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**HYPHAE NETWORKS OF QUEER LOVE:  
ERASING BINARIES AND EXPANDING MASCULINITIES  
THROUGH THE DANMEI NOVEL  
*LITTLE MUSHROOM* BY SHISI**

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## INTRODUCTION

Set against the backdrop of a post-apocalyptic future where, as a result of infections due to rapid mutations in most earthly organisms, human civilisation has significantly declined, the “Danmei” novel *Little Mushroom*, by Yi Shisi Zhou, narrates the tale of a mushroom on a quest to recover his spore that was stolen by humans.<sup>1</sup> At the novel’s beginning, the mushroom unsuccessfully attempts to save the life of an injured human. However, in the process, it absorbs their genes and memories and shapeshifts into a human form called An Zhe. He sets out to find a centre of human civilisation, where he encounters a human, Lu Feng, the novel’s second protagonist.

This paper examines how this work of speculative science fiction embodies the concepts of post-humanism and queer masculinity and rejects the narratives of strict binaries and the superiority of the human race over others. It highlights the author’s attempt to move away from anthropocentric and heteronormative thinking as the novel engages in narratives that showcase queer love and queer masculinities in a positive way—a way that does not conform to or restrict itself to the boundaries set up by a backward society.

The connection formed between An Zhe and Lu Feng evolves into a more intense form of love which is conveyed to readers as unconventional and forbidden, as they belong to different species. Moreover, Lu Feng’s status as a Judge in this fictional world, a position that requires him to immediately expel and kill any human being who has undergone any form of mutation, creates further barriers to their relationship. Nevertheless, the novel emphasises how this unusual connection is strong enough to withstand such obstacles. Lu Feng’s long-held fears and preconceived notions about non-human species are also challenged and uprooted.

The authors analyse how the novel situates queer masculinity through the behaviour and character of An Zhe, whose innocence, vulnerability and emotional responses clash with the idea of traditional hegemonic masculinity. As a mushroom, An Zhe is unacquainted with the orthodox ideas imposed by human beings on masculinity, including emotional rigidity and stoicism as indicators of strength. Though initially perplexed by the development of personal feelings, An Zhe welcomes all manifestations of emotion. We show how An Zhe's physical body and ability to shapeshift and protrude hyphae is a physical metaphor for gender fluidity. The paper interprets the hyphae as indications of flexibility in relations to bodies of any kind, mutated or otherwise, and affirms their right to exist. The hyphae that aid An Zhe in numerous ways are a manifestation of the network, a concept which blurs the boundaries of human embodiment and human limitation, along with sexual and non-sexual expressions of personhood.

Because nature and its constituents have been visualised and realised as dynamic and contingent in Shisi's fictional world, the novel exemplifies Donna Haraway's critique of the essentialist and harmonious natural order. An Zhe and other xenogenic characters symbolise the constantly changing and evolving aspect of nature as propounded by Haraway. Thus, the novel's narrative disrupts dominant power relations and ideological structures. It constructs new forms of solidarity between humans and non-human entities and promotes an inclusive narrative of queer masculinities and queer love.

Lastly, this paper also calls attention to the way that *Little Mushroom* contributes to the canon of queer ecologies by its queering of nature, interlinking queer desire and invoking parallels from the real world in relation to gender expectations, heteronormativity and human-centeredness.

### LITTLE MUSHROOM

The novel is categorised as a Danmei novel, an informal Chinese term given to works belonging to the Boys' Love (BL) genre, which features romantic relationships between two male characters. The term *Danmei* means "indulging beauty."<sup>2</sup> It is derived from the Japanese word *tanbi*, meaning "aestheticism." The term became popular in China in the 1990s as Chinese BL fans began to use it to refer to stories that featured male same-sex romance. Fans also founded several online Danmei forums, increasing the genre's popularity. Chinese readers often use the terms BL and Danmei interchangeably. Aiqing Wang refers to the genre as marginalised, while simultaneously reflecting an increasingly visible and popular subculture.<sup>3</sup> In a discussion of Xianqing, a popular online forum in China, Yang and Xu state that owing to the widespread presence of Danmei fiction, this online space has become a significant queer public sphere that defies strict classification and offers pleasure and meaning to its users.<sup>4</sup>

An original work of science fiction, Shisi's (a pseudonym used by the author) *Little Mushroom* was translated by Xiao from the original Chinese and published in English in 2022. The novel probes the limits of dystopian fiction as it imagines a harsh world where, in 2020, the Earth's magnetic field begins to disappear, allowing cosmic radiation to create widespread destruction and almost obliterate the human species. As the story progresses, the precarious existence carved out by the surviving human populations over the following century through creating artificial magnetic poles also comes under threat. The titular mushroom lives inside a cave in the Abyss, a place humans deem extremely dangerous due to the fearsome organisms and mutated entities that inhabit it.

While trying to save the life of a human named An Ze, the mushroom inadvertently absorbs his human genes, shapeshifts into An Ze's likeness and ventures out from the Abyss towards the human Base in a quest to recover his lost spore, something the mushroom considers a crucial part of itself and their life's purpose. The novel centres on this now part-human mushroom who refers to himself as "An Zhe." This new name suggests a new identity derived from the human An Ze, and points towards the concept of fluid boundaries between humans and non-humans as developed by Haraway.<sup>5</sup>

Haraway's famous essay "A Cyborg Manifesto" was written as a response to the essentialist social binaries prevalent in Western culture in the 1980s. Instead of viewing technological advancements as inimical to feminism, she proposed that technology be developed into a tool to advance feminism and enhance gender relations and expressions of gender fluidity. "So my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work."<sup>6</sup> Thus, the figure of the cyborg offers an alternative to the conventional dichotomous manner of representing bodies, while opening up a realm of experimental, perhaps hazardous, new amalgamations and alliances. "From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints."<sup>7</sup> Such joint kinship, as proposed by Haraway, is emphasised in the novel as the only way forward for humanity, a situation where mutations are accepted and the faculties and skills of different organisms are used to make a new world.

For Haraway, the cyborg is a hybrid being, which, due to its contested identity as not fully human, but also not a machine or an animal, serves as an incarnation of complex mixed identities. Simply put, a cyborg corrodes and destabilises all traditional boundaries. In place of a unified monolithic identity, in her essay she champions fragmented, multifaceted and interlinked identities.

As a sentient mushroom, An Zhe fulfils Haraway's criteria for a cyborg. In the novel, An Zhe shifts into his hyphae form whenever convenient. Hypha or hyphae are delicate filaments found in fungi, forming either a loose network called mycelium or a tightly packed interwoven mass of pseudoparenchyma, a term used for the fruiting body of mushrooms.<sup>8</sup> An Zhe displays these scientific characteristics of mushrooms and hyphae while also being able to transform himself and display human form and behaviour, suggesting parallels with Haraway's cyborg. As the novel progresses, the world of *Little Mushroom* becomes increasingly cyborg-like. Further forms of hybridisation and amalgamated individuals make appearances and, in the end, this reassembled, chimaera-like world becomes the new reality that humanity accepts.

This paper focuses on the strength of queer love, alternative masculinities and the unexpected connection between two dissimilar species represented by An Zhe and Lu Feng. Lu Feng, the second protagonist, is a human whose professional title is an Arbiter, a figure with the final authority to strike down anyone he suspects of harbouring infection-causing mutated genes. Anchored by concepts of the cyborg and non-binariness, queer masculinity and gender performativity, queer ecologies and non-anthropocentrism, the authors examine how the novel critiques essentialism and heteronormativity and instead champions same-sex love and equality between all beings that inhabit the Earth.

## AN ZHE'S MASCULINITY AND QUEER CONNECTION

Having spent most of his life in the Abyss, An Zhe is unfamiliar with the norms that regulate, govern and restrict humankind. Consequently, the rules of hegemonic masculinity do not impede him. Connell situates queerness in the ideology of hegemonic masculinity as follows: "Gayness, in patriarchal ideology, is a repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity, the items ranging from fastidious taste in home decoration to receptive anal pleasure. Hence, from the point of view of hegemonic masculinity—gayness is easily assimilated to femininity."<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the novel, several characters remark on An Zhe's ability to appear soft and demure, especially in the face of calamity. An Zhe offers the reader a subdued yet palpable form of resilient masculinity, one signifying resistance without aggression and impassiveness, as the male protagonist never succumbs to violence and its demonstrative, anger-filled signs, even when dealing with injustice and cruelty. The calm and serenity that permeates his character, often assigned as elements of femininity, is not a sign of weakness, but rather a unique form of strength that does not rely on disturbing, dominating, agitating or frightening others.

As the novel explains, a powerful extraterrestrial pulse is causing genetic mutation and fusion in organisms. As the situation worsens on Earth, this pulse triggers the fusion of non-living elements, unleashing permanent anarchy as the ever-changing composition of all things, material and immaterial, threatens to collapse all civilisations and infrastructures, with little hope of restoration. In this environment, Zhe becomes an anomaly when it is discovered that his genes and constituent elements resist the mutation caused by the pulse. In human social contexts, gender fluidity is often considered a destabilising force against biological determinism. This attitude often elicits fear and apprehension from the proponents of stability. From this perspective, the author has created a masterful characterisation of the paradoxical An Zhe: it is An Zhe's queer gender fluidity that provides stability in the chaotic world of the novel. By embodying both stable and chaotic elements within himself, An Zhe symbolises an equilibrium that requires the presence of both components for the functioning of the world. The novel lays out the desirability and efficacy of such an alternate queer form of masculinity through Shisi's delineation of An Zhe.

For Siedler, authentically alternative masculinities are those that promote and embody egalitarianism in all forms.<sup>10</sup> Surveying masculinities in literature, Hobbs notes that there is still a need to identify themes relating to men's daily lives that can highlight alternative masculinities and their practices.<sup>11</sup> Zhe's practices, such as politeness, open-mindedness, emotional availability, anti-machismo behaviour and body positivity, situate him firmly in the realm of queer masculinities.

The novel draws attention to An Zhe's habit of wrapping his hyphae around the wounds of xenogenics and other massive organisms that are potentially dangerous to him. Feeling empathy towards all beings, he would bring the wounded creatures back to his cave to give them a chance to recover and heal. He is also confident in the abilities of his shapeshifting body and does not detest any part of it, even though others often tell him that he looks fragile.

The author signifies the connection between An Zhe and Lu Feng in almost reverential terms. The highest authority in the Trial Court, Lu Feng is referred to as the Arbiter, issuing orders to all the other Judges of the court. He holds the record for the highest precision and accuracy when identifying xenogenics—a term humans use to refer to individuals who have become infected due

to mutations between human genes and other organisms, rendering their state animalistic and dangerous. However, even Lu Feng cannot confirm An Zhe's status as either human or xenogenic.

Exploring the network of events that brought these two characters together, the path can be traced back to Lu Feng's obligation as a Judge of the Trial Court to spend at least six months every year in the Abyss. This duty is enforced so that Judges can become familiar with xenogenics, identify the characteristics of infected beings, and collect samples of different bio-organisms for research purposes.

We learn that it was, in fact, Lu Feng who took An Zhe's spore as part of his sample-collecting task, thus setting off the series of events that led to An Zhe coming to the human Base. Additionally, An Zhe and his spore become the primary factors preventing a total human extinction, because his genetic composition stays inert and hence is immune to infection. The contradiction implied by a masculinist and anthropocentric task becoming the genesis point of queer ecocentrism, queer interaction and the subsequent intense bond between the two protagonists is noteworthy. It is implied that Lu Feng, who has been on many dangerous missions, including volunteering at the Underground City Base to restore the artificial magnetic frequency, has remained unscathed by mutation and infection due to having spent a significant amount of time in close proximity to An Zhe.

Zhe's hyphae also exhibit a strange affinity for Lu Feng. In their book *Intimacies*, Frank, Clough and Seidman examine the nature of such hybrid intimacies and their unexpected qualities, exploring their unsettling effects as agentic possibilities affecting the politics of control and exclusion in the real world. Emotional texture, a sense of the agency of the complicated, multilayered self, lends meaning to these interactions.<sup>12</sup> This emotional texture is perceived in the novel because of the perplexities that the two protagonists face as a result of the pronounced differences between their respective species and genetics. For example, a significant confrontation occurs when Lu Feng finds An Zhe, who had left the human Base after finding and taking back his spore, for a second time. The tension reaches a point where Lu Feng points his gun at An Zhe. Nevertheless, even during such a critical situation, their underlying attraction is intermingled with the signs of conflict, aptly conveyed in the narrator's words, "The muzzle of the gun suddenly trembled."<sup>13</sup>

Connell's views on masculinity are relevant here, as emotion constitutes a core component when considering diverse masculinities. Connell, discussing people whose behaviour is considered unmanly and non-masculine, states: "In its modern usage the term [masculine] assumes that one's behaviour results from the type of person one is. That is to say, an unmasculine person would behave differently, being peaceable rather than violent, conciliatory rather than dominating, hardly able to kick a football, uninterested in sexual conquest, and so forth."<sup>14</sup>

These qualities of an "unmasculine" person resonate with what we observe of An Zhe's character in the book. Violence and dominance are of little interest to him even when he finds himself in extreme circumstances, such as his spore getting stolen, becoming the subject of experimentation or being tortured for information. In such circumstances, he does not resort to the normative standards of hegemonic masculinity. His thinking is never determined by the primitive analogy of what men ought to do.

Connell argues that masculinity has been defined primarily by contrasting it with femininity. However, such a contrast between masculinity and femininity cannot be found in An Zhe. As Lu Feng's thoughts about him illustrate, he exhibits the traits of innocence, nurturing and compassion,

typically associated with women: “He looked like he had no aggressiveness whatsoever nor any vigilance or caution against everything outside, just like a child who had not grown up.”<sup>15</sup> However, An Zhe’s courage in navigating the unfamiliar world of the human Base and bravely facing its dangers are traits associated with normative masculinity.

## A QUEER, GENDER-FLUID MUSHROOM

Gender—a social construct, as Judith Butler explains—is an all-influencing structure that An Zhe escapes because he is a non-human entity, a little mushroom. According to Butler, gender identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results.<sup>16</sup> Although An Zhe takes on the shape of a male, having absorbed the genes of a biological male, he does not adhere to the performative elements dictated by the male gender. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler states: “That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender’s performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality.”<sup>17</sup>

Butler’s concept of gender performativity dismantles the notions of true or inherent masculinity while also creating a framework for expressing different forms of queer identities. The novel effectively exemplifies the bearer of such a role as An Zhe who, born in the Abyss, has no prior experience of learned male behaviour due to societal conditioning. Behaviourally, emotionally and even via physical manifestations, An Zhe consistently subverts masculine norms, both consciously and unconsciously. Such physical demonstration of the decentring of biological elements, so that it is no longer possible to identify the birth sex of individuals accurately, is a concept also explored in Samuel R Delany’s short story “Aye, and Gomorrah.”<sup>18</sup> These science fiction works may be regarded as establishing and expanding a new canon that focuses on creating networks composed of egalitarian elements derived from the deviant and the queer.

One of the most visible and physically evident ways that gender non-conformity is portrayed in the novel is through An Zhe’s biological process of giving birth to his spore. Moreover, once he recovers his spore, he nourishes it inside his body. An Zhe’s hyphae are intertwined with the tiny hyphae of the spores and, subsequently, this sincere and passionate act of reproduction and nurturing—traditionally regarded as the essential responsibility and purpose of women—traverses the boundaries of male and female at a psychological and physical level. It is an exemplary literary instance that evokes and celebrates Haraway’s suggestion of transgressed boundaries, potent fusions and dangerous possibilities.<sup>19</sup>

While reflecting on the phenomenon of gender fluidity, Coney developed the idea that it is the feelings associated with gender that influence people’s perception of their bodies, and fluidity in gender is determined by the constant yet inconsistent fluctuation of these feelings.<sup>20</sup> Such a fluctuation may be observed in An Zhe when he is hyper-focused on retaining and taking care of his spore as part of his mushroom identity, while simultaneously showing anxiety about his human companions, especially Lu Feng.

The physical characteristics of hyphae, which are thin and delicate yet exhibit resilience, provide a powerful rhetorical and metaphorical underpinning for non-dualism and non-binarism. These

hyphae aid An Zhe in covertly seeking out his spore through the vents in the human Base. Here hyphae can be viewed as a metaphor for camouflage, an action that resonates with queerness. Until they feel safe enough to come out, community members may cherish some sort of camouflage as it offers them a temporary shield against threat. Hyphae, a product of nature, are rendered queer and non-heterosexual because of their peculiar forms and quality of non-adherence. These queer hyphae protect An Zhe in escaping the threat of sexual assault by a human and indeed from any attacks on his person.

This quality of queerness is further enhanced when Lu Feng, the embodiment of human essentiality and anthropocentricity, falls in love with An Zhe after the latter shows him compassion, emotional availability and genuine interest. In fact, it is the stoic and emotionally rigid Lu Feng who initiates closeness and physical contact even after learning An Zhe's true identity: "In the silence, it was unclear if Lu Feng was driven by some emotion or it was just a subconscious action when he hugged An Zhe from behind."<sup>21</sup>

Chapter 23 of the novel explicates Lu Feng's point of view. It highlights how this tangible and all-encompassing connection challenges conventional labels and boundaries and encourages ambiguous relations between humans and non-humans. This romantic queer connection leads Lu Feng to deviate from his established code of behaviour, the mores which used to govern his actions. "There was only grief. Yet within the grief was an innocent calm, as if, so long as Lu Feng gave a reason, he would accept anything and forgive anything."<sup>22</sup>

Lu Feng and An Zhe act as queer, non-normative parents to An Zhe's spore. Here again, we find a blurring of physical and emotional boundaries and the welcoming of a post-gender world. The couple serve as a positive representation of parenthood for marginalised gay couples who face derision and lack of trust from the mainstream dominant society that seeks to exclude them, based on misjudgements of their ability to act as good parents. Zhang and Chen note that by challenging heterosexual assumptions about how to 'do' family, gay parents are reconstructing the definition of an ideal family.<sup>23</sup> In the novel, such re-imagining of family spaces as queer offers a counternarrative to encourage marginalised communities. The Danmei series, *The Disabled Tyrant's Beloved Pet Fish* by Xue Shan Fei Hu (a pseudonym), similarly portrays non-conventional queer parenting, the progeny of which also defy strict classification.<sup>24</sup>

It is in the depths of nature that An Zhe and Lu Feng finally yield to their mutual queer love and attraction and share their first kiss. Nature here is a refuge, a place of free indulgence of their desires, exemplifying the dynamism and diversity of nature itself. Earlier in the novel, it was established that the Abyss, populated by xenogenics, mutated plants and other organisms, is a highly dangerous place for humans. However, the protagonists' time there makes the readers perceive nature in a different light and lays bare its fruitful multiplicity. Nature becomes a healing space, while simultaneously brimming with danger:

Here, there was no trace of human existence, only open country all around and unbroken desert that connected directly to the night sky.

Just like humankind had never existed. No humans, no human culture, and no human base. All of the—all of the exhausting entanglements and all of the painful struggles disappeared along with the signal, suddenly dissipating like ashes and smoke.<sup>25</sup>



Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson discuss the delegitimisation of binary constructions of sexuality and animality that have informed scientific and cultural discussions of sex.<sup>26</sup> They catalogue a number of non-human, non-heterogeneous sexual acts that have been witnessed between animals which suggest the fallacy of separating nature and culture and categorising same-sex acts as unnatural. Literary works such as *Little Mushroom* contribute to breaking down these binary hierarchical structures and interlinking nature and queerness. A further example of the theme of queering nature is the torture of An Zhe's spore through experiments carried out by human scientists in the cause of humanity. Such legally sponsored torture echoes the torment suffered by nature in the real world due to the exploitation of its resources and human actions that Other and subordinate nature.

## XENOGENICS, NATURE AND DISTORTIONS

The hybridity of everything—a focal theme of Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*—is woven into every aspect of Shisi's speculative fiction. An Zhe and his ability to shapeshift between a mushroom and a human being—a phenomenon that resists the labelling and compartmentalising of entities, as well as the existence of xenogenics, with the complicated discourse that surrounds them—echo Haraway's notions of partiality and perversity.<sup>27</sup>

In the novel, the discovery that it is not only the biological genes of various organisms that are mutating sparks the existential crisis of human beings. Instead, the scope of the process was much larger. An amalgamation, involving every minuscule particle that constitutes the Earth, was taking place. Such a fearsome process would ultimately halt and dismantle all forms of infrastructure, all human processes and culture. Instead of a disclosure by a human, it is through An Zhe, a fungus, that the discovery of contamination involving all living things is first stated:

If, if something like mutual contamination could occur, if a living creature's qualities could instantly change, why couldn't other things do the same? And what was the difference between the bodies of living things—those DNA helices—and the world's other inanimate materials?

Therefore, paper and wood would also contaminate each other, and steel and plastic would as well.<sup>28</sup>

*Distortion* is the name given to this phenomenon. However, it is this distortion that causes human beings to view things and their existence in the world from a less human-centred point of view and to learn to tolerate and share space with xenogenics. The stability of composition of all tangible objects achieved at the end of the novel, albeit with high cost to the human species, yields a world where a system of strict polarities is rethought and revamped.

The gene fusion and mutations between humans and monsters comes at a stage where such an amalgamation is deemed to be peaceful, as no one entity's genes dominates another's. The welfare of humankind is enhanced as the strength of xenogenics is preferred over human-made weapons and equipment. Many humans leave the cooped-up Base and return to the ruined cities overtaken by wilderness to form small settlements there. The surviving people in this post-apocalyptic fictional world are now less human-centric—a community that is more integrated with their environment. Emerging from the remains of the old order, this new world envisioned by the author is described thus:

The monsters of the external world who needed food still eyed them greedily, but they no longer coveted human genes, or to put it another way, most of the monsters who survived up until now had already obtained human genes. Viewed from a different angle, under that all-encompassing frequency, both humans and monsters had achieved stability. It was an undeniable fact that humankind's intellectual superiority had come to an end long ago.<sup>29</sup>

This post-human world also realises the vision of a post-gender world as biological boundaries, which often restrict people into specific gender roles, are diluted and erased. It can be compared to Octavia E Butler's *Xenogenesis* series, which focuses on the genetic merging of human genes with those of the Oankali, an alien race.<sup>30</sup> According to Hadsell, "a post-human cyborg is presented as a more peaceful solution to the binary opposition that requires a physical, moral, and cultural evolution of humanity to a state of post-humanism in Octavia Butler's work."<sup>31</sup> Octavia Butler evokes sentiments that oppose the Self/Other dichotomy. Shisi's work may be considered a step further in this direction, given the way she has interwoven the themes of non-conformity in queer expressionism and gleefully embraced the idea of non-discrimination between different bodies.

In the end, Lu Feng and An Zhe inhabit a world that is brimming with queer post-gender bodies, where people no longer show disdain when it comes to relationships that are not strictly between cis-heterosexual male and female bodies. The progenies and families of these post-gender beings are also gender- and form-fluid, heralding a new biological era.

## THE FUSION FACTION AND THE TRIAL COURT

The Fusion Faction and the Trial Court are the two significant organisations in the novel that serve to drive the plot and shape the chronicles of this fictional world. The Trial Court, introduced in the novel's early chapters, leaves an immediate impact due to the brutality that is practised by its members and visited on anyone who comes into its purview, most often unwillingly. The unmitigated power of its Judges, who may have good intentions, is critiqued, and the bloodshed unleashed by them is a recurring motif in the novel. The horrifying discovery that their judgments are only about eighty per cent accurate, and that they are unable to detect infections in women, underlines the urgent need to limit their operations. However, any hope of dismantling the Trial Court is a phantom, and only becomes possible once the threat of xenogenics is diminished.

Introduced as a somewhat eccentric and radical organisation, the Fusion Faction's quest to negotiate between xenogenics and humans appears unsettling and unfeasible to humans on the Base. Ultimately, the organisation is responsible for unveiling the mystery behind genetic mutations and the unearthly pulses that distort all the frequencies on Earth. With the help of An Zhe, the Fusion Faction is able to determine the configurations of an inert frequency that can counter the pulse, a discovery which solves the problems relating to the frequencies of artificial magnetic poles. This discovery keeps the xenogenics at bay but also carves out a new way of existence, facilitating new human settlements that create open sharing spaces and social bonds with the xenogenics.

The existence of a convoluted network linking the history and agency of both these organisations is a significant revelation in the book—the author drives home the messiness, strangeness and chaos that this network throws up in readers' minds. Pauli Jones, the leader of the Fusion Faction, is revealed to also be the first Arbiter of the Trial Court. Jones experiences insurmountable guilt

as a result of being responsible for the taking of hundreds of human lives. As head of the Fusion Faction, he had striven to create a world where xenogenics were not simply labelled as monsters, disregarded and killed, one where co-existence between humans and xenogenics is a hopeful possibility for the future. His experiment involving a xenogenic ends up exposing the entire Base to genetic infection. As a punishment, he is tasked with examining and killing anyone who has been infected, an event referred to as the first Judgement Day.

Following this traumatic episode, the Trial Court was created, with the researchers from the Fusion Faction serving as its first members—at the time, they had more experience than anyone in identifying mutations. Later, the military took over. Remorse for his actions as Arbiter of the Trial Court prompts Jones to leave the human Base and relocate near the Abyss. He established the Highland Research Institute there, with xenogenics serving as members. This baffling connection between the two organisations underscores a vital tension that the author asks readers to accept—strange interlinked occurrences in the network of fictional history that emulate their real-world counterparts.

The Trial Court is a representation of traditional and hegemonic masculinity, forever linked with oppression and suffering, while the Fusion Faction is perhaps symbolic of alternative, queer forms of masculinities which are open to new possibilities and forms of existence. According to Judith Butler, “[p]ossibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread.”<sup>32</sup> The Fusion Faction, with their willingness to deregulate the process of Othering in relation to xenogenics, supports Butler’s argument about the need to accept a variety of gender possibilities. Butler’s idea of performativity is also relevant here as Fusion Faction members refuse to align their beliefs with the dominant discourse on the Base. They subvert the expectations and disparage the rules followed by their fellow community members and, despite objections, continue to assert their views.

## THE FRAGILITY OF HUMANKIND

Humankind’s interest takes precedence over all else. This motto, promulgated by the human Base, is denigrated throughout the novel as the survival of the humans leads to actions that result in the deaths of many other beings. Researchers, children, fertile women and military personnel are deemed more important than the others. To secure these superior lives, the lives of other human beings are sacrificed, rendering the Base motto hauntingly ironic and indeed false. Madam Lu, a woman and a researcher who has dedicated her life to increasing the reproduction rate at the Northern human Base, gives voice to her disillusionment with humans:

We resist monsters and xenogenics along with the contamination of human genes by foreign genes for the sake of preserving the will that is specific to humans and avoid being ruled by animal natures ... But to achieve this goal, all of our actions run counter to the norms of human nature. And the community we collectively form—all of the things it does, such as obtaining resources, strengthening itself, and producing offspring—can only embody the nature of animals. In fact, humans are no different from the monsters of the outside world. It’s just that because of the brain’s flexibility, they give their various actions self-deluding meanings. Humans are just one kind of ordinary animal. They are born like all other lives, and they are also on the cusp of extinction just like all other lives.<sup>33</sup>

An Zhe also repeatedly reflects on the fragility and weakness of the human species, whether it be their biological or genetic composition, which is highly susceptible to mutation, or their intellectual prowess. Human intellect is regarded as weak as it cannot find the causes of the infections and the measures that might aid in deflecting them. Furthermore, the creatures living in the Abyss are also gifted with intellect—it is not a feature unique to humans.

In his critique of the Anthropocene, Bauman argues for reconfiguring agency across the planet to deal with our uncertain future.<sup>34</sup> The novel supports this sentiment of resolving “climate weirding” and the climate crisis through non-human interventions; this is especially seen in the ending, where An Zhe’s self-sacrifice helps humans discover the frequency that corresponds to absolute inertia. In this way, An Zhe restricts the ongoing degradation of the planet and limits the attacks carried out by xenogenics.

## CONCLUSION

The science fiction genre was a significant contributor to Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto* and, nearly four decades later, we continue to appreciate the genre’s impact in generating new ideas, spawning new literary theories and exemplifying them in fictional form. Shisi’s *Little Mushroom*, through its representative sentient mushroom An Zhe, conjures up a powerful image of gender morphism, hybridity and queer assemblages. Similar to the cyborg, the mushroom and their associated hyphae speak to the possibilities of identities, sexualities, networks and associations beyond what is recognised in the dominant popular narratives of anthropocentrism, cis-heterosexuality, traditional hegemonic masculinity and the Othering of non-humans.

The article has discussed how through the character of An Zhe, Shisi promotes the idea of queer masculinity and explores how a queer network might be structured on the foundations of inclusivity, open-mindedness and empathy. The novel is a crucial work of literature that demonstrates queer resistance and perseverance, as well as the power of queer non-conforming love. Moreover, the article outlines how the book opposes human-centredness.

Shisi’s compelling narrative provides new perspectives that raises the profile of queer individuals and is sympathetic to their struggles, desires, attitudes and beliefs. Albrecht and Van Horn’s essay on the Anthropocene defines a new phenomenon, “sumbiophilia” —the experience of love that flows from living together in harmony with all the other beings that exist in our vast ecological matrix.<sup>35</sup> Our article has underlined how this respect and affection for all beings is emphasised in the novel, while promoting an ethic of sustainable co-existence.

Through detailed analysis of Shisi’s novel, the authors have argued for a more nuanced outlook regarding interactions between entities such as humans, xenogenics, animals, plants and fungi. The article recognises the interlinkages between queerness, desire and form, fluidity and nature. Lastly, our study delineates the emotionally charged queer network created by the non-human An Zhe, especially with the human Lu Feng, using the building blocks of empathy, deviance, desire and love.

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