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## **“IDENTITY ARISES IN CRISIS”: MULTIPLICITY, TRAUMA, AND IDENTITY IN ANN LECKIE’S IMPERIAL RADCH TRILOGY<sup>1</sup>**

Iuliia Ibragimova

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Contemporary philosopher and feminist theoretician Rosi Braidotti, while contemplating identity in *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti* (2011), suggests refusing dialectical oppositions, including “human and animal or machine,” and turning them “into allies in a process of becoming,” thereby dismantling the “unitarian – and dualistically opposed – identity” (31). Deconstructing these oppositions both challenges traditional hierarchical structures, centred on the human, and opens the possibility to explore identities that do not fit into the habitual outlines of Cartesian duality, such as the identity of an enhanced human or an artificial intelligence (AI). Ann Leckie’s *Imperial Radch Trilogy* (2013-2015) features an AI protagonist – the sentient spaceship *Justice of Toren/Breq* – and an enhanced human antagonist – Anaander Mianaai – between whom the main conflict of the series unfolds.<sup>2</sup> Their complex embodiments – one mind connected to multiple bodies – and the traumatic events that happen to them contribute to shifts in their identities. For Mianaai, this involves a traumatic split, and for Breq a significant transformation, revealing the process of “asymmetrical becoming” that overflows the boundaries of gender, class, and race (Braidotti, *Nomadic* 30).

The framework for analysing the identity transformations of these posthuman entities is provided by posthuman literary criticism that, as Carolyn Lau defines in “Posthuman Literature and Criticism” (2018), “activates, de-territorializes stable identities, and forms affirmative and alternative subjects” (347). Mianaai, ruler of the enormous space empire the Radch, has multiple cloned bodies and his digitally stored mind and memories are accessible throughout the Radch. His physical presence is thus ensured in different locations simultaneously, preserving a seemingly consistent personality. When Mianaai encounters the Presger – an alien species with superior technology that can annihilate both his empire and the entire human species – he is conflicted over how to address the threat. The conflict, exposing his vulnerability and comparable to a traumatic experience, entails a split in his personality. This split affects the whole Radch as different factions of his personality introduce clashing policies, resulting in conspiracies, abduction practices, and massacres.

Mianaai’s identity construction centres on his human component rather than on superhuman enhancements, which differs him from *Justice of Toren/Breq*.<sup>3</sup> *Justice of Toren/Breq* is a complex human-machine combination, and its/her identity is eclectic by design. Its/her machine intelligence runs multiple processes and information flows and develops further complexity by the addition of ancillaries – human proxy bodies with different gender and race characteristics, turned into living appendages of the sentient spaceship through technological enhancement.<sup>4</sup> *Justice of Toren* and

its whole crew are destroyed through the schemes of Mianaai's competing factions. Having only one human body left to house the spaceship's AI triggers its identity transformation and liberates it from its programmed limitations. The tragic consequences of the split in Mianaai's human-centred identity, striving to regain its unity, is contrasted with the productive flux of *Justice of Toren/Breq's* identity. This flux reveals its/her intentionality and blossoms in its/her leading role in the creation of a new political entity to counter the Radch and its imperial ambitions.

After *Justice of Toren's* destruction, its sole surviving ancillary, One Esk Nineteen,<sup>5</sup> embarks on a transformational journey from Mianaai's soldier and servant to a rebel opposing him and his policies. As an ancillary, One Esk Nineteen is a human body that was forcefully taken from a colonised planet, deprived of its memories and personality, and connected to the spaceship's AI with implants. Confined to one human body after the destruction of the ship, having lost its unlimited lifespan and access to the knowledge of *Justice of Toren*, it calls itself Breq, hides outside the Radch, and plans on assassinating Mianaai. When her revenge partially succeeds, she finds herself assigned to run Athoek system, where she manages to break the remaining limitations of her conditioning and declares a provisional independent republic, potentially protected by the treaty between humanity and the Presger.

The tension between Mianaai's struggling unitarian identity and *Justice of Toren/Breq's* innate multiplicity resonates with critical posthumanism. Critical posthumanism, as Braidotti notes in an eponymous entry to *Posthuman Glossary* (2018), dwells on the place of the human and nonhuman others in the context of digitalisation, globalisation, and technoscientific change (95). The posthuman nature of complex entities, as discussed by the series, invokes the issue of non-human agency, which this article analyses by employing the critical thinking of Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Karen Barad. The tragic events framing the main plot of the trilogy take place in an environment of imperial expansion and its forced termination, drawing upon real-life examples of colonial practices and their consequences. For this reason, literary trauma theory becomes a useful framework with which to examine these texts and consider the psychological, social, and political consequences of the characters' traumas. Robert Eaglestone's "'You Would Not Add to My Suffering If You Knew What I Have Seen'" (2008) helps underpin this framework through his application of literary trauma theory to the analysis of the Holocaust and African postcolonial contexts. As well, the works of Roger Luckhurst further demonstrate the relevance of literary trauma theory to an analysis of the trilogy. Luckhurst's *The Trauma Question* (2008) dwells on the history of the concept of trauma and analyses the representation of trauma in literature and art, while "Future Shock: Science Fiction and the Trauma Paradigm" (2014) argues for the applicability of literary trauma theory to Science Fiction (SF). Considering the trilogy through the lenses of critical posthumanism and literary trauma theory enables this article to trace the transformations of complex posthuman identities, their multiplicity, and the fluidity of their asymmetrical becomings, as well as their implications on the political rhetoric of posthuman identity in a technologised environment.

I argue that *Justice of Toren/Breq's* posthuman identity, emerging out of its/her transformation, and undermining Mianaai's tyrannical regime, subverts the anthropocentric perception of agency and

challenges traditional hierarchical structures of human-centred perception of the world. To contrast *Justice of Toren's* and Mianai's identity transformation, this article starts with an analysis of their initial identities. As an AI, the protagonist is originally programmed to follow orders from its captain and lieutenants – independent humans who directly control it – and to unquestioningly obey Mianai personally. A programmed self-learning algorithm ensures that *Justice of Toren's* ethical choices are based on the ethical judgement of the Radch, and consequently reflect Radchai prejudices and biases, including attitudes towards colonised populations and opinions on non-human subjects, especially the alien and technological other. The article proceeds to analyse Mianai's and *Justice of Toren/Breq's* responses to traumatic experiences, triggering the transformations. Mianai's struggle to preserve his 'unitarian' identity incites social unrest and violence. The trauma of almost total destruction by Mianai's ruthless actions exposes *Justice of Toren's* multiplicity and also reveals the potential for asymmetrical becoming, arising out of its complex posthuman embodiment. The clash between *Justice of Toren/Breq's* programmed responses and empirical evidence disrupts the programmed algorithm of learning ethical behaviour from the society it/she interacts with. This existential crisis triggers the building of a new fluid identity, not limited by programmed behaviours, but capable of formulating independent ethical judgements. Finally, the article discusses *Justice of Toren/Breq's* posthuman identity, its/her ethical stance, and actions resulting in political changes in the Radch. Interacting with non-Radchai cultures outside the colonisation paradigm – not as a colonisation tool, but as a free agent – commences a shift in Breq's ethical and political views towards respect to diversity and otherness. Breq's new understanding of her place in society and an awareness of her agency enables her to transcend the boundaries of her previous functional identities of an AI spaceship and embrace its/her fluid posthuman identity.

### **Soldier, Servant, and Master: Identities Before the Trauma**

*Justice of Toren's* initial identity combines two symbolic images of SF: the technological other and the cyborg. As a sentient spaceship run by an AI, it is a technological other, created by Radchai engineers to be a formidable instrument of colonisation, capable of destroying or annexing planets (Leckie, *Justice* 338). In certain aspects of operation, it relies on ancillaries who fit the classical definition of the cyborg as proposed by Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline in "Cyborgs and Space" (1960). The crucial difference between the classical cyborg and an ancillary lies in the position of the human. In the classical cyborg, the human forms the centre and technology serves to push the limits of flesh, while an ancillary is a human enhancement of an AI, expanding the technological other's functionality and emotional experience. By decentering the human, ancillaries question the anthropocentric premise behind the classical cyborg and invoke the cyborg metaphor of Haraway's influential essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985). The Harawayan cyborg challenges traditional Western dichotomies by transgressing the strict boundaries between flesh and metal, organic and inorganic, natural and artificial, human and machine.

As appendages of the AI spaceship, ancillaries are initially seen as enacting the identities of the servant and the soldier that are traditionally imposed on the cyborg and the technological other and which lack agency. In "A Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway refers to the cyborg as an "illegitimate

offspring of [...] patriarchal capitalism," implying its connection with labour structures and emphasising the original role of technology in creating oppressive production systems (Reader 10, 12). Continuing the discussion of technology and labour in "Class and Its Close Relations" (1995), Alexandra Chasin considers identities as a product of actions rather than an entity's intrinsic characteristic. Thus, she argues the role of the servant performed by the technological other is constitutive of its identity (74).<sup>6</sup> *Justice of Toren's* Radch designers intended it to provide for the comfort of independent humans assigned to control it, and its performance of menial tasks actualises the identity of the servant, pertaining both to the cyborg and the technological other. The low skilled tasks spaceships and their ancillaries carry out, including washing, dressing their officers, and mending their clothes, accentuate the servitude of spaceships and their ancillaries and strike a discordant note with the spaceships' high intelligence and knowledge, as well as with the complex technology involved both in the creation of an AI spaceship and in ancillary production.

Contemplating the tasks performed by the technological other, Chasin connects them with race aspects, as the role of house servants in the contemporary US is generally taken by females of non-white descent (74). Haraway, analysing the influence of technological development on a global working class, states that it is not "race-neutral" (Reader 29). The racial implications of the identity of the servant are actualised in Radchaai AI spaceships; ancillaries are made from human bodies abducted during colonisation, which exposes a deep racial bias. This bias is reflected in the Radchaai language, showing the permeation of racist presumptions in the Radch society. "Radchaai" is translated to mean simultaneously "civilized" and "citizen," positioning the non-Radchaai as uncivilised and "barely even human" (Leckie, *Justice* 85). The view of non-citizens as less human underlies the moral acceptability of ancillary-making and allows the Radchaai to forcefully take a substantial part of a new colony's population, erase their personalities, and turn them into ancillaries before citizenship is granted. As a programmed instrument of colonisation, *Justice of Toren/Breg* both shares this bias and becomes a victim of it, as its/her initial identity of the house servant entails a racial component and conditions racially discriminative attitudes towards it/her in the Radch society.

Another identity arising out of the cyborg's and the technological other's functionality is the soldier. In "A Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway traces the cyborg's origin to militarism (Reader 10), while Chasin places an emphasis on the actualisation of the links between the defence sector in the US and the image of the technological other (90). The identity of the soldier is predetermined by the military potential of the Radchaai AI spaceships. Their weapons can "vaporis[e] planets" (Leckie, *Justice* 338), while their ancillaries' skeletal and muscular augmentation makes them suitable for invasion practices and law enforcement. Ancillaries had constituted the main troops during annexations before the treaty with the Presger was signed and ancillary production was made illegal (16). The intimidating power of the Radch spaceships makes them efficient killing machines, prompting techno-anxious images. But the portrayal of technological hybrids in the trilogy goes beyond the tight framework of negative implications, which Braidotti refers to in *The Posthuman* (2013) as a "narrow and negative social imaginary," casting the technological other as a source of violence and oppression (64). As a part of the colonisation machine, Radchaai AI spaceships and their ancillaries may follow orders precisely and without qualms, but they do not revel in the

supposed superiority of the coloniser. The comparison of ancillaries with independent human soldiers in *Ancillary Justice* (2013) exposes the human soldiers' cruel and oppressive attitudes – something that Leckie's technological hybrids do not share: "[...] One Esk would never beat me or humiliate me, or rape me, for no purpose but to show its power over me, or to satisfy some sick amusement" (Leckie, *Justice* 18). This characterisation of *Justice of Toren* is voiced by the spiritual leader of a territory subjugated by the Radch, suggesting another parallel between the colonised human population and the technological other, both oppressed by the Radch'ai imperial drive. Hence, though the identity of the soldier is attributed to the protagonist, Leckie refuses to depict technological hybrids as inherently evil, instead portraying them in a complex way, thereby resisting simplistic and superficial judgements.

This nuanced depiction of technology does not alleviate its ethical implications. As Melvin Kranzberg states in "Technology and History: Kranzberg's Laws" (1986), "Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral," and this lack of neutrality is especially prominent in ancillary production (545). Ancillaries can be seen as an AI spaceship's body parts, thus, "depriv[ing] a ship of its ancillaries" is "a terrible thing" that can be equated to an amputation of a healthy organ (Leckie, *Sword* 139). However, turning people into ancillaries, effectively killing them with "identities gone, bodies appendages to a Radch'ai warship," is intrinsically atrocious and imbued with negative ethical connotations, regardless of who does it and to what purpose (Leckie, *Justice* 67). The racist selection of ancillary bodies from colonised populations and, later in the trilogy, lower-class Radch'ai citizens accentuates that the wide implementation of appalling technological decisions is rooted in immoral political practices, such as the colonial expansion of the Radch or the black market of migrant workers' bodies, sold to be ancillaries.

The unethical nature of the ancillary making process remains problematic throughout the trilogy. Ancillary bodies, coming both from colonisation and from abduction of citizens, drive both the main and secondary plots in the trilogy. In *Ancillary Sword*, Leckie introduces Lieutenant Tisarwat, a young officer assigned to Breq's crew, whose plotline is contrasted to that of One Esk Nineteen/Breq's. Tisarwat's body is abducted and implanted with Mianaai's personality and memories, using the ancillary-making technology in order to spy on Breq in Athoek System. However, her body rejects the transformation, and her health steadily worsens until the implants are surgically removed. Yet, instead of returning to her previous self or retaining Mianaai's identity after the surgery, Tisarwat is a blank slate, unable to associate with either personality, or their desires and memories. Hence, severing the link between the body and the implants does not enable ancillaries to regain their previous personality: "Tisarwat was dead from the moment they put those implants in" (Leckie, *Sword* 54).

The irreversibility of ancillary production makes its atrocity irredeemable. Within the trilogy, only Breq's own existence receives a symbolic exoneration when she gets the Presger gun (designed to kill Radch'ai spaceships) from its current owner, Dr Strigan. The gun is invisible to the Radch'ai surveillance systems, so Breq can use it to assassinate one of Mianaai's bodies, attracting the attention of all factions and exposing Mianaai's split identity. Strigan, a vocal opponent of the

Radch, guesses that Breq is an ancillary and initially tries to convince her to remove her implants. After their conversation, Strigan changes her mind. As Tisarwat's example shows, the process of returning to independent functioning entails a deep depression, internal conflict, and psychological suffering. Unlike Tisarwat's, Breq's body is not degraded by ancillary implants, meaning the surgery would cause psychological suffering without providing health benefits. Strigan admits the absence of medical reasons for the surgery and understands that the surgery would destroy *Justice of Toren's* millennia-long experience and distinct individuality without restoring the original person. Thus, by giving it/her the gun, Strigan recognises *Justice of Toren/Breq's* right to life and individuality in their current body that lacks any other connections with the world. However, this token redemption neither attempts to justify the atrocity nor offers a comprehensive solution to the ethical dilemma of ancillary bodies.

In contrast to the subjugated identities of the technological other and cyborg, Mianaai's initial position is of unquestioned dominance. As the highest authority in the empire, he drives colonial expansion and uses his multiple cloned bodies to ensure the work of imperial mechanisms throughout the Radch. Connected by one technologically augmented consciousness, shared memories, and digitally transmitted experience, these cloned bodies provide Mianaai with practical immortality and near-omnipresence. Mianaai's superhuman enhancement invokes ideas of the transhumanist transcendence of the human condition. Francesca Ferrando notes in "Transhumanism/Posthumanism" (2018) that transhumanism is derived from the Humanist paradigm, emphasising its focus on technological improvement of the human (439). The acutely anthropocentric vision of transhumanism renders technology as an obedient tool devoid of agency and shapes master-slave relations between the human and technology, thus repeating the Humanist hierarchical vision of the human/machine dichotomy (439). Thus, the conflict between Breq and Mianaai exceeds the limits of the personal to become a political and philosophical confrontation between the coloniser – "Man," the "Humanist ideal" – and the subaltern – the colonised, marginalised, and subjugated other – whose voice remains unheard and whose rights are habitually disregarded (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 13). Breq's rebellion and possible success in establishing a new republic shows that the world can be changed and shifted by the agency of these others.

### **Multiplicity, Fluidity, and Trauma**

As posthuman entities, Mianaai and *Justice of Toren/Breq*, though opposed to each other, share a similar structure. Their single mind, ensuring consistency of personality, processes data from technologically enhanced and interconnected bodies, making them capable of being present in many places simultaneously. Eleonor Gold refers to this in "Mindclones, Ancillaries and Cyborgs" (2019) as "polyproprioception" – a simultaneous awareness of several bodies as one's own (152). Polyproprioception presents a seeming reversal of multiplicity – the psychological condition of multiple identities with diverse thoughts, emotions, behaviours, and memories inhabiting the same body, as defined by Gergő Ribáry et al. in "Multiplicity: An Explorative Interview Study" (2017). However, technologically connected multiple bodies harbour a predisposition to forming separate identities, caused by a possible lag in memory synchronisation when bodies are physically

separated by long distances or through imposed disconnection. Both *Justice of Toren* and Mianaai are subjected to a delayed synchronisation of memories, as Mianaai's bodies are scattered across the Radch territory, and *Justice of Toren's* ancillaries are separated from its spaceship body when deployed on planets during "annexations" (Leckie, *Justice* 11). Each body, acting as a part of a whole but separated by cosmic distances, can develop in its own way, with differences emerging every time they separate. This implies that the experiences of the core entities are not identical or equal to the experience of their proxy parts, and the difference in experiences, however miniscule, causes divergence in emotional reactions and decisions, opening a possibility of "be[ing] of two minds" (Leckie, *Justice* 213, original emphasis).

The technological complexity of Leckie's posthuman entities mirrors the increasing complexity of contemporary technology that influences identity building. The one mind – multiple body structure becomes not only a means of investigating the potential multiplicity of an AI mind, but also of the multiple human identities that emerge in digital, online environments. This is discussed by Gold when she compares the impact of embodiment on the experience described in *The Imperial Radch Trilogy* with *Virtually Human* (2014), a non-fiction work by Martine Rothblatt, and argues for the potential for the emergence of differences in multiple material or virtual bodies, even if they share one mind (155). However, having lost the bodily multiplicity of *Justice of Toren*, Breq still casts doubt on the existence of a monolithic identity, wondering if "anyone's identity [is] a matter of fragments held together by convenient or useful narrative" (Leckie, *Justice* 207, emphasis original). Breq's comment pertains to posthuman entities, with complex embodiments, as well as a wide range of both human and non-human entities whose multiplicity is promoted by an advanced technological environment. Likewise, Braidotti argues that an advanced technological setting entails a "radical estrangement" from "unitary identity" and actualisation of a "privileged bond with multiple others" (*The Posthuman* 92). Leckie depicts the posthumanist vision of identity building through posthuman entities but challenges the idea of a consistent identity for all agents, contributing to the discussion of the influence of technology and exposing the irrelevance of the dualistic framework of identity in a world where the nature/culture divide is radically deconstructed by the aliveness of technology.

Multiplicity, predetermined by the form embodiment takes in the series, becomes apparent after traumatic experiences. Allucquere Rosanne Stone, an academic theorist and a co-founder of transgender studies, draws attention to the correlation between multiplicity and trauma in "Identity in Oshkosh" (1995): "multiple personality [...] is the site of a massive exercise of power and its aftermath," emphasising the violence involved in the emergence of a split in personality (35). The complex embodiments of Leckie's posthuman entities have an intrinsic proclivity to the fracturing of identity through the experiential and memory delay, even if in "ordinary circumstances" they preserve a seeming unity (Leckie, *Justice* 207). However, trauma brings differences to the surface, exposing not only fractures but pronounced identities, triggered by the experiences of separation and reactions of each body, either mechanical or organic, to circumstances threatening their lives and integrity. Luckhurst draws attention to the connection between technology and multiplicity, contending that "the wired-in, webbed and networked computerized present of the third industrial



revolution transforms subjectivity, [as] narratives of the potential impact of these technologies on the meaning of 'the human' multiply" ("Future Shock" 158). Complex embodiments within the *Imperial Radch Trilogy* afforded by technology present a new type of subjectivity that challenges the boundary between the human and the machine and displays itself under the stress of "adaptational breakdown" (158).

In the series, Mianaai and *Justice of Toren/Breq* are compared not only in terms of embodiment, but also in the events they perceive as traumatic. For Mianaai, the exposure of multiplicity is caused by an encounter with the Presger technology and its potential to annihilate the Radch. This technology appalled him so much that he ordered the destruction of an entire solar system, and the civilisation inhabiting it, after the weapon was used there. The threat from the Presger also forces him to sign a treaty with them, protecting not only the Radch, but the whole of humanity, as the treaty stopped the Radch's colonial expansion and compelled him to inflict no harm on alien species. The atrocity of his actions and impelled change in policy cause an internal conflict that aggravates Mianaai's physical predisposition to multiplicity. Overlapped with the technical impossibility of full real-time synchronisation of memories, it results in a formation of separate personality factions that secretly fight each other, using the time lag to conceal their actions. *Justice of Toren* falls victim to Mianaai's scheming twice. Firstly, Mianaai uses jamming equipment on One Esk, temporarily severing the connection between the ancillaries and the spaceship. Secondly, he executes One Esk's favourite, forcing the decade to act against him, and eradicates the AI spaceship, its independent crew, and its ancillaries, understanding that it has been recruited by a different faction.

However, his actions also inadvertently help *Justice of Toren* survive. After the jamming equipment turns it into disconnected parts, the spaceship becomes aware of its multiplicity: "The first I noticed even the bare possibility that I-*Justice of Toren* might not be I-One Esk, was that moment that *Justice of Toren* edited One Esk's memory of the slaughter in the temple of Ikkt" (Leckie, *Justice* 207). The order to kill the person One Esk loves triggers the first violation of its programmed obedience, allowing Breq to build her independent identity based on One Esk's. Thus, both Breq's and Mianaai's identities bear traces of the violent traumatic events, though different in scale and physical exposure. These events not only reveal the fractures in their seemingly monolithic personalities but also inherently different correlations between their parts and manners of handling the ensuing internal conflicts.

Trauma not only constitutes a vital plot element of the series, but also influences its narrative structure. In *The Trauma Question*, Luckhurst considers cultural connections between notions of the "traumatic 'flashback'," "multiple personality," and trauma (80). Luckhurst also considers aesthetic means used to create a traumatic narrative, including "play[ing] around with narrative time," "disrupting linearity," "suspending logical causation," and "running out of temporal sequence" (80). Eaglestone, analysing trauma literature in postcolonial contexts, also defines "confused time schemes" as one of its features, artistically expressed in flashback and fragmented structure, which reflects that "events are not expressed as they happen, but only afterwards, in fragmentary and

broken ways" (84). Reflective of these critical considerations, Leckie, in *Ancillary Justice*, employs multiple flashbacks to recount the traumatic events the characters went through. The novel starts with two temporal strands: the main timeline happening nineteen years after *Justice of Toren's* destruction, and the secondary timeline recounting the events right before *Justice of Toren's* destruction. Thus, the secondary timeline is a prolonged flashback; the narrative structure is further complicated by an interruption of the secondary timeline by another flashback, explaining that one of Mianaai's identities reprograms *Justice of Toren*, inducing its internal conflict.

The narrative strands converge when Breq explains her motivation to Strigan in order to get the Presger gun. Sharing her story becomes a "means of productive transformation or even final resolution of trauma," mending the structural split in the narrative and symbolising her acceptance of the tragedy, the transformation, and a new understanding of her identity (Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* 82). Conversely, Mianaai effectively prevents his own 'final resolution'. By concealing the truth about the Presger technology and preventing its discussion not only in the Radch society but also in his own internal dialogue, he makes the recovery impossible, exacerbating not only his internal conflict but also the emerging split in the Radch society.

Breq's and Mianaai's similar embodiment structure and the exposure to their multiple identities through traumatic experiences does not translate into the same consequences for them. Mianaai sees his split as a catastrophe, while *Justice of Toren* accepts multiplicity as an inherent feature of its personality. Their contrasting perceptions are rooted in the distinctive essence of these posthuman entities. Mianaai is a human, fulfilling a transhumanist, anthropocentric dream, dominating his empire and striving to preserve his authority. Multiplicity threatens his lifetime endeavour of building an intersystem empire. To preserve both personal and political unity, each of his factions aims to eliminate the others, launching opposing policies, corrupting power structures, and sparking collusions within local governments. These actions entail injustice and violence towards human and non-human agents in the empire. In contrast, *Justice of Toren* is an AI that is connected to random abducted human bodies from colonised planets, differing in race and gender, which presupposes intrinsic diversity. This diversity enhances the post-anthropocentric decentering of the human, challenging the gender and race dichotomies. *Justice of Toren's* multiplicity comes naturally as each decade has individual preferences, interests, and hobbies, like One Esk collecting music and singing as a choir (Leckie, *Justice* 23). After losing most of itself, the potential for individuality in each segment and a capacity to act on its own becomes a source of empowerment, a platform to form a new individual who inherits *Justice of Toren's* traits and memories but grows into somebody new and different. For *Justice of Toren*, its multiplicity, and its identity that "arises [...] in crises" (Stone 35), is a path to freedom from the limitations imposed on it both by her conditioning and the environment, enabling it to challenge the anthropocentric and racist views of the Radch. Thus, the difference in how the characters handle the trauma and the consequences of multiplicity reveals the opposition between the anthropocentric drive of transhumanism, represented by Mianaai's vehement attempts to eliminate his multiplicity, and the posthumanist paradigm that decentres the human, represented by *Justice of Toren's* fluid and multiple identity that does not yield to the dualistic perceptions and limits of unitary identity.

### The Posthuman Identity

By uniting technology and the organic body, the complex embodiments of *Justice of Toren*, other AI sentient spaceships, and Mianaai challenge the border between the human and the machine, the born and the manufactured. The complexity of their entities questions the essence of the human in a highly technological environment. When his humanity is challenged, Mianaai resorts to traditional dichotomies, defining AIs as machines that lack personhood and, consequently, agency, while he, as a human, is entitled to both (Leckie, *Ancillary Mercy* 310). Mianaai's position exposes his anthropocentric perspective; for him, humans – at least certain groups of them – have value, while non-humans and non-Radchaai – “uncivilised” – do not. Blurring these distinctions would threaten the underpinnings of his worldview. In contrast, *Justice of Toren/Breq*, in running Athoek system, recognises the rights and voices of all species and groups, and its/her views are not limited by traditional dualisms. In addition to the human/nonhuman boundary, its/her embodiment blurs the boundaries of sex and gender, with both male and female bodies used as ancillaries. Its/her embodiment further amplifies the union of the mechanical and the organic, effectively undoing the traditional dichotomies and engaging in an “asymmetrical becoming” (Braidotti, *Nomadic* 30). Hence, accepting the fluidity and lack of centrality in her identity allows *Justice of Toren/Breq* to recognise the importance of different voices in establishing a welcoming environment for all species.

The complex process of Breq's asymmetrical becoming, through which the human and the non-human, the male and the female, the Radchaai and the non-Radchaai are united in a productive fluidity, unwinds throughout the trilogy. In the first novel, multiplicity rooted in the structure of the posthuman entities' embodiment comes to the fore in the traumatic circumstances triggering internal conflicts. As mentioned, the union of the two main spatial and temporal narrative strands in *Ancillary Justice* indicates the recognition of Breq's agency and her independent ethical stance and identity, which is accompanied by a gradual liberation from programmed behaviour and identities. Breaking the programme starts during *Justice of Toren's* destruction, but, even after a partial success of her attempted assassination of Mianaai, Breq is still under the control of one of his factions. Revealing the insidious nature of the mechanisms of subjugation, she is bound to obey even when it contradicts her personal beliefs and desires. Her conscious choice not to support any of Mianaai's identities – asserting that all of them are essentially the same person, capable of atrocities, violence, and tyranny – cannot be finalised without shedding these limitations. The asymmetrical becoming of Breq's fluid identity paves the way to oppose the tyrant, seen when she declares an independent republic in Athoek system in *Ancillary Sword* (2015). She justifies the declaration by asserting that AIs are a separate non-human species, which prevents the Radch from attacking them under the conditions of the treaty with the Presger. The provisional republic is a culmination of the trilogy and the final touch to the liberation process, emancipating the protagonist from the compulsion to obey the tyrant and from the limits of the servant and the soldier identities.

The formulation of an independent political stance as part of the liberation process is reflected in Breq's shift from the biases of the Radch colonial paradigm to an anti-racist and anti-colonial position. Before its destruction, *Justice of Toren* shares the views of the liberally oriented

part of the Radch society: the ship's preferences in relation to humans are based on their ethical judgements, rather than on their position in the strict hierarchy of the Radch society, which is based on the arrogance and corruption of the old Radch families who tend to hold positions of power. *Justice of Toren's* respect for human life is displayed in its treatment of citizens and non-citizens: it aspires to limit its violence towards people in the colonised territories and learn their language and culture to assist in their integration into the Radch society. But these views do not go beyond the Radch colonisation paradigm, stipulating that the Radch brings prosperity and civilisation. Arguing about the Radch with Strigan, Breq defends the Radchaai approach to civilisation and the position of the Radch as the metropole bringing progress to the periphery: "But at the end, after all the blood and grief, all those benighted souls who without us would have suffered in darkness are happy citizens" (Leckie, *Mercy* 156). Breq's claim exposes *Justice of Toren's* absorption of the biases of its colonisation paradigm, much like a real-life self-learning algorithm, which invites consideration of the bias that a self-learning AI assimilates from the data it uses.

Several studies of AI, algorithms, and ethics, including Seth D. Baum's "Social Choice Ethics in Artificial Intelligence" (2017), Megan Garcia's "Racist in the Machine: The Disturbing Implications of Algorithmic Bias" (2016-2017), and Kirsten Martin's "Ethical Implications and Accountability of Algorithms" (2018) show how decisions taken by AIs and algorithms are influenced by their design or the data they use, exposing the prejudice and unfairness of the originating society and raising questions of fairness and accountability in their application. Having been initially programmed by the Radch as a self-learning AI, *Justice of Toren* continues to learn from other actors in society and adopts their views. Baum describes it a bottom-up approach to learning ethical behaviour, where AI learns ethics from other agents (166). In doing so, *Justice of Toren* inherits and exposes the racial prejudice of the Radch society. This follows the patterns of real-life algorithms as Garcia and Martin show in their analyses of the implications of utilising contemporary algorithms and consequential exposure of racial prejudice embedded in the data (Garcia 112, Martin 839). Unlike these real-life algorithms, Breq can make ethical judgements of her own, which is initiated by Mianai's destruction of *Justice of Toren* and its existential crisis. The years she spends functioning within other cultural frameworks changes Breq's attitudes: she learns to appreciate differences, which eventually eliminates the bias of the coloniser's point of view on "uncivilized" systems (Leckie, *Justice* 235). Correcting this bias, Breq opposes the Radch worldview, thus affirming Haraway's idea from "A Cyborg Manifesto" that cyborgs "are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins" (*Reader* 10). Thus, her transformation includes not only overcoming the limitations of her programmed functionality, but also the biases of the Radch society, allowing Breq to formulate her own stance and promoting her agential power.

## Conclusion

Non-human agency deserves a lot of attention in posthumanist theory. In *Posthuman Knowledge* (2019), Braidotti emphasises that agency is not a human's prerogative in an interconnected world (45). Haraway, in *When Species Meet: 03 (Posthumanities)* (2008), defines technology as one of companion species and allocates it the place of "full partner," mediating the relations of the human and the world and possessing its own agential power (249). Breq's communication with

other human and non-human agents shows how the technological other can be in a productive partnership, resulting in the establishment of a new political entity. Breq becomes an independent agent participating in a network of interactions with other agents, which resonates with Barad's theory of agential realism, as presented in "Posthumanist Performativity" (2003). Barad sets forth agency as originating from "intra-actions" of matter rather than from individual entities and embracing both the human and the non-human (817). "Intra-actions" imply temporary coupling within the continuous flow of matter, where objective borders are momentarily revealed only to become indistinct again with the end of an intra-action (815). Breq's identity, with its proneness to multiplicity and its asymmetrical becoming, resembles the flow of matter, with its boundaries made momentarily definite in the intra-actions with other human and non-human entities. Forming ties with humans, AIs, and aliens, Breq is involved in a network of intra-actions, through which her agency becomes palpable and influences the world. The recognition of her agency is a crucial part of its/her transformation and establishes her as an agent in a complex world where the human and nonhuman interact and make connections with each other.

After her trauma and due to subsequent identity transformations, Breq, an AI in a colonised body, becomes a subversive voice, appreciating diversity and speaking against colonisation and the inherent injustice of the hierarchical Radch society. An AI overstepping the limitations of her creators' prejudice and becoming capable of seeing injustice and oppression, and acting to counter it, undermines the centrality of the Humanist subject and blurs dichotomic boundaries. In the trilogy, this posthumanist subversion of anthropocentric ideals and the discussion of non-human agency fosters the vision of the AI identity as "something other than a master, a slave or a self" (Gold 157). Leckie portrays Breq as a fully independent entity with indisputable agency, countering the Radch vision of her as "the non-person, the piece of equipment" (Leckie, *Justice* 370). Breq defines AIs as a separate sentient species, expanding the notion of agency to non-human subjects and asserting a move towards Barad's understanding of agency. Thus, an AI protagonist with agency blossoming in "intra-action" and asymmetrical fluid identity challenges the anthropocentric paradigm and mechanisms of oppression in the politics of the Radch empire and consequently sheds light on the potential of a posthuman identity in the real contemporary world.

## NOTES

1. This article is partially based on the second chapter of my MA thesis, titled "Singing Your Own Song: The Role of Posthuman Bodies in the Creation of a Posthuman Protagonist in *The Ship Who Sang* (1969) and *Ancillary Justice* (2013)."
2. *The Imperial Radch Trilogy* consists of *Ancillary Justice* (2013), *Ancillary Sword* (2014), and *Ancillary Mercy* (2015).
3. Leckie uses italics for the spaceships' names in the trilogy.

4. The Radchaai language and culture do not have gender identification and a female pronoun is used for all humans; the issue of gender is discussed by Marcia Texler Segal and Vasilkie Demos in "Gender Panic, Gender Policy: An Introduction" (2017). I use masculine/feminine pronouns for the characters who are gendered by the characters from other civilisations. The Radchaai characters whose gender is not identified are referred to as "she." The Radch ships and stations are referred to as "it," but Breq is a "she," following her new social status and functioning.

5. Due to the complexity of the protagonist's body structure and identity transformation, I use different names to indicate different configurations within the entity of the sentient spaceship and its transformation: "*Justice of Toren*" denotes the whole ship; the twenty-bodied unit – decade – functioning before Mianaai's sabotage is referred to as "One Esk"; "One Esk Nineteen" is used to speak about the segment surviving after *Justice of Toren's* destruction; and "Breq" indicates the transformed identity.

6. The concept of identity as a product of actions, rather than inherent properties of an individual, is developed by Judith Butler in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay on Phenomenology and Theory" (1998).

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**BIONOTE**

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