

The Politics of Language and Identity: A Review of Gender-Neutral Expression in Contemporary English Poetry

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Abstract:

The growing recognition of gender diversity has profoundly influenced contemporary English poetry, challenging long-standing linguistic conventions and reshaping poetic discourse. This review explores the complex relationship between language, identity, and inclusivity, focusing on how contemporary poets employ gender-neutral expression as both a linguistic strategy and a political act. By examining a range of twenty-first-century poetic works, the paper highlights how language serves not merely as a medium of representation but as a site of resistance against gendered hierarchies and exclusionary norms. The discussion situates gender-neutral poetics within broader sociolinguistic and feminist frameworks, tracing how the rejection of binary pronouns, reconfiguration of metaphors, and adoption of fluid linguistic forms reflect evolving notions of selfhood. Rather than treating neutrality as absence, contemporary poets use it to articulate multiplicity, ambiguity, and the right to self-definition. The review also considers how poetic form—through fragmentation, silence, and rhythm—mirrors the instability of identity and questions the limits of linguistic categorisation. By integrating insights from queer linguistics, critical discourse analysis, and literary theory, this study underscores the politics of poetic language as a dynamic negotiation between expression and erasure. Ultimately, the paper argues that gender-neutral expression in modern English poetry is not a stylistic trend but an ethical and cultural movement towards more inclusive forms of communication that recognise identity as fluid, self-constructed, and perpetually in motion.

Keywords: Gender-neutral language, Contemporary English poetry, Identity and representation, Queer linguistics, Language politics, Poetic discourse, Inclusive expression

Introduction:

In recent decades, literary and linguistic scholarship has increasingly examined how language constructs identity and reflects socio-cultural hierarchies, particularly in relation to gender. Traditionally, English poetry has employed gendered pronouns, binary representations, and linguistic patterns that reinforce fixed conceptions of selfhood. Such conventions, however, have come under scrutiny as contemporary poets and theorists advocate for multiplicity, ambiguity, and fluidity in gender expression [1], [2]. Within this evolving paradigm, gender-neutral

expression in English poetry has emerged not merely as an aesthetic choice but as a conscious political and cultural act that challenges linguistic binaries and redefines the boundaries of poetic subjectivity [3].

Language functions not only as a communicative tool but also as an instrument of power, shaping perceptions of self and other. Poets who adopt gender-neutral pronouns or reject binary linguistic forms actively participate in the politics of representation, questioning patriarchal norms embedded in traditional poetics [4]. The shift toward gender-inclusive language in poetry mirrors broader

feminist and queer theoretical frameworks, where language is viewed as performative and constitutive of identity rather than reflective of a stable self [5]. This linguistic resistance is evident in the works of contemporary poets who reconstruct pronouns, syntax, and narrative voice to portray identities beyond binary categorisation.

Scholars have noted that feminist poetry historically foregrounded emotional and embodied language as a response to patriarchal marginalisation, using poetic form to reclaim linguistic agency [6]. However, the recent rise of non-binary, transgender, and gender-fluid subjectivities has expanded this scope, urging language to evolve beyond the dualism of “he” and “she” to encompass a spectrum of lived experiences. Gender-neutral expression in poetry thus becomes a means of reimagining both linguistic and ontological boundaries — a movement from representation toward transformation.

In contemporary English-language poetry, this linguistic experimentation manifests through pronoun instability, syntactic disruption, and self-referential ambiguity. As Kaur [7] observes, the poetic self in gender-fluid expression often operates through shifting subject positions — “I, she, I he, I s/he itself” — embodying resistance to categorisation. These formal disruptions signify a deeper engagement with the politics of language, where poetic voice becomes a site of negotiation between fluid identity and rigid linguistic structures. Likewise, Ali [8] highlights that modern poets employ hybrid

narrative modes and symbolic re-imaginings to destabilise gendered expectations, transforming poetry into a discursive field for identity reconstruction.

Furthermore, sociolinguistic research emphasises that the incorporation of gender-neutral linguistic elements — such as the singular “they” or avoidance of gendered metaphors — extends beyond grammatical reform. It reflects a broader ideological shift toward inclusivity and recognition of diverse identities [9]. Within poetry, this linguistic innovation not only challenges normative grammar but also reshapes the aesthetic and emotional texture of expression. The interplay of rhythm, tone, and pronoun choice becomes a microcosm of cultural change, embodying the ongoing struggle to articulate fluid identities within historically gendered linguistic frameworks.

This review paper aims to synthesise recent scholarship on gender-neutral expression in contemporary English poetry, identifying key linguistic strategies and thematic patterns through which poets negotiate identity and resistance. By focusing on poetry rather than prose, the study foregrounds how form and language intertwine to express the evolving dynamics of gender and selfhood. It situates these literary practices within larger theoretical contexts, drawing upon queer linguistics, feminist poetics, and discourse analysis to examine how gender-neutral language disrupts traditional hierarchies of representation.

The significance of this inquiry lies in understanding how poetic language, as a dynamic medium, reflects cultural shifts toward inclusivity. As gender identity becomes increasingly recognised as fluid and self-defined, English poetry emerges as a vital site where linguistic innovation meets social consciousness. In examining gender-neutral expression, this paper demonstrates how poets not only mirror but actively shape the transformation of language and identity in the twenty-first century — redefining poetry as both an artistic and ethical response to the evolving politics of being.

II. Literature Review

The discourse surrounding gender-neutral expression in contemporary English poetry has evolved from broader linguistic and feminist debates about the relationship between language and power. Early scholarship on language and gender primarily focused on how linguistic structures reinforce patriarchal dominance [10]. However, the advent of queer theory and post-structuralist perspectives introduced a more fluid understanding of identity, highlighting the performative nature of gender and its dependence on linguistic representation [11]. In poetry, these ideas have been reinterpreted through experimental forms, where linguistic disruption mirrors the fluidity of gender and the instability of the poetic self.

Studies on feminist poetics provide a foundation for understanding gendered language as both a medium of expression and a

site of resistance. Moi [12] argues that feminist writers use poetic form to reclaim agency over linguistic space, challenging male-centric traditions of authorship. Similarly, Showalter [13] demonstrates how the “gynocritical” approach in literature foregrounds female linguistic subjectivity and collective experience. These early frameworks paved the way for the emergence of gender-neutral poetic practices, which extend beyond female authorship to encompass the entire spectrum of gender diversity.

Recent research indicates that contemporary poets increasingly employ gender-neutral pronouns and non-binary syntax as strategies to express identities that defy categorisation. Cameron [14] notes that such linguistic choices reflect an ideological commitment to inclusivity, transforming poetry into a political medium of self-definition. Likewise, Motschenbacher [15] explores how gender-neutral lexicons in English create new modes of relationality, allowing poets to construct fluid and intersectional identities through linguistic play. This movement is not confined to English-speaking contexts but resonates globally, suggesting a broader cultural shift in how literature negotiates identity through language.

In the realm of English poetry, scholars have observed that gender-neutral expression frequently coexists with formal innovation. Kaur [16] analyses how contemporary poets use shifting pronouns and fragmented syntax to mirror the instability of selfhood, creating spaces where identity remains in flux. Similarly, Ali [17] highlights that gender-fluid

poetic voices challenge narrative coherence and authorial fixity, inviting readers to participate in the construction of meaning. These stylistic disruptions are not purely aesthetic; they signify a deliberate rejection of linguistic hierarchies and a reclamation of voice from the constraints of binary grammar.

Furthermore, the intersection of queer linguistics and poetic discourse has deepened the analytical framework for studying gender-neutral expression. Bucholtz and Hall [18] propose that linguistic identity is emergent and interactional, shaped through discourse rather than inherent in the speaker. When applied to poetry, this concept implies that the poetic persona becomes an act of performance—constructed through the strategic deployment of pronouns, metaphor, and rhythm. Contemporary poets such as Carol Ann Duffy, Ocean Vuong, and Eileen Myles exemplify this approach by embedding linguistic ambiguity into their work, transforming language itself into a site of gender negotiation.

Collectively, the reviewed literature underscores that gender-neutral expression in modern English poetry is not a linguistic novelty but a form of cultural intervention. By dismantling the binary scaffolding of language, poets articulate identities that resist categorisation and privilege multiplicity over conformity. The intersection of feminist linguistics, queer theory, and poetic innovation thus establishes a fertile ground for examining how contemporary poetry reflects—and redefines—the politics of language and identity. However, there remains a research gap in

systematically reviewing the specific linguistic mechanisms through which poets achieve neutrality and how these mechanisms differ across cultural or regional contexts. Addressing this gap forms the central motivation for the present review.

III. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical review methodology to examine the representation of gender-neutral expression in contemporary English poetry. The approach is grounded in interpretative literary analysis and informed by frameworks from feminist linguistics, queer theory, and discourse studies. Since the focus of this paper is to synthesise existing scholarship rather than conduct empirical linguistic testing, the methodology prioritises conceptual integration, thematic categorisation, and interpretive evaluation of peer-reviewed academic sources.

A. Research Design

The research adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) model, following the methodological guidance proposed by Snyder [19], which emphasises structured selection, critical appraisal, and synthesis of scholarly works. This design allows the study to trace conceptual developments in gender-neutral poetic expression and to highlight emerging linguistic trends in modern English literature. The review draws upon primary literary criticism, peer-reviewed journal articles, and theoretical treatises published between 1990

and 2025 to ensure both historical context and contemporary relevance.

The selected literature was categorised into three major domains:

1. Linguistic Studies – examining theories of gender-neutral or inclusive language;
2. Poetic Studies – focusing on stylistic and formal experimentation in English poetry;
3. Theoretical Frameworks – including feminist, queer, and post-structuralist perspectives on language and identity.

B. Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The data for this review were derived from academic databases such as JSTOR, Scopus, Taylor & Francis Online, and Google Scholar. Search keywords included combinations of: “gender-neutral language in poetry,” “queer poetics,” “non-binary identity in English literature,” “language and gender politics,” and “feminist linguistic theory.”

Inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Articles published in peer-reviewed journals or edited academic volumes;
- Research focusing on English-language poetry (post-1990);
- Studies addressing linguistic or identity-related aspects of gender expression.

Exclusion criteria eliminated popular essays, non-academic commentaries, and non-English literary analyses. The final corpus included over 40 academic papers, out of which 20 key studies were selected for detailed analytical

synthesis based on their relevance, theoretical depth, and contribution to the discourse.

C. Analytical Framework

The review employs thematic content analysis, drawing on the interpretive models of Braun and Clarke [20]. Texts were coded under major themes such as pronoun politics, linguistic inclusivity, performative identity, formal experimentation, and intersectionality. This approach enabled the researcher to identify patterns of representation and recurring linguistic motifs within gender-neutral poetic expression.

In addition, the methodology integrates insights from critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how poetic language constructs, resists, or redefines gendered identities [21]. This dual-layered framework—combining thematic and discourse analysis—ensures both textual and socio-linguistic depth in interpreting the reviewed literature.

D. Reliability and Validity

To maintain methodological rigour, cross-verification of themes was undertaken by comparing multiple scholarly interpretations across similar poetic works. The triangulation of theoretical sources from feminist linguistics, queer studies, and literary criticism enhances the validity of the findings. Following the recommendations of Creswell [22], interpretative neutrality was maintained by ensuring that no single theoretical perspective dominated the analysis.

E. Ethical Considerations

Since this research is based solely on secondary data from published academic sources, ethical concerns were minimal. However, all cited materials are appropriately credited according to IEEE referencing standards, ensuring academic transparency and intellectual honesty.

Overall, this methodological approach provides a robust framework for synthesising current academic insights on the linguistic politics of gender-neutral poetry. By integrating literary analysis with sociolinguistic and cultural perspectives, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how language operates as a medium for identity reconstruction and inclusivity within the contemporary poetic landscape.

IV. Findings and Discussion

The review of contemporary English poetry reveals that gender-neutral expression has evolved beyond a linguistic reform into a mode of cultural resistance. Poets increasingly employ neutral pronouns, fluid narrative voices, and ambiguous subject positions to question the coherence of gendered identity. The findings suggest that such strategies not only challenge grammatical conventions but also dismantle the ideological binaries embedded in language [23].

One key observation is that poets use linguistic indeterminacy as an aesthetic tool. Instead of merely replacing “he” or “she” with “they,” many poets deliberately manipulate syntax, rhythm, and metaphor to unsettle gender expectations [24]. This creative use of ambiguity reflects Judith Butler’s notion of

gender as a performative act rather than a stable identity [25]. In several poems analysed within the reviewed literature, the shifting of pronouns and narrative voices signals an effort to construct spaces of linguistic inclusivity where non-binary identities can exist without constraint.

Another significant pattern involves the intersection of linguistic politics and emotional self-expression. Scholars note that neutral language in poetry often accompanies themes of alienation, belonging, and re-embodiment [26]. This convergence of form and feeling reinforces the idea that language is not merely a communicative tool but an instrument of identity negotiation [27]. Moreover, poets such as Ocean Vuong and Danez Smith exemplify how the lyrical voice transforms grammatical neutrality into a gesture of solidarity, aligning poetic aesthetics with social justice [28].

The findings also highlight a persistent tension between innovation and intelligibility. While some critics argue that excessive linguistic experimentation risks alienating readers, others contend that this very disruption fosters awareness of normative language structures [29]. The discussion underscores that gender-neutral poetry operates as both art and activism—a transformative linguistic practice that exposes the politics of naming and recognition.

Ultimately, contemporary English poetry demonstrates that the pursuit of gender-neutral expression is not a superficial grammatical adjustment but a profound re-imagining of language, identity, and power.

V. Conclusion

The exploration of gender-neutral expression in contemporary English poetry reveals a powerful linguistic and cultural transformation. Poets are no longer confined by the grammatical binaries that once defined literary voice; instead, they employ neutral pronouns, fragmented syntax, and fluid narrative perspectives to articulate identities that transcend traditional categories. Through this linguistic innovation, poetry becomes a site of resistance, where language evolves to mirror the complexities of modern identity.

The study underscores that gender-neutral expression is not a mere stylistic preference but a deliberate political and ethical stance. By reconfiguring the relationship between language and selfhood, poets challenge exclusionary norms and invite readers to perceive gender as a continuum rather than a fixed binary. This ongoing shift in poetic discourse demonstrates that words hold the capacity to reimagine cultural values and reshape social understanding.

Ultimately, gender-neutral poetry exemplifies the dynamic interplay between art, language, and identity. It reaffirms the role of literature as a transformative space—one that not only reflects but actively constructs more inclusive modes of human expression.

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