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Beyond Breaking Binaries

Subverting Genre Conventions in *Iron Widow*

and *She Who Became the Sun*

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Author:
Elina Laiho

Supervisor:
Merja Polvinen

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Abstract:

Genre conventions and associated tropes can be considered intrinsic to any form of genre fiction but are brought to attention especially in young adult speculative fiction (YA SF) since they participate in creating visible trends in contemporary book culture. Established, recognisable conventions invite subversions, and this is highlighted especially in the phenomenon of retelling narratives that draw inspiration from mythology, folklore, and history, using the established frameworks to address contemporary concerns.

Such is the case for Xiran Jay Zhao's *Iron Widow* (2021) and Shelley Parker-Chan's *She Who Became the Sun* (2021). Both novels are a reimagination of the rise to power of two imperial Chinese rulers, Wu Zetian and Zhu Yuanzhang, respectively. Through the analysis of three prominent themes of YA and SF – the character of the hero, femininity/masculinity, and romance – this thesis shows how both novels deliberately subvert their genre conventions while echoing warrior epics in the form of heroic SF. Current scholarship agrees that SF, and other literary genres for that matter, are not stagnant categories, and often occupy liminal spaces that can be seen as amalgamations of distinguishable characteristics of several genres. The awareness of this intertextuality is at the core of reimagining narratives as well.

Gender, especially the potential dissonance between social and individually embodied expressions of gender identities, emerges a prominent factor in the novels' exploration of these themes, which prompts queer and feminist readings. Drawing queer theory and on scholarship surrounding Judith Butler's conceptualisations of the performativity of gender this thesis looks at the way gender is discussed in the novels as both a social construct and as a means of self-actualisation.

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1 Introduction

The act of retelling or reimagining narratives is hardly a new venture in the realm of fiction writing, yet it appears to be enjoying perpetual popularity among readers. Particularly prevalent in the young adult (YA) category, as of December 4, 2023, 836 works have been shelved under "YA retellings" on book discovery and review platform Goodreads (Goodreads 2023), making it a prominent category to be considered alongside previous and much proliferated trends such as 'paranormal romance' or 'teen dystopia'. While the reimagination of the fairytale remains perhaps the most common form of this phenomenon, the source materials for retellings vary from mythologies to literary classics as well as historical figures and their deeds, as is the case for Xiran Jay Zhao's *Iron Widow* (2021) and Shelley Parker-Chan's *She Who Became the Sun* (2021). Both novels draw their inspiration from imperial Chinese rulers – Wu Zetian and Zhu Yuanzhang, respectively – and combine historical elements with the genre of speculative fiction. Such a combination of history and mythology is present already in the tradition from which the novels draw their inspiration: the culturally rich wuxia tradition, which draws from fictionalised accounts such as Luo Guanzhong's 14th century novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Elements of such "military romances-cum-tales of chivalry celebrating historical personages" (S. Teo 2015, 20) can be also seen in the two novels, and in their blending of fact and fiction *Iron Widow* and *She Who Became the Sun* thus have comparable relation to history as popular Anglo-American fantasy has had to the Arthurian legend.

Current scholarship on the genres of fantasy and science fiction tends to agree that establishing strict genre frameworks is unproductive, if not impossible. Rather, as suggested by literary and book culture scholar Kim Wilkins, genre is negotiated between its "textual, social and industrial aspects" (Wilkins 2019, 11) and these categories are non-stagnant. Farah Mendlesohn, a founding scholar in speculative fiction (SF) studies, also emphasises the dialogical nature of establishing the core effects of the genre, describing that "the fantastic is an area of literature that is heavily dependent on the dialectic and the reader for the construction of a sense of wonder" (Mendlesohn 2008, xiii). Similarly, this sentiment of the author's and the readers' mutual agreement to engage in the suspension of disbelief is also one of the core ideas in historical fiction writing, where it is utilized "in order to explore alternative depictions and/or modern adaptations of narratives" (Cooper & Short 2012, 6). In short, the aim of a historically inspired retelling is not necessarily adhering to the historical

fact in pursuit of accuracy, but rather explore the potential subversions to established frameworks. In YA, frameworks curated by genre often take the form of a series of distinguishable tropes that proliferate in literary content as well as in marketing culture. For example, tropes such as 'the love triangle' or 'the chosen one' are so prevalent in YA SF that they themselves have become genre conventions to be explored and subverted.

In this context, the literary terms "convention" and "trope", and their interdependent relationship require closer examination since their functions might be deemed mutually exclusive. The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Baldick 2015) describes conventions as "established practice […] commonly adopted in literary works by customary and implicit agreement or precedent rather than by natural necessity" (2015). Moreover, in genre fiction, such as romance, thriller or SF, commonplace conventions like reoccurring settings, plot arcs, or relationship dynamics work as agreed markers of said genre. However, these markers do not exist in a vacuum nor are they stagnant, but they can reaffirm or subvert one another. In the same dictionary, "trope" is referred to as a "figure of speech, especially one that uses words in senses beyond their literal meanings" (2015). This is seen in 'the chosen one', 'the love triangle', or the myriad metaphorical expressions listed on TV Tropes – the online wiki dedicated to indexing tropes occurring in different forms of media. The website itself characterises the word trope as "a storytelling device or convention" (TV Tropes 2024), harkening back to the joint existence of the two literary terms. It is indeed difficult to draw a clear distinction between conventions and tropes in the contemporary discussion, but if such a difference is to be made, conventions can be seen as intrinsic to genre and thus exist more implicitly, tropes provide explicit hooks for the work of literature to attach itself into the intertextual continuum of genre texts. Additionally, tropes obtain a communicative dimension. Wilkins, for instance, discusses the social and industrial influence of "genre tropes", describing how they "spill out of books and into social discussions; social discussions pressure publishers to change the contents of the books; and market success influences the choices writers make about how to use and combine genre elements" (Wilkins 2019, 11–12). Tropes, thus, are also used to describe the way conventions move between genres, as well as the way those conventions are shaped by and communicated within popular discourse surrounding literary works.

Fantasy genre conventions – especially those of high fantasy – and their tropes continue to be visible in current popular culture including YA SF (Wilkins 2019, 13). However, many of these conventions have been marked with misogynist worldviews justified by their pre-

modern settings (17) and colonialist ideologies (Young 2015, 115). Both *Iron Widow* and *She Who Became the Sun* have protagonists that are initially doomed to fail just because they are born girls. However, against all odds, they are able to attain and exhibit power in their respective societies and change the course of their fates. While this is not a unique phenomenon in YA SF, this thesis argues that these novels deliberately subvert their genre conventions while echoing ancient warrior epics in a form of heroic SF. The analysis of the subversions and their impact within the novels' contexts is conducted via discussions of prominent themes: the character of the hero, masculinity and femininity, and romance. These are not subversive elements on their own, but the ways in which the novels explore them both overtly and covertly challenges the current YA SF tropes that derive from genre conventions of fantasy. Wilkins has characterised the coalescence of young adult and fantasy fiction as "one of the twenty-first century's most visible and successful meetings" (Wilkins 2019, 11), resulting in it currently being "the dominant expression of fantasy" (7). The success of YA SF is not slowing down with new titles gaining traction on social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, online communities that count as key elements in current book culture. Alongside the cultural importance generated by sheer commercial success, it is beneficial to analyse works of YA SF as they often represent the conjugation of literary expression with elements of contemporary popular culture. I will proceed with introductions of the novels and their authors after which I provide an overview of the theoretical frameworks used in this thesis. Expanding upon ideas of the interactive nature of YA SF, this thesis draws from previous scholarship on fantasy literature to examine the emerging genre conventions. Moreover, I will discuss how gender emerges a focal point in the act of reimagining narratives and why queer theory provides an effective tool in analysing this phenomenon.

1.1 *Iron Widow*

Before the take-off of their writing career, Xiran Jay Zhao, a first generation Chinese Canadian, became known in the online sphere as a content creator on YouTube, providing humoristic yet informative videos on Chinese history, mythology, and cultural representation in popular media. Released in 2021, *Iron Widow* is their first published novel and the first part of a duology; the sequel – *Heavenly Tyrant* – is set to release in 2024. The novel is a reimagination of the rise to power of Wu Zetian – the sole empress in Chinese history. However, instead of taking place in the 600-700s, Zhao places Zetian on an alien planet where Zhou dynasty China meets futuristic technology, notably in the form of gigantic battle mechs used to fend off the hostile alien lifeforms called Hunduns. The mechs require two pilots, a

male and a female, but the girls' purpose is to serve as an energy supply to the boys and they are assumed to perish during the battle as a necessary sacrifice, while the boys attain celebrity status. Eighteen-year-old Zetian will not let this be her fate and strives to collapse the oppressive systems that are built on lies and pretence.

Aligning with marital traditions of imperial China, in addition to being pilots, the girls must also act as concubines to the boys. With this comes a plethora of expectations and ideals of what it means to be a proper woman that Zetian finds extremely restrictive, and which she strives to undermine on her journey to become the most powerful pilot. Paired in an arranged marriage with Li Shimin who is a victim of rampant colourism and subsequent mischaracterisation, Zetian becomes even more aware of the extent of the artificiality of essentialist dichotomies endorsed by society. Furthermore, the heteronormative ideals of romantic relationships are challenged when Zetian and Shimin both show interest in Zetian's childhood friend Yizhi.

1.2 *She Who Became the Sun*

Like *Iron Widow* for Zhao, *She Who Became the Sun* (2021) is Shelley Parker-Chan's debut novel. On their website Parker-Chan, an Asian Australian with Malaysian Chinese roots, characterises their writing as "lightly fantastical historical fiction with plot, a surfeit of feelings, and flawed characters making bad life choices." (Parker-Chan, 2023). *She Who Became the Sun* presents a reimagination of the story of another historical Chinese ruler, the Ming dynasty's (1300s-1600s) first emperor – Zhu Yuanzhang. The novel is the first part of *The Radiant Emperor* -duology; the sequel *He Who Drowned the World* was published in 2023. In Parker-Chan's retelling, a nameless girl from the impoverished Zhu family assumes her brother's identity after he dies of starvation and shock after a bandit raid their father also fell victim to. A fortune teller had promised greatness to the brother, and now it is the sister's mission to enact his fate. Parker-Chan draws inspiration from both historical events and Chinese costume dramas, but what my thesis is most interested in is the genderqueer identities that the novel portrays, thereby questioning the gender-essentialist ideologies that many societies have upheld throughout history. Kaisa Hirvi's (2023) thesis has also discussed the novel's portrayal of non-normative gender identities as a part of the novel's postmodern interrogation of traditional fantasy structures. The presence of postmodernity in literary analysis brings forth elements of liminality, which is also relevant to my analysis of both genre and gender.

After leaving her old village behind, Zhu begins her new life as a boy by joining a monastery as an apprentice. Growing up socially presenting as a man, Zhu feels little attachment to her identity as a girl, and this is enhanced by the fact that women are considered unworthy in the novel's society. Yet, she does not see herself as a man either but something in between the two. Turning the burden of secrecy into a strength, Zhu is able to attain and exhibit power, eventually becoming the emperor. Moreover, Zhu's quest to establish her own selfhood is mirrored in the character of General Ouyang, a eunuch carrying a grudge over what was done to him as a punishment, and Ma Xiuying, a young woman whose life was dictated by her gender of birth until she met Zhu. What unites all three characters, is the ability to choose, or lack thereof, that curates how they enact their fates. Additionally, the element of choice is a key theme in the companionship and blossoming romance between Zhu and Ma as well.

1.3 Theoretical Overview

In a recent publication, leading fantasy scholar Brian Attebery reiterates how SF operates intertextually rather than within set theoretical margins: "The nature of fantasy literature keeps changing. New voices come into the field, new traditions are drawn upon […]" (Attebery 2022, 1). Fantasy, and other literary genres for that matter, are not stagnant categories, and often occupy liminal spaces that can be seen as amalgamations of distinguishable characteristics of several genres. The inherent nebulousness of what constitutes SF is seen in how scholarly interpretations of speculation, fantasy, or the fantastic attain a discursive form with no absolute definitions. Still, exemplary literary theorists such as Todorov (see Andrew Butler 2016) and Bakhtin (Attebery 2022) are being utilized by contemporary scholars to formulate conceptions of the complicated relationship between the natural and the supernatural. Another key element of fantasy literature stemming from its continuity and change is proliferation. Wilkins describes the concept of proliferation in the context of YA SF as both a narrative and an industrial phenomenon:

> [F]antasy fiction is known for its proliferating narrative threads, which are not containable in single texts but generate sequels and series and related works. That is, there is an industrial element to fantasy's proliferation implied both textually and paratextually (Wilkins 2019, 52 – 3)

With evidence from how the three focal points of my analysis – the hero narrative, femininity and masculinity, and romance – have been portrayed in SF previously, and taking into account the contemporary industrial practices of the genre, this thesis examines how they reflect and refract the conventions that the genre produces. This self-referentiality is also at

the core of the act of reimagining narratives as well, and it is used to emphasise emerging topics and themes illuminated by contemporary discourses, such as gender politics. In her analysis on postmodern reimaginations of the fairytale, Christina Bacchilega states that traditional tales "continue to play a privileged role in the production of gender, and as such are deconstructed and reconstructed in a variety of ways" (Bacchilega 1997, 10). Similarly, Katherine Cooper and Emma Short argue that contemporary historical fiction's re-imaginative nature is closely tied to the representation of gender, often foregrounding "tensions within existing gender politics through challenging and subverting the conventions that underpin them" (Cooper and Short 2012, 10). The depiction of gender, especially how it manifests through the protagonists' struggles against patriarchal traditions, is one of the key topics in *Iron Widow* and *She Who Became the Sun*. With a cast of characters consisting of varying gender identities, both novels show that gender essentialist ideologies upheld by patriarchal societies benefit nobody.

The performative nature of gender expression is ingrained into the themes through which this thesis considers subversions of genre conventions. The analysis of the subversive characteristics of these themes is therefore done in discussion with contemporary queer and feminist theories. Rather than seeing gender as a category to be subverted, this thesis discusses the different expectations that come from performing a certain gender, which are considered norms in the eyes of the sociocultural sphere and are thus imposed on characters in ways that clash with their own selfhoods. The artificiality of these norms and what is considered normative, is at the core of Judith Butler's argument in *Undoing Gender*: "Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might be very well the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized" (Butler 2004, 42). Drawing from her previous works and addressing previous criticisms, Butler advocates for a more trans, intersex, nonbinary, or otherwise genderqueer inclusive feminism. She discusses the paradoxicality of gender expression; its restraints but also its simultaneous potential to be liberating.

Butler's ideas on the performativity of gender have been explored extensively in both queer and feminist scholarship. For example, Rachel Carroll discusses the debate regarding the transgender subject as a point of contention between feminist and queer studies, and how this is seen in the literary representation of transgender lives throughout history: "Reduced to a rhetorical vehicle for analogical thinking about the meaning of normative gender, the relationship between the transgender figure and the actual or potential lived experience of

transgender people is obscured" (Carroll 2018, 20). The paradoxicality of gender as performance that can be subverted versus it being an integral part of identity is still present in current discussions of gender inclusivity with no clear-cut answer. However, the agency of choice is of utmost importance, and that is portrayed in the two novels discussed in this thesis in the form of the protagonists striving to take hold of their own destinies, which, simultaneously, become quests of establishing selfhoods.

It is also important to consider the context of queer Sinophonicity introduced by Howard Chiang and Ari Larissa Heinrich et al. (2014). The term Sinophone, coined by Shu-mei Shih, has been used as a more inclusive variant for "Chinese" and "Chinese diaspora" in the field of Chinese studies, acknowledging Sinitic languages and cultural diversity in Taiwan, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Singapore (Chiang & Heinrich 2014, 19). The notion of queer Sinophonicity brings forth issues of intersectionality, pointing towards the queer cultural productions that exist 'outside' the Westen sphere of queer studies due to the historically pertained dichotomy of "China and the West" (3). While Sinophonicity is not the focus of this thesis, and even though both *Iron Widow* and *She Who Became the Sun* are primarily aimed for the Anglophone market, awareness of these issues is constructive considering the novels' close relationship with Chinese history and sociocultural elements, as well as both of them being inspired by Chinese costume dramas, for example. Furthermore, the cultural aspects play a role in how the novels discuss the themes of heroism, gender, and romance, as they follow in the footsteps of the popular combination of contemporary romance and the wuxia tradition, where warrior women, or "nuxia" feature in the role of the romantic heroine (see Kamblé 2020).

As mentioned previously, I will discuss the subversive elements of *Iron Widow* and *She Who Became the Sun* via the analysis of three emerging: the character of the hero, femininity and masculinity, and romance. In each chapter, I aim to establish how said themes have been traditionally portrayed in both SF and YA, and thus set up the frameworks against which I will compare these novels. Beginning with the character of the hero in Chapter 2, I examine the tradition of the hero narrative in fantasy, which the novels both reconstruct and deconstruct. Chapter 3 focuses on the emerging gender issues in more detail, and finally, in Chapter 4, I will show how both novels' hero narratives and standpoints on gender affect how elements of romance are portrayed. To productively analyse the multifaceted nature of both genre and gender, I will first examine the novels in detail separately before drawing out conclusions and applying them to potential further discussions.

2 The Character of the Hero

Every story, at least in the very traditional sense of the word, has a protagonist through whose experiences the plot unfolds to the readers in various ways. In SF, the role of the protagonist tends to be especially pronounced due to the dramatic stakes their storyworlds often involve. With high, world-altering stakes at play, different perspectives to the ongoing conflicts emerge, and these sides are often dichotomised into heroes and villains that abide by their own, mutually conflicting agendas. From a formal standpoint, Patrick Colm Hogan has characterised the pattern of the heroic narrative as consisting of two recurring "schematic structures" (Hogan 2010, 136).

> The first includes usurpation of legitimate social leadership (often by a relative of the rightful leader), the exile of the leader and the ultimate restoration of that leader. The second treats a threat against the home society by some alien force. Commonly, the displaced leader is restored in the course of defending the home society against the alien threat (135).

Hogan's structure is a prototype that purposefully omits the ambivalent nuances of most narratives, yet from this pattern an overarching theme can be distinguished – power and its distribution. However, it would be undermining the versatility of SF to claim that the genre consists entirely of hero stories. Indeed, Ursula K. Le Guin has argued that the Hero "with his imperial nature and uncontrollable impulse" is not intrinsic to SF novels because "instead of heroes [these novels] have people in them" (Le Guin 1986). Le Guin goes on to criticize both the measurement of technological advancement in tools of destruction, and the hyper-masculinized "killer" subject as the unequivocal hero-character in these narratives (1986). The imperialistic tendencies SF has been associated with run deep, but they have also been challenged in various ways. For example, Andrew Rayment analyses the political potential of postmodern fantasy, claiming that fantasy can deliberately and even radically challenge conservative ideologies due to its myriads of (im)possibilities: "And the world we find in their Hall of Mirrors is a distorted representation of our own, yet one which is not only recognisable, but somehow truer" (Rayment 2014, 19). Indeed, Hirvi (2023) discusses *She Who Became the Sun* as a work of postmodern fantasy that deliberately challenges pre-conceived notions of heroism in the pursuit of inclusivity. Despite the gradual movement towards more diverse perspectives in popular SF, the interest in structures of power persist, as do the imperialistic connotations, or as Helen Young puts it, the genre's "Habits of Whiteness" (2015). In fantasy specifically, the concept of medievalism plays a significant role

in enforcing these habits: “What matters here is not what the Middle Ages were like, but what they are thought and said to have been in the popular imagination of the twentieth century (Young 2015, 66). While medievalism is commonly correlated with either the nostalgia of J.R.R. Tolkien, or the ‘gritty’ and ‘grimdark’ subgenres of fantasy in contemporary discourse, its influence is palpable across the genre. Wilkins, for example, discusses the prevalence of pre-modern settings in YA, and how their innately ruthless nature amplifies the dramatic qualities of the narrative (Wilkins 2019, 16): “the narrative stakes for teenage characters in pre-modern settings are very high indeed, with the end result of a more thrilling and fast-paced plot” (17). Both heroic narratives and medievalism, thus, can be seen as attending to the imperialistic stereotypes and the high stakes of the SF narrative.

Iron Widow and *She Who Became the Sun* both employ narrative settings that harken back to the medievalist traditions of fantasy. The latter novel is easier to connect to the topic since it takes place during the medieval times, 1300s to be exact. *Iron Widow*, however, ostensibly belongs in the realm of sci-fi, but even here, the explicit references to history and historical figures, the technology that is drawn from ancient energies and the employment of recognisably archaic, gender roles link the novel closely to the ideas of the pre-modern. However, instead of repeating the Eurocentric connotations associated with the pre-modern, both novels foreground China and Chinese culture, which have been considered “the Eastern Other” in the Anglophone literary tradition (Young 2015, 68). Moreover, as both works are fictionalised retellings of historical Chinese rulers, the shift in perspective brings forth areas of history that are less explored in the Western literary market, as well as help re-examine how popular imagination’s ideas of the medieval, or the pre-modern, are strictly rooted in Eurocentric connotations, and how they presuppose whiteness as the norm in what Young refers to as “monochrome Middle Ages” (Young 2015, 71). This argument deals more with how works of fantasy that deploy a pre-modern setting are by default set in a European environment despite the narrative taking place in a completely different world. Still, this particular notion of medievalism can be seen as permeating the genre, and overall, has influenced the genre’s conventions and tropes. Moreover, the ubiquitous whiteness of the genre has formed barriers, as observed by author Ebony Elizabeth Thomas:

> When people of color seek passageways to the fantastic, we have often discovered that the doors are barred. Even the very act of dreaming of worlds-that-never-were can be challenging when the known world does not provide many liberating spaces (Thomas 2019, 2).

Thus, the possible escapism offered by SF is rooted in inequalities, and presenting stories that are explicitly from non-white cultures is one way to break these barriers.

The presumption of normative whiteness has strongly affected the image of the ideal SF hero as well. As Neil McGarry and Daniel Ravipinto write: "The hero may be of questionable parentage, an orphan who does not know his origins, but he is almost never a member of a persecuted minority in terms of race or sexuality" (McGarry and Ravipinto 2016, 14). Young notes how the characteristics of the "natural leader" are in popular SF rooted in the white American (masculine) ideals: "White American hero [is] self-sufficient and independent, strong, honest, abiding by his own code of honour" (Young 2015, 26). Whether the hero is the rightful but displaced leader, as described in Hogan's model (2010, 135), or a perpetrator of vigilant justice who is not gallant but recognised as the only one brave enough to act, his story draws on the tradition of white heroism. Moreover, adjacent to the idea of the hegemonically white pre-modern and its connotative values, the hero's goal is often to restore the world-order by appealing to "a melancholy longing for better days, and the certain knowledge that the current generation is but a pale shadow of greater forefathers [...] and the restoration of their ways is something to be celebrated (McGarry and Ravipinto 2016, 13). The contemporary, then, represents chaos from which the world should be protected. Like Rayment (2014), Hirvi also emphasises the role of postmodernity in deconstructing the frameworks of traditional, nostalgic fantasy, stating that it "embraces plurality, ambiguity, and alteration in the portrayal of the concepts that are traditionally more restricted" (Hirvi 2023, 9). The restrictions placed by traditional conceptions of SF has acted as point of divergence to the genre's young adult iterations, that, in turn, obtain their own much proliferated tropes that need examination.

Indeed, contrary to the conservatism associated with the fantasy genre, YA SF is considered the realm of rebellious transformations and challenging the imposed social order presented by authorities. Specifically, popularised by the subgenre of YA dystopia, also known as teen dystopia, young women have taken centre stage as the leaders of the adolescent rebellion against oppressive social structures. Sara K. Day et al. describe the prominence of young heroines in YA, specifically YA dystopias, can be attributed to their ability to occupy liminal roles as both the oppressed and the liberators:

> the female protagonists of contemporary young adult dystopias occupy liminal spaces as they seek to understand their places in the world, to claim their identities, and to live their lives on their own terms. Further, and perhaps most

> significantly, these young women also attempt to recreate the worlds in which they live, making their societies more egalitarian, more progressive, and ultimately, more free (Day et al. 2014, 3).

However, usually this calls for exceptionality most adolescents cannot claim, which has been critiqued: "While the headstrong heroine is not new in culture, iconic female characters from YA books such as Katniss Everdeen or Tris Prior have encouraged a new expectation that women, especially young women, have strength, skill, and stamina enough to save the world" (Wilkins 2019, 19). Moreover, in addition to being capable fighters, these girls are described as conventionally attractive, and, more often than not, are of white descent. Furthermore, despite their rebellious spirit, these female protagonists have also been subject to the expectations of passive desirability of romance heroines that ultimately reinforce heteronormative values relating to gender and sexuality, which Chapter 4 discusses in more detail.

It is thus interesting to examine *Iron Widow* and *She Who Became the Sun* against these traditions of genre conventions. The protagonists of both novels, Zetian and Zhu, respectively, emerge as the heroes of their narratives. However, the question of attaining power is discussed in a manner that problematizes the dichotomy of good and evil, which is also linked with the concerns of identity-building. Gender is also integral to the conceptualisation of this dichotomy and used to further problematise the traditional hero-identity.

2.1 Wu Zetian as a Transgressive Heroine

In *Iron Widow*, Wu Zetian is the protagonist, and both her inner life and outer actions are explicitly described through her first-person focalization. It is via her perspective that readers familiarise themselves with the stakes of the story, and this focus on her character is one of the main reasons why Zetian emerges from the story heroic despite her shortcomings. The novel's society as well as its pilot system is entirely built on gender-based oppression, which builds on the image of the harsh pre-modern China even if the novel takes place on an alien planet, Huaxia, during an undetermined time. The dramatic stakes fostered by the otherworldly setting of the novel are put into words by Zetian's contemporary narrative voice that bridges the metaphorical gap between the fantastic and the recognisable to, perhaps, evoke relatability. Jane Tolmie describes the "female role models" portrayed by heroines of medieval romances often serving covert didactic purposes in "the exposure of similarities between the world(s) of fantasy and quotidian reality" (Tolmie 2006, 149). Moreover, to

effectively expose the unfairness of their systems, the heroines need to “excel within” them (148). This is a common phenomenon especially in the YA iterations of the SF genre that has seen many rebellious heroines throughout the years. These heroines, however, are indeed defined by their exceptionality, which sets them apart especially from other women. Wilkins describes this exceptionality affecting not only the heroine’s ability to stand up against the patriarchy, but also contributing to her status as ‘the chosen one’ who often acts as a catalyst for resistance (2019, 19, 22). Zetian fits well in this framework of an exceptional young heroine: upon her initial enlistment, her spirit pressure, or the measure of her mental strength, easily overshadows every other girl being tested alongside her (Zhao 2021, 39). In fact, the strength of her spirit pressure is outstanding gender notwithstanding, which only serves to deepen the frustration she feels with the lack of power she has in the society because she is a girl: “If I were a boy. I’d be living a dream. I could fight mecha-aliens in my own giant transforming war machine, be loved and raised as a celebrity [...]” (40). Subverting this present notion of double standards becomes the primary driving force for Zetian and is the catalyst for the novel’s discussion on gender and gender roles (see Chapter 3).

Zetian’s cynicism, festering wrath against the Huaxian society, and the frustration towards her lack of power despite being measurably powerful herself, all constitute her determination, acting both as an antithesis of the docility of womanhood expected from her, as well as a departure from the traditional heroic plot of the restoration of a society’s former glory, or fighting to preserve it. *Iron Widow* presents an alien threat in the form of the Hunduns, but the story’s intrigue is predominantly placed on Zetian’s strive to collapse the system from the inside. Furthermore, Zetian’s journey begins with a self-imposed mission: she voluntarily throws herself into the Chrysalis institution to avenge her sister Ruyi who fell victim to the pilot program. As a girl who is nothing in the eyes of her society, Zetian feels like she has nothing to lose and uses this to her advantage when threatened by others: “Look on the bright side, I tell myself. After this I can die. Finally. Being alive has been painful, exhausting, and disappointing” (52). When she gets roped into the media-play of the celebrity culture surrounding the pilots, she acts the part of a villainous femme fatale that gets imposed on her: “Too bad. I am exactly the kind of ice-blooded, rotten-hearted girl he fears I am. And I am fine with that” (114). The volatility of Zetian’s emotions also serve as reminder of her youth, and the pervasive disappointment in figures of authority act as backdrop for the rebellion lead by the younger generation to begin, as seen in other works of YA SF. Indeed, Zetian’s goals are emancipatory. She is ready to sacrifice herself for the sake of her sister and all the other

girls who have succumbed in the Chrysalises: “I close my eyes, picturing myself taking command of a Chrysalis, towering over buildings and smashing the earth with my colossal limbs or luminous qi blasts. I could crush anyone who’s ever tried to crush me. I could free the girls who’d love to run away” (23). For Zetian, freedom is attained by literal destruction as well as deconstruction of oppressive social hierarchies. Her aim, thus, is the opposite of what McGarry and Ravipinto call “restoration” of bygone glory (2016, 13). Conversely, YA SF depicts hard-won social transformations: “Young protagonists are often the saviours of fantasy societies precisely because they are young and bring new energy or ideas to the resistance” (Wilkins 2019, 21). This is the case for *Iron Widow* as well, in the sense that the revolution is predominantly focused around Zetian as a person. However, instead of bringing “power to positions of morally just leadership against oppression and injustice” (26), Zetian acts with destruction in mind: “Since they want me gone so badly, I’ll go. But they’re all coming with me” (Zhao 2021, 237). “My real redemption can only come from overhauling the pilot system before those girls get old enough to enlist” (303). To fully liberate herself and the girls who would keep being fed into the system, she purposefully leans into the villain role imposed upon her.

The character of Zetian is quite capricious and there is a palpable edge to her narration, which is, for example, seen in her referring to herself as “ice-blooded” or “rotten-hearted” (114). Despite that, the brunt of the villainization directed at Zetian, and her partner Shimin, for that matter, is done by the surrounding society which also has put them in a position of disenfranchisement. The narrativization of the hero-villain dichotomy is deliberately commented on by the presence of the celebrity and social media culture in the novel, and Zetian wants desperately to be in control of this narrative:

> “I prefer to think of it as storytelling, my dearest [Shimin].” I cradle his face with one hand, switching on my best vixen vibe. “A story of the *Iron Widow* and Iron Demon, taming each other. Redeeming themselves in a battle over a lost province. Transforming from villains to heroes. What is this if not the first page?” (267).

While this is a part of their scheme to keep the fraction of power granted by being the most powerful pilot-pair within the institution, it also refers to a potentially hopeful future that can be achieved only after the current oppressive government is demolished: “He and I are the most powerful pilots in Huaxia, by a gigantic margin. He should be Iron King and I should be the Iron Queen. Yet Iron Demon and Iron Widow is all they’ll let us be,” (199). Both Zetian and Shimin’s confinement in strict labels is also what ultimately makes them lash out, which

attends to both resisting the authorities and the building of their identities. With the constant scrutiny from the pilot advisors, other adults, and the general public, Zetian has little space to explore who she is outside the Iron Widow image. This exploration is strongly tied to the novel's interrogation of socially imposed femininity and its narrow confinements, which Chapter 3 discusses.

While Zetian can be seen as adhering to the expectations of a rebellious YA SF heroine, as well as playing into the "medievalist fantasy trope of the exceptional woman [that] allows conflict to arise out of women's resistance to male power" (Wilkins 2019, 19), she also embodies elements that subvert this image. She is exceptional in terms of her spirit pressure but suffers from physical impairments caused by her bound feet (Zhao 2021, 21), which challenges the assumption that the hero is naturally able-bodied. From the very beginning of the novel, it becomes clear that the story will be told on her own terms. There is not a great call for adventure nor is she involuntarily pulled into resistance, which is the case for plenty of YA heroines (see Childs 2014). Zetian also subverts the moralistic characteristics that are associated with the typical SF, or wuxia, hero. Her world lacks justice and respect for her, which is why she is happy to return the gesture, even if it means that she is painted as the villain by her society.

2.2 Zhu and the Pursuit of Radiance

While *Iron Widow* is exclusively told from Zetian's point of view, *She Who Became the Sun* employs multiple focalizers alongside the main protagonist, Zhu, and is narrated from a third-person perspective with occasional first-person interventions describe the characters' inner monologue. The beginning of *She Who Became the Sun* establishes an ideal setting for a zero-to-hero narrative setting wherein the protagonist arises from figurative nothingness to a position of power and is often backed up by considerable strength and even stronger sense of justice. In the novel, a tragedy befalls the impoverished Zhu family, leaving only one orphaned survivor. Moreover, there is a prophecy that proclaims greatness to the family, uttered fervently by the village's fortune-teller: "This child has greatness in him. Oh, how clearly did I see it! His deeds will bring a hundred generations of pride to your family name" (Parker-Chan 2021, 19). This fate, however, is not promised to the protagonist of the story, Zhu, but to her brother, Chongba, who almost immediately dies in the aftermath of a bandit raid (25). Zhu is enraged at the fact that her brother, despite the accolades promised to him, "had chosen to become nothing" and given up survival and, thus, his fate, since nothingness

was all she was promised because of her assigned gender at birth. Therefore, she decides to seize his fate he had given up on: "*If he took my fate and died... then perhaps I can take his, and live*" (26). This exchange of two fates can be seen as a deliberate play on the trope of 'the chosen one', in which a character, usually the protagonist, is marked by destiny before they have a chance to act in the story's narrative. Wilkins links this trope with the concerns of adolescent identity building when presented within the context of YA: "Adolescence is generally recognised as a period of identity formation, self-fashioning and self-reflection [...] In YA fiction, however, these aspects of learning who one is are tied to very high dramatic stakes" (Wilkins 2019, 20). Indeed, Zhu's newfound and almost obsessive pursuit of achieving greatness is interlinked with the formation of her own identity, which develops throughout the novel. The novel's events span over eleven years, during which Zhu transforms from a nameless girl shrouded by her brother to a novice monk who then becomes a rebel commander against the Mongolians, ultimately seizing the title of the Radiant Emperor, and thus evidently completing her quest for greatness. Ostensibly, this track of development seems rather linear, and her steady rise to power is in accordance with traditional hero plots, which Hirvi (2023) also remarks on. However, the plurality that is present in Zhu's identity-building as well as the morally ambiguous attitudes towards warfare the novel adopts derivates Zhu's rise to power from the traditional hero's journey. Hirvi also discusses the hero identities portrayed in the novel and how they subvert the conventions of traditional "quest fantasy" that has been characterised by its "dependency on particular kind of maleness and masculinity" that in turn, validates heterosexist power dynamics (Hirvi 2023, 45). Moreover, Zhu's self-centred journey to greatness further challenges existing structures of traditional fantasy that favours restoration of old social hierarchies over transformation (44).

After being granted refuge in the Wuhuang monastery as Zhu Chongba, Zhu begins her new life as a boy whose goal is to attain the greatness that was promised to her brother. However, this linear path towards destiny is soon challenged with the appearance of the eunuch general Ouyang who parallels Zhu regarding both his hunger for power and, most importantly, his non-normative gender identity in what Hirvi calls "a thematic bridge" (18) between the two characters:

> To resonate in likeness to a eunuch, whose substance was neither male nor female – it was nothing less than a reminder from the world itself of what she tried so hard to deny: that she wasn't made of the same pure male substance as Zhu Chongba. She had a different substance. *A different fate*. (Parker- Chan 2021, 52)

Fate in the novel is entwined with gender, and the fear of nothingness that haunts Zhu's mind is caused by her gender of birth. Moreover, the realisation of there being a fate of her own instead of her merely enacting Chongba's destiny fuels her desire to become great even more. The path towards destiny is thus beginning to split into two: Outwardly, she acts as Zhu Chongba yet introspectively, she is building her own identity – the latter remaining an undercurrent that grows stronger as she constructs her own selfhood:

> She had stood up as Zhu Chongba and claimed greatness, and Heaven had validated it. In the blink of an eye, ten thousand of the eunuch general's men had become nothing. She shivered with awe, and with her feverish desire for something she had never thought she would desire. Her fate. (Parker-Chan 2021, 141)

The multiplicity of Zhu's identity, as her own subjectivity is intertwined with Chongba's, recall queer ideas of identity-building. In addition to the explicit indeterminacy of her gender identity, the plurality of Zhu's subjectivities places her outside of binary oppositions. Zhu can be seen as undoing gender in Butlerian terms (2004), but this process is highly embodied, even if gender is understood to be an abstract category of social production. Rachel Carroll cites Gayle Salamon who writes: "Genders beyond male and female are neither fictive, but are precisely embodied and live" (Salamon 2010: cited in Carroll 2018, 15). The word fictive is especially interesting within the context of SF, which is considered the realm of unrealities. Indeed, the queer potential of SF is often linked with the genre being "a literature of difference" (Kenneally 2016, 8) as well as its ability to "dissipate what is familiar and accepted" (Rayment 2014, 21). However, Zhu's genderqueer experience is not linked with the fantastic of the novel nor does it operate as an allegorical vehicle. Rather, it is an integral part of her personhood.

Customary to SF novels, powers marking destiny have tangible manifestations. In *She Who Became the Sun,* this is represented via the Chinese historical-philosophical concept of "the Mandate of Heaven": a celestial power that was used to legitimise the ruling elite who, in turn, acted to uphold "heavenly principles" (Jiang 2011, 5). In the novel, this power attains physicality by appearing as a radiant light: "The Emperor's divine light – the physical manifestation of the right to rule, granted by the Son of Heaven" (Parker-Chan 2021, 109). Zhu's strengthening connection with the Mandate correlates with her becoming surer in her own identity and culminates in the second 'death' of Zhu Chongba when Ouyang almost fatally injures Zhu in a battle: "The eunuch general had delivered Zhu Chongba the fate that would have destroyed everything he was, even more certainly than death. It would have made

him nothing. Zhu thought slowly: But I'm still here" (337). This revelation ultimately finalises the separation of the two tracks of destiny, and fully foregrounds Zhu's "I" from the shadow of "Chongba"; a process that builds up throughout the novel, which, then, acts as a moment of self-actualisation for Zhu, not only in terms of her gender identity, but also in terms of concretizing her own goals: "for that seed of greatness that had been transplanted into her under the false understanding that she was someone else. But now that she looked, she saw what had been there all along [...] her own determination – her desire" (338). One's selfhood being tied to a fate certainly resonates with Wilkins' (2019) observations of 'the chosen one' trope in YA SF. However, the way in which the novel attends to the plurality of the processes that contribute to identity-building in the form of the separating tracks of fate, Zhu's multiple positions within her social environment as well as breaking free from her parallelisms with Ouyang, creates an image of a multifaceted personhood that extends beyond a hero "who is chosen by 'someone' to fulfil a role in the greater lore of the story" (Wilkins 2019, 20). Rather, by seizing her fate, Zhu also seizes the entire story by assuming the control of the Mandate: "She didn't just want greatness. She wanted the world." (Parker-Chan 2021, 403).

Zhu's rise to power evokes an emancipatory reading because she does arise from nothingness to greatness and does so by attesting to the trueness of her genderqueer identity. Moreover, the oppressiveness presented by the novel's medieval setting gives 'greatness' and 'nothingness' quite literal meanings, creating a dramatic narrative framework for Zhu to overcome. However, the novel does not portray Zhu as the hero because she is objectively good or abiding by a strong sense of justice, which are traits commonly associated with SF protagonists. On the contrary, 'the sun' (on top of being a pun on 'son') in *She Who Became the Sun* is characterised not only by its radiance, but also with its destructive potential. Hirvi also observes how Zhu challenges the "moral righteousness" expected from the traditional SF hero (Hirvi 2023, 35), linking it with postmodern destabilization of familiar narrative patterns. Indeed, Zhu's hero-narrative is not depicted as ubiquitously just, which serves to blur the dichotomies of good and evil that are deeply rooted in the genre.

As she grows accustomed to the volatile political landscape of her society, the lengths she must go to achieve power also dawn on her. This process, however, is not without self-reflection, which is shown in her contemplation of the character Chen Youliang – a scheming minister who is shown to eliminate anyone who he deems to be in the way of his own pursuit of political power: "the person who climbed according to his desire, with no regard to what he

did to get there [...] Was this who she would become in pursuit of her greatness?" (225). The almost obsessive way Zhu regards becoming powerful is not necessarily a sign of inherent corruption but a product of the ruthless landscape she operates within: "She had tempted fate by using tools that Zhu Chongba might not have had, and broken her monastic oath by taking a human life by her own two hands – but despite how those actions had felt, and whatever future suffering they would bring, they must have been the right choices" (185). Heroic actions or not, the novel discusses the ruthlessness that is demanded from a person to climb political ranks that are already corrupt: "The acid taste of power filled her mouth. [...] As long as I keep moving towards my great fate and keep doing what I need to do, one day I'll have it" (185 – 186). As a final step towards ultimate incandescence, Zhu slays the Prince of Radiance, a child who embodies the Mandate of Heaven: "Keep looking at the moon, little brother. It will be better that way. And when you're born centuries from now, make sure to listen for my name. The whole world will know it" (405). The desire for recognition shadowed by the fear of nothingness is what carries Zhu throughout the novel. These relatable concerns, however, gradually become entangled with obsession for power, which makes her a complex hero-character worthy of investigation.

2.3 Further Discussion and Conclusion

As shown in previous discussions, both Zetian and Zhu have qualities that connect them with hero characters of YA SF. The dramatic stakes enforced by the pre-modern settings and the overt gender discrimination provide a narrative framework for them to rise above their oppressive societies. Moreover, power, both political and fantastic, is discussed in a manner that goes beyond it just being a tool for the hero to perpetuate justice. Social transformation is followed by deconstruction and even destruction of their societies, which acts as an antithesis to the concept of restorative heroism discussed by McGarry and Ravipinto (2016). When the other option is to succumb into nothingness, it is no surprise that both Zetian and Zhu fight to keep themselves afloat even if it means committing deeds that are morally questionable. Additionally, to transform imperial rulers to relatable protagonists does provoke ethical questions, which the novels can be seen as addressing by having their protagonists rattle the hinges of the assumption that heroes, especially in YA, should be distinguishable by their morally 'pure' conduct that sets them apart from the oppressive regimes of their societies.

Questions regarding identity also emerges as prominent from the novels. Gender becomes important as both Zetian and Zhu struggle with the identities imposed upon them, and this is

discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 3. With Zhu, this process is more introspective as she comes into realisation that she is neither a man nor a woman, whereas Zetian's narrative deals with exterior markers of identity, such as playing up a character that fits other people's expectations of said character in order to maintain fraction of power in a socially repressive environment. Furthermore, as queer characters of colour in the predominantly white landscape of YA SF, the protagonists hold representational power and offer new perspectives. For example, the devotion to family and rigorous filial piety deriving from Confucian values is challenged in both novels. This is brought up explicitly in *Iron Widow* where Zetian is expected and encouraged to stay loyal to her family despite them blatantly disregarding her throughout her entire life. In *She Who Became the Sun*, ghosts keep haunting Zhu, partly adding to the question of identity and being quite literally haunted by one's roots (see Odabas 2018), but their first appearance being after she buries her father and brother add to the feeling of burden represented by the family. Hsu-Ming Teo discusses the role of Asian, especially Chinese, family as a marker of multiculturalism and a point of contention in tropes of identity building in contemporary Asian American popular fiction (Teo 2020, 4). She observes that the trope of the protagonist's family being stereotypically strict is not only used to evoke cultural authenticity, but it also ends up highlighting cultural differences that, in worst cases, perpetuate the Orientalist East versus West dichotomy: "Chinese filiality must be destroyed in order for Western individualism to triumph" (9). As the novels portray solely Asian, primarily Chinese and Mongol, cultures, this dichotomy is left out, but the issue of the family as an obstacle to individual freedom, not in an individualistic sense but as a mode intrinsic to self-actualisation, remains.

It is outside the scope of this thesis to even solve this tension, but as more culturally inspired narratives enter the popular sphere, it is interesting to see how this convention develops, especially relating to works of YA SF where, cultural connotations notwithstanding, distant, or outright cruel family dynamics are utilised to enhance the dramatic stakes of the narrative. Moreover, Zetian and Zhu diverge from the traditional wuxian knight-errant who, as described by Rong Cai, is a "larger than life hero who could right wrongs when law failed to protect people from injustice and abuse of power" (Cai 2005, 445). Operating with a strict moral conduct and a sense of loyalty, these hero characters are perpetrators of chivalric justice. The wuxia tradition has included female heroines as well but fall into the similar binarized depiction of womanhood where one cannot be a warrior while attaining traditionally feminine qualities (446).

To conclude, both novels challenge dichotomies presented by the tradition of both SF and YA. With deliberate plays on tropes such as ‘the chosen one’, and the moral ambiguity of both Zhu and Zetian for example, the character of the hero is expanded beyond its traditional representations. Moreover, the discourse around what is considered good representations of marginalised groups has created strict frameworks that rarely allow ambiguity. Thus, the anti-hero position of both Zetian and Zhu aid in deconstructing this paradigm, subverting the expectations of heroes also acting as role models that follow a clearly defined conception of justice. In the novels’ contexts, gender also proves a challenge when it comes to the question of power and its manifestation not only physically but also, and even more importantly, socially. In the following chapter, I will demonstrate how the novels’ depiction of diverse femininities and masculinities further problematize the image of the traditional hero-character of YA SF.

3 Femininity and Masculinity

As established in the discussions of the previous chapter, the characteristics that constitute a traditional hero pertain to rather narrow definitions of masculinity and femininity. Drawing on these established discussions, in this chapter I will be redirecting the focus on the conceptions of normativity and the social constructions of gender. Moreover, the concept of subversions, and the act of challenging what is considered the norm is closely tied to discussions surrounding gender, even in literary contexts, as observed by Bacchilega: "performance is always already implicated in the situation of a norm, whether it be gender, subjectivity or narrativity, but can re-articulate this norm by exposing its constructedness." (1997, 22). In both *Iron Widow* and *She Who Became the Sun*, the expression of femininity and masculinity is closely tied to the gender roles enforced by the novels' patriarchal governments. The relationship between gender and power is examined in both novels extensively, which is seen how they construct their hero narratives that both reconstruct and deconstruct elements that have been depicted in SF and YA. Through this interrogation, the novels seek to challenge the deep-rooted assumptions of normativity regarding both feminine and masculine gender expressions and their artificiality. Before embarking on the following analyses, it is important to note that this thesis does not consider femininity and masculinity as binary categories but rather than a spectrum of gender expression that is capable of fluidity.

The challenging of hegemonic ideas of normativity is at the core of both feminist and queer criticism. Will Stockton writes that queer theory "might well be understood as a project of interrogating sex and gender norms" (2022, 68), which is a process feminism is also highly involved in. However, what constitutes a norm and, consequently, its potential subversion is heavily tied to socio-cultural contexts. Butler notes on the need for intersectionality in examining this: "The critique of gender norms must be situated with the context of lives as they are lived and must be guided by the question of what maximizes the possibilities of a liveable life […]" (Butler 2004, 8). What constitutes a liveable life becomes highly contested in narratives that deploy dystopian or medievalist settings, since under oppressive regimes the default state of an ordinary individual's existence can be easily deemed *unliveable*, which then prompts the protagonists to act. However, instead of acting merely as a catalyst for a traditional hero's journey, both *Iron Widow* and *She Who Became the Sun* explore the subversion of norms curated by the oppressive regimes in a queer-coded manner, which is to say they set their gazes to the possibilities social transformation produces in a liberating

manner. This is done via the examination of femininity especially but the diverse expressions of masculinities in both novels also play a role in the deconstruction of preconceived notions of normativity.

The portrayal of femininity and the female figure have been extensively analysed especially in the context of the fairytale because of their depiction of strict gender roles and moralistic dimension. Consequently, this is also one of the primary reasons to why fairytales have been subject to plenty of retellings and revisions. As Attebery notes: "the fairy tale has become a major form of artistic expression, self-examination and political activism for women" (Attebery 2022, 112). In fairytales also lie the origins of many a female archetype portrayed and proliferated in SF. Keridwen N. Luis observes how author Joanna Russ's characterisations of the female "non-persons" such as "the faithful wife, the beautiful temptress, the seductive destroyer […]" (Russ 1995, 82, cited in Luis 2016, 173) are still applicable to contemporary fiction as well (172). Moreover, Luis discusses that it is the awareness of the genre and its restrictive elements that produce an impactful retelling and establish the possibility of liminality within feminine expressions of identity "between the princess and the witch, the beauty and the beast" (178). While the characterisations of the ideal male hero leave little room for nuance, the dichotomization of female characters tend to be starker, which calls for explorations of liminality and looking beyond binarized conceptions of gender itself. Moreover, as described by Hirvi, "interrogating the marginalizing binary of gender norms also interrogates the traditional patterns of fantasy" (Hirvi 2023,18). Indeed, the binary assumptions of gender run deep especially in the context of fantasy, which is one of the reasons why YA SF is particularly interested in challenging these binaries, especially through the lens of female empowerment.

As observed by Day et al. the dystopian heroine of YA is in a liminal position, not only in terms of her own identity and her journey from childhood to adulthood, but also considering how she navigates the world that tries to shut her down (Day et al. 2014, 3). The expression of feminine gender identity has been the object of scrutiny in many contemporary works of YA SF. As established, these discussions are closely tied to the expectations surrounding the role of the protagonist. On one hand the act of rebellion these protagonists engage already subverts the stereotypes of passivity associated with femininity or being female, yet on the other, as observed by Ann M.M. Childs, the heroine is often "pulled into rebellion by someone else" (2014, 199). Childs claims that this pattern occurs so that the protagonist can still act out "the romantic heroine's obligation of passivity" whilst remaining exceptional in YA terms (199),

but this also shows how, even in the dire contexts of dystopian novels, ingrained and internalised these restrictions placed on feminine identities are. Whether in the context of dystopia or the medievalist pre-modern, the claim for agency irrevocably connotates with overthrowing the systems that enforce this oppression, which is indeed the case for Zetian and Zhu's narratives as well.

The persisting dichotomies of activity and passivity, as well as of good and evil, and their curation in narratives brings us back to concept of normativity. Stockton describes how "moral codes engage deeply with our ideas about normality" alongside customary cultural and social practices (Stockton 2022, 68 – 9). In the novels, the social value an individual woman is akin to nothing, thus striving for agency in itself, is taking a stance against normality. This relates to the very real concerns of contemporary femininity as well, especially that of young women. Aapola, Gonick and Harris describe how "[i]t is a constant struggle for girls to express feminine sexuality in socially accepted ways, while maintaining their agency and individuals and citizens" (Aapola, Gonick and Harris 2005, 165). This fragile balance becomes even more precarious in the novels' contexts. In what follows, I will first explore how femininity and masculinity are depicted in *Iron Widow*, focusing on the character of Zetian and her struggles with her own feminine identity. After this, I will turn my attention to *She Who Became the Sun*, its portrayal of the adversities that comes along with presenting as a female through the character of Ma Xiuying, and how the novel constructs the non-normative gender identities it portrays against the restrictive expectations of both femininity and masculinity via the parallelism between Zhu and Ouyang.

3.1 Femininity and Masculinity in *Iron Widow*

"Yizhi, do you believe girls are naturally predisposed to sacrifice themselves?" is a question posed by Zetian to her friend at the very beginning of *Iron Widow* (Zhao 2021, 17). The fictional society of the novel, Huaxia, adopts a view of gender that is rooted in dualisms justified by the presence of tangible yin and yang energies that are required to pilot the Chrysalises, as a last line of defence against the Hunduns: "Girls go in the lower yin seat, while boys go in the slightly higher yang seat behind them, wrapping their arms around the girls" (16). In Chinese philosophy, the characterisations, and interpretations of the yinyang's essence vary depending on the school of thought, but among other properties, it signals "process of harmonization ensuing a constant, dynamic balance of all things" (Wang, n. d.). In *Iron Widow*, Zetian describes this concept as follows: "Yin and yang represent the opposing

forces that churn the universe into life. Yin is everything cold, dark, slow, passive, and feminine. Yang is everything hot, bright, fast, active, and masculine. Or so my mother told me" (Zhao 2021, 16). The presence of this natural dichotomy lays the ground for essentialist constructions of gender to occur, which are actively being regulated by the ruling body of Huaxia. Regulation, as Judith Butler has noted (2004, 55), is a question of control and "bound up with the process of normalization" also in the context of gender. Indeed, it is not the primordial forces that bear the brunt of the novel's critique but the narrow socially imposed definitions of femininity and masculinity. *Iron Widow* unequivocally places most of its focus on the misogynist repercussions of this as the novel is narrated from Zetian's perspective and she acts as a refraction to the Huaxian system. Whilst the role of femininity takes the centre stage, the novel also expands its discussions of what is considered acceptable gender expression in an intersectional direction, particularly in terms of race and class.

With overt feminist critique, the novel voices Zetian's unfaltering grievances regarding her experiences as a woman and her impending future, or lack thereof, that comes with the social expectations of being assigned as female:

> *Female*. That label has never done anything for me except dictate what I can or cannot do. […] No living my life without being constantly aware of how pleasing I am to the eye. No future except pushing out son after son for a husband, or dying in a Chrysalis to give some boy the power to reach for glory. (Zhao 2021, 17)

In an Oxford student review of *Iron Widow*, Jessica DeMarco-Jacobson cites an interview with author Francesca Tacchi who sees the Chrysalises as a metaphor for "how gender roles and the gender binary are arbitrary and arbitrarily enforced" (DeMarco-Jacobson 2022). Indeed, this notion of arbitrary enforcement is concretised in the novel as it is eventually revealed that the Chrysalises actively interfere with the girls' energy flow to supply more energy to the boys in turn (Zhao 2021, 323). Thus, the concept of a balanced match – a pilot pair equal in power, which ensures the girl's rare survival and is considered the pinnacle of female achievement – turns out to be rigged, specifically against girls, ultimately leading to their deaths: "It wasn't because she was weaker after all. It was because the pilot system didn't physically let her pilot at full potential" (323). This revelation is monumental in the novel's context not only because it shows that Zetian's critiques are completely justified, but it also points towards challenging the assumption that girls need to be exceptional in order to succeed – they just need to be given a chance. The way the novel presents the concept of the balanced match as built on falsehoods can be read as a commentary on heteronormative

marriage culture as a reflection of how superficially girls are often viewed. Moreover, in the novel's universe universe their personhood is explicitly subsidiary to the numerically measurable qi-values, which corresponds with how much yin energy they can offer in a Chrysalis. Women, thus, are not actualised individuals but mere extensions of men despite their vital role in society. Such gendered oppression is essential for the novel's society to continue to work as it is, and Zhao's text sets up a sharp critique of gender being used as a regulatory norm (see Butler 2004, 53). Ultimately, gender is a political tool in Huaxia, and so are the expressions of femininity and masculinity that are enforced by the heteronormative patriarchal values to uphold the illusion of harmony.

Questioning constrictive definitions of femininity through characters' struggles to fit into tight beauty standards is a common theme in YA literature as it reflects the concern of adolescent readers, particularly concerns associated with girls. As the concept of femininity broadens, attention is brought to the arbitrary curation of femininity and its desirable forms of expression that are simultaneously considered outdated, yet still enforced in everyday life. Within the realm of YA fiction, discussing this has been particularly popular in the subgenre of dystopia because in these narratives, the extrapolation of the worst parts of our current societies become the characters' realities: "female protagonists are catapulted to the centre of their societies' attention because they dare to test their boundaries by fighting against the laws and norms of their deeply flawed worlds" (Fritz 2014, 18). With the attention of society, femininity itself becomes a politically contested topic and "dystopian heroines can be identified in some way as reiterating conventional figurations of femininity and girlhood in a manner that is in effect rebellious" (27). Despite her grievances against traditional Han Chinese femininity, Zetian also finds herself reproducing its beauty standards after she succeeds in killing Yang Guang – the pilot to whom her sister perished in a Chrysalis battle – and is thrown to the wolves of media play. Because of her insubordination, a rumour arises that Zetian is a mythical "fox spirit" that appears as a "beautiful girl in order to devour men" (Zhao 2021, 118). Zetian, unsurprisingly, finds this incredulous, but ends up playing along with her newfound femme fatale image, as the fear associated with the myth helps her secure a position in the political field of the military institution. Moreover, overt femininity and finding agency in one's femininity has been subject to rampant sexualisation as exhibiting power is equated with deviancy: "In restrictive heterosexual regimes, only men are allowed to be agents of desire, and then only if women are their objects" (Marcus 2007, 115). Yet, as discussed in *Iron Widow*, the deviant woman is a source of intrigue from the general public

despite her perceived indecency, which Zetian tries to use to her advantage when she presents herself to the media through various public appearances and photoshoots: “Shimin is lounging on the chair, tugging my chain, expression nonchalant as if I’m a pet of his. Yet I’m eyeing the camera with a qi-charged sizzle in my gaze as if this is all part of my wicked plan” (Zhao 2021, 266). Shame is another important topic in *Iron Widow*’s exploration of femininity. This is seen in the sexualisation and the vilification of the nine-tailed fox -imagery, and how Zetian’s public image is built upon how the male gaze views her. However, Zetian refuses to let this objectification hinder her. Rather, she strives to turn this negativity into a strength and return the scorn she has been subjected to right back at her society, claiming that “[t]he very force of their judgement and hatred” will make her “unstoppable” (276). What starts as a mission to avenge her sister turns into a quest to liberate femininity from the society’s oppressive, and equally obsessive scrutiny.

Appearances that take precedence from potential political upheavals is a recurring theme in female-lead teen dystopias, as Amy L. Montz observes: “when these young girls rebel, they are not only rebelling against the larger dystopian government that controls their lives, but also against the expectations for their gender that attempt to limit their choices of agency” (Montz 2016, 110). One of the most gendered regulatory practices of patriarchy in terms of excluding women is what Montz describes as competitive girlhood depicted in YA dystopias, portraying “limited choices of normalcy and encourage competitive girlhood as superficial means of portraying normalcy when, in fact, they serve as distractions from the true problems of their societies” (110). In *Iron Widow* this competitive girlhood is ingrained in the Chrysalis system, since male pilots usually take multiple girls to serve them as concubines: “I may be starting off as a Consort, but Yang Guang could easily favor and promote another girl […] I could be forgotten among the herd of servant girls in his watchtower” (Zhao 2021, 41). In addition, this competition between concubine candidates manifests in petty rivalries amongst the young women despite their equally precarious position (44). Furthermore, Zetian notably lacks female allies in her pursuit of power. The discordance between female rebellion and female friendship has been a major point of critique regarding YA fiction, since the rampant competition among girls can be interpreted as putting down other women being a prerequisite of individual strength, which in turn can enforce the stereotype of “girls as shallow, competitive creatures incapable of camaraderie” (Childs 2014, 188). When Zetian seeks Dugu Qieluo’s, a fellow female pilot in a balanced match, allyship, she is met with animosity that undoubtedly stems from Zetian’s seductress image: “I know your type. So it’s best that you

stay away from me, and especially from my partner" (Zhao 2021, 203). Zetian has better luck with Ma Xiuying but finds out she does not share her spirit of rebellion. Women, thus, are not natural allies despite their shared fickle position in society. However, the novel does not fault the women, but rather seeks to show understanding to their internalised misogyny. Zetian reflects on this long tradition of gendered oppression, and how it has managed to turn women against each other: "You tell [women] they're meant to do nothing but serve from the minute they're born […] You tell them over and over, until it's the only truth they're capable of living" (Zhao 2021, 210). Through Zetian's poignant critique as well as the exploration of the extent of which the social control of femininity is ingrained into people, the novel challenges any assumption of women being considered naturally weaker.

As established, femininity in *Iron Widow* is a very contested topic. This discussion can be crystallised in the regulation of gender in order to uphold patriarchal values, and the need to rebel against it, collocating the novel with "the project of rewriting the historical female figure and her liberation from the patriarchal discourse that has so long dominated historical and cultural narratives […]" (Cooper & Short 2012, 14). However, instead of just positioning Zetian as a sole force of resistance in the system, the novel seeks to open discussions in a more intersectional direction. While this thesis focuses mostly on the aspects of femininity and masculinity instead of those of race and class, the novel's commentary on these topics remains present. Men are subject to much less scrutiny from the patriarchal society, but the difference in the way which the Huaxian government views Zetian's two male love interests, Gao Yizhi and Li Shimin, is a commentary on race and class's prevalent influence in discourses of gender politics. Yizhi, Zetian's childhood friend, is often referred to as "rich boy" in the novel and described with well-maintained appearance and expensive silk robes. Additionally, the novel also cheekily points out his privileged status by having him yell "You can't shoot me, I'm rich!" in a lethal situation (Zhao 2021, 195). While partly acting as a contrast to Zetian's brusqueness, he also differs from the (Western) masculinised romantic interest because of his gentle demeanour and effeminate disposition. Regarding the budding romance between Yizhi and Zetian, she observes their difference in social status: "If someone caught us together, he's not the one who'd get stuffed into a pig cage and drowned in the name of his family's honor" (Zhao 2021, 12). Shimin, on the other hand, represents a more traditional warrior-like masculinity in terms of physical appearance and strength. However, the novel questions how much his image is imposed by the Huaxian society due to his status as 'Rongdi' – meaning non-Chinese, specifically non-Han-Chinese – and the subsequent

vilification of him as a person. In addition to system-induced alcohol abuse, Shimin is a victim of constant racist stereotypes of being violent or hypersexual, which is seen in how the other characters view him. For example, Xiuying immediately thinks Zetian's bruises are inflicted by Shimin: "I know men can get carried away. Especially a Rongdi like pilot Li" (209). Furthermore, the stereotypes also influence of Zetian views him, despite her perpetual critique of how patriarchy arbitrarily characterises people. "It's like my brain wants to frantically categorize him, to make sense of him, but can't. It's receiving conflicting cues. Han versus Rongdi. Danger versus docility. Drunkard criminal versus invincible pilot. Iron Demon versus human boy" (139). As seen in the depiction of internalised misogyny, the novel comments on how the influence of harmful master narratives pertained by societies affect individuals.

With its portrayal of femininities and masculinities, *Iron Widow* comments on the innate arbitrariness of heteronormative gender roles as constructions of patriarchal social conduct. In addition to the degree of femininity or masculinity, intersectional factors also affect how a person is perceived in society. However, despite an abrupt mention of genderqueer identities and the natural variation of biological sexes (Zhao 2021, 16), *Iron Widow*'s critique of patriarchal regulation of gender focuses mostly on the traditional binary categories of men and women, drawing from historical oppression of women, which is enhanced by the dystopian novelty of the seating arrangement of the Chrysalises.

3.2 Femininity and Masculinity in *She Who Became the Sun*

In contrast to *Iron Widow*'s focus on the gender binary, in *She Who Became the Sun,* binary division of gender in terms of patriarchal heterosexist values is present mostly just as a starting point, to elicit historical accuracy. The novel presents a medieval Chinese society where war and rebellion run amok – men being the perpetrators and women part of the conquest. Most of the characters are male warriors who view women in a misogynistic light due to this objectification and their difference from the society's masculine ideals: "He hated their unmoving faces beneath their thick white makeup, their tiny steps that made them take forever to get from one place to another, and their stupid column hats […]" (Parker-Chan 2021, 164). These qualities are undoubtedly enforced by patriarchy. The character of Ma Xiuying (not to be confused with *Iron Widow's* character of the same name), and her focalisation brings forth the struggles of being a woman in a political sphere that perpetuates gendered oppression, despite being in a privileged position in terms of her high education and

amicable marriage with Zhu that eventually blossoms into a romance: “she was a woman, trapped within the narrow confines of a woman’s life, and everything that could be wanted was all equally impossible” (191). Moreover, despite her keen eye to the novel’s ongoing political battlefield, her observations are mostly dismissed because of her womanhood (103). Thus, the dualistic view on gender is present, but what is more interesting is the non-normative gender identities that are present in the novel: namely Zhu, the protagonist, and general Ouyang – a rival to the former whose experiences parallel hers in multiple ways.

As established in the previous chapter as a starting point for her hero-journey, Zhu leaves her old life and her gender of birth behind as her remaining family perishes in a bandit raid. What starts as a desperate attempt to survive becomes Zhu’s newfound reality as she takes shelter in Wuhuang monastery by becoming a novice, which then requires the constant concealment of the gender of her birth. Zhu grows up in the monastery protecting her secret yet embracing her new masculine identity and eventually becomes a monk – just before the monastery is burnt to the ground by Ouyang. This cataclysmic event makes the two characters aware of each other: “As she stared at the eunuch standing there amidst his ghosts, she suddenly felt the half-forgotten twang of a string plucked deep within her. Like connecting to like” (77). Zhu’s gender of birth and Ouyang being a eunuch is what sets them apart from the normative expressions of masculinity surrounding them.

However, the key difference between the two is the question of agency: despite the initial burden of her secret, Zhu builds her identity to suit herself, finding freedom in existing outside the binary. Ouyang on the other hand, was made a eunuch as a punishment for his family’s, brewing his vengeance ever since. Despite his military prowess and excellent fighting skills, he is not seen as an actualised person, which would bring his social status akin to a woman’s had he not had a close yet complicated relationship with prince Esen. Hirvi remarks that due to his involuntarily non-normative identity, Ouyang is especially aware of the social performance of masculinity that is required of him to hold a position of power among other warriors (Hirvi 2023, 24). Viewing both men and women with scorn, Ouyang values his own strength the most, which is why he cuts off Zhu’s arm as an act of humiliation, debilitating her ability to fight and taking away from her the only thing that in his own life has kept him afloat in the political playground of war and conquest: “’Zhu Chongba,’ he said.[…] ‘Your men were loyal to you, before. Let’s see how loyal they are to you now, when all you can inspire in them is scorn and disgust’” (Parker-Chan 2021, 314). Unbeknownst to him, by almost killing Zhu and purposefully targeting what he sees as detrimental to the ideal of able-

bodied masculinity, Ouyang ended up freeing her from the bodily confinements of her gender identity, ultimately reconciliating with her non-normativity: “Now she reeled with a realization that upended everything she’d believed about the world. *I survived – because I am not Zhu Chongba*” (337). Hirvi also notes on the monumentality of this battle in terms of the novel’s deconstruction of the binarized view on gender: by recognising that she is not her brother, and thus does not share his experience of being male, she is able to locate her own identity “beyond the binary gender pattern” (Hirvi 2023, 32). The non-normative gender identities described in *She Who Became the Sun* negotiate with the more traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Parker-Chan’s novel combines the concerns of the individual and the fluidity of selfhood with the overarching social practices that curate the norms and does so in a narrative that negotiates a similar dynamic in its adherence to and subversion of genre conventions. Not only are traditional fantasy’s binarized conceptions of gender brought to light as discussed by Hirvi (2023), but the novel also plays with tropes associated with gender in contemporary popular fiction, such as YA SF and historical romance.

The topic of masquerade, to appear as someone or something else can be tied to adolescent concerns of identity building. Furthermore, cross-dressing, especially heroines disguising themselves as men, is a common trope in YA SF as well as wuxia stories featuring female protagonists. Kamblé describes androgyny in these narratives aligning with the “rejection of other traditional feminine traits” (Kamblé 2020, 10). She observes, however, that in romance the “masculinized gender behaviour” is strictly temporary done away in favour of pursuing the romantic plot (10), which is an argument that can also be made for the plethora of YA stories, where the heroine initially disguises herself, but the revelation of her true gender is ultimately of more narrative importance, since it serves to prove her competence as a girl in a male dominant environment. *She Who Became the Sun* deliberately plays with this trope by having Zhu identify herself with the more masculine gender presentation: there is no revealing her womanhood since it is not there to begin with. Hirvi describes Zhu’s notion of the impossibility of her femaleness and her fear of being perceived as one stemming from her seeing gender as “a preordained, binary concept” (Hirvi 2023, 30). It is true that the presence of this perceived binary is at the root of Zhu’s gendered experience, but rather than being internalised from the beginning, it is the social constructions of gender that instil the fear of discovery into her, because it ultimately would disrupt her journey to greatness, and render her newly discovered fate unattainable. Moreover, the explicit negotiation of her birth gender

becomes an important plot point in the novel as it serves to deepen the connection between her and Ma, but rather than prompting a narrative shift, it reinforces Zhu's self-acceptance as she overcomes her fear of being perceived as a woman, turning all her efforts into nothing: "[Zhu's] face had a flayed vulnerability, something so raw and terrible that Ma flinched to see it. It made her think of someone baring a mortal wound they dared not look at themselves" (Parker-Chan 2021, 254). Moreover, their shared experiences of the restrictions placed upon them by their femininity works as a bridge in their mutual understanding, despite them experiencing gender very differently otherwise.

For Zhu, the journey from being a nameless girl to becoming emperor Zhu Yuanzhang is highly private in in the novel. While a few characters are privy to her secret, it is only Ma who she trusts with the information of being neither female nor male. This is tied to the romantic aspect of the novel as the romantic companionship is depicted happening in private as a contrast to the publicity of the characters as political figures in the ongoing warfare (see Chapter 4). Moreover, Zhu's self-identification as genderqueer is empowering as it is depicted happening naturally in an environment that places a lot of pressure on how one presents themselves, not only in terms of masculinity or femininity, but also in those of class and military status. It is true that she initially assumes Chongba's identity and, thus, his masculine expression of gender required to enter the monastery, but it can be argued that she had little attachment to her gender of birth, which she connotates with nothingness since the very beginning (20). In *Undoing Gender,* Butler explores the relationship between the individual self and the social aspect of having a body that oftentimes ends up being the signifier of one's identity to the outside world. She writes: "The body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine" (Butler 2004, 21). Judgements based on appearance can be a source of anxiety for anyone: for instance, *Iron Widow* discusses this extensively while depicting solely cisgender identities. The issue of dissonance between the body and the self becomes amplified when discussing gender non-conforming identities, yet this does not mean that the experience would not be highly embodied, which is portrayed by Zhu.

What, then, does it mean to have historical figures such as Zhu Yuanzhang as a vessel for this highly introspective exploration of gender identity? In their investigation of historical fiction, specifically regarding the motivations to write explicitly fictionalised depictions of history and historical figures, Cooper and Short cite Linda Hutcheon: "As Hutcheon has observed, there is a suggestion that to 're-write or re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both

cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (Cooper and Short 2012, 184). Indeed, the contemporary outlook on history tends to be constructed through today's norms. Furthermore, this combines with the simplistic outlook on history proliferated in fictional narratives, which can be often attributed to medievalism in terms of whether it is seen as "monochrome" (Young 2015, 71) or perceived as dominantly heterosexual. The historically inspired retelling of *She Who Became Sun* thus not only subverts the frameworks through which binarized conceptions of femininity and masculinity are constructed both historically and contemporarily, but the novel also challenges the heteronormativity that is associated with YA SF tropes by offering a uniquely gendered experiences that are negotiated by their divergence from socially adopted norms. What Hirvi calls the novel's "postmodern engagement with fantasy structures" to allow more inclusive perspectives (Hirvi 2023, 34) can be seen as being at the root of these subversions. Moreover, the blending of aspects associated with history, such as harsh environments, wuxia warriors and strict gender roles to those associated with contemporary concerns like identity building and romance especially from an explicitly queer standpoint situates the novel in an intertextual point of convergence of works of YA SF.

3.3 Further Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, I demonstrated how different femininities and masculinities, normative and non-normative alike, are portrayed in *Iron Widow* and *She Who Became the Sun.* Both novels depict the negotiation of gender identities in relation to both individual experiences and the surrounding society as well as being integral to the identity building of the protagonist. In *Iron Widow,* femininity becomes weaponised and Zetian seeks to topple the governing elements that perpetuate gendered oppression to uphold an illusion of harmony. The narrative aims to show how deeply ingrained oppressive ideologies are not, in the end, absolute. Moreover, via the focalisation of Zetian, the novel shows the unfair and frustrating dimensions of the social expectations of womanhood. In *She Who Became the Sun*, femininity initially is something to be suppressed, but, via the character of Zhu, the novel discusses the navigation between what is considered normative and non-normative modes of gender expression, and how finding one's place within the spectrum can be liberating. Agency is integral in this process and the character of Ouyang, and his internalised narrow ideals of masculinity (Hirvi 2023, 24) is used to negotiate the effects of what happens when it is taken away from someone.

The subversion of norms is a key element in both novels, whether it is done by challenging existing perceived dichotomies, or exploring identities outside of it. However, to simply categorise gender as an arbitrary category to be subverted becomes somewhat problematic when discussing genderqueer identities. As an argument against gender being constituted solely via performance detached from embodiment, Rachel Carroll, echoing Jay Prosser, writes that "assumption that gender can be subverted by individual acts of agency underestimates the very real and injurious constraints to which the expression of gender is often subject" (Carroll 2018, 19). Carroll, alongside other trans activists have specifically questioned the ways in which transgender or otherwise gender nonconforming identities have been used primarily as metaphors for gender subversions and "rhetorical vehicles" rather than fully-fledged expressions of gender (20). While both novels portray gender being integral to the question of power and acts of subversion within one's perceived gender identity being a necessary means to seizing said power, they can be seen as adopting a highly embodied stance on how issues of femininity and masculinity are explored. Furthermore, it is easy to position norms and normativity in the role of the villain in the discourse of diversifying expressions of femininity and masculinity. Queer studies, despite their largely adopted antinormative stance, have also discussed how the image normativity as something to be usurped is also constructed. Stockton refers to Wiegman and Wilson who have proposed that "queer theory's antinormative posture perpetuates the misunderstanding of norms as exclusionary, rigid edicts" (Stockton 2022, 85). It is true that what is considered to be the normal is under constant change and full of nuances that sometimes gets overlooked in favour of rebellion. However, it is the amplification of rigidness of the norms that posits the narrative interest and social commentary of plethora of SF works, making their depictions of subversions all the more satisfying.

The exploration of non-normative femininities and masculinities, and what is considered morally acceptable often concomitantly foregrounds questions of sexuality. In the following chapter, I will investigate how the theme of romance emerges integral to the novels' questioning of YA SF genre conventions. Moreover, drawing on the discussions of the previous chapter, I will show how the two novel's depiction of romance is subversive because of the deliberate deployment of recognisable tropes presented in a form that challenges the heteronormative expectations of romantic subplots that have become commonplace in the genre of YA SF.

4 Romance, Sexuality and Companionship

Romance, ranging from tragically separated lovers to titillating trysts has had a considerable role in SF, and is somewhat of a staple in its YA iterations. In Chapter 2, I introduced McGarry and Ravipinto's discussion of the traditional goal of the fantasy hero being restoration rather than transformation. This restoration often involves a romantic element that occurs in subplots adjacent to the main quest, and with women in a passive position. They bring up Arwen and Aragorn as an example: "There is little to say about Arwen Evenstar who in the entire series sews a banner and marries Aragorn, two traditionally female roles that have little impact on the struggle against Sauron" (McGarry and Ravipinto 2016, 22). Indeed, the heteronormative presuppositions of masculine and feminine gender roles become contested in the studies of romance, from both feminist and queer perspectives. Andrew M. Butler writes that "[t]he romance has historically privileged the heterosexual union, representing it as a utopian goal of an individual self being complemented and completed by another" (A. Butler 2016, 55). Such complementation has traditionally excluded queer relationships, and in romantic narratives portraying heterosexual relationships it has meant undoing the previously established self-actualization of the women in these narratives by privileging a successful relationship as the pinnacle of female achievement. This is especially true for narratives that employ a pre-modern setting with oppressive patriarchal regimes. While the SF genre has seen a plethora of strong women, the masculine tradition of restorative fantasy hinders women's ability to fully exert power: "Redemption as restoration provides no change of a social transformation which would allow them power while remaining wholly women" (McGarry and Ravipinto 2016, 24). What being "wholly women" would mean is another question altogether, but McGarry and Ravipinto's analysis shows how the binarized depiction of womanhood where traditionally masculine and feminine qualities cannot coexist within one body has been prominent in SF. They utilize George R.R. Martin's warrior women as examples of the prevalence of this binary, pointing out that their masculine roles in society excludes them from receiving "acclamations of beauty" (24) in the narrative. The attractive female love interests, on the other hand, occupy passive positions that are considered more suitable and desirable.

On the flipside of this demureness, however, is the strong girl phenomenon of YA literature, striving to subvert the idea of what Bacchilega calls "innocent persecuted heroines" (Bacchilega 1997, 29), and inspiring many a fairytale re-interpretation that show these

previously passive young women in action. The empowered heroines challenge the control of their societies and emerge victorious, inspiring a better world for future girls. The exceptionality required from these girls has been critiqued as discussed in the previous chapters. Moreover, as Wilkins notes, there are also romantic consequences of being the 'chosen' one: the heroine is "so exceptional that multiple male characters lose their hearts to her" (Wilkins 2019, 21). Romance is a prominent part of YA SF literature and surrounding culture, but this the aspect has also been criticized for reinforcing the very same female stereotypes the genre has sought to undermine. Childs describes how the favouring of romantic relationships over platonic ones in contemporary dystopian fiction – that has been the main domain of powerful girl protagonists so far – often also enforces female passivity: "This specific stereotype, when extrapolated, privileges females' heterosexual relationships as the only important ones and, therefore, males as the most important social connections" (Childs 2016, 188). The path to established relationships may be tempestuous and competitive, but those relationships hold narrative importance almost equal to the worldly stakes of YA SF, bringing the adolescent heroine's concerns closer to those of the young readers. In this light, the older feminine stereotype is still present even in the active YA protagonists:

> The passive romantic heroine is at odds with the type of girl who can challenge an oppressive government, as required by a dystopian novel. These traits are reconciled when the protagonist's male lead provides romantic companionship as well as pushing her into her own rebellion. (Childs 2016, 197)

The rebellion and the heroine herself, thus, become fully realised only after romantic fulfilment, which is in line with Andrew Butler's description of the ultimate complementation of the self through the other (2016, 55), referred to above.

It becomes apparent that the concept of the romantic heroine carries a plethora of negative connotations that are in contrast with the contemporary ideals of newly empowered, strong young women. Veera Mäkelä discusses the subversions of the trope of the passive romantic heroine within the romance genre, exploring the question whether "the performance of traditional femininity" is inescapably passive (Mäkelä 2021, 9). Like Luis (2016) regarding fairytales, Mäkelä sees the answer in the understanding of the romance genre and the intertextual dimension surrounding it. Moreover, she names subversion of tropes "crucial to the development of the genre" (11). The recent years have seen a shift in the ubiquity of heterosexual relationships portrayed in popular fiction. The diversifying depiction of genders

and sexualities also challenges the persisting heteronormative social hierarchies, conjoining with feminist goals. In their exploration of discourses surrounding young femininity and power, Aapola, Gonick and Harris describe how "traditional discourses of female chastity and sexual vulnerability, even danger are still very powerful in discussions of young women's sexuality" (2005, 133). These discussions, however, are being challenged by new discourses that "emphasize the centrality and positivity of sexuality and a range of possible ways in which sexuality might be expressed for both (young) women and men" (133). The experiences of embodied sexuality, both as an activity and identity, outside social control become central. Thinking back to Judith Butler's contributions to contemporary queer theory, one of her central ideas is deconstructing correlations between gender identity and sexuality and thus affirming the dissonance between gender and sexuality from two different perspectives: "the one seeks to show possibilities for sexuality that are not constrained by gender [...] the other seeks to show possibilities for gender that are not predetermined by forms of hegemonic heterosexuality" (Butler 2004, 54). Both *Iron Widow* and *She Who Became the Sun* seek to challenge this hegemony by portraying romantic relationships that depict the diversity of gender and sexuality. These texts show both sexuality and gender as not only fluid and capable of change but also not interdependent on each other. Not only this works to broadening the view on certain sexualities and deconstruct the idea of a single queer experience, but showing queer people actively participating in romance plots that previously have been reserved for heterosexual couples also obtain representational significance.

4.1 Romance in *Iron Widow*

The romantic aspect of *Iron Widow* is intrinsically tied to the act of resisting the double standards of feminine and masculine presentations of gender discussed in Chapter 3. Moreover, Zetian's refusal of docility and determination to make a name for herself as the "Iron Widow" within the pilot industry inspires misguided hyper-sexualisations of her character, due to the presuppositions of deviancy of the 'unruly' woman. Unsurprisingly, she becomes increasingly frustrated of the continuous assumptions that leave her no space to explore her own sexual identity as an eighteen-year-old woman. On one hand, she is expected to remain 'pure' and abstain from sexual activities, and on the other, she is assumed to know how to 'consummate' her arranged marriage. This unfairness causes Zetian to lash out at the military strategist responsible of her who pressures her into having sex with Shimin in order to enhance their connection as pilots: "All my life, I've been told this [sex] is the worst and filthiest thing I could do! Do you know how many times my family has threatened to shove

me in a pig cage and drown me because they suspected me of getting close with a boy?" (Zhao 2021, 219). This can also be seen as a critique of sexual activity being the pinnacle of connection within a relationship. Furthermore, both in literature and in real life, the brunt of the imposed social control is borne by girls: "Young women are at the epicentre of the sexual/embodiment debates" (Aapola, Gonick and Harris 2005, 135). The perceived failure to conform with the imposed docility corresponds with danger, as discussed by Sara K. Day. (2014). Day investigates ways in which young women in YA dystopias have embraced their own sexualities in narrative settings that extremify the restrictive aspects of societies: "the adolescent woman is expected to conform to specific physical requirements that ultimately position her as a threat that may be monitored, controlled, or exploited by the social system in which she lives" (Day 2014, 77). Moreover, finding empowerment amidst repressive regulations of sexuality has been explored in YA, through the young female protagonist: "she uses her sexuality, subverting the ways in which other people's control over and expectations of her body have made her vulnerable in the past" (Day 2014, 84). These are precisely the circumstances Zetian is upheaving against: the governmental pressure, both on her body and mind, does not cease until the finale of the novel where she proclaims herself as the "Empress Wu", physically and symbolically rising above the system (Zhao 2021, 382). Female sexuality attains almost a mythical status due to this repression, which is seen in the nine-tailed-fox -imagery imposed on Zetian. The danger associated with this is justified to further control her, but conversely, she also discovers that she can weaponize her sexuality to her advantage: "My looks are an illusion to snag their attention. My decadence is a bait to stir their outrage [...]" (276). By embracing the sexualised image imposed on her Zetian stakes a claim for her own agency and subverts the society's expectations of shame associated with female sexuality that would eventually bring her to submission.

It is no wonder, then, that Zetian expresses disillusionment regarding matters of romance, or the 'power of love': "[L]ove doesn't solve problems," she says, "Solving problems solves problems" (179). The pragmatic view on the subject subverts the stereotype of young women being obsessed with romance or romantic fulfilment. Yet, the novel does not dismiss the importance of companionship, which is seen in her developing relationships with Yizhi and Shimin. This, combined Zetian's lack of female allies, recalls Childs' argument on YA narratives favouring male "social connections" as the most important ones (Childs 2016, 188). However, in the grand scheme of the narrative, at no point does romance take priority and it is Zetian's own will that pushes her into rebellion. For example, before joining the pilot

program, she refuses Yizhi's abrupt proposal to save her from perceived certain death: "Now you could bravely elope with me, and we could spend our lives as humble migrant workers in some small city, but because I never got to do what I wanted, I will be miserable. [...] is that what you want? Is that the life you want, Gao Yizhi?" (Zhao 2021, 35). The novel, thus, argues for female agency even on the romantic front.

As shown above, Zetian fully rejects the passivity associated with both romantic heroines as well as the female love interests of SF. However, perhaps the most poignant subversion of YA tropes the novel makes, involves the concept of a 'love triangle' in which two, often male, characters compete for the female protagonist's attention (Wilkins 2019, 21). Furthermore, as described by Wilkins, the protagonist's "confusion and deliberations over these potential relationships are sometimes seen as undermining the gravity of other aspects of the plot" (21 - 22). With the introduction of Yizhi and Shimin, the novel presents two potential romantic interests for Zetian that greatly differ from one another, setting up for the traditional triangular conundrum to occur. However, any potential conflict with the three is resolved by having them establish a consensual polygamous relationship, which is explicitly negotiated between the characters: "Cheating is deception" Zetian tells Shimin who is apprehensive to engage with her romantically, knowing her history with Yizhi, "He and I have talked about this. He's secure enough to know it's not a competition. That any feelings I have for you don't cancel out the ones I have for him. He's okay with however close you and I get'" (Zhao 2021, 308). Alongside, the positive emphasis on communication as well as the message "love can be infinite, as much as your heart can open" (308), the novel also challenges the ubiquitous, monogamous heterosexuality perpetuated as the "utopian goal" (A. Butler 2016, 55). The sexualities of the characters themselves are not labelled explicitly, but they all are shown being romantically involved with one another. Most action happens between Zetian and either one of the boys, but the kiss scene between Shimin and Yizhi becomes a formulative moment in the actualisation of their polygamous relationship, the "final line" in their "triangular formation" (Zhao 2021, 332). Moreover, this triad also holds symbolic meaning within the novel's context. The entirety of the heteropatriarchal underpinnings of Huaxia is justified by the palpable presences of yin and yang energies that are misconstrued for misogynistic purposes. This primordial duality is seen as a constant, which the introduction of a third presence challenges. The "mind realm" (Zhao 2021, 64) the pilots enter subject them to psychological trials that can become lethal, and the presence of Yizhi's qi-energy aids both Zetian and Shimin in this: "A soothing force spreads and expands through the Bird. Yizhi is

here with us. Not in mind, but in spirit" (238). Moreover, this further deconstructs the duality presented by the yin/yang and the idea of a balanced match that upholds the assumption of superiority of the heterosexual union in the novel's society. Furthermore, Yizhi's character is a contrast to the brusqueness of both Zetian and Shimin, representing and amplifying their tenderness, which the Huaxian society rarely allows them to express within their curated social roles.

Romance, thus, is a prominent element through which *Iron Widow* subverts the conventions and well-known tropes of YA SF. The romantic subplot does not interfere with Zetian's emancipatory mission, rather, she is the one who pulls Shimin and Yizhi along as a contrast to Childs' claim that YA heroines need to be introduced to rebellion by someone else (2014, 199). More importantly, Zetian is shown comfortable with her sexuality despite the society's insistence that she should be ashamed. The emphasis on comfort as well as communication about one's wants regarding romantic matters is at the base of her polyamorous relationship with her two love interests, offering a fresh perspective to the much proliferated and critiqued trope of the 'love triangle'.

4.2 Romance in *She Who Became the Sun*

Amidst the war between the rebels and the Mongols as well as internal political conflicts, romance becomes an element in *She Who Became the Sun* that foregrounds the private feelings of the characters, which is in contrast with the perceptible images they project as pieces on the political chessboard. This is especially true for Zhu whose internal negotiations with her gender nonconforming identity also affects how she perceives attraction. Furthermore, her parallelisms with Ouayng are deepened via the romantic aspect. Both of them regard their individual quests for power veering towards obsessive, to the point it becomes the primary constitutor of their selfhoods. The confrontation of this becomes most pronounced when they interact with their closest companions: Ma Xiuying for Zhu, and Prince Esen for Ouyang. Whereas in *Iron Widow* the agency to one's sexuality and relationship is declared stalwartly to challenge restrictive heteronormative ideologies, *She Who Became the Sun* adopts a more introspective tone where the romance operates within private spheres and contributes significantly to the identity-building of the characters.

Ouyang and Esen are a very complex pair that characterise the novel's approach to power fuelled by revenge as something all-consuming and unequivocally destructing. They are not a couple in a traditional romantic sense aby any means, and it remains ambiguous whether

Ouyang's attraction towards Esen is either because he represents the ideal expression of masculinity he himself cannot claim (Hirvi 2023), or because he possesses gentleness he himself feels incapable of: "As he looked at Esen's noble profile, for a moment all Ouyang wanted to do was to ease his unhappiness. Ouyang felt his own pain at seeing Esen hurting, and tried to imagine it multiplied by a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand. He couldn't" (Parker-Chan 2021, 211). The simultaneous longing for companionship and lament at their emotional dissonance is the source of Ouyang's emotional turmoil: he has grown fond of Esen but recognises that he must kill him to fully execute his revenge plot against his family, and reclaim that part of himself that was stolen as an ultimate attempt to grasp agency: "The residence's doors banged and slammed as if by angry ghosts, and Ouyang felt his ancestor's eyes upon him as he ate with the son of his family's murderer, the person he held dearest in all the world" (166). This becomes the foremost reason for why romance between the two is impossible, but it is also shadowed by their difference in class, and the general disapproval of homosexuality of the novel's time period. Additionally, Hirvi observes that due to Ouyang's constrained view of masculinity, he has also "made his attraction to Esen a taboo for himself" (Hirvi 2023, 21). When Esen compliments Ouyang's beauty comparable to a woman's (Parker-Chan 2021, 270), he feels only betrayal, not only because of his internalised misogyny (Hirvi 2023, 24), interpreting Esen's gesture as undermining Ouyang's masculinity, but also severing the possibility of the two engaging in a relationship where they would both emerge as equals: "[Esen] owned everything he laid his eyes on, and that included Ouyang. He had merely reached for something beautiful, confusing it for another of his precious things" (Parker-Chan 2021, 270). This perceived objectification is especially cruel for Ouyang who struggles with his identity and being perceived as "a thing" or a "tool" that "had no desires of its own" (91) for the entirety of the novel, and which act as justifiers for his vengeance plot against Esen and his family.

While impossibility marks Ouyang and Esen, Zhu and Ma are distinguished by possibility. Furthermore, the novel gives readers access to both of their minds through internal focalizations which provides ample space to the reconciliation of feelings on multiple levels of the narrative. As discussed previously, the character of Ma personifies the lack of choice women have historically had within the society, which aligns with Day's observations on YA heroines strive for sexual agency: "In particular, control takes the form of choices about sexuality as well as choices about reproduction—both of which are part of larger social and political discourses in which young women themselves are almost never invited to

participate." (Day 2014, 84). The navigation between imposed gender identities and private processes of constructing a selfhood become integral in the establishing of their relationships, since Ma fully understands the possibilities being with Zhu would offer, after she learns Zhu is not a man: "She wanted. She wanted everything Zhu was offering with that promise of difference. Freedom, and desire, and her life to make her own" (Parker-Chan 2021, 254). Zhu's nonconformity in terms of gender also mean an escape for Ma for her fate as a woman on top of being physically attracted to Zhu, which has not gone unnoticed by the latter:

> I'd wondered why you chose me instead of Sun Meng, since I'm so much uglier than he was, but now I know the truth: it's because I have breasts,' Zhu said. She'd found out the more she said such things, the easier they were to say. 'You took one look and knew I was the man for you (344).

The humoristic tone of this statement not only signals of Zhu growing more comfortable with expressing her identity out loud and the growing self-confidence she has gained after sharing her secret with Ma, but also shows how non-normative gender identities can be discussed in a light-hearted manner as a means of normalisation, even amidst the high stakes of the narrative, in which the characters are active participants of.

The emphasis on fate is infused to the entirety of the novel, and Zhu herself embodies this from the very beginning. While becoming the emperor is a public affair, the pursuit of greatness ultimately is a private process, and therefore, Zhu deems her relationship with Ma acts as a diversion from this goal. Yet, this does not mean her feelings for her would be disingenuous: "The thought of seeing Ma's spark crushed […] was irrationally troubling. Zhu realized she wanted to keep that fierce empathy in the world. Not because she understood it, but because she didn't, and for that reason it seemed precious. Something worth protecting." (237). Whereas Ouyang is constituted by festering revenge, Zhu is comprised of the ambition of attaining greatness. The personal and symbolical dimensions of these characteristics isolate them from their peers, which manifests in the disconnect from their companions who do not shy away from expressing humane emotions. The contrast this creates with the otherwise cutthroat environment of the novel. Additionally, Esen acting out elements of the same role as Ma helps the novel avoid the potential pitfall of having the only prominent female character symbolise tenderness, since she also expresses nurturing, almost motherly qualities in the brief moment she and Zhu share with the Prince of Radiance before Zhu ultimately slays him (399).

Butler observes bodily identity and how we always appear to be looking some way to others rather poetically: “we are, from the start, even prior to individuation itself, and by virtue of embodiment, given to an other: this makes us vulnerable to violence, but also to another range of touch” (Butler 2004, 23). The desire to bet encountered as one’s true self is recognisable in both Zhu and Ouyang, but the threat of violence, both emotional and physical stemming from their gender nonconforming identities and the society’s perception of them, is what keeps their barriers up. However, this makes their respective connections with Ma and Esen all the more meaningful, which is utilised in the novel’s explorations of romantic possibilities between the characters.

Despite explicitly foregrounding gender non-conforming identities, the way in which *She Who Became the Sun* approaches the theme of romance can be also seen as conforming to the romantic tradition. By featuring the two couples, the novel creates an expectation of romantic fulfilment, which is largely granted by Zhu and Ma even though it remains ambiguous whether the two will actually have a happy ending, or whether such ending is at all possible within the context of the novel since the all-consuming nature of Zhu’s burning desire for power that “scorched and blistered those who came near it”: “Ma knew that pain was something she would have to endure over and over again for the transgression of loving and choosing Zhu” (408). Moreover, this potentially destructive devotion that is present in both Zhu and Ma as well as Ouyang and Esen, is reminiscent of traditional romantic tragedies, provoking agonizing ideas of what could have been had fate not intervened.

Similarly to *Iron Widow*, the romantic subplots of *She Who Became the Sun* do not distract the characters from their ultimate goals, nor do they provoke dramatic narrative shifts in terms of their individual ambitions. Rather, the romantic aspect of the novel is highly involved with introspective identity-building of Zhu, Ma, and Ouyang. Not only are Zhu and Ouyang’s ruthless internal landscapes are contrasted by Ma and Esen, but the validation of the formers’ bodily identities lies partly in the acknowledgments from the latter characters, which is also where their paralleled narrative threads unravel further.

4.3 Further Discussion and Conclusion

The difference in tone between *Iron Widow* and *She Who Became the Sun* is prevalent also in their discussions of romance. In the former, emphasis is placed on the social meaning of the relationship, breaking binaries on societal and symbolical levels as another aspect of resistance. In the latter, however, romantic elements are utilized to deepen the introspection of

characters, to conjure reflections of themselves and their ambitions. Moreover, both novels feature explorations of the characters' sexualities in terms of physical attraction and sexual activities. This, alongside the extremely prevalent heteronormativity the societies of both novels enforce, presents a diversion to the ubiquity of the monogamous heterosexual union as being the most valued form of relationships.

As noted by Teo (2020), popular romance is still considered a largely white genre. In this light, it is interesting to consider the relationship the wuxia tradition has with contemporary fiction, as observed by Kamblé (2020). The fates of the romantic heroine and warrior women rarely meet because of the limitations placed by gender roles. Cai describes this as a means to "maintain gender coherence" in wuxia to "avoid dangerous confusion and impasse" by breaking the limited roles assigned to the characters (Cai 2005, 448). By deconstructing these limited, and highly gendered, roles, *Iron Widow* and *She Who Became the Sun* are able to portray romantic subplots that avoid the pitfalls of passivity of the romantic protagonist that is still largely associated with the genre. Moreover, the introduction of romantic elements does not act as a diversion from the main narrative, but rather offer respite to the protagonists in them striving to complete their goals while provoking introspection on their own identities.

Featuring explicitly queer relationships has been a point of contention in both YA and SF. Stephen Kenneally remarks that "[q]ueer fantasy's invisibility is no accident. It is rooted in the commonly heteronormative nature of fantasy as a genre, the tendency of queerness to inhabit the margins, and the power and potential that lies within the hidden" (Kenneally 2016, 8). Similarly, Anne Balay notes on the invisibility of queerness in YA fiction: "These novels work by containing homosexuality without naming it, and this covert queerness fits the demands of the YA market" (Balay 2012, 937). Implicit representations as well as having to 'read out' queer topics from narratives certainly is not a new venture for either readers, or queer literary theory as a field. Ambiguous queerness is in an intriguing position: on one hand, it offers safety from a largely hostile world, and on the other, it holds representational power, since the lack of specific labels might resonate with a larger group of readers, which can become important regarding the concerns of adolescent identity building. The two novels show that queerness can be simultaneously both explicit and ambiguous, which is in line with contemporary ideas of the sheer diversity of queerness, and the lack of a single defining 'queer experience', for example. Furthermore, as works of YA SF their definitive stances against heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality, subvert the underpinnings of the genre that still persist.

5 Conclusion

Through in-depth explorations of the three interconnected themes of the character of the hero, femininity/masculinity and romance I have shown how *Iron Widow* and *She Who Became the Sun* subvert their genre conventions by interrogating established frameworks of both SF and YA. These frameworks that constitute both genres and their points of convergence, however, are not absolute, but rather a part of highly intertextual and self-referential continuum that take into account not only intertextual content, but also paratextual elements and industrial practices. Rather, distinguishable conventions and tropes operate as markers of the genre, and the subversions of the two novels both reflect and refract these markers in a deliberate manner. By constructing hero narratives that diverge from traditional conventions of YA SF, the novels explore beyond different dichotomies that have been associated with these narratives. Moreover, as rebellious young protagonists, Zhu and Zetian's journeys are enacted on their own terms, which makes their rise to power not only transformative, but also self-reflective in terms of identity-building. Gender occupies a vital role in this, and the novels explore the social constructions of normative gender identities and how their protagonists deliberately refract these norms with either vocal critique of their superficiality, or exploring beyond binarized conceptions of gender altogether. The differently gendered hero-identities also affect how the characters view romance, the theme of which both novels utilise to further explore the introspective elements of their narratives, while also challenging the privileged position heterosexual unions still have in the realm of YA SF by featuring explicitly queer relationships.

Examining the convergence of both contemporary queer and feminist theories is an effective tool in analysing the three main themes explored in this thesis, not only because of their queer-feminist elements but also because of the decentralisation of normative assumptions is at the core of both theoretical approaches. Moreover, this decentralisation and destabilization is essential to Judith Butler's *Undoing Gender* (2004), which explores the paradoxicality of gender as both an abstract, performative category and an embodied part of one's personhood. The artificiality of norms that constitute normative gender identities is thoroughly examined in contemporary conceptualisations of gender expression, which is also reflected in the novels' discussion on feminine and masculine identities.

As reimaginations of the rise to power of imperial Chinese rulers, the novels deliberately reinterpret historical elements, mirroring them against contemporary discourses. Moreover,

the need for social transformations to break away from the restrictive traditions is depicted through queer and feminist aspects, which are thematically present in both novels. Thomas describes the transformative potential of re-storying as a way to "synthesize and recontextualize a multiplicity of stories in forming new narratives (Thomas 2019, 159). Thomas attributes this diversifying trend of narratives to the youth and the global age foregrounding issues of social change: "as young readers imagine themselves into stories, they *reimagine the very stories themselves*" (159, original emphasis). If social transformation and the emphasis on diversity is the product of the contemporary, it is no wonder, then, that concepts of history and the historical subject are especially brought under this scrutiny.

Despite dealing with challenging negative stereotypes, the act of genre convention subversion is not solely about portraying complete diversion from established literary practices. Rather, their true effect can be seen in how they are used to establish intertextual dialogues. By negotiating with established structures curated by both the genre conventions of YA SF and the phenomenon of retelling, *Iron Widow* and *She Who Became the Sun* can be seen as partially reconstructing these frameworks in order to ultimately deconstruct them. As Attebery proposes in *Fantasy*, this process is a part of an intertextual continuum that encourages subversions:

> Just as historians have revisited the classical, medieval, and early modern worlds and found that women and people of color were there all along, active, aware and resisting like fury, contemporary fantasy offers worlds built from materials previously obscured by master narratives such as Great Man history and imperial triumphalism[.] Even as boy heroes and white saviors continue to be written, they find themselves competing with other, more compelling fantasies of self-discovery and social transformations (2022, 135).

As nonbinary authors of colour, both Zhao and Parker-Chan contribute to the multiplicity of narratives by explicitly 'queering' their source material and depicting experiences that challenge the master narratives that have both imperialistic and heteronormative roots. Furthermore, the explicitly queer and feminist perspectives depicted in the novels' themes destabilise the presuppositions of hero, or warrior narratives both in SF and the wuxia tradition as belonging to exclusively 'male' domains. Despite explicit allusions to history and the portrayal of archaic social hierarchies, their depiction of queerness is distinguishably contemporary. This can be seen as another act of re-storying, particularly that of identity, which Thomas sees as a way to "blur boundaries between traditional categories" (Thomas 2019, 162). In terms categories of identity, the novels maintain an aura of ambiguity and do

not definitively label the characters. This, however, does not diminish the validity of their non-normative experiences. Considering adolescent concerns of identity formation especially, the different approaches the novels adopt via the characters of Zetian and Zhu depict the tumultuous inner emotions that can occur when one realises one does not fit the perceived norm or finds oneself in environments that refuse to recognise understand a particular identity. While Zetian lashes out and leaves none of her frustrations unsaid, Zhu takes a more introspective path, being extremely aware of her surroundings and thus others' perceptions of herself.

Despite being still often dismissed as frivolous, YA SF emerges a remarkable site for social progression, which is evident in the prevalence of emancipatory narratives even after the initial boom of the explicitly rebellious teen dystopias. However, while outside of the scope of this thesis, political tension remains whether transgressive topics are considered appropriate for adolescents, especially considering the growing list of banned books in the U.S. A report conducted by Pen America show that 56 percent of the banned books belonged in the YA category, the "prime targets of removal" being stories about "diverse identities" (Meehan and Friedman 2023). While this does not reflect the diversifying trend in contemporary book culture, to be seen as a threat further proves the transformative power of fiction. Moreover, Young observes that on a 'fandom' level, the growing diversity within fantasy narratives has met vocal resistance: "The term 'political correctness' itself suggests an inherently inauthentic statement, so it is a powerful rhetorical tool to counter a call for greater diversity in racial representation" (Young 2015, 76). Diminishing the value of diverse representation as 'pandering' or calling advocators for diversity 'social justice warriors' in a demeaning manner is an ongoing phenomenon in online discourses, showing that the battle against the presupposed white heterosexual norms is not yet over.

As is seen in the current trend of reimagining narratives, subversions of genre conventions are also interested in the issues of gender, whether the aim is to provide an explicitly feminist critique or offer gender nonconforming accounts that have been less explored in contemporary popular fiction. With *Iron Widow* and *She Who Became the Sun* as points of reference, I have shown how common themes of YA SF can obtain subversive elements because of the recognisable tropes and conventions they depict. Moreover, as trends change and new patterns emerge, the strategies of narrative subversions are also subject to alteration. However, as I have shown, queer-feminist analysis is an effective tool to examine these subversions, since the destabilization of the norm is essential to the development of genres as

well. Furthermore, this thesis briefly touched upon the cultural dimension of the two novels as it is integral to both their narrative content and their position in contemporary popular literature sphere as historically inspired retellings that challenge Eurocentric connotations of SF. Moving forward, as the genre becomes more culturally diverse, further research into strategies of challenging the medievalist Eurocentrism in SF, whether explicitly referring to a point in history or otherwise, is a prolific ground for further literary analysis.

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