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ONE ANNIHILATES THE OTHER,
ONE CANNOT EXIST WITHOUT THE OTHER:
DEATH BECOMES HER

ABSTRACT

The paper is based on the assumption that the balance of positive and negative, aggression and nurturing, or plus and minus results in the ultimate annihilation of the existence of both. The duality balance results in opposite reaction. The plus becomes minus and the minus becomes a plus. This is presented by the feminine becoming masculine, understood through Hofstede's (2001) division into masculine and feminine cultures, by taking on the traditional male role, ultimately killing the feminine, being no-one and thus becoming death impersonated contrasted with assigning attributes to concepts fully understood through themselves. This will be based on the female character Arya Stark in J.R.R. Martin's popular series "A Song of Ice and Fire" and its adaptation in "Game of Thrones."

KEYWORDS: Culture, Masculinity, Femininity, Personification of Death, Domination, Annihilation

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł opiera się na założeniu, że równowaga pozytywizmu i negatywizmu, agresji i opanowania, czy też plus i minus prowadzi do ostatecznego unicestwienia istnienia obu. Bilans obu prowadzi do reakcji przeciwnych. Plus staje się minusem, a minus plusem. Zjawisko to przedstawione zostało na podstawie kobiecości przekształconej w męskość (to rozumiane zgodnie z założeniami Hofstede'a (2001)). Biorąc pod uwagę tradycyjną rolę męską, kobieta zabija kobiecość, zostaje 'nikim', a tym samym staje się tożsama ze śmiercią. W kontraście do tego ujęcia zostanie przedstawione zjawisko nadawania atrybutów ideom rozumianym samym w sobie. Materiały, które zostały poddane analizie wykorzystują przykład postaci Aryi Stark występującej w „Pieśni o Lodzie i Ogniu” oraz jej telewizyjnej adaptacji – „Grze o Tron”.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: kultura, męskość, kobiecość, personifikacja śmierci, dominacja, unicestwienie

1. THE BEGINNING IS THE END AND THE END IS THE BEGINNING

Where to begin ... a logical man would say to start from the beginning. But when, or should I say, where is that? What can remotely be considered as a beginning? Do we see that through time and space, night and day, creation and non-existence? Or do our own human perspectives peek our curiosity on how it all

started, and in that case, what do we mean by a starting point. We are accustomed to thinking, or rather, perceiving one event as having a beginning and an end. It is only natural as our lives begin and end; the sun sets, winter comes and goes... a metaphor, 'as those we live by', just to mention Lakoff & Johnson's (1980) work. For ages we have pondered these questions and the answers we have come up with, are in no way contrary to the way we perceive reality. Popular culture will see this as part of our daily routine, as a fixed mechanism, a clock that *tics and tacs*. Whoever refuses to believe so, does not fit the generally accepted schema. One and two equals three and that is a generally accepted fact. And so it is. But what makes a one and two? How do they combine to make a three? And what is a three? Do these result from the Christian belief in the Holy Trinity, that is to say, that our cultural perception is modeled on metaphorical structures that then create imagery of the three creating One? Or does the Judeo and Islamic notion of the One God define our thinking?

Dualistic monism best explains the paradox of the unity of duality as expressed in Taoist metaphysics – the way in which they engage with one another as tangible entities, thought as being complementary and not opposing. In this sense life and death, positive and negative are seen as a whole and not separate elements, or, in other words, one cannot exist without the other; one defines the other. Death cannot exist without life and life needs to pass. One can find this philosophical approach in Buddhist scripts; the *Heart Sutra* explains monism as “Form is emptiness; emptiness also is form. Emptiness is no other than form; form is no other than emptiness.” Yet, one should not associate such considerations with Far Eastern reference only; Western culture has had its fair share of such concepts in both the pre and post-Socratic era (Origen, Hippolytus of Rome). In Hamlet, Act II Scene II, Shakespeare makes us aware that “...for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”, or Jean-Paul Sartre on Marxism referred to it as ‘*dualist because it is monist*’. Thus, if we have oneness then our cognitive perception will naturally question the opposing categories as existing complementary, but still as two separate beings. As mentioned earlier, the sun rises and sets – we perceive this as two separate events and not as one – the end becomes the beginning as the beginning becomes its end.

Some believe that the answer to the above proposed question can be found in language. The tool we use to communicate. A tool...nothing more. Or is there much more? Perhaps the solution is stored deep within us, yet we see elements as syntax, lexical variation, as just varieties of communication systems, and end up in the same place ... Just another system, where symbolic references must indicate meaning. The beginning of thought within a system that interacts becomes its end. Our perception of reality, as proposed by the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (1956, 1983), which, for a while became rejected amongst structuralism theorists, implies that it is indeed language that determines our way of thought and every culture basis its reasoning on the positive vs negative, as is our entire technological advancement

is based on the zero-one system. Linguists argue for conceptual categories of cognition, indicating that meaning originates from socially and culturally shared practice and norms.

For the purpose of this paper, the author assumes a monism perspective, however balance of positive and negative, aggression and nurturing, or plus and minus results in the ultimate annihilation of the existence of both; the duality balance results in opposite reaction as would be logically considered. The plus becomes the minus and the minus becomes the plus. Thus, they do not simply co-exist but do not exist at all in their current form. This is tentatively referred to as the *Plus-Minus Theory* – an epistemological metaphor on the existence of *complementary monism*. The author will use this approach in order to show how, when the feminine becomes masculine, understood through Hofstede's (2001) division into masculine and feminine cultures, by taking on the traditional male role, the female kills the feminine, becomes *no one* and thus is death impersonated (the minus annihilates the plus and becomes the minus, however this would not be possible, were it not for the existence of the plus).

2. FEMININITY AND MUSCULINITY ACROSS SOCIETIES

Expanding Hofstede's model for *dimensions of culture and programming the mind*, one discovers ever increasing layers that go beyond classic understanding of social, regional, organizational or gender distinction (Hofstede 2001, pp. 24–29). Having observed the evolution of human social construction, now spanning towards digital and cross cultural (as opposed to *intercultural*) relations, each marked layer then undergoes further sub-categorization. Hofstede sees this as collective programming, which separates one group from another, where certain traits are universal, a part of human nature, while others depend greatly on our own personality. Yet, it is Hall's classic definition of culture seen as the *secret language*, or in his words, "...a vast unexplored region of human behavior that exists outside the range of people's conscious awareness" (Hall 1990, p. 3), that clearly shows the complexity of the subject. Social categorization further involves the concept of *self*; in other words, one's own place within the group. This refers to our own understanding of interrelations within the group – how our actions affect others and in turn how we are affected by other members. This has been defined as *cultural scripts* and deals with the influence of set speech community assumptions on verbal interactions (Goddard & Wierzbicka 1994, p. 153). However, the focus of this paper is associated with Hofstede's dimension of masculinity and femininity.

It should be noted at this point that the scholar never meant to describe how gender differs in a culture, yet rather uses the term 'masculinity' to capture certain ideas. The terms relate to nurturing nature (feminine) versus assertive (masculine)

behaviors and ideals. So, the values are actually placed on traditional male and female values. Comparing them both, the masculine society sees social gender roles as distinct, where men are supposed to be assertive and tough, while women are tender and concerned with quality of life; feminine societies, on the other hand, see gender roles overlapping. We can thus summarize societies with a high M score in the following points:

- higher degree of gender differentiation;
- males dominate a significant portion of the society;
- priority is given to achievement;
- highly competitive, task oriented;
- value is placed on accomplishment.

In contrast, a high F score society highly values nurturing, equality and quality of life; conflict should ideally be solved through negotiation and value is placed on the art of compromise. Japan, Italy or Germany are considered to be examples of high M countries, while Sweden, Norway and Denmark result in low M scores (which seems quite ironic considering anthropological masculinity generally attributed to Viking cultures – a perfect example of the minus annihilating the plus; in this case the feminine overtakes the masculine and ultimately death becomes her).

If duality is considered complementary, then the masculine feminine co-existence ultimately results in the struggle for status, however the female desire for status cannot be measured using male values and definitions. Benenson (2011) assumes that there is very little proof that the desire for status differs between men and women and the fact that females are far less concerned with status, is a result of male understanding of status. Chapais (1996) concludes that “high status is highly sought for by females” whenever they have the opportunity (Chapais 1996, p. 13). Betzig (1997) assumes that variance in power has currently levelled off, thus one cannot simply add anthropologically female values to male ones and arrive at a *new woman*. Scholars across disciplines have agreed on various evolutionary factors affecting female aggression. Campbell (1999) reports the following:

In summary, women have long faced the same evolutionary problem with regard to inclusive fitness. Biological factors, infant dependence, and male reproductive strategies mean that the mother is more critical to the offspring’s survival than is the father. If a mother wants her children to survive, then she must be equally concerned with her own survival. Because of this, we should expect that women would have evolved a psychology in which the costs of physical danger would have been weighted higher than that of a male (Campbell 1999: 205).

Similarly, the traditionally understood nurturing nature of the female does not necessarily exist within the zero-one schema in nature. Williams (1966) reports on pipefish, seahorses, and polyandrous birds – an odd group in which “the male customarily assumes all or most of the burden of incubating the eggs and feeding the young,” while “the female is the aggressor in courtship; she is brighter, takes more risks, and is more promiscuous” (Williams 1966, p. 186).

Most of our perception is therefore built around conventionalization of norms. So, suggesting that a certain norm is conventional, is assuming that it is a norm that in some sense is the norm that we follow. Consequently, interpretation, or perception of events, societies and gender differences is conditioned by emotions and other affective phenomena, along with a set of culturally and socially interpretative schemas, which arise due to a set of manipulative patterns. Recent investigations suggest, that within the cross-cultural framework, processing emotions remains the same. Scholars stress aspects as experience and interaction with the surrounding world, arguing for emotion as an important factor in cognition. In a relatively closed social system in which communication among members is unrestricted, the system as a whole will tend to *converge* over time towards a state of greater cultural *uniformity*. The question thus remains, whether the feminine-masculine duality exists as conventional, or whether the existence of one is presupposed by the existence of the other. If there is good, there must be evil; where there is life there must be death.

3. AND DEATH SHALL COME

Life and death are frequently perceived as two forces of the *Great Mother*. According to Erich Neumann, death is the hungry earth, devouring its own children. In classical Greek tradition life is personified as feminine, while death is masculine. Hesiod established in his *Theogony* that Thánatos is a son of Nyx (Night) and Erebus (Darkness) and twin of Hypnos (Sleep). Please refer to the following:

“And there the children of dark Night have their dwellings, Sleep and Death, awful gods. The glowing Sun never looks upon them with his beams, neither as he goes up into heaven, nor as he comes down from heaven. And the former of them roams peacefully over the earth and the sea’s broad back and is kindly to men; but the other has a heart of iron, and his spirit within him is pitiless as bronze: whomsoever of men he has once seized he holds fast: and he is hateful even to the deathless gods” – Hesiod, *Theogony* 758 ff., trans. Evelyn-White

In the Judeo-Christian religion, death is not personified as a human-like figure; it is rather described by its actions. The Christian concept of death associates it with sin, which is regarded as opposition to the will of God. It is only in apocalyptic writings that Death is personified in human form – the culturally accepted pale horseman. Over time, different cultures have continued to personify Death, attributing a more tangible aspect, by naming it directly; in Abrahamic religions we encounter the *Arch Angel Michael* (as opposed to *Samael*, the controversial Angel of Death) and *Azrael*; in Far Eastern mythology *King Yama* and *King Yan*. Medieval allegorical personifications through the *Danse Macabre* or *Totentanz* (understood as our ultimate fate, no matter of who we are in life) and the *Death and the Maiden* Renaissance motif, further established the masculine as Death (the Maiden definitely added

the erotic context – best observed in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and general Vampire lore, where the kiss of Death is an orgasmic experience). Yet the XX century's most iconic representation of a white-faced man who wears a dark cape as portrayed by *Bengt Ekerot* in *Ingmar Bergman's The Seventh Seal* (1957) remains the current mass culture symbolic personification of Death.

However, it should be noted at this point, that Death does not only have its male personification. Here we need only mention *La Santa Muerte, Mictecacihuatl* in Aztec culture or *Hel*, the Goddess of death in Norse mythology, showing that the feminine has had its share in personifying Death. Yet conventionalization, as mentioned previously, creates this dualism of a nurturing Earth (a Mother – Life) and the dark abyss represented by the hooded man. Biologically and allegorically, the woman gives life, whilst the man takes it. This has existed in Western cultures thus creating the generally accepted notion of differentiation. The feminine and masculine, as life and death, are interlinked in *complementary monism* with one annihilating the other and one not existing without the other. If the feminine turns to conventionalized masculine values then she becomes death impersonated – she annihilates her own conventionalized feminine values (the plus destroys the minus or the minus becomes the plus). This counters all accepted layers of non-interrelated existence of masculine and feminine values, as represented by the establishment of moral systems based on a dichotomy of good and evil.

For the purpose of this paper, the author has chosen to focus on the character of Arya Stark from George R. R. Martin's "Song of Ice and Fire". With the series still two novels short, it is imperative to refer to HBO's "Game of Thrones" in relations to continuing events. The author will attempt to represent the above set considerations based on the aforementioned character.

4. SHE WILL BRING DEATH

The youngest daughter of *Eddard Stark* and *Catelyn Tully*, very early in her life, Arya Stark proved to be very unlike her sister, or any other girl, for that matter. Her own father refers to her in the following: "Ah, Arya. You have a wildness in you, child. The 'wolf blood,' my father used to call it..." (Game of Thrones, Ch. 2, 1996), while her mother considered that Arya "...had always been harder to tame" (A Clash of Kings, Ch. 45, 1999). She never intends to be a Lady or carry out lady-like duties attributed to high standing woman in Westeros. Her wild nature finds disapproval amongst the high classes, with many calling for disciplining her.

And Arya, well... Ned's visitors would oft mistake her for a stable boy if they rode into the yard unannounced. Arya was a trial, it must be said. Half a boy, half a wolf pup. Forbid her anything and it became her heart's desire. She had Ned's long face, and brown hair that

always looked as though a bird had been nesting in it. I despaired of ever making a lady of her. She collected scabs as other girls collected dolls, and would say anything that came into her head. (A Clash of Kings, Chapter 55).

Fueled by her brother (*Jon Snow* hands her *Needle*, a sword named after her least favorite activity) and put into motion by her father, Arya begins her training with *Syrio Forel*, a Braavosi swordsman.

Jon Snow: “All the best swords have names, you know.”

Arya Stark: “Sansa can keep her sewing needles. I’ve got a needle of my own.”

Syrio not only trains Arya, but educates her and it is from him that she learns about the *God of Death* (“And what do we say to the *God of Death*? Not today”). Although, the lore behind this develops throughout the storyline, the belief stems from many different lands and many different religions. As one may assume, all of these were practically the same as they all worshiped death in some fashion – this meant their polytheistic nature with having a God of Death, or basically a mono deity that had power over death. Over time the belief merged into the so-called *Many-Faced God of Death*. Followers assume that, as the only certainty in life, Death has appeared under many different faces or different Gods, but ultimately all of them are one God. It is this event that will define the character and her journey towards *Valar Morghulis* (*all men must die*). The phrase is in *High Valarian* and is usually answered with *Valar Dohaeris* (*all men must serve*); she learns this from *Jaqen H’ghar*, who never explains its meaning to her, however, Arya having suffered the death of her loved ones, starts using it in her prayer of people she wants dead.

In a series of events Arya ultimately makes it to the *House of Black and White* in *Braavos*, where she is initiated into the *Guild of the Faceless Men* – a group of assassins, considering themselves to be servants of the *Many-Faced God of Death* (the concept was based on a group in *Shia Islam* operating between the XI–XIII century). *The Elder Man* who initiates her, assumes the face of *Jaqen H’ghar*, but tells her that he is not him but actually “no one”, as all Faceless Men. He urges Arya to do the same – only then, when she leaves all behind, can she truly become faceless and serve death (*dohaeris*). Events unravel quickly, with Arya hiding *Needle*, thus actually never leaving everything behind.

Having survived the assassination on her life and being aware that *Jaqen* wanted to kill her, Arya confronts him. *Jaqen* claims that she has finally become “no one”. Arya disagrees and claims that she will never be “no one”; she will always be Arya Stark of Winterfell:

Jaqen H’ghar: “Finally a girl is No One.”

Arya Stark: “A girl is Arya Stark of Winterfell. And I’m going home.”

Her ultimate return to Winterfell is paved with blood. Having the ability to change face, she uses her new skills to quickly dispose of those who have brought harm to her and her family as *House Frey* will so drastically experience:

“My name is Arya Stark. I want you to know that. The last thing you’re ever going to see is a Stark smiling down at you as you die.”

Recent papers on the character have concentrated on the dualism of gender imbalance, portrayed by contrasting her persona with that of her sister, *Sansa*. Williamson (2014) sees her as deconstructing “gender norms not only through her outward rejection to act feminine, but also through her actions” (Williamson 2014, p. 3), which has generated criticism by Varga (2015), who rather supports Jones (2012), who claims that “she lives in a society that, while having empowered women like *Cersei* and *Catelyn*, still does not allow them to bear swords and fight as equals to men” (Jones 2012, p. 18). In other words, she does not oppose to *becoming* a boy, if it allows her to achieve her goals. Jones continues that she never denies her gender and becoming the labeled *tombboyish* girl, she is simply the form of the modern archetype of the *Hero*, which Varga sees as defying restraints of gender and social class as also represented in Ferreday (2015).

Ucan (2017) writes about the character crossing traditional gender roles and referring to this concept as *gender binarity*. The author sees this in her training with *Syrrio Forel*, when referencing it as a dancing class. The aforementioned Williamson (2014) sees this as a metaphorical contrast to violence, or as he puts it ‘in opposition to the patriarchal norms’ (Williamson 2014, p. 6). Similarly, Buchanan (2014) states, “this attitude influences Arya as she stops defining herself by gender and instead refers to herself as a sword, a cat, the wind, and a shadow” (Buchanan 2014, p. 25). Her final rejection of speaking in the third person and accepting *Arya Stark* gives her identity and acceptance of self. Following Ucan, “self-determination is the main goal, independent from patriarchy’s prescriptions, but also from feminist prescriptions” (Ucan 2017, p. 63). Seemingly, she remains herself, the *dualist monade*, yet that may only be superficial as the story is still ongoing and unfinished. She claims to be herself, however *Jagen’s* words remain prophetic.

At this time, the author will refer to aspects as consciousness and responsibility, referenced in Larrington (2016), seen from the point of view of the *metaphysical*. Although the book examines historical inspirations, which mirror that of Tolkien’s *Middle Earth*, one does observe inspirations raised through 21st century analogies, such as digital coding, which the author of this paper sees as elements of a piece of software, cut from existence, should their *being* threaten the algorithm. Larrington (2016) proposes that: “nobility is tightly bound up with the concept of chivalry, conceived in near-identical terms to the medieval understanding of knightliness” (Larrington 2016, p. 18). Arya, herself, is that who breaks the systemic understanding of reality attributed to her persona; to the concept of *self*. In a coded reality she

becomes the possibility of its ultimate demise. In order to survive in a new reality she must *change self* – adapt. The *self-changing* phenomena is particularly visible in Jacoby (2012), who presents a similar dualism as seen in the relation between human and animal as portrayed through *skinchanging* or *shapeshifting* and its moral aspects – by becoming something different. Although there are certain morals that the reader learns from *Varamyr Sixskins* about *skinchanging*, the character in fact rejects his mentor's warnings and rejects his morals, and strips him of his *second life* as it is that, which will protect, or rather preserve, his life, when the actual body of the *shapeshifter* dies. The metaphysical abomination of the animal within us that unites matter and consciousness. It shows the moral side of the soul and the animalistic nature of the material body's struggle against an ontological unity.

Now, with *Cartisian Dualism* in mind, the author of this paper suggests that the gender imbalance approach of post-modern societies finds its way into the key issue of the personification of death. Leibniz described the *Monade* as the ideal and everything around it, based on the assumption that knowledge can be derived *a priori*, with truth coming from the metaphysical mind. These ideas have been the basis for modern linguistic theory, stemming from the concept of a *Universal Language* and resulting in *Semantic Primes*. Wierzbicka (1997) maintained that there is also an "absolute order of understanding, based on inherent semantic relations among words." (Wierzbicka 1996, p. 10). In simpler terms, words cannot be understood by anything other than by themselves. They represent our innate ideas or fundamental concepts which, as a result, generate all other concepts. Such an ontological approach allows the human mind to conceptualize death, while culturally bound schemas then assign meaning through experience, beliefs or personal interpretation. Linguistically, we attach markers as something being or not (plus or minus). We attach these categories to ontological concepts, like death being [+Masculine] and [-Feminine]. Thus, if Arya has accepted her role as the *dualist monade*, then she is both the plus and minus in one...Arya is now *no one*.

She now serves death...she brings death...she is Death. As opposed to the other female characters, like *Daenerys Targaryan* and *Cersei Lannister*, who scheme, plan and bring fire, Arya remains the genderless personification of Death. All characters evolve, including her sister *Sansa*, who eventually becomes *Queen in the North*, passing sentence on *Littlefinger* (yet, it is Arya, who carries out the execution), however the character's journey results in the annihilation of *self*. There is no safety, there is no calm. Death is neither man nor woman. Death as a result is *no one*. Arya destroys not only the feminine (as the plus annihilates the minus), but by becoming *no one* the duality of values ceases to exist. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, one does not exist without the other, one annihilates the other. In Arya's own words: "*Nothing isn't better or worse than anything. Nothing is just nothing*".

Just like the semantic prime of the concept of death — she is one, genderless, both existing as an ontological concept and as a socio-cultural idea categorized

through Hofstede's femininity versus masculinity. Arya rejects what we would consider to be traditional feminine values as described earlier and chooses to take on the masculine role. In order to achieve that she must destroy that which society would dub as pre-determination. The very act of going against *self* implies becoming *non-self*, thus nothing altogether. Through her story arc the reader and viewer experiences the complete decomposition of conventionalized norms and the perception of the character may be conducted on these two levels of understanding – personification of death with socio-cultural attributes or on the level of prime cognition. Considering Hofstede's dualism of gender identity, one may ask the question of whether it is really *Arya Stark* or is this just a genderless composition? If God made us in his image, then the *Many-Faced God of Death* is personified through Arya, as that which will come to us all – she will bring Death, it will come.

That makes her more terrifying than any other character in the series. For those she chooses, she is the last thing they see in life. Her appearance means that death has come. Again, quoting reference to the death of *Walder Frey*, "*The last thing you're ever going to see is a Stark smiling down at you as you die*" – Death will smile at us all (all we can do is smile back). This gentle looking little girl, who never wanted to be a Lady, is the paradox of the gentle and harsh. If traditionally Death has been associated with a man, then Arya impersonates the feminine death; that which does not only take life, but destroys the soul. Perhaps, in this highly gender-wise duality approach, Arya Stark symbolizes the clash of the *plus* and the *minus*, the *feminine* and the *masculine*, *life* and *death*.

However, if we refer to the innate *attribute-less* concept, then death becomes her and death becomes him. Divisions, how deeply rooted they are, simply disappear. Again, one annihilates the other, one cannot exist without the other. Everything is one and in balance. And the beginning is the end and the end is the beginning. Arya symbolizes the endless conflict, which exists in the *collective consciousness* of assigning meaning to concepts, which are best understood through themselves. Death is a consequence of life. It is practically Newtonian, as even the very title indicates – *A Song of Ice and Fire*. For every action there is an opposite and equally powerful reaction. In death we are neither man nor woman; in death, like Arya, we are *no one... Valar Morghulis...*

In conclusion, the author would like to state that the dualist observational paradigm reflects that of the presented model of thought. Arya seen as genderless and Arya seen as the *Monade*, are in fact both, complementary. Each state represents existence of the concept as in the *Heart Sutra*, where the lack of form is also existence. If death creates the gender balance then the *Little girl is no one*. Arya both lives personifying masculine qualities and takes the form of a girl. A walking embodiment of that which touches us all, regardless of gender. By being *no one* she, becomes the ontological concept of death...*death* (traditionally a man) becomes *her*. Both together, they are *no one*.

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