ter Horst's observation and apply Cixous's and Irigaray's feminist paradigms. In fact, Ter Horst already makes the link with psychoanalytic theory: she suggests that the novella subverts the Oedipal triangle, which "most often reinforces heterosexual reproduction and transmission of patriarchal language, ideas, and principles, but does leave open the possibility of deviating from these fixed patterns" (321).

The deviation from heteronormative relations neatly ties in with Cixous's essay "Sorties" which was published in 1975. As already mentioned in the first chapter, Cixous's aim is to find a *sortie,* an exit, out of the binary system that continuously perpetuates different hierarchical sets. As Fouqué demonstrates in his novella, power dynamics are grounded in binary structures. In relation to gender roles, the hierarchical system of "Western philosophy and literary thought" always goes back "to the fundamental 'couple' of male/female" (Moi 104). However, Toril Moi shares Cixous's view that the heteronormative values are false constructs and do not correspond to the sincere nature of humans because of "the inherently bisexual nature of all human beings" (Moi 108). Cixous's conception of sexuality thus aims to entirely dispose of the male/female categories. Instead, she proposes the notion of "*other bisexuality*, which is multiple, variable and ever-changing" (Moi 109). The encounter between Undine and Bertalda seems to support such a liberated sexuality. Their first encounter is imbued with erotic connotations, and yet, without explicitly confirming their attraction for each other. Undine even describes their mutual affection as "a mysterious connection" which must be connected to "some deep and secret cause"; and "even Bertalda could not deny that she felt a confiding impulse, an attraction of tenderness toward Undine" (Laythorpe and Widger). One could of course argue that the possibility of their erotic affection for each other could not be stated due to the social norms in place when Fouqué produced his novella. Still, both women do not defy their "mysterious connection" but embrace the affection they feel for one another by starting a triangular household.

Their sexual bond becomes even more pertinent when Undine saves Bertalda and Huldbrand from drowning. Undine is compared to "a hovering white dove" who "flew down from the hill, raised the knight and Bertalda, and bore them to a green spot, where, by her

earnest efforts, she soon restored them and dispelled their terrors" (Laythorpe and Widger). The metaphorically rich passage appears as a crucial turning point in their *ménage à trois.* As a white dove, Undine restores peace among the three of them and pacifies their triangular relationship that was on the verge of crumbling. Moreover, Undine's act of restoring her two partners on a patch of grass evokes metaphorical connotations with an earthly liberated sexuality. According to Olaf Briese, earth represents a *locus* for intercourse and sin. As "natura lapsa" it unifies "Bilder des Irdischen und des Femininen im Zerrbild des Irdisch-Weiblichen[13]" (Briese 115). Accordingly, Undine's act of saving intermeshes the life-giving aspects with sexuality; she not only saves Huldbrand and Bertalda from death but also frees their phallogocentric thinking. For a brief moment, Bertalda's and Huldbrand's survival completely hinges on Undine. Her act of saving happens precisely at a moment of flux in relation to their sexuality but also in relation to their ontological existence. Undine becomes the one who gives, restores and saves their relationship, but only because Huldbrand is in a vulnerable state that forces him to yield to the mermaid's inherent liminal forces. The saviour act thus reflects a moment of unrestrained femininity, or what Cixous calls "female jouissance", in which the elemental and sexual flux points toward a "utopian vision of female creativity in a truly non-oppressive and non-sexist society" (Moi 121).

Following Moi's synthesis of Cixous and Irigaray, the latter's conception of feminine sexuality is closely tied to Cixous's stance. Irigaray proposes a "mystical imagery" where

[13] „Earthly and feminine images within the distorted picture of the earthly-feminine" [own translation]

binary oppositions are not conceivable (Moi 136). It is a suitable conceptual soil for the kind of sexuality that Undine introduces with her act of saving Huldbrand and Bertalda:

> Mystical imagery stresses the night of the soul: the obscurity and confusion of consciousness, the loss of subjecthood. Touched by the flames of the divine, the mystic's soul is transformed into a fluid stream dissolving all difference. This orgasmic experience eludes the specular rationality of patriarchal logic: the sadistic eye/I must be closed. (Moi 136)

The "mystical" and obscure characteristics of their relationship emphasise the dissolution of coherent, ratio-driven heteronormative values. In a non-literal sense, Undine saves Bertalda and Huldbrand from a monolithic mindset in which sexuality depends on heterosexual relationships. She advocates a sexuality that is "inclusive" and in which women do not have to choose "between clitoral and vaginal pleasure" (Moi 144). As anticipated, this peaceful, liberated feminist sexual household cannot be sustained and is disrupted by the Romantic *and* feminist irony. Their *ménage à trois* continues for some time in harmony until their trip on the Danube. As already mentioned, Ter Horst argues that Huldbrand's interruption of Undine's gift to Bertalda ceases the possibility of a deeper bond between the two women. In contrast to the green spot in the woods, it marks a moment of affection between the two women only, without Huldbrand's involvement. It could have represented a moment of sexuality *without* the patriarch. Moreover, this possibility of an intimate bond between the two women highly resonates with Irigaray's "parler femme," which she qualifies as that spontaneous moment "when women speak together," but which "disappears again as soon as men are present" (Moi 144). Accordingly, the moment vanishes as Huldbrand enters the scene and intentionally disrupts the growing affection between the two women. Fouqué thus touches on the possibility

of an alternative sexual order, but he does not fully execute it. Huldbrand's patriarchal interjection leads to his own tragic end. Having broken his prospects for the liminal and thus, his bargain with the elemental woman, Huldbrand must be murdered. Unlike the little mermaid, Undine is forced to act within the heteronormative sphere because Huldbrand rejects her solution of a liminal, fluid sexuality.

Furthermore, apart from negating heteronormativity, Irigaray stresses the convergence between human and non-human by mixing mystery with sexuality. As a "Wassermädchen," Undine is inevitably entangled with the elemental world (Pfeiffer 1). There is no other alternative for her than to yield to elemental powers. In contrast to the little mermaid however, her dominance by the elements puts her into the position of a victim. Everything Undine does is driven by her aquatic relatives. For instance, her public announcement of Bertalda's blood-relatives is inspired by Kuhlborn who entrusts Undine with the secret. Her final disappearance or even merging with the river Danube rounds off her existence that only serves others: "her disappearance was like both and neither" (Laythorpe and Widger). The only escape from her ontological impasse seems to be a fluid and liberated encounter between the elemental woman and the male human: the Romantic utopian idea of a cosmic unification.

Besides Undine's liaison with the waters, there are numerous references to the celestial element, for instance Undine's symbolic association with the white dove, which suggests that she does not solely belong to the waters. The cyclic, non-essentialist connection between the elements further complexifies her ontology. It pertains to a flux between elements that "are not fully differentiated, but instead blend into each other" (Ter Horst, 305). The celestial realm, in particular, frames the narrative for which the moon is used as a recurring motif. At the beginning of the narrative, when Huldbrand looks for Undine, he finds her "by the light of the moon, again

cloudless" and when he comes back from a fowl hunt, "Undine seldom failed to greet him with a scolding, because he had cruelly deprived the happy joyous little creatures of life as they were sporting above in the blue ocean of the air" (Laythorpe and Widger). During the night of their nuptial intercourse, they are "lightened by the moon that shone brightly through the windows" (Laythorpe and Widger). In the German original, the presence of the celestial forces is even more powerful. The moon is personified as "he" gazes inside the bridal chamber ("Monde, der hell durch die Fenster hereinsah" [Fouqué 36]). The connection between the elements is even further nuanced than in *The Little Mermaid* and hence, strongly emphasises elemental and irrational fluidity. Undine's deep connection with several elements makes her a participant in a playful liminality in which she freely transcends categorical boundaries. Undine's very nature conditions her to take alternative leaps between the realms. However, as it happens with her sexuality, her elemental fluidity is problematised by Huldbrand because he does not accept that his wife cannot be contained by land. With his outcry "[s]o, then, you have still a connection with them," Huldbrand demonstrates that he has not fully made peace with Undine's liminality (Laythorpe and Widger). The "still" reveals his hope for a unified, monolithic maid that is fixed to earth. Undine embodies the prototype of a liberated woman whose sexuality and nature are abruptly shut down by male dominance. Her female fluidity serves as an example for the female ideal Irigaray holds in *Elemental Passions* (1992). Similar to Cixous in "Sorties", Irigaray questions the Western philosophical and literary tendency to dominate and categorically differentiate. Irigaray asks her male partner, who represents Huldbrand's paradigm, why "[f]ire, air, water- are they thus to be dominated by the earth" and why men maintain an obsessive male "need for solidity", "[f]or a rock-solid home" (80). Her questions could be extended to Huldbrand and his instant favouring of earth as the "most elemental" of all elements, which equally reveals his fear of the unsteady, fluid elements (80). Instead, Irigaray explicates to her

male partner and imaginary listener that female sexuality cannot be contained by a "finite circle, closure" and that her "body closes and opens the horizon with a single gesture" (75). Accordingly, movement is women's "habitat": "My only rest is motion. Whoever imposes a roof over my head, wears me out. Let me go where I have not yet arrived" (Irigaray 25). This freedom in movement and playful transition reflects Undine's nature. For her ambivalence does not need to result in an ontological trauma when her fluidity is acknowledged and accepted, rather than ostracised and dominated. Finally, it is neither the interspecies marriage between human male and female water woman nor her ambivalent existence that lead to the tale's tragic end. Rather, it is the dominance of the male patriarch that is fixated upon its "rock-solid" categories and does not affirmatively concede Undine's liminality.

vi. Conclusion

Undine's long-standing popularity among German women appears even more relevant within such a feminist frame. As this chapter has analysed, Undine tries to demonstrate her complexity as a mermaid or water woman through her elemental and sexual fluidity. Many of her characteristics suggest that her ontological ambivalence hinges on the oppressive heteronormative social values, rather than on her nature *per se*. This is in particular nuanced through her sexuality. Her triangular household with Bertalda and Huldbrand brings in the possibility of sexual relations that do not yield to traditional value systems but are fluid, plural and inclusive. I tried to illuminate her sexuality in relation to Irigaray's paradigm and in relation to the deep, female connection established during her notion of "parler femme". The non-fixed sexual attraction between two women and one man pertains to a liberated sense of sexuality and thus, a liberated sense of oneself. Even if Undine is inherently dominated by her elemental origins, an acceptance of her nature sustains the liminality would make a cosmic co-existence

feasible. In addition to her sexuality, her ontological plurality is equally emphasised by the non-linear appearance of other elements next to the water. In particular the looming, almost voyeuristic, presence of the moon underlines the flux between the elements. If Undine could fully embrace her plurality as an elemental spirit, and thus as a woman, she would not need to be ostracised into the waters. However, Huldbrand's patriarchal ignorance shatters this harmonious conception of the world and downgrades it to a utopian fantasy. Even if Fouqué adopts the same genre as Andersen for his mermaid, his tale offers a scope of artistic experimentation that is heavily imbued with a socio-cultural mood. The Romantic irony in Fouqué's tale is thereby confirmed and proves that indeed humanity is still too fixated upon its traditional Western dogmas of rationality and essentialism. In that respect, Undine corroborates the inherent feminist complexity of the mermaid figure and problematises monolithic perceptions that overlook her status as a liminal figure.

THIRD CHAPTER: THE MERMAID AND FRACTURED IDENTITIES IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S AND KAMILA SHAMSIE'S NOVELS

i. Introduction

The previous chapters mainly examined the mermaid figure in relation to the white patriarch and his heteronormative value system. Yet, passing from the aquatic undersea world to the human realm on land has not only been put under gendered scrutiny but also lends itself to a colonial reading. As Rhoda Zuk notes, "the story of the mermaid's struggle to transcend the physical difference and cultural and spiritual conditions of her underwater race problematizes imperialist and class-based morality" (166). Subjected for her "otherness," the mermaid's connection with colonialized subjects in old imperialist regimes almost unfolds naturally. In that regard, writers from the postcolonial tradition have implemented the figure of the mermaid

in their writings to come to terms with the deeply troubled, even ambivalent, consciousness of postcolonial subjects who are affected by the earlier brutal colonial encounters. In this chapter, the term postcolonialism borrows its meaning from Homi K. Bhabha. According to Bhabha, postcolonial criticism "bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order" (Bhabha, *Location* 245).

The following chapter will therefore analyse the role of the mermaid in two novels by South/West Asian writers and how she impacts cultural but also gendered representation. The mermaid figure will be studied in *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie and *Broken Verses* by Kamila Shamsie. Accordingly, Warner's and Kennedy's "Kulturbrille" will once again be adjusted to the specific socio-cultural implications in Anglo-Indian and Anglo-Pakistani writing. The cultural spectacles or the transcultural lens for this chapter serves to come to terms with the diasporic identities of the characters in the novels and their ongoing struggle to embody hybrid identities. Both Rushdie and Shamsie draw on Eastern and Western traditions and the cultural hybridity in global encounters that are today fostered through globalisation. However, rather than focusing on postcolonial criticism and the relevance of cultural hybridity, the notion of hybrid identities will be associated with the concept of fluid identities and therefore be grounded in a French feminist analysis. Accordingly, my reading will exclusively analyse the mermaid's association with the female characters of the novels and how a feminist reading helps to "undo repression, and to endow the woman with increased force in matters of re-engendering social and linguistic relations" (Conley xviii). Indeed, the French feminist paradigms will be implemented on two levels. For Rushdie's novel, I will mainly apply Cixous's and Irigaray's defiance of dual, rational thinking that allows female characters to

counter the male feelings of anxiety and unbelonging. The analysis of Shamsie's mermaid figure, though, will not only apply French feminism but also account for the linguistic implications. As I will show, etymology and different layers of language play a crucial role in conceiving of the female identities in *Broken Verses.* As done in other chapters, the recurring mermaid tropes will be compared to the rest of the primary corpus.

The primary reason for analysing Rushdie's and Shamsie's writing in the same chapter results from their aesthetic affiliation. As Shamsie has noted herself, she "has been impressed by the ability of the post-Independence 'Indo-Anglian' fiction championed by Salman Rushdie" (Clements 124). Moreover, in terms of style, Shamsie's writing is imbued with "Rushdie's playing with language, punning, caricature, stories within stories, comic names, foregrounding of storytelling and amusing allusions" (King 149). Accordingly, both authors include the mermaid figure as an allusion and feminine metaphor to refine their female characters. *The Satanic Verses* is commonly associated with Rushdie's death sentence by Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-1989), but barely with its feminist stance. Therefore, this chapter will outline a radically different framework for Rushdie's fourth novel. As we will see, Rushdie's feminist stance translates to the protagonist's treatment of women that stems from male anxiety. This male anxiety is deeply troubled by the postcolonial but also gendered sense of unbelonging. As we will see, two important female characters in the novel are associated with mermaid tropes. The mirror plays a crucial role as it highlights the diasporic identity of the characters and at the same time, helps to rebuild an identity for themselves. In *Broken Verses,* the mirror equally impacts the perception of the female protagonist's plural identities. Thus, the mirror trope will be read as a feminist trope. Moreover, Shamsie aligns the mermaid figure with the haunting memory of the protagonist's dead mother. By slowly facing the

traumatic experience of maternal loss, the protagonist leans on the ontological plurality of the mermaid figure to grasp and legitimise feminine fluidity under the highly patriarchal Hudood Ordinances.

ii. Salman Rushdie's Ambiguous Feminism

As it is typical for Rushdie's writing, *The Satanic Verses* is divided into numerous plots. I will give a brief summary of the narrative in order to provide a better understanding of the central story which does not necessarily focus on the mermaid. At the core of the novel are the reincarnations of the two protagonists Gibreel Farishta and Salahuddin (Saladin) Chamcha after their *Boston* airplane crashes into the English Channel. For some irrational reason, Gibreel and Saladin, who are both Indian actors, survive the plane crash and end up on the shores of English territory. However, their fall inaugurates a metamorphosis in both characters, in which Gibreel increasingly appears with a halo and takes on the form of an archangel, whereas Saladin turns into Satan, acquiring horns, hooves, a tail and an abhorrent breath. A woman called Rosa Diamond finds them and accommodates them in her house, until the police arrive as they mistake them for illegal immigrants. Showing up in the fine clothing of Rosa's dead husband, Gibreel gets the authorities' respect and they only take away Saladin. After spending some time with Rosa Diamond, Gibreel travels back to London and is taken in by his former lover Alleluia Cone. However, Gibreel is tormented with dreams or even hallucinations with the early history of Islam, which forms a substantial subplot of the novel. These visions feature Ayesha, who "embodies the force of a feminized revision and salvation of Islam" by leading the inhabitants of Titlipur on a pilgrimage to Jahilia, which stands of course for Mecca (Hai 20). In another dream, Rushdie goes back to the three female demigods, called Al-lat, Uzza and Manat whom Mahound (that is Mohammed in Islam) wrongly takes for Allah's daughters. However, in line

with Islamic belief, the three women are downgraded as the "false" deities, gods and goddesses which were worshipped by the pagans of Arabia and thus, are connected to the satanic verses (*Ontology of Quranic Concepts*).

Saladin, who becomes unrecognisable as the goat-like Satan figure, goes back to his old home only to find that his wife Pamela has cheated on him with his best friend Jumpy. To keep his *Gestalt* hidden, they bring him to a café, where friends do their best to take care of him. As symbolic countertypes of good and evil, Saladin and Gibreel aboard on different journeys until they meet again at a party in London. At that party, Saladin decides to take revenge on Gibreel for delivering him to the British police. However, Allie's presence at the party messes with his plans and instead, he decides to take advantage of Gibreel's unjustified outbursts of jealousy against Allie. With his talent as a voice actor, Saladin pranks Gibreel pretending to be one of Allie's non-existent lovers. His plans work and Gibreel leaves Allie. However, during the riots night in London, Gibreel finds out about Saladin's revenge and plans on killing him. Instead, Gibreel rescues Saladin from the burning Shandaar Café. With his saving, the physical transformations of both characters recede and they meet again in Bombay. Saladin is there to make amends with his dying father and stays after rekindling his former love affair with Zeeny Vakil. Gibreel has relaunched his career as an actor and is shooting in Bombay. Some days later, Saladin is informed about the death of Alleluia and Sisodia, one of Gibreel's producers. Allie crushed her skull falling from the same building as Gibreel's first wife. Gibreel comes to Saladin's house and confesses his murders. From the lamp that Saladin's father has kept for years, Gibreel pulls a gun and shoots himself.

Rushdie's religious plot caused an outrage among many Islam worshippers since it questioned some of Islam's pillars. Accordingly, *The Satanic Verses* has become best-known

for the *fatwa* that was issued against Rushdie, one year after the publication of his novel. The subsequent retrieval from public life and the "twenty-one murders associated" with the book largely overshadowed the literary quality of *The Satanic Verses* (Spivak 87). After Rushdie regained his freedom to live a public life, he explicitly stated his happiness that the novel is finally taking on the life of a book, with some people loving it and others hating it[14]. Accordingly, literary scholars like Stephen Morton have read the novel as a commentary on "the role of women in modern Islamic communities" but also "the place of secular political concepts, such as nationhood, citizenship, democracy and social justice in Islam; and the role of Islam in the struggle against the economic, political and cultural imperialism of the West" (47). There is a contentious debate surrounding Rushdie's feminist stance, with two dominant strands. On the one hand, there are his harsh critics, including Gayatri Spivak, who argue that Rushdie's portrayal of women corroborates traditional gender codes. According to Spivak, *The Satanic Verses* reflects Rushdie's "anxiety to write woman into the narrative of history" (82). Moreover, Spivak alleges that the two protagonists, Gibreel and Saladin "are tortured by obsession with women, go through them, even destroy them, within a gender code that is never opened up, never questioned, in this book where so much is called into question, so much is re-inscribed" (83). Justyne Deszcz partly agrees with Spivak by arguing that Rushdie's novel *Shame* uses "conventional patriarchal strategies that attempt to mask male dread of women by inscribing into a text two contrasting models of femininity" (36). However, Deszcz goes on by arguing that Rushdie aims to question patriarchy by laying bare "untouchable fairytale sexual politics" and thereby "to deconstruct stereotypical patriarchal configurations and images of

[14] *India Today*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDGV2RUvzwc

women" (41). In relation to *The Satanic Verses,* the same tactic of challenging traditional models and dogmas gives his book a feminist undertone, as Ellen Willis notes:

> To claim that it's imperialist to criticize a culture that subjects women to the authority of their husbands, keeps them cloistered at home, denies them the right to go to school, work, travel, or own property—a culture in which girls must endure clitoridectomies and wives can be put to death for adultery—is to deny women's humanity. (234)

On a more factual note, Willis also adds that not a single woman was seen among the demonstrators against Rushdie's book in the streets of New York. The feminist discussion around Rushdie seems to oscillate between extremes: he is either criticised for maximising traditional models of patriarchy, or scholars argue that the inclusion of these patriarchal norms serves precisely to challenge and question fundamental grounds. I would however argue that Ambreen Hai's interpretation of Rushdie's feminism proves to be most suitable for my thesis. Hai extrapolates a certain ambivalent feminist stance from Rushdie's writing. That is to say, Rushdie unites his postcolonial resistance and secular revisionist project with an "ambivalent feminism" that reflects some paradigmatic anxiety (Hai 20). By reifying a certain code of femininity through tropes, "overarching symbolic structures" or tone, Rushdie develops "an entire way of seeing, a larger tendency" that is grounded in contradictions (Hai 18-19). Following Hai's argument, it is at these contradictory frictions that Rushdie's feminist stance becomes most interesting (20). This argument resonates with Spivak's observation of Rushdie's anxiety to write woman in history as he appears to advocate gendered stereotypes and a subsequent suspicion vis-à-vis "feminism and matriarchy even as he seeks to promote them" (Hai 45). In addition to his diasporic Indian-Anglophone background, a certain "patriarchal code" consistently nags him and fosters a gendered "unbelonging between a purported feminism, a desire to recraft postcoloniality in terms of feminine revision, and a more dubious

codification of sexual stereotypes" (Hai 46). In that regard, my feminist reading of the mermaid figure in Rushdie's novel will refer to that notion of unbelonging and anxiety, which also translates to the male characters' behaviour towards women.

iii. The Mermaid Figure in *The Satanic Verses*

As already mentioned earlier, Rushdie does not incorporate the mermaid as a character, but more as a feminist trope to nuance characteristics of the two central female characters. Moreover, there is one more general allusion to the mermaid in the narrative which appears to be an intertextual revisiting of Andersen's version. After their fall into the English Channel, Saladin and Gibreel wonder whether they survived because they were "in some way underwater, escorted by mermaids, the sea passing through [them] as if [they] were fish or ghosts, was that the truth, yes or no, I need to have to… but when his eyes opened the questions acquired the indistinctness of dreams, so that he could no longer grasp them, their tails flicked before him and vanished like submarine fins" (Rushdie 132). The close even liminal connection between the dream and the mermaid figure inaugurates the sequence of fantastic metamorphoses that the two characters undergo. What is even more intriguing and symbolically rich is that Rushdie establishes a connection between the mermaid and the female counterparts of Saladin and Gibreel, that is Zeeny and Allie. Starting with the latter, there are obvious physical and behavioural mermaid tropes that are integral to Allie's character. First and foremost, her physical descriptions highly resonate with the looks of the mermaids analysed in earlier chapters. Both Gibreel and Saladin notice her fairness with her "snowlike body with its pale, pale hair" (Rushdie 321). However, rather than underlining her extraordinary beauty, the men are mesmerised by a certain enigmatic quality that emanates from her. On his first encounter with Allie, Saladin finds himself "transfixed, and somewhat chilled, by her eyes, he

felt his reborn animosity towards Gibreel extending itself to her, with her degree-zero go-to-hell look, her air of being privy to some great, secret mystery of the universe" (Rushdie 428). Of course, Allie's cosmic mystery already points towards the feminine, elemental entanglement which I largely discussed in the previous chapter. Moreover, one could argue that Allie's sharp pain in her feet brings the mermaid's painful metamorphosis to a sarcastic extreme. Even Gibreel makes the connection, calling her "his silkie":

> He had read a Bumper Book of fairy-tales in which he found the story of the sea-woman who left the ocean and took on human form for the sake of the man she loved. She had feet instead of fins, but every step she took was an agony, as if she were walking over broken glass; yet she went on walking, forward, away from the sea and over land. You did it for a bloody mountain, he said. Would you do it for a man? (Rushdie 197)

A final explicit connection is the saviour motif, a trope that has spanned over- at least- nine centuries; from Julnar's story in *The Arabian Nights,* to *Undine* and *The Little Mermaid* in the nineteenth century and finally, to Rushdie's re-telling in the late twentieth century. When Gibreel arrives in London, he passes out in the street. Allie raises him over her shoulders and carries him home, with the stinging pain in her feet that "reawakened all the resentments she'd stifled when she thought him dead" (Rushdie 301). As suggested by Hai and Deszcz, Rushdie recycles the traditional fairy tale tropes of the feminine looks, the limited mobility and the saviour motif. However, the enigmatic expression in Allie's eyes or the fact that saving Gibreel gives ground to feelings of resentment rather than affection hint at her feminist empowerment. Nonetheless, with Allie's eventual murder, it is difficult to entirely overlook Gibreel's dominance as a patriarch. Yet, as I elaborated in relation to Rushdie's conflicted feminist paradigm, Gibreel's behaviour is inflicted with a similar sense of anxiety towards Allie. This

anxiety can be linked to Allie's independence and empowering sense of autonomy as a mountain climber. Like Julnar, Allie enters a divine realm by reaching the summits of the highest mountains. After all, she is compared to the goddesses of the Islamic, satanic verses; that is to say, to one of the "most false creatures" or "princess of the powers of the air" (Rushdie 321). Aligning her with the "wrong" version of Islam further pronounces the fear against untamed femininity that resonates with the male protagonists in the novel as "*wilderness,* a hard, sparse thing, antisocial, self-contained, an essence" (Rushdie 428). However, like Huldbrand in *Undine,* Saladin finds himself attracted to Allie's unapologetic feminine wildness that goes against his steadfast British rationality. During his encounter with her, Saladin notes that he desires Allie for "what he took to be that inner certainty of hers; lacking which, he envied it, and sought to damage what he envied" (Rushdie 428). With reference to the postcolonial agenda, I would nonetheless argue that the female assertiveness that Saladin perceives in Allie stems less from her Britishness than from her feminine autonomy as a Mount Everest climber. During her climb, Allie has visions of ghosts and thus, like for other elemental women, her activity in nature has endowed her with a strong liminal sense for what cannot be perceived with the male, rational mind.

To better understand the male anxiety vis-à-vis Allie, I would argue that the male characters are deeply embedded within a system of binaries. For Saladin, it is the Indian/British dichotomy that haunts him and Gibreel progressively deteriorates under the secular/religious pressure. With their minds trained to think in dual categories, liminal entities further disrupt their dogmatic conception of the world. Accordingly, Gibreel directly challenges Allie's commitment to nature as she suffers her stinging feet "for a bloody mountain" (Rushdie 197). Allie does, however, not really confirm that she would sacrifice herself for a man; an attitude

that is highly problematic for Gibreel. His thinking in categories is a salient example of what Cixous aims to deconstruct within white and Western logic. As already discussed in the previous chapter, Cixous associates hierarchised imbalances with binary metaphors:

> Activity/passivity,
>
> Sun/Moon
>
> Culture/Nature,
>
> Day/Night,
>
> (…)
>
> Form, convex, step, advance, seed, progress.
>
> Matter, concave, ground- which supports the step, receptacle.
>
> $\frac{\text{Man}}{\text{Woman}}$ (287)

Gibreel's human/nature and male/female thinking creates hierarchical oppositions "where the 'feminine' side is always seen as the negative, powerless instance," or always located underneath the fraction bar (Moi 104). Moreover, Gibreel's confusion seems to result from the fact that Allie, the "weaker" part of the binary, does not yield to the "stronger" side in Cixous's male/female binary, but instead unites with another "weak" side from the culture/nature divide. Like Undine, Allie incorporates an elemental wilderness which aligns her with mermaids and makes it hard for men to dominate her. Due to this uncontrollable, elemental wilderness, Allie instils and furthers anxiety within Saladin and Gibreel, for whom homicide presents the ultimate resolution. In contrast to more traditional mermaid tales, their relationship does not end with the death of the patriarch but with the killing of the untamed elemental woman. Ironically, towards the end of the novel, Gibreel still sees himself as the victim of the

female enemy, "of Rekha and Alleluia Cone and all the women who wished to bind him in the chains of desires and songs" (Rushdie 336).

The mermaid characteristic in Allie thus crystallises in her close elemental connection and her subsequent defiance of rational binaries. Zeeny Vakil's links to the mermaid are perhaps less obviously portrayed. Nonetheless, I would posit that the mermaid trope comes to the fore in the relationship between Zeeny and Saladin. Zeeny is a staunch feminist and member of the Indian communist party. She clearly constructs her identity within Indian culture and thus greatly opposes Saladin who wishes to entirely dispose of his Indian inheritance. Yet, Zeeny does not agree with Saladin's vehement negation of his cultural roots. On his visit to Bombay, Zeeny invites Saladin to a pub, where one of their friends ends up in a heated political debate. In response to Saladin's embarrassment towards the discussion, Zeeny urges him to "change back" to his Indian self (Rushdie 58). In her passionate criticism of Saladin, she reminds him of "a vortex, a siren, tempting him back to his old self" (58). The analogy with the siren suggests that Saladin characterises her as a dangerous *femme fatale* who wants to lure him into the sinister depths of his Indian cultural heritage. This close connection between the siren's temptation and his luring (Indian) identity is magnified through the mirror trope. Zeeny cautions Saladin that once he has "stepped through the looking-glass [he steps] back at [his] peril. The mirror may cut [him] to shreds" (Rushdie 58). Before delving into Zeeny's statement, it appears noteworthy to elaborate on the significance of mirrors for mermaids. The traditional and highly simplistic interpretation holds that the typically hand-held mirror amplifies the vanity of mermaids (Hayward 14). Hayward however goes on by saying that the mirror reinstates the mermaid's sense of fractured identity. With reference to Jacques Lacan's mirror stage, during which "the child recognises its reflection as something more integrated, coherent and complete

than the body it conceives," the mermaid's obsession with the mirror can be understood as "dysphoric" (Hayward 14). That is to say, the mirror highlights the mermaid's liminal existence as neither human, nor fish. In line with psychoanalytic theory, the mermaid's reflection reinstates that no matter how deeply she wishes to belong to either one of the realms, the mirror will always only represent her ideal-I that cannot be attained.

As mentioned earlier, Luce Irigaray departs from Lacan to elaborate a more empowering, feminist standpoint. In "Book as Mirror, Mirror as Book," Veronica Schanoes argues that the mirror fulfils a more effective function in feminist fairy tale rewritings. Schanoes thereby reclaims the mirror as "a potential source of power, self-creation, and magic" (Schanoes 6). With reference to Angela Carter's stories, for instance, Schanoes suggests that the mirror can sustain the development of feminine subjectivity. In particular, female desire and sexuality can be developed through woman's perception of herself in the mirror as it might help her to better the understanding of herself. Schanoes synthesises Jenijoy La Belle's stance that "the book and the mirror are also in apposition, that in literature, women search in the mirror what men seek in books" (Schanoes 17). I would argue that Irigaray's inverted conception of the looking-glass even strengthens female empowerment. In *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977), Irigaray firstly outlines the phallogocentric connotations of the mirror, as it has functioned as a matrix of social and cultural organisation that is highly embedded in phallogocentric thought. Subsequently, Irigaray questions who has been represented in that flat, monolithic mirror image and "what 'other' has been reduced by it to the hard-to-represent function of the negative" (Irigaray 154). That is to say, in reference to sexual anatomy, the flatness of the mirror only serves to represent man and his relation to other men. However, the traditional "flat" mirror fails to fully disclose women and their bodies. Accordingly, Irigaray argues that the male

institution had to face yet another phallus-lacking, female inconvenience and thus, invented the speculum to intrude and scientifically exploit the female body. The speculum is grounded in "masculine parameters," as it excludes "women from participation in exchange, except as objects or the possibility of transaction among men" (Irigaray 155). Following Irigaray, the traditional mirror serves to further objectify women and increases male dominance over their bodies. Therefore, to escape the male conception of the looking-glass, women need to venture beyond masculine parameters. They can only detach themselves from the male preconceptions if they situate themselves on "the other side of the looking glass, where the familiar rules of logic have been reversed, deconstructed, and subjected to a sea change" (Burke 290). Burke associates the female mirror realm with "the dizzying perspective of an adult Alice," in which the female perspective could be explained as "'the other side', an ideological space beyond the psychic economy of patriarchy" (Burke 296).

The mermaid's liminality and fluid ontology strongly resonate with that other space beyond the phallogocentric looking-glass. In that regard, Zeeny's statement resonates with Irigaray's feminist realm that is outside the rational, British world view which Saladin so highly values. However, one step through his "flat mirror" could bring Saladin to a place where his binarism finds no longer stable ground and can only be cut to shreds (Irigaray 154). The connection between Zeeny as a water woman and the mirror comes back in a later dream, in which Zeeny is "transformed into a mermaid, singing to him from an iceberg in tones of agonizing sweetness, lamenting her inability to join him on dry land, calling him, calling- but when he went to her she shut him up fast in the heart of her ice-mountain, and her song changed to one of triumph and revenge" (Rushdie 135). When Saladin wakes up, he immediately looks into "a mirror framed in blue-and-gold Japonaiserie lacquer" (Rushdie 135). The close ties

between Zeeny as mermaid and Saladin's confrontation with the mirror trope repetitively evoke what is located beyond the traditional looking-glass, and what could once and for all shatter Saladin's heteronormative world conception. At the same time, it could dissolve Saladin's deep sense of unbelonging which precisely is built on phallogocentric and rational values.

iv. Kamila Shamsie's "decentred perspective" on Pakistan

Shamsie's novel opens with Aasmaani's old dream of trying to save a breached mermaid. As I will later explain, the mermaid stands for the haunting memory of her dead mother Samina, who left her child when she was only fourteen. Aasmaani wakes up in the nursery of an apartment in Karachi, which she shares with her step-sister Sabia and the latter's husband. As a quiz show researcher, Aasmaani starts to work at the broadcasting company called Save the Date studio, where she meets and falls in love with her working colleague Ed. Ed's mother, Shehnaz Saeed is a famous actress who is starring in the studio's new TV show. Shehnaz also used to be a very close friend to Samina, Aasmaani's mother. Aasmaani quickly notices that the relationship between Ed and his mother is deeply troubled by some unrevealed past events. One day, Aasmaani receives a letter from Shehnaz with an encrypted code which the actress dismisses as creepy fan mail. Aasmaani immediately recognises the code from her childhood: she believes that it was written by the Poet Omi, her mother's lover, for whom Samina left Aasmaani's father. However, the Poet was supposedly killed by the authorities several months before Aasmaani's mother's own disappearance and suicide. Aasmaani suspects that the letter proves that the Poet is still alive, yet she does not reveal her suspicions to Shehnaz. The letter kicks off a spiral of memories and the hope of her mother's return. As a feminist activist, her mother and the Poet were outspoken in their opposition against the Islamic jurisprudence of Zia ul-Haq's military regime.

Ed brings more letters to Aasmaani which reinvigorate her belief in the Poet's survival. As Ed and Aasmaani grow closer, she entrusts him with her suspicions about the Poet and her goal to find out about his survival. Ed however urges her to keep her investigations private because she might risk to endanger herself. In one of his letters, the Poet claims that the minions forced him to watch the new TV show starring Shehnaz. Thereupon, Ed proposes to Aasmaani to mess with the film props and to leave a crossword on the coffee table which will show the words "jazz fugues" and "frass"- words which hold a lot of meaning for the Poet, Aasmaani and Samina. Aasmaani also finds out that Shehnaz was deeply in love with her mother and how her obsession has overshadowed her responsibilities as a mother. After having spent the night with Ed, Aasmaani opens his laptop to leave a love note behind; only to find that Ed wrote the encrypted letters. Ed explains that he knew the code because Samina had revealed it long ago to Shehnaz and him over dinner. He used the coded letters to convince his mother to pick up her acting career after she retired due to Samina's disappearance. It should all have ended there, but as his mother decided to send the letters to Aasmaani, Ed was entangled in his own lies. Soon, he saw the letters as a way of staying close to Aasmaani with whom he had fallen in love. He failed all attempts of telling her the truth and planned on ending it by sending her a letter with the minions informing her about the Poet's death. After Ed's confession, Aasmaani falls into a depression, finally mourning for the Poet's and her mother's death. The novel ends with Aasmaani standing in the sea, where she holds a symbolic funeral for her mother.

Kamila Shamsie was born in Karachi and possesses Pakistani and British nationality. Clements characterises her as "a transnational and activist Pakistani writer" who "comes from an affluent Muslim emigrant family" with three generations of women writers (124). A great deal of her writing is based on the restrictive laws of General Zia's Islamisation scheme, but

she equally offers a "decentred perspective on Pakistani and world politics" (Clements 125). A key characteristic outlined by Clements is Shamsie's "relationship to national and international writing and realpolitik, as to Islam and to feminism" that should "be understood as refractory and reflexive" (125). Unlike Rushdie, Shamsie's advocacy of female emancipation is straightforward and needs to be demarcated for a better understanding of her complex, female characters.

Bruce King gives an insightful outline of the book's socio-political context. As already brought in earlier, Shamsie locates Pakistan's transition from democratic state to military governance within international as well as national politics. The novel remembers precisely that time of governmental transition and Samina, as a woman, is stripped of her former rights under the introduction of the Hudood Ordinance of 1979: "accusation of rape could only be proven in a court of law if there were four pious, male Muslim adults willing to give testimony" (King 92). Yet, Shamsie is equally interested in portraying the feminist response to the Islamic jurisprudence by making Samina a stern feminist activist, representing the Women's Action Forum which was founded in 1981. Apart from her mother's struggle and loss of her freedom as a woman, the novel also centres on the gender politics of Aasmaani's generation. Faced with the ongoing effects of the military regime but also of growing globalisation, the novel picks up "the dilemmas of educated women in contemporary Pakistan, and the tensions experienced by women between the demands of children and their own lives and work" (Ranasinha 139). Women are faced with the battle of choosing between gender-defined categories, in which "Samina's politicised activism, questionable maternal and sexually transgressive nature contest fixed, predefined female subjectivities" (Ranasinha 139). Yet, Samina's comparison with the mermaid subverts these gendered boxes. As it should be clear by now, as a half-fish, half-human

that belongs to the waters but also shows an affiliation with other elements, the mermaid embodies feminine fluidity and defies these traditional gendered categories. The negation of monolithic statements and unilateral classifications resonates with Shamsie's strength as a novelist. Even if she undermines legal oppression of women that is justified by religious fundamentalism, Shamsie does not radically undercut Islam. Instead, she gives a female interpretation of it, that is gentle, tolerant and diverse: "In *Broken Verses* the Qur'an remains an awe-inspiring book, but also one which Shamsie implies the Prophet's progressive, female, Muslim inheritors must nevertheless struggle to make their own" (Clements 139).

v. The Mermaid Figure in *Broken Verses*

The narrative opens with Aasmaani's recurring dream of the breached mermaid, whom she desperately tries to save from dehydration:

> I rush down, see scales where I expect legs. I have seen a mermaid once before, spent hours splashing water on to it to save it from dehydration. I remember the ache of my arm from the effort, but not whether I saved the creature. It is evident nothing will save this one. I turn towards the hut to see why people are shouting, and when I look back she is gone, only her impression remaining. I know what is necessary. I must cut out the sand which is imprinted with her body, lift it up, and bury it. But the sea is coming in again and I know that, faster than I can respond, waves will wash away the contours of her body, the graceful curve of her tail. When I awoke, this line came to mind: Dreams, sometimes, are rehearsals. (Shamsie 1)

As for Saladin, the mermaid appears in the protagonist's dream world. She also acts as a framing figure to the novel: towards the end, it becomes clear that the mermaid emblematises

Aasmaani's mother, Samina. Aasmaani's thought when she wakes up foreshadows that her dream is a rehearsal for her later symbolic funeral for her mother, when indeed, she writes Samina's name in the sand, cups it in her hands and puts it below the waves. Clements suggests that the mermaid "proves central to the reader's understanding of Aasmaani's hauntedness" caused by the traumatic maternal loss (Clements 135). Apart from functioning as a framing device to the narrative, I would add that the parallels established between the mermaid and Samina are highly complex and need to be analysed on two levels: firstly, from a socio-political standpoint which situates Samina within Pakistan and the military regime; secondly, the mermaid characterisation bears on the more domestic, microscopic female/male dichotomy and the underlying sense of male anxiety.

Both Samina and her companion the Poet Omi publicly counter Islamic jurisprudence. In relation to the mermaid attribute, the Poet aligns himself, Samina and Aasmaani with the element of water:

> The Poet used to say we all have a particular topography in which we feel ourselves at home, though not all of us are fortunate enough to find the landscape which makes us so aware of that thing called "the soul". It is mountains for some, deserts for others, wide open plains for the most obvious in our midst. But you and I, Aasmaani, he'd tell me, we are creatures of water. (Shamsie 30)

This poetic alliance with water becomes even more pertinent when the Poet tells Aasmaani to look up the word "to breach". Aasmaani finds two definitions: "'to fail to obey or preserve something, for example, the law or a trust'" and beneath "'to leap above the surface of the water (refers to whales)'. That was all the proof I needed that there was order in the world, and that- this followed naturally- my mother would come back soon" (Shamsie 71). As this line suggests,

Aasmaani extrapolates that her mother is still *above* the surface of the water, however, as I will demonstrate, it is the first definition of "to breach" that is crucial for a feminist reading. In line with Cixous and Irigaray, Shamsie herself is fascinated by the female *jouissance* that is hidden in words and by the "intense, powerful engagement with layers of language" (Ranasinha 135). Accordingly, the same semantic layers can be inferred from Aasmaani's name. In Urdu, *aasmaan* translates to "sky" or "heaven[15]". By ignoring the etymology behind his foster daughter's name, the Poet undercuts his own art as a writer. Moreover, naming her protagonist after the celestial realm, yet making her association with the water an explicit theme in the novel argues for the cyclic connection between the elements. It strongly ties in with the second chapter of this project, in which we looked at Undine's elemental fluidity which underlines the porousness of elemental boundaries. Aasmaani resembles Undine's liminal existence and alternative leaps between different elemental realms, even if in a much more realist tone. At the same time, the Poet's fixity on the water element echoes Huldbrand's strong attachment with earth and thus, proves that as a man the Poet is still somewhat dependent on the heteronormative "safety" offered by categories.

This elemental trope that is deeply grounded in the mermaid tradition is even pronounced by the Poet's and Samina's interaction. Even though the Poet fights for a liberated state, his hegemonic position as an artist confines Samina to the page and robs her of her autonomy. Ironically, the Poet believes to save Samina from her wife and motherhood prison, yet he only puts her from one reductive category into the next. As his muse, Samina is defined by the Poet. He even makes her the female emblem of Pakistan by changing "the year of her birth in his poems, [making] her two years younger than she was so that she was the same age

[15] *Urdu Dictionary :* https://www.rekhta.org/urdudictionary/?lang=1&keyword=aasmaan

as Pakistan" (Shamsie 87). Following Ranasinha, the Poet thereby employs a highly patriarchal trope of the female, that is the "woman as nation trope" (139). This loss of feminine self-hood becomes even more tragic in Aasmaani's dream where she desperately aims to save the mermaid, that is her mother, from dehydrating. It does not only point toward the aim of keeping her alive but even more so to preserve the feminine nature inside her mother. Instead, Samina is subjected to prescribed, phallogocentric categories which mutually exclude one another. Nonetheless, there are several instances where Samina proves her fluid femininity. Aasmaani remembers that her mother used to sing the Poet's verse; something which he would never himself do. It pertains to her sonic expression as a woman that resembles the bodily expression of other mermaids, such as Julnar or the little mermaid. Even though Samina still uses her *voice* it is not through speech but through song that she creates her own realm of expression "which women know and which men fear" (Cixous 293). Indeed, Aasmaani describes her mother's singing voice as an "arresting voice" which she was "unashamed to use its own smokiness to haunting effect" (Shamsie 214).

Moreover, Shamsie briefly brings in the mirror trope as a destabilising factor to further pronounce Aasmaani's own ontological fraction. After she wakes up from her mermaid dream, Aasmaani wants to look at her reflection, yet finds herself distracted by the sea creatures painted on the walls of the nursery: "I couldn't look in the full-length mirror without some creature extending tentacles, fin, snout or tail towards my reflection" (Shamsie 2). Accordingly, Aasmaani does not look in the mirror; she leaves her reflection empty. One could argue that she thereby avoids succumbing to that heteronormative side of the mirror as posited by Irigaray. Saladin, for instance, relies on the mirror as a rational "instrument" to behold himself and maintain "thereby a narcissistic relation" to himself as a male (Minh-ha 22). Aasmaani,

however, ends up leaving the reflection empty and thus, she allows it to be filled with plural, yet indefinite meanings. In line with Irigaray, Aasmaani thus prevents a traditional and suppressive "tension between a personal ego and a formative agency" and allows herself to be represented in detachment to the patriarchal mirror (Irigaray 118).

Finally, the cathartic burial of her mother's name takes Aasmaani to one of the elements, that is to the sea and this is where the true definition of "to breach" becomes clear. That is to say, to fully embrace her female identity as a young, educated Pakistani woman, it is not enough to "leap above the surface of water" (Shamsie 71). Instead, the unbound feminine within her fails "to obey or preserve" the categories that the world around her tries to impose on her- including Omi, the Poet. I would even argue that in the last passage when Aasmaani finally puts the memory of her mother to rest, the cosmic unification, or elemental plurality is fairly emphasised:

> I take the block of sand in my palms and walk forward until I am knee-deep in the cold, clear water. The bright winter sun throws a net of silver between the horizon and me. I bend my back and lower my cupped hands just below the surface of the sea. Her name and the sand stream out between my fingers, dissolve into the waves, and are carried away. (Shamsie 338)

Aasmaani puts her mother's name *below* the surface and thus, on a metaphysical level, brings the spirit of the mermaid back to one of her elements. However, it is not necessarily the element water that dominates in the passage, but there is also the "bright winter sun"; the "net of silver" on the horizon and "the block of sand" (338). This elemental liminality helps to disrupt the categories that Pakistan aimed to forge for Samina. By embracing that plural freedom, Samina (or her name in the sand) does not have to choose between deserting her child while being a staunch feminist, nor does she need to stay at home and yield to Islamic jurisprudence. With

strong resemblance to Undine's elemental mobility, Shamsie thus embeds her young protagonist within a place of elemental transcendence. Aasmaani appears to fully embrace the plurality within her- and her mother. Their female plurality is located in the cosmological realm rather than in one stagnant category. As her mother's name in the sand exemplifies, Aasmaani understands the possibility to "flow out to the whole of nature" (Irigaray 45). Finally, it is interesting that Shamsie does not describe the water as a reflective surface as it would perpetuate the male, "speculative" trope of the mirror (Irigaray 45). Instead, Aasmaani perceives the water as "clear," finally giving her the answers she so desperately tries to find throughout the narrative: her mother's disappearance was a quest for plural feminine selves, which could only be found in the liminal realm.

vi. Conclusion

I looked at two writers from the postcolonial tradition who include the mermaid figure to nuance their female characters and to add to the fluid and complex meanings of femininity. In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie's use of the mermaid clearly resonates with his own sense of unbelonging between traditional gender codes and progressive feminism. This gendered anxiety is recognisable in the way Gibreel behaves towards his female lovers and how he tries to stifle their feminine untamed nature. Allie bears many resemblances with the most traditional and archetypal mermaid narratives and her deep elemental entanglement is presented like a threat to male binarism. Moreover, Zeeny lays bare the trope of the mirror and even furthers its significance beyond simplistic associations with vanity. In line with Irigaray's speculum tenet, the mirror stands for a heteronormative matrix that fails to fully incorporate female representation. The female characters need to venture beyond the looking-glass, into the liminal realm, in order to embrace their ontological plurality. Moreover, the mermaid figure in these

writings has not only helped to elucidate the characterisation of women but also to expose how harming and confining these binaries can be for men. It instils a deep sense of anxiety within characters like Saladin and forces them somewhat to think in categories. In *Broken Verses*, Kamila Shamsie establishes a connection with the mermaid's defiance of gender categories and Pakistan's oppressive military regime under the leadership of Zia ul-Haq. Accordingly, her female characters must fight for the plurality of meanings that reside within womanhood. The mermaid analogy with the narrative's feminist Samina appears fruitful to further emphasise this feminine fluidity. Moreover, by naming Samina's daughter after the celestial realm, Shamsie leaves space for the cosmological unification that was so intrinsic to Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's writing but also partly to Andersen's little mermaid. Therefore, I argued that Aasmaani and her final acceptance of elemental fluidity resembles Undine's ontological dwelling in the liminal. These women are presented as more than just water women. The only way to escape the confines of the military regime and its patriarchal, monolithic value system is to break free from categorical classifications.

FOURTH CHAPTER: DECONSTRUCTING THE "FEMININE FAKERY OF MERMAIDS" IN *THE MERMAID AND MRS HANCOCK*

i. Introduction

Three years of research went into the creation of *The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock* and shortly after its publication, the book was featured on the shortlist for the 2018 Women's Prize for Fiction[16]. According to Heathcote, Imogen Hermes Gowar's debut novel was the outcome of her research at the British Museum, where she "encountered its 18th-century 'mermaid,' a

[16] The Women's Prize for Fiction 2018 short-list can be accessed here: https://www.womensprizeforfiction.co.uk/ (last access 22.05.2018).

mummified splicing of monkey and fish" (Heathcote). However, Gowar's fascination for mermaids did not limit itself to the monstrous corpse. Her historical fiction constitutes this project's primary work with the greatest variety of mermaid figures. With the aim to portray a historical account of Georgian London, the novel's connections between women and mermaids appears even more pertinent. Accordingly, the analysis of the plurality and complexity of the mermaid figures is brought to bear on the plurality and complexity of women in Georgian London. Therefore, I will argue that the novel aims to challenge constructed, patriarchal ideals that dominated Georgian discourse and confined women to fixed categories. The key argument of this chapter stems from Hermione Eyre's observation that Gowar "delights in the feminine fakery of mermaids, but as a writer she is the real deal" (Eyre 2018). Accordingly, the "feminine fakery" surrounding mermaids in the tale will help to shed light on the feminine fakery of Georgian London which was constructed by men.

Gowar's book is suitable as a concluding chapter because of the variety of mermaid figures, which brings together the different tropes that were studied in the previous chapters of this thesis. Therefore, the interweavement of numerous mermaid elements even furthers the categorical porousness of what is means to be a liminal creature that does not succumb to logocentric ideals. The transcultural aspect will be addressed on two levels. As a British writer, Gowar entwines the mermaid with her socio-cultural alienation, which parallels Shamsie's and Rushdie's reworking of the mermaid. This chapter will once again discuss the novel through the lens of the two French feminists Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. More specifically, the plurality of femininity will be a point of connection between the mermaid figures and Irigaray's notion of "parler femme". I will not only show how Irigaray's paradigm can be applied to the novel, but also how her playful, post-structuralist use of language resembles Gowar's language.

In order to clarify where the different mermaid figures enter the narrative, this chapter will open with a brief summary of the novel. I will then continue by giving a historical account of Georgian London, and more precisely, of the discourse that surrounded and categorised women. These patriarchal value systems will be applied and further analysed in relation to the novel's female characters. I will then turn to the different mermaid figures in the narrative that are presented in a rational discourse which aims to categorise and classify them. Finally, I will show how the female protagonists, namely the mermaid and Mrs Hancock, help to challenge these patriarchal, rational female archetypes through their female and liberated means.

As already briefly mentioned, the narrative is set in the eighteenth century and takes place in London. Jonah Hancock is the owner of a counting house in the South Eastern part of the city, namely in Deptford. Jonah is a widower who is frequently haunted by the ghost of his lost child. Most of his earnings are financing his niece Sukie's dowry. Upon the return of one of his captains, Jonah is shocked to see that he traded one of his ships for a mermaid caught in the Javanese Sea. Although dead, Jonah keeps the mermaid and uses her as a freakshow exhibit. Meanwhile in West London, the recently widowed courtesan, Angelica Neal, returns to the "King's Palace," an elite brothel which is a stone's throw away from St James's Palace[17]. At twenty-seven, Angelica is considered too old to regain her popular status in Mrs Chappell's brothel. Faced with her longing for independence, yet bad experience with the matriarchal abbess, Angelica is unresolved whether she should go back to being one of Mrs Chappell's nunnery girls. Mr Hancock and his niece Sukie make a considerable amount of money by showcasing the mermaid carcass at coffee houses. The news quickly reaches Mrs Chappell, who contacts Jonah to close a bargain on behalf of the mermaid. Mrs Chappell borrows the

[17] Until 1837, St James Palace was the official residency for Britain's monarchy (*royal.uk)*

mermaid for an opulent exhibition at her nunnery with a fair reward for Jonah. However, the abbess plans to overthrow Jonah's business by sending Angelica to seduce him during the opening night at the brothel. On the night of the exhibition, Jonah quickly falls for Angelica's well-trained seductive charms. Yet before Jonah and Angelica retreat to a chamber, they watch an opulent show in which disguised sailors and mermaids from the saloon start an erotic dance which prepares the room for an orgy. Jonah is appalled at the lewdness, rejects Angelica and darts outside the salon. After that night, Jonah puts an early end to his bargain with Mrs Chappell and the mermaid is sent back to his office. Mrs Chappell is highly vexed by Angelica's failed effort to seduce Mr Hancock. Despite Mrs Chappell's anger for losing Jonah (and thus his mermaid), Angelica finds herself another suitor: George Rockingham.

Jonah sells the mermaid for twenty thousand pounds. As a rich but lonely man, Jonah regrets his loss of Angelica. Angelica teases him, alleging that she will only agree to a meeting if he catches her another mermaid. Angelica's bliss is short-lived as she is soon faced with George's debts. During George's two-week trip, Jonah pays Angelica regular visits. When George returns, he announces that he wants to leave Angelica and pins it to her regular meetings with Mr Hancock, even if of innocent nature. Mrs Chappell, though, is too proud to take Angelica back under her wing. Mr Hancock intervenes and proposes to take over Angelica's bills. Angelica being dependent on Mr Hancock's good-will agrees to move in with him, under the condition that they marry.

As a married couple, the Hancocks and Sukie live in Deptford. Angelica soon discovers that she is pregnant and informs her husband. Jonah purchases a house in Blackheath with an extraordinary grotto in the back yard; a perfect dwelling place for another mermaid. After the captain's unusual long departure, Mr Hancock is informed about his return. Seeing his captain

much altered, Jonah finds out that it is the mermaid's doing as she instils a deep grief in people. Jonah finds himself ensnarled by her mysterious nature, completely neglecting his wife and his business. Angelica, meanwhile, undergoes the traumatic loss of her child. The only witness is Sukie, who promises not to inform Mr Hancock. The married couple drift further apart for different reasons. During a nightly hushed operation, Mr Hancock has the mermaid delivered to the grotto in Blackheath. Sukie urges her aunt to save her household and to tell her husband about her child loss. Angelica thus entrusts her husband with her secret; however, Jonah does not reveal the mermaid's existence. During the night, Angelica catches Jonah wandering through the mist and she decides to follow him. He finally takes her to the grotto to reveal the mermaid. Partly out of vengeance, Angelica decides to host another mermaid party and to let her visitors be affected by the mermaid's almost unbearable grief. After Mr Hancock and Angelica mutually agree that they neglected each other, Angelica is restored to her old spirits and busy with party plans. Yet, with the intention of protecting Sukie from the mermaid's effect, they do their best to keep the mermaid from her. Soon, though, Angelica spots Sukie in a hallucinated state, knocking against the door that leads to the grotto. Angelica and Mr Hancock rush to save their niece and thereupon decide that they need to dispose of the mermaid and her soul-sucking presence. They release the non-solid mermaid in buckets of water until the tank is empty. With prescribed bed rest, Sukie progressively recovers. The Hancocks still decide to throw a party and thanks to Angelica's taste for decorum, their *Wunderkammer* turns out to be a success.

ii. Women's Place in Georgian London

Before delving into the analysis of women, it appears essential to give a historical account of the broader socio-political context of eighteenth-century Britain. According to Vivien Jones,

the economic and political changes of the period affected social roles and thus, women were under scrutiny (7). It constitutes the period between the "Glorious Revolution" in 1688 and the French Revolution in 1789 during which "England's economy completed the change from a predominantly feudal organization to pre-industrial capitalism, political power shifted correspondingly from an aristocratic base to an alliance between landed and mercantile wealth, and a rapidly expanding middle class gained cultural ascendancy" (Jones 10). Jones notes that within this model, women took on a "passively functional" role, in which they represented "the objects of exchange of which male social mobility depends" (10). Cindy McCreery adds that the revolutions and consequent dislocations posed a threat to the stability of families. Thus, "[w]omen's status as guardians of the family seemed most valuable just when it appeared most vulnerable. Women's behaviour therefore became a source of particular public concern and comment" (McCreery 113). That public comment crystallised in the different categories that were created for women.

Two dominant female classifications emerged which forged and imposed a "good woman/bad woman dichotomy" (Kittredge 8). In relation to the family's stability, motherhood played an essential role. Women's worth was measured by their ability to give "birth to future English soldiers and sailors" (McCreery 114). Indeed, Gowar gives a portrayal of these various, normative women ideals. Jonah's niece, Sukie, for instance, is trained to become the ideal woman. She lives with Jonah, helps him with house chores and in return, he takes care of her dowry. As Gowar herself has noted, Sukie represents the kind of girls from middle-class families who were deeply embedded in the family's network, had financial security, but with limited female autonomy. During the exhibit of the mummified mermaid, Sukie excels in her book-keeping skills, which "was a valuable asset for them to understand business" (Gowar, *Georgian London* interview). As the prospective wife of a merchant, the ideal woman needed

to understand finances. Accordingly, "this is the education that Sukie is getting, how to economically run a house and how to look over account book but perhaps not by making active decisions about them" (Gowar, *Georgian London* interview).

On the other hand, independent behaviour transgressed "customary limits" and risked women to be degraded as nonconform women (McCreery 113). The older the woman, the less she could get away with. According to McCreery, "[f]ashionable old women were perhaps the most troublesome group of all, as they combined the freedom of their rank with all the negative attributes associated with old women" (115). The King's Palace abbess, Mrs Chappell, represents such an independent woman who is highly despised by society. Indeed, on her way to court, Mrs Chappell's carriage is taken down by her opponents and she is beaten to death. As the abbess of a brothel that employs sex workers *and* as an elderly woman, Mrs Chappell embodies the "image of transgression" and consequently, she does not go unshielded from society's judgment (Kittredge).

Another transgressive pattern associated with the Georgian anti-Ideal was inappropriate sexual behaviour. According to Kittredge, society's judgment of women's sexuality depended on a constructed behavioural code. To avoid social criticism, women "adhered to the codes of behaviour that communicated 'feminine' gender for fear that any deviation would be read as a signal that they were not sexually restrained females" (Kittredge 6). Accordingly, women who rejected the stable but dependent family networks were left with little choice other than prostitution. If women tried to make an independent living they were very often forced to enter the lewd category as their bodies became their main income source. The interest in the lewd women, though, did not solely stay within the peripheries of public discourse. Even if regarded as moral anti-Ideal, the public objectification of sex workers forged a controversial discourse of celebration. As Gowar herself notes, it became a public interest, "so much that it lent its

name to quite a few newspapers and journals" (Gowar *Georgian London*, interview). The annual journal *Harris's List of Covent Garden Ladies* is an example of such a public record, which was published anonymously from 1757 to 1797. The journal entailed a list of over hundred prostitutes working in Georgian London, including their names, address, physical description as well as sexual conduct and performance. Ironically, in the preface, the author refers to these ladies as "the most celebrated ladies" in London (*Harris's List)*. This line of introduction clearly reinstates the patriarchal voices behind the public discourse on women. In the following example taken from the journal, the female objectification dominates the description of the young prostitute, called "Miss B—rn":

> This accomplished nymph has just attained her eighteenth year, and fraught with every perfection, enters a volunteer in the field of Venus.
>
> …
>
> In bed she is all the heart can wish, or eye admire, every limb is symmetry, every action under cover truly amorous; her price is two pounds two. (*Harris's List*[18])

Apart from the highly sexist description, it is interesting for this thesis that the description of Miss B-rn opens with a "nymph" analogy. That is to say, as a sexually available woman, she is from the start associated with the elemental woman. This non-fictional association with the spiritual woman clearly corroborates the novel's title and thus, Angelica's link with the mermaid figure. Indeed, I would argue that her alliance with the mermaid helps to destabilise the patriarchal cachet of female categories. However, before delving into the mermaid

[18] List accessible online: http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/42075/pg42075-images.html

characteristics that are integral to Angelica's character, I will show how the mermaid figures are also confined to stereotypical categories which sustain patriarchal discourse.

iii. Patriarchal Categorisation of Mermaids

The first mermaid that appears in the narrative undercuts the recurrent trope of extraordinary beauty. To the contrary, she is described to have "the size of an infant," a large head and "fists drawn up to its face" (Gowar 32). Her monstrosity is accentuated by her "fearful claws" and "a snarl, with such sharp fangs in it" (32). The rest of her body ends in a fishtail. Moreover, her hair is not typically blonde but "silky black" (34). There is nothing charming in her appearance, yet she still exercises some appeal for her audience precisely because of her ugliness: "people crush into the little room so that they can only shuffle around the mermaid, peering and shrieking at its goblin glare" (71). As a freakshow exhibit, the first mermaid resembles the way "mermaid mummies" were sewn together and exhibited as a curiosity. Lucy Fraser explicates that this tradition of constructing a ghoulish mermaid carcass comes from Japanese tradition, which inherited it from China. During "the Edo period (1603-1868), grotesque 'mermaid mummies' (ningyo no miira), manufactured from monkey torsos and fishtails, were popularly exhibited as curiosities" (Fraser 249). During the early Enlightenment years in Europe, the field of teratology studied and thus rationalised mermaids. Parallel to the study of abnormalities that put the mermaid into an organic context, the development of medicine helped to create and replicate ambivalent creatures (Bernd 24). In the mid-seventeenth century, the mermaid entered the species system as "*animal rassimum,"* which marked her transition from monster to animal. Accordingly, as a constructed curiosity, the first mermaid is not only used to be "other" in public but also to rationalise and categorise the liminal.

Furthermore, Bernd mentions in his trajectory of the rationalisation of mermaids that before, and arguably after, mermaids were rationalised by science, they were used as a "Projektionsfläche männlicher Phantasien und erotischer Fixierungen[19]" (20). As I have discussed in earlier chapters, the medieval synonym for mermaid was prostitute and therefore, in patriarchal discourse, the mermaid became a symbol of lust and sexuality. In the first chapter, I already showed how this reductive portrayal of mermaids was used in works pre-dating medieval times. The highly sexualised description of the mermaids in "Abdullah the fisherman and Abdullah the merman" corroborates the representation of the mermaid as an erotic fantasy. On the night the mermaid carcass is exhibited at Mrs Chappell's nunnery, the prostitutes disguise themselves as mermaids. If the monstrosity of the first mermaid constitutes one extreme of the spectrum, then the highly sexualised perception of mermaids is located at the other end of the spectrum. In accordance with this stereotypically sexist classification, the eight prostitutes perform an erotic dance with eight disguised sailors:

> Thus enter, singing, eight beautiful girls, the finest from Mrs Chappell's stables. Each holds a comb and a mirror, her hair falling over her shoulders and back, and each is as good as naked. They wear seed pearls around their necks and their hair is sprigged with coral and laced with ropes of pearls, but they make no attempt to cover their breasts or their bellies.
>
> …
>
> The girls are coquettish behind their mirror, stretching thick locks of their hair out from

[19] „a plane for projecting male fantasies and erotic obsessions" (own translation)

> their heads with the combs, and letting the curls fall back over their shoulders all in perfect unison. (Gowar 131)

Their performance uses stereotypical mermaid tropes, including the mirror and the comb. However, contrary to the dysphoric mirror reflection discussed in the previous chapter, the mirror perpetuates the traditional phallogocentric paradigm, in which it is an emblem of female vanity. Bram Dijkstra adds that a woman's look in the mirror "became representative of her perverse unwillingness to recognize that it was her natural, predestined duty to yield her ego to a man's will" (135). Accordingly, the subsequent sexual performance seems to tame, even suppress, this female search for selfhood in the mirror. By magnifying the sexualised mermaid tropes, the disguised prostitutes satisfy the sexual appetite of their male audience who "pleasure themselves as if in private, with their shirts falling open over their hairy bellies" (Gowar 132). The mermaid and her tropes are tailored to the sexual pleasure of the male visitors and thereby corroborate patriarchal constructs that confine women to a place of heteronormative suppression.

Bringing together the ugly mermaid carcass with the erotic fantasy model, Gowar showcases two highly reductive mermaid categories within patriarchal discourse. The first one aims to rationalise her existence as an ambivalent creature, and the second mermaid version is a sexist construct that essentially aims to satiate male fantasies. At the same time, the opposition between the ugly "sea-goblin" and the disguised "river-nymphs" parallels with the good/bad dichotomy that defined women in Georgian London (Gowar 51, 131). This, of course, ties in with Cixous's contention of binary thinking. As discussed in the previous chapters, Cixous directs her criticism at the Western, logocentric dogma that sustains a binary thought pattern: "[t]hought has always worked by opposition" (Cixous 287). As a consequence, these binaries

lead to hierarchies in which one side of the binary represents the negative, "Inferior" side and the other the positive, "Superior" side (287). Indeed, in patriarchal discourse on women, the "Inferior" side of this hierarchical binary is the female, anti-Ideal; that is, either the old, independent matriarch or the young but lewd prostitute. The "Superior" side of the binary is represented by the ideal woman who is educated according to matrimonial dogma and has a decent dowry to present to her future husband. After her first encounter with the mermaid carcass, the remark of one of the courtesans plays up the constructiveness of these binary categories: "What do people *want* of a mermaid? … A beautiful siren? Or a malevolent little beast?" (Gowar 108). So, the crucial question becomes to which category of the binary women will yield.

iv. Angelica as a Mermaid Figure

I would argue, though, that Angelica Neal does not succumb to any of these defining categories. In line with the title of the novel, I will show how Angelica's connection with the mermaid complexifies her status within the reductive Georgian discourse and aligns her with the liminality of the mermaid. Belonging neither to the Ideal nor to the anti-Ideal, Angelica reinvents her place as a woman and helps to destabilise patriarchal categories for women in eighteenth-century Britain. Angelica's physical description bears striking similarities with the mermaids of previous chapters. Her admirers call her their "favourite little blonde" and their "dear playmate with the beautiful voice" (Gowar 20). Her body is depicted as "plump" and "classical in its proportions- although her legs are a little too short," which reveals the unnatural disposition of her legs where a tail might as well be (212). Angelica also brings in an ambivalence in character, which strongly resembles Undine and her oscillation between *femme fatale* and *femme fragile*. Indeed, men are said to have wept for her grave sweetness, but if "any

have come to her in the hope that she will be like a child in all respects, they have been disappointed" (Gowar 42). This parallel with Undine comes back at the King's Palace when Anglica "looks up into [Jonah's] face with a peculiar expression: mischief or adoration" (127). It strongly recalls the moment in *Undine* after she bit Huldbrand and looks at him with an expression which is "very gloomy and displeased" (Laythorpe and Widger). Like Undine, Angelica's character cannot be contained by one single category. Instead, she bears both the sweet and the lewd within her.

Moreover, Angelica's attempt to seduce Jonah at the King's Palace, more precisely inside the exhibition grotto, is richly interwoven with mermaid tropes. Firstly, Jonah is struck by the voices that "weave around him in a high wordless melody, as if all the sirens had banded together to lure him to their shores" (Gowar 125). These voices are amplified as Angelica's touch makes his fingers ache and sing. In complete awe, Jonah comes to the resolution that it "is not the music of mermaids but of angels" (126). In this brief but narrative advancing passage, Gowar entwines several significant mermaid tropes. Firstly, the sonic voices of the mermaids that resonate through Mrs Chappell's exhibition room bring back the mermaid's refusal of traditional *logos*. As discussed for Julnar, the little mermaid but also for Samina, singing is an alternative way of expression that is subsumed under the female "aesthetic of corporeality" (Wilkie-Stibbs 37). Moreover, Jonah elevates the music to the angelic realm. I would object to the idea that this comparison elucidates Angelica's altruist morals; conversely, her later marriage to Jonah does not stand out for her angelic selflessness- even if her name would suggest otherwise. Yet, by bringing together mermaids and angels, Jonah evokes their elemental interconnectedness. As we saw in previous chapters, with the fluidity of elements, the mermaid figure cannot be confined to one monolithic element. Instead, the mermaid figure's relation to

several elements emphasises her playful liminality and helps to leap from one category to another. The fact that Jonah succumbs to this elemental fluidity proves that Angelica's effect on him is imbued with a mermaid's charms. Even more, it might suggest that Jonah is more tolerant than Huldbrand in *Undine* and thus, his relationship with Angelica as a mermaid figure could gain substantial grounds.

The biggest categorical leap happens when Angelica tells Jonah that he needs to marry her. Their matrimonial bond is clearly out of the ordinary since, as a well-trained courtesan, Angelica is expected to marry a man from the upper classes. However, it is precisely in this unconventional marriage that Angelica starts to alter her behaviour because, as the title foreshadows, it is *Mrs Hancock* and the mermaid rather than *Angelica* and the mermaid. It is crucial not to mistake Angelica's change in character as symptomatic of having been tamed by the patriarchal male. To better understand Angelica's transition from living her life as an "anti-Ideal," as prescribed by Georgian society, to an "ideal" wife, it is helpful to turn to the interluding mermaid passage and how they affect Jonah and Angelica. There are several interludes in the novel in which mermaids seem to take over the narrative voice. Through a somewhat playful language, which is imbued with a French feminist tone, these mermaid voices talk about their existence as liminal spirits. It is the only instance in my reading where the mermaid figures actively *seize* the narrative voice and account for their ontological existence as well as their interaction with the world around them. Thus, these passages are empowering accounts of the mermaids controlling their narrative which so often tries to define them. Moreover, their speech does not stem from one perspective but resonates with plural perspectives:

> We fill their mind even when we are far away. They fancy they see us even when they do not. They tell one another stories about us.
>
> …
>
> These females from the other side of the world's mirror pursue their own lust with impunity, never thinking to wait meekly to be approached, but complacent in their own beauty, calling out, I want you; I want you; come to me. (Gowar 74-5)

The "we" and "they" opposition clearly demarcates the liminal realm of the mermaids from the rational, human world. Moreover, their voices are not complacent, instead, "she lets the other language speak-the language of 1000 tongues which knows neither enclosure nor death" (Cixous, *Medusa* 427). As demonstrated, the inclusive tone strongly resonates with Cixous's voice in "The Laugh of Medusa". Cixous refrains from communicating her feminist stance from a first-person perspective. Instead, *écriture féminine* develops from a female inclusive place that accounts for more than one voice. The elemental connection with the waters only underlines the realm of the liminal, that is prone to alter and hence, to leap from one category to another: "'But look, our seas are what we make of them (…) and we are ourselves sea, sand, coral, seaweed, beaches, tides, swimmers, children, waves… More or less wavily sea, earth, sky- what matter would rebuff us? We know how to speak them all" (Cixous, *Medusa* 427). Representing *a priori* more than one person equally problematises, if not challenges the endeavour to confine the mermaids to one of the definitions (ugly curiosity or sexual object). Indeed, the mermaids illustrate the distinction between "speaking (as) woman" and "speaking of woman" (Irigaray, *This Sex* 135). Irigaray draws a clear line between these two actions, in which "speaking (as) woman" is less normative: "[i]t is not a matter of producing a discourse of which woman would be the object, or the subject" (135). "Speaking of woman," on the other

hand, is an "attempt to provide a place for the "other" as feminine" (135). Accordingly, in these interludes the mermaids are speaking *as* mermaids, and not *of* them. They thereby avoid reproducing the monolithic male discourse in which they "tell one another stories about [them]" (74). As Jones has carefully laid bare in the introduction to her anthology, women were-wrongly- understood as "fixed and knowable categories" defined by male discourse, which was perpetuated and disseminated through story telling (9).

Another recurrent trope in this passage is the mirror. The mermaids perceive of themselves as coming "from the other side of the world's mirror" to "pursue their own lust with impunity" (Gowar 94). The mirror stands in stark contrast with the mermaid prostitutes' use of it. The (real) mermaids remove the mirror out of the patriarchal vanity stigma and use it to underline its logocentric function "where the historical development of discourse has been projected and reassured" (Irigaray, *This Sex* 154). Coming from a liminal stand point, the mermaids use the mirror as a point of friction between two realms. The mirror's function is "assigned to the role of 'matter,' an opaque and silent matrix, a reserve for specula(riza)tions to come, a pole of a certain opposition whose fetishist dues have still not all been paid" (Irigaray, *This Sex* 154). This opaqueness aimss to suppress the other side, where entities are in flux and impossible to fixate. Accordingly, categories appear futile from that other side of the mirror.

v. Transcultural Challenge of Gendered Categories

As I already argued, this other side of the mirror, where categories founder, seems to speak to Angelica when she decides to break free from the category of the lewd courtesan to become Mrs Hancock. Still, Angelica's understanding of liminality and her feminine freedom are undermined by the pressure of motherhood lasting upon her shoulders. Motherhood, as mentioned before, was a pressing stigma on women to measure their social value as their

contribution to the breed of young men. Even though Angelica appears to freely transgress these social boundaries, when it comes to her pregnancy and the later loss of her child, she deteriorates under the maternal expectations. Completely mistaking her body for her abilities, Angelica deems that the loss of her child proves that she is "no match for any of it" and that it promises her failure in relation to her status as wife (Gowar 392). Indeed, the pressure physically weighs down on her and manifests as a choking feeling that ties her down to her bed for days. Almost simultaneous to the loss of her child, Angelica stops believing that her husband could ever fulfil his promise of catching a second mermaid. As a "transgressive" woman, that is one who jumps between social categories, Angelica tries to evade heteronormative expectations and to reside within the liminal (Kittredge). Yet, losing her child strikes Angelica too hard to remain transgressive and it momentarily breaks up her belief system in this liminal alternative. It is only when Angelica finally joins her husband to the grotto to behold the mermaid that her spirit is restored. I would therefore argue that the second mermaid helps Angelica to reassert her belief in the liminal woman who resists the pressure of motherhood.

In fact, in earlier interludes, the mermaids sing about their powerful bonds with the sea which allow them to "unhesitatingly cast off the bonds of motherhood, forget [their] uxorial vows" (Gowar 75). In her study of the Japanese mermaid figure called "shojo," Fraser equally points to mermaids' negation of motherhood: as "a liminal figure who refuses maturity and removes her body from any symbolisms of fertility," the mermaids can be read as "sexualised non-reproductive figure[s] associated with water and 'beautiful' death rather than fecund earth" (Fraser 251). As with for example their rejection of heteronormative sexuality, which I analysed in the second chapter, mermaids do not let themselves be defined by reproduction. It also brings back Aasmaani's mother, Samina, from the third chapter who leaves her maternal

responsibilities behind to "vanish for ever in the turn of a wave as if it had all meant naught to her" (Gowar 75). At the same time, wrecking the necessity of motherhood helps to question and rewrite the importance of motherhood. In the same vein with Irigaray, children are (wrongly) conceived as a means to reinstate closeness: "[m]en and women have children to embody their closeness, their distance" (Irigaray 209). The subsequent question posed by Irigaray is "but we?"; asking whether she needs to seal her relationship with a child (209). In other words, the renunciation of motherhood makes sense for "transgressive" women- and men- who do not yield to social norms and thus, to conjugal expectations.

To reinforce the transculturality of the mermaid figure, it appears important to bring Angelica's female transgression, and hence her outsider status in dialogue with Shamsie and Rushdie. Given that the three novels were published in Britain, it is intriguing how these three works dwell on the close ties between female "otherness" and the mermaid figure. Like *The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock,* Rushdie's novel is partly set in London. As I discussed, the male protagonists in Rushdie's novel are haunted by a sense of alienation that is generated by the pressure of patriarchal categories. In contrast to this categorical pressure are the female characters, Allie and Zeeny. Their liminal approach to life allows them to eschew social and gendered categories, and therefore aligns them with the mermaid figure. Interestingly, this sense of alienation already haunted Britain two hundred years prior to Rushdie's London. Right before the bloodshed of the French Revolution and the Napoleon Wars, the thriving stability felt during "the Golden Age" of Georgian London stood on the brink (Summerson 111). With a salient connection to Rushdie's London, this time of apparent English stableness equally marked a time of alienation that came with enforced social categories. As discussed above, the constructed categories for women aggravated that sense of alienation. Accordingly, Angelica

Neal's later depression stems from this categorical pressure that appears to haunt Londoners throughout the ages.

Furthermore, this sense of categorical alienation is also picked up by Shamsie. As a British-Pakistani author, Shamsie infuses the city of Karachi with a similar sense of social alienation. As I argued in the previous chapter, Samina feels limited under the predefined female categories of Pakistan's military regime. She therefore feels forced to choose between the different gender categories, which press down on her freedom as a woman. Accordingly, her association with the mermaid figure helps to prise apart these patriarchal rules. In the same vein, the mermaid's liminality helps Angelica to challenge the gendered categories. Indeed, her depression that follows the loss of her child is temporary and vanishes as soon as she embraces her female liminality. Accordingly, it is interesting to observe that the three writers with British background contest the social and gendered pressure through the mermaid's liminality. I would indeed argue that it corroborates the transcultural significance of the mermaid figure, as her liminality and thus, her challenge of phallogocentric categories resonates throughout different nations, cultures and historical circumstances. To further illustrate the strong ties between Angelica as a transgressive woman and the liminality of mermaids, I will focus on the second mermaid that has been caught for Mr Hancock and his wife. In fact, I will argue that her presence in their lives firstly destabilises their marriage to then deviate to a life that does not pertain to the expectations of Georgian London.

vi. A Liminal Alternative to Patriarchal Discourse

Gowar introduces a new mermaid figure who does not possess a traditional body but instead is an atomic constellation inside the waters, that is fluid and adapts to the eye of the beholder. For Jonah, she "is like a shoal of tiny fish, all surging and flickering together, a great mass that

forms and re-forms and thinks all in accord. He can make out sometimes her arms, and often her swirling hair. He sees the silvery rolling-over of her heavy tail. He hangs over the water for many minutes as she sighs and rolls" (Gowar 385). The mermaid evokes some traditional tropes, such as her hair, the lure of her voice and the fetishization around her long tail. Nonetheless, her haunting effect mainly stems from the addictive feeling that she instils within the characters. When Angelica discerns her in the water, she is taken back to childhood memories:

> 'I see her.'
>
> 'And?'
>
> 'When I was a little child,' she whispers, 'I lived by the sea. (…) it was so buoyant,' she says, 'energetic and terrible. I was so afraid of it that sometimes all I wanted was to leap into it.' (Gowar 438)

Firstly, I would posit that the fact that Angelica and Jonah perceive the mermaid holds that they are open to the liminal and that they understand what does not fall under socially fixed categories. Moreover, it is precisely after beholding the mermaid that Angelica is taken back to her former- almost untamed- spirits. However, out of vengeance for the pressure to which society exposes her, Angelica wants to organise a mermaid party to make the other members of society suffer under the deep sadness the mermaid radiates. Only when the mermaid starts to endanger Sukie's mental state with her sadness, Angelica understands that they "must put an end to this" by disposing of the mermaid (Gowar 475). Unbeknownst to Angelica, the mermaid helps her to develop strong, maternal feelings for Jonah's niece. It is an alternative love that she nurtures which, however, stems from a genuine place. The meaning behind her affection and protectiveness for Sukie does not need to be defined by "their blood" (Irigaray 209). The

mermaid's presence and thus her risk towards Sukie pushes Angelica to fully perceive and care for the child that is already present in her life. Her act of releasing the mermaid not only saves Sukie but also helps her husband to cater for his family and business. Moreover, releasing the mermaid from the tank leads Angelica to symbolically release the mermaid from confining categories. Poignant to this analysis is the mermaid's "oh" every time a bucket is emptied, which can be read as her sonic expression in relation to her freedom.

A second striking observation which undercuts stagnant feminine categorization is the mermaid's subsequent transformation into plural selves that follows her release. After each bucket of water is emptied, Jonah observes as the mermaid "dances like stars and then plunges downward" until beneath the surface "she wings in netty lengths, rediscovering her atomised self" (Gowar 477). In the subsequent interludes, her sense of freedom that is even further brought to the fore: "First I sink, then I trickled, then I rush. I am here; and here; and here. I touch this surface and also that. I mingle, I quiver with a thousand new voices, and all these voices my own. I am a great tumble of motion which torrents all in unison" (Gowar 480). Shortly afterwards, the mermaid's first-person narrative becomes a "we": "We rush young and bright, and ever widening, and these bitter atoms are lost in new-minted freshness" (Gowar 480). The concept of "parler femme" reverberates through the many voices that the mermaid perceives as her own and which she implements through her "we". To recall the definition from the second chapter, Moi qualifies Irigaray's concept of "parler femme" as that spontaneous moment "when women speak together," but which "disappears again as soon as men are present" (Moi 144). However, whereas in *Undine* this moment is interrupted by the patriarchal imposture of Huldbrand, in *The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock* this feminist instant of unison expands and ultimately helps to contest the logocentric order.

Through the embodiment of plural selves reflected in the mermaid's "we," she (or they) create an inclusive realm for a multitude of voices. Irigaray's use of a feminine "we" resembles the mermaids' polyvocal poetics: "Stretching out, never ceasing to unfold ourselves, we have so many voices to invent in order to express all of us everywhere, even in our gaps, that all the time there is will not be enough" (Irigaray 213). Accordingly, as soon as the mermaid is released from the confines of the tank, she can recover her communication and resonance with the other mermaids' voices. This brings their liminality to its fullest expression and helps to leave the definitiveness of logocentric, monolithic categories behind. In line with Irigaray, their expression is grounded in a flux, it is "multiple, devoid of causes, meanings, simple qualities. Yet it cannot be decomposed. These movements cannot be described as the passage from a beginning to an end. These rivers flow into no single, definitive sea. These streams are without fixed banks, this body without fixed boundaries. This unceasing mobility" (Irigaray 215). Without "fixed boundaries," the mermaids are not forced to yield to any "worthier discourse," which classifies and reduces them to either monstrous curiosities or highly sexualised objects for male pleasure (Irigary 213). Accordingly, the mermaid's release from the tank helps to break Mrs Hancock free from the normative, social shackles which hold her down as a maternal failure and former lewd woman. Gowar's epilogue to the novel further helps to shed light on the stark connection between mermaids' and women's freedom within the liminal. "After [Jonah has] spent a fortune getting mermaids, the people were most pleased by no mermaid at all," and Mrs Hancock's party proves to be a success (Gowar 484). The decorated grotto and the discourse that surround it are enough to keep their visitors entertained. Mrs Hancock's conclusion to their mermaid encounter summarises the constructed nature of these categories, created to confine women in a society where "the things that are wrought may be quite as extraordinary as those that are *found*" (Gowar 484). To rephrase Angelica's insightful comment,

social expectations are grounded in a constructed narrative which is perpetuated, disseminated and thus helps to sustain a fixed identity for the "weaker" parts of society that are not advantaged enough to create a narrative for themselves. Accordingly, Angelica's encounter with the mermaid and her freedom in the liminal helps her to associate "the feminine fakery of mermaids" with the feminine fakery of Georgian woman (Eyre 2018). Both groups are suppressed by logocentric discourse and defined by constructed categories. However, once women succeed in detaching themselves from these discursive constructs, they are free to embrace their feminine plurality. For Mrs Hancock, this entails her acceptance of remaining childless and to be a former courtesan who decides to marry a merchant from Deptford. By doing so, Angelica escapes her "compartment" and embraces her "multiplicity" as a woman (Irigaray 210-212). Instead, she lives in-between the Georgian good/bad dichotomy that translates to the lewd prostitute or the well-trained wife. Her resemblance with the mermaid and her liminal flux between these different feminine distinctions helps her to embrace her feminine complexity. Being unafraid to leap from one category into the other, Angelica counters the immaculate rationality that is at the core of the patriarchal paradigm.

vii. Conclusion

This chapter aimed to shed light on the interconnectedness between women and the liminal mermaid figure who have been rationalised and stigmatised by patriarchal discourse. Based on *The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock*, I aimed to show how the liminal existence of mermaids is brought to bear on the protagonist's leaps between socially constructed categories. As a historical fiction, the novel centres on the highly patriarchal discourse that predominated in Georgian London and in which women were either stigmatised as the meek domestic ideal or the eroticised public anti-ideal. As discussed, Gowar has interwoven a similar dichotomic and

categorical discourse for mermaids, with the monstrous Japanese catch on the one hand, and the sexualised brothel mermaid on the other hand. Yet, as foreshadowed by the title, the mermaid, the voices of her elemental sisters and Mrs Hancock help to destabilise these logocentric and patriarchal stigmas. Firstly, the mermaids' interludes pick up several crucial tropes to recover their meaning within a non-monolithic but therefore inclusive narrative. Accordingly, the mirror is elevated from the reductive association with feminine vanity and employed as a point of friction between the male hegemonic world order and the feminine, playful and liminal alternative realm. More so, by releasing the mermaid from the confines of their showcasing tanks, Angelica appears to regain her strength to prevent a depression under the social burden of the importance of motherhood. Indeed, as shown by Irigaray, the social pressure of motherhood risks to be misused as a means of reawakening the lost closeness between husband and wife. Moreover, the second mermaid's fluid ontology that resonates and speaks through a plurality of other liminal and elemental voices interrelates with the many female voices that are embedded in Irigaray's concept of "parler femme". Besides the meaning of uninterrupted and fluid feminine exchange, Irigaray's post-structuralist use of language strongly resembles the mermaids' playful language where the first-person singular narrative blends into a first-person plural narrative. This narrative transition once again links with the inclusive feminist stance of both Cixous and Irigaray. In fact, like the two French feminists, the mermaids' interludes help to illuminate the constructiveness behind stigmatising discourses. It remains questionable as to why society holds onto these false, feminine constructs that aim to muffle their plural identities, when they might as well believe in their liminal selves.

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CONCLUSION: RECOVERING THE MERMAID'S MEANINGS

i. Summary

Through a feminist lens, this project studied the mermaid figure in different literary genres. Contemporary culture and world leading brands have exploited the mermaid figure for her feminine, aesthetic features and objectified her to please a male audience. To contest this monolithic understanding of the mermaid, this project undertook a feminist reading of the mermaid figure to undermine her objectification and liberate her from a place of categorical confinement. Given that Andersen is considered to be the founding writer of the mermaid's existence, her figure is often-even if wrongly- associated with Western culture. However, such a monocultural perspective is equally limiting as her sexually objectified cultural representations. Since the mermaid is often associated with the female "other" in culture and literature, acknowledging her fluid and liminal place in the world equally helps to liberate women from stigmatisation and monolithic categories. To understand the feminist meanings underlying her figure, this project made use of the concepts developed by Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. As post-structuralist feminist scholars, Cixous's and Irigaray's theoretical frameworks are expressed in fluid poetics and their theoretical stances aim to liberate women from a place of confinement. Indeed, concepts such as Cixous's "écriture féminine" and Irigaray's "parler femme*"* were crucial to the reading of the mermaid figure in this project. Coming from a place of subversion, Cixous's concept "écriture féminine" was especially helpful to illustrate how mermaids use an alternative way of expression that does not emulate the traditional logocentric understanding of speech. The concept of *"*parler femme*"* helped to read the compelling moments of female unison, during which women resonate in a realm that defies traditional phallogocentric laws. A key transcultural concept for this project was Warner's and

Kennedy's *Kulturbrille*, which helped to zoom in on the specific socio-cultural contexts of my primary works. For each chapter, the cultural lens was "modified- perhaps corrected even- and the light of a new understanding will flood through the lens" (Warner, Kennedy 5). However, the transcultural findings of this project go even beyond the specific socio-cultural frame of the mermaid figure and her tropes. In fact, in each chapter I argued for the mermaid's means of countering the heteronormative and phallogocentric confinements. As I will recapitulate shortly, the mermaid's endeavour to prise apart the patriarchal dominance over her existence resonates through all the chapters. This proves that the feminist reading of the mermaid figure appears to be even more powerful for its transcultural resonance than anticipated. In reference to the introduction, this powerful, feminist and transcultural connection between the mermaid figures endorses Zuckmayer's view on transculturality that is "[i]ntermixed-like the waters from sources, streams and rivers, so, they run together to a great, living torrent" (Zuckmayer, quoted by Welsch). In this project, this living torrent of empowered feminist voices runs together to fight the phallogocentric order.

The first chapter focused on the mermaid's most archetypal representation in fairy tales. However, instead of merely doing a study of Hans Christian Andersen's tale from 1837, this chapter also looked at two mermaid tales from *The Arabian Nights.* Like Warner has confirmed, this combination of primary literature felt crucial since Andersen's inspiration for writing the little mermaid went back to his reading of the *Nights.* The chapter opened with a study of the mermaid figure in "Julnar the Sea-Born," where I argued that Julnar's refusal to speak with her new human husband is a female act of empowerment. Julnar's use of her own "écriture féminine," that is her non-logocentric but corporeal way of expression, comes with her pregnancy. Julnar does not obey her husband's expectations to hear her voice. Instead, she

firstly defies his heteronormative expectations until her feminine corporeality leads her to self-affirmative expression. The second tale from the *Nights*, called "Abdullah the Fisherman and Abdullah the Merman," is the only tale with a male merman. The mermaids in this tale possess less of a voice; however, I argued that their representations are highly idealised and serve for later objectifications of mermaids in culture. More interesting than the mermaid figure herself is the portrayal of the underwater world, which is presented as an alternative, utopian world. This chapter continued with Andersen's little mermaid and the journey leading towards her female empowerment. Unlike Julnar, the little mermaid founders on logocentric laws. She fails to seize her speech and progressively gives up her defining features, starting with her voice and ending with her existence as a water woman. However, this thesis disagrees with Stuby's argument that, by turning his mermaid figure into an aerial spirit, Andersen points towards an absolute feminine obliteration. Instead, I argued, aligning the little mermaid with the celestial realm saves her from the dichotomy between "othered" mermaid and oppressive patriarch. As a daughter of the air, the little mermaid embraces an elemental purity that underlines her liminality. This stark transformation marks her exit from the patriarchal oppressive system and allows her to reclaim her agency as a female but liminal creature. Moreover, the leap between water and the celestial realm corroborates an elemental fluidity and avoids the creation of new categories.

This elemental fluidity was picked up in the second chapter, where I analysed the mermaid figure in Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's tale *Undine*. Written twenty-six years earlier than Andersen's story, *Undine* is heavily imbued with a Romantic tone. The deep longing for cosmic unification attained through alternative, possibly irrational means, gave raise to liminal creatures such as the water figure. In that vein, this chapter looked at the deep incoherence that

is at the core of Undine's characterisation. Haunted by her ontological ambivalence, Undine behaves like a human being on the surface. Yet, underneath, Undine is orchestrated by the elemental drives. Her ambivalence as a mermaid figure enters in conflict with the short-sighted, heteronormative order. Her fluid sexuality highlights this feud between the patriarchal quest for suppression and the untamed feminine water woman. The presence of Bertalda, Huldbrand's former lover, brings in the possibility of a *ménage à trois,* that is a sexual household that undercuts the traditional heteronormative mindset. The plural and fluid sexual attraction between the two women and one man also points towards the possibility of sexual relations that do not include the man as a patriarch. Indeed, Undine introduces Bertalda to such a liberated moment of "parler femme". Huldbrand's shattering intervention puts a halt to this liminal understanding of sexuality and corroborates the Romantic ironic tone. Besides Undine's fluid sexuality, the presence of several elements other than water symbolises the elemental interconnectedness of the mermaid figure. Undine's complexity is strengthened as she not only belongs to the waters but to the flux between the different elemental realms.

The third chapter discussed the meanings of the mermaid figure in two novels from the postcolonial tradition. In Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses,* I showed how the interweavement of certain mermaid tropes helps to illuminate Rushdie's ambiguous feminism. As I explained, Rushdie's writing is torn between the use of patriarchal feminist motifs and a progressive commentary on women. In line with Ambreen Hai, I argued that his writing and thus, the inclusion of mermaid motifs pertains to a certain sense of anxiety. This sense of gendered anxiety shows in the main characters' behaviour towards women. As I will shortly illustrate in an in-depth analysis, Zeeny and Allie embody numerous recurrent mermaid tropes. As a mountain climber, Allie is deeply entangled with the elements. The sense of liberty and

liminality that come with this passion of hers pose a threat to Gibreel's rational thinking in binaries. Moreover, the trope of the mirror is brought to bear on Zeeny's characterisation and relation with the mermaid figure. As opposed to stereotypical association with female vanity, the mirror helps to underline Saladin's identity anxiety. In accordance with Irigaray's theorization of the mirror, Zeeny thwarts the traditional use of the mirror as a projection of male norms. Instead, the mirror is a liminal looking-glass which serves to contest the constructed male world and which presents no stable ground for hierarchical thinking. In Kamila Shamsie's novel, I argued that Samina's behaviour as a progressive feminist resonates with important mermaid tropes. This progressive feminism stems from Shamsie growing up under the suppressive laws of General Zia al-Huq. Accordingly, the mermaid references appear in Samina's defiance of enforced gender categories. As the mermaid resides within the liminal, her figure is helpful to identify with and hence, to fight for her feminine fluidity. As already mentioned, in Shamsie's novel the post-structuralist play with language bears on the elemental interconnectedness between the waters and the celestial realm. The final burial of Samina, that is enmeshed with a flux of elemental metaphors, lights and shadows, brings this liminal place of the mermaid figure to a catharsis.

In the closing chapter, I analysed the mermaid figure in Imogen Hermes Gowar's recently published historical fiction, *The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock.* Again, to gain a better understanding of the numerous mermaid figures in Gowar's debut novel, an essential part of the chapter was to outline the context of Georgian London and how the highly patriarchal discourse confined women to dichotomic categories. Women were either associated with the ideal house wife or classified as the transgressive, lewd anti-Ideal. Gowar forges similar dichotomic categories for the mermaid figure: the male-pleasing category is a highly sexualised

version and the less approved type is a monkey-like carcass. To thwart these short-sighted categories for women as well as for mermaids, I argued that there is a compelling connection between Angelica Neal and the second mermaid, caught by Jonah Hancock's captain. Moreover, the mermaids' interludes in the narrative help to recover the meaning of the mermaid figure that is plural and cannot be classified in monolithic terms. After her confrontation with the mermaid's stark liminality, Angelica regains the strength to recover from her depression. The depression stemmed from her frustration of losing another child and of not conforming to the maternal, Georgian ideal. Through the mermaid's threat to their niece Sukie, Angelica is however introduced to an alternative version of nurturing that does not fall under Georgian categorisation and pertains to a French feminist understanding of motherhood. Finally, the sonic resonances of the mermaids reflect another crucial instance of "parler femme," in which their playful poetics sustain a notion of female plurality and inclusion. This non-fixed flux of female voices goes against enforcing rational categories on a figure that, *a priori*, is at home within the liminal.

ii. Bringing the Mermaids Together

In the following section, I will do an in-depth comparison of the mermaid figures studied in each chapter by bringing together the four points that helped to do a feminist reading and to support her transcultural relevance. Before delving into these four points, I will recapitulate the mermaid's physical descriptions to show that her physical portrayal in literature does not fully endorse her objectification in popular culture and media.

My research confirmed Hayward's observation that mermaids are overwhelmingly represented as Caucasian (187). The little mermaid, Undine, Allie Cone and Angelica Neal have long blonde hair, and blue expressive eyes. Julnar, the mermaids in "Abullah the Merman and

Abdullah the Fisherman" and the mermaid carcass in *The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock* have dark hair. I would argue that this shows that the mermaid figure reflects the beauty ideals of women from specific countries. Accordingly, Andersen's little mermaid, Undine and Angelica Neal represent Northern European women, whereas Julnar and the Japanese mermaid carcass partly respond to West and East Asian women's looks. However, in most representations, the mermaid's beauty is emphasised, and her beauty excels that of other female characters. For Julnar, the little mermaid, Undine and Angelica, their overwhelming beauty plays a vital role in their characterisation. The supernatural, almost eerie, beauty is stressed in "Abdullah" but also in Allie Cone's description. The enigmatic charm that comes with Allie's appearance suggests that Rushdie's mermaid figure bears traces from both *The Arabian Nights* and the Western fairy tale figure.

The mermaid's leg deformity also comes back in different shapes. Of course, this goes back to her hybrid nature as part fish and part human. And yet, in *The Arabian Nights,* Julnar is immediately introduced with a pair of legs and no visible pain from walking. In "Abdullah," though, the mermaids are presented with a tail in addition to their feet in the middle of their body. Even Fouqué presents his Undine with a pair of legs and there is no mention of a tail. It is only in Andersen where the transition from land to sea marks the symbolic metamorphosis from tail to legs. When in "Abdullah" the absence of a tail was regarded as "other," the mermaid stories post-Andersen have portrayed the presence of a tail as "other". The little mermaid's stinging pain in her new legs has been reworked by Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses.* Allie Cone is afflicted with a sharp agony in her feet and as a mountain climber, she is constantly reminded of her handicap. Even in *The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock,* the feet/leg deformity comes back: despite Angelica's "classical" proportions, "her legs are a little too short" (Gowar 212).

Moreover, the sexualised appearance of the mermaid appears pertinent in only two works, that is in "Abdullah" and the so-called "City of Women", and in Mrs Chappell's brothel in *The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock*. Interestingly, in both cases the sexual stigmatisation of these women does not aim to give an accurate depiction of women. As discussed, "The City of Women" represents a utopian alternative that is meant to stay within the imaginative realm. The mermaid prostitutes in Gowar's novel are used as a satirical counter example to the "real" mermaids' interludes. Thus, according to these comparisons, the sexual and objectified representation of the mermaid figure in popular media does not pertain to her representation in literature. The following section will focus on the four most important findings that support the mermaid's feminist and transcultural complexity.

a. The mermaid's negation of phallogocentric speech

The negation of speech happens when the mermaid figure transitions from the aquatic, fluid world to the heteronormative, logocentric sphere. Julnar, the little mermaid and Undine firstly remain silent after they enter the phallogocentric world. On the other hand, *logos* is typically replaced by other means of corporeal expression, which pertains to Cixous's "écriture féminine". Accordingly, the little mermaid, even though silent, starts to express herself through dance, Julnar waits for her body to conceive a son before she speaks, Samina sings the poet's verse and Angelica's touch releases a cacophony of sonic voices in Jonah Hancock's body. An important characteristic of their expression is its inclusiveness and disruption of hierarchised binaries. Accordingly, it appears short-sighted to reduce the silence of the mermaid to a place of suppressed female agency. Instead, the mermaid's alternative means of expression are a way of thwarting phallogocentric speech.

b. The mirror trope

The mirror is another significant trope that is picked up in several works. In *The Satanic Verses,* Zeeny's association with the mermaid figure depends on the mirror trope, since her presence drives Saladin to be reminded of his heteronormative, existential dilemma that is fixated on the idea of the "flat" mirror (Irigaray 154). This duality of the mirror is also picked up in *Broken Verses* where Aasmaani prefers to leave her reflection empty in order to eschew her representation through a patriarchal construct. This other side of the "flat" mirror comes back in *The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock* where the mermaids assign themselves to "the other side of the world's mirror" in which a liminal, irrational and non-heteronormative realm exists (Gowar 74). Accordingly, the significance of the mirror trope does not stand for a female symbol of vanity. Instead, the latter interpretation of the mirror is another means of objectifying the mermaid, as I illustrated with the sexual dance performed by the mermaid prostitutes in *The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock.* Yet, in general my research has proven that the connection between the mermaid and her, often hand-held, mirror is not grounded in vanity. Rather, I aimed to prove that in all the works, the mirror helps to create a tension- even a point of friction- between the rational, patriarchal world and the liminal, female realm.

c. Elemental fluidity against female categorisation

Another trope is the mermaid's place between the elements. In line with her liminality, the mermaid's elemental fluidity stems from countering rational categories. In some works, this liminal place is preceded and foreshadowed by the patriarch's inability to confine the mermaid figure to a certain category because of a persistent ontological ambivalence. This ontological ambivalence is emphasised in *Undine* and comes back in *The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock;* both Undine and Angelica frustrate the men around them with their mixture of *femme fatale* and *femme fragile* behaviour. Their ontological ambivalence can only be resolved if they challenge

patriarchal categories through their liminal fluidity. In all the works, this fluidity is made explicit through the flux of elements. In *The Arabian Nights*, Julnar's power to restore peace on Earth and under the sea makes her a bridge between two apparent dichotomic elements. The little mermaid's final ascendency to the aerial daughters marks her liminal and playful transition between water, land and the celestial realm. The many moon references in *Undine* and Undine's analogy with a white dove pertains to her own elemental fluidity. As a mountain climber, Allie Cone experiences phantoms of dead climbers illustrates her understanding of the divine realm. At the same time, her comparison to a "princess of the powers of the air" assigns her not only with the Qur'an's satanic verses but also with the aerial daughters in *The Little Mermaid* (Rushdie 321). In *Broken Verses,* the playful poetics in Aasmaani's name bring this elemental flux to the fore. As I illustrated, in Urdu *aasmaan* translates to "sky" or "heaven[20]". Her mother's drowning in the sea pronounces the element of water and, in the end, all the elements unite during Aasmaani's cathartic burial of her mother's name underneath the waves. I observed the same poetic play in Angelica's name, which equally points towards her association with both water and sky. In *The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock,* the elemental fluidity is also evoked by Jonah Hancock. At Mrs Chappell's nunnery, Jonah assigns the music in Angelica's presence to the angelic realm, thus bringing together celestial and marine creatures. As argued in the fourth chapter, the second mermaid's transformation into plural selves speaks for the resonance with voices that emerge from plural perspectives. Accordingly, the elemental fluidity of the mermaid figures helps to reinforce my hypothesis that patriarchal and reductive categories undermine a rounded understanding of the complexity of the mermaid. To borrow Irigaray's expression, the

[20]*Urdu Dictionary :* https://www.rekhta.org/urdudictionary/?lang=1&keyword=aasmaan

mermaid figure needs more than one element; that is, more than one category to stretch out, "never ceasing to unfold [herself]" and her complex meanings (213).

d. Mermaids speaking together across the borders

The fourth and final point is the way mermaid figures speak together in the liminal and female realm. Their female unison proved helpful to deploy Irigaray's concept of "parler femme". As termed by Irigaray, it represents the moment "when women speak together" but vanishes as soon as men are present (Moi 144). In *Undine,* "parler femme" crystallises in the relationship between Bertalda and the mermaid figure which points toward the possibility of an intimate moment without the patriarch. As an alternative to the heteronormative household, Undine introduces a liminal and fluid understanding of sexuality that escapes the rational and heteronormative order. The mermaids' interludes in *The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock* also hinge on this liminal moment of female exchange. Their voices are inclusive, detached from *logos* and function in polyvocal and liberated ways. Their speech and expression resonate throughout the waters and do not founder on any suppressive, phallogocentric discourse. I would even posit that "parler femme" proves to be an overarching concept for this entire project as the mermaids' voices resonate with one another, with the common goal to undermine the phallogocentric order through their liminal but pure means.

iii. Final Thoughts

The key findings of this synthesis show that the dominantly objectified representation of the mermaid figure and her tropes is short-sighted and does not pertain to her feminist and transcultural complexity. As shown in the introduction, this reductive discourse is largely perpetuated in popular culture and media and might therefore reach a larger audience than literary fiction. The key conclusions show that the mermaid figure symbolises a liminal creature

that characterises her female plurality but also her transcultural specificities and exchanges. More pertinently, the mermaid's defiance of the phallogocentric order has been observed in all the works and thus, meaningfully corroborates her transcultural status. One crucial observation in relation to the transculturality of the mermaid is that her position vis-à-vis the suppressive patriarch is much more constant than anticipated. Given the strong links between the mermaid figure and women in general, these findings equally advocate plural feminine meanings for women. In other words, confining the mermaid to phallogocentric categories is as reductive as stigmatising women in general. Through alternative means, the mermaid has been shown to deconstruct the phallogocentric order and to fight symptoms of suppression, including imposed silence and female vanity. By talking back to the most pertinent questions in gender disparity, the mermaid helps to thwart female stigmas and to give women the possibility to speak their mind and own themselves.

I would like to address the shortcomings of this project which I mainly see in the transcultural component. Even though this project aimed to study the mermaid within a transcultural framework, the feminist tone dominated. It would have been fruitful to give a closer inspection of the transcultural exchanges of certain tropes and to further elucidate, for example, why the *absence* of the tail is "othered" in the *Nights* when its *presence* is "othered" in Andersen's story. Furthermore, the claims about the categorisation of women in this project are not meant to be definite and universally absolute but I wanted to shed light on a tendency in the media, culture and society that I know best, namely European and American culture. Moreover, I am not excluding that other literary works perpetuate the objectified representation of the mermaid. As for the implication for further research, it would be interesting to go back to the role of the merman in literature. Again, given the scope of this project, I did not delve

into the meanings of the merman figure. Accordingly, it would be interesting to further analyse the significant underrepresentation of mermen and how it responds to the findings of this project. Furthermore, this project only used literary fiction as its primary corpus. It could be insightful, though, to look at different genres, such as fantasy and young adult fiction, in order to compare the results of this project with the representation of the mermaid figure in these works.

With this project, I hope to contribute to the field of fairy tale studies but also to show how iconic fairy tale figures and tropes emerge in a variety of genres. In that regard, it appears erroneous to associate the novel with realism only. One does not need to look very far to prove that this fallacious association is still dominating, as the definition of novel by the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* illustrates: "a fictitious prose narrative of considerable length, in which characters and actions representative of real life are portrayed in a plot of more or less complexity" (quoted by Walder 10). This project proved how significant the mermaid figure is in these narratives, and thus how deeply interwoven fairy tales and novels are. Therefore, I hope that this thesis helped to broaden the understanding of literature in general which, like the mermaid, should be approached from a much more liminal perspective. I would even claim that fairy tales are intrinsic to one's understanding of literary fiction, and also vital to shed light on gendered discourse. Social injustice for women should be challenged everywhere as it persists on every scale. De facto, women are categorised, classified and judged and that often more harshly than men. Gender disparity should be addressed on every level, be it through the study of the mermaid figure in literature or in the UN Congress Room.

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