

Representation of Posthuman Trope in Cyborg Literature: An Overview

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Abstract:

Cyborg literature is concerned with an imaginative and imaginary exploration of the extent to which cybernetic organs can evolve themselves with the help of the inventions of techno-science so as to adapt themselves to the post-biological condition for their survival. The present paper will address the question of the possibility of a cyborg to retain its cognitive potency. It will also take into account the cyborg writers' handling of the issue of identity of the cybernetic organism and more importantly, their gendered identity. It will also address the neo-colonial perspective implicit in cyborg literature, because the cyborg writers' projection of transhumanist side of the entire method of equipping human species for survival in posthumanist condition involves the issue of the economic power, as the people of the economically less affluent countries will always be exploited by their counterparts in the wealthy nations. The paper will conclude with the prolepsis that humans and machines will fully develop their interconnected potentials, to facilitate an original interspecies venture into the quest for existence.

Keywords: Cyborg, Transhumanism, Posthumanism, Neo-colonialism, Techno Science, Gender, Identity.

Technology, which was initially an outfit of human existence, has emerged in the recent years as a potential means to guarantee humanity a place in the Post-biological future. It aims at improving human capability so that eventually homosapiens will change into beings far superior to any human that has ever lived on earth. This ambition of techno science thus points to the possibility or claim of a 'post-human' state of existence. "Posthumanism", a term coined by the postmodern theorist Ihab Hassan in an article entitled "Prometheus as Performer: Towards a Posthumanist Culture?" (1977), gives shape to the posthuman

aesthetics, featuring techno-mythologies and cyborg embodiment. Within the post-humanist theoretical framework, as it has been asserted by Martin Heidegger in his essay *The Question concerning Technology*, “Technology is a way of revealing”¹ (Heidegger). This potential of techno-Science to enable human beings to survive as a more equipped species in the post-human condition has enkindled the imagination of some Science Fiction writers to create a substantial body of what is now described as Cyborg Literature. Donna Haraway defines cyborgs² as ‘hybrid creatures’, composed of ‘special kinds’ of organisms and machines, beings that will demolish gender stereotypes. To quote Haraway, “Cyborgs are post-Second World War hybrid entities, made of, first, ourselves and other organic creatures in our unchosen, high technological guise as information systems, texts, and ergonomically controlled labouring, desiring, and reproducing systems. The second essential ingredient in cyborgs is machines in their guise, also, as communication systems, texts, and self-acting, ergonomically designed apparatuses.” (Haraway 1)

A plethora of critical issues have been raised regarding the ultimate ethics, responsibilities, accountabilities, motives, directives, and purposes of this technological advancement in our rapidly evolving contemporary culture and society. In a bid to outline certain theoretical perspectives of Posthumanism associated and reflected in Cyborg Literature, this paper attempts to study how the cyborg writers respond to the question of the possibility of a cyborg to retain its cognitive potency. It will also address the neo-colonial perspective implicit in cyborg literature, because the cyborg writers’ projection of transhumanist side of the entire method of equipping human species for survival in posthumanist condition by enabling them to transcend their physio-chemical human weaknesses, vulnerabilities and limitations definitely involved the issue of the economic power, as the people of the economically less affluent and less advanced countries will always be exploited by their counterparts in the wealthy nations. Another important issue is that of the the cyborg writers’ handling of the issue of identity of the cybernetic organisms (because the cyborgs are claimed to be both individuals and members of a unique species) and more importantly, the gendered identity of the cyborgs (because the theorists of cyborg literature are mostly in favour of the obliteration of the male/female as well as masculine/feminine binaries). A study of this aspect of cyborg literature is inevitable because the perpetuation of the process of reproduction of cyborgs has to be ensured in the post-biological state, which cannot happen if the gendered dimension of the cyborgs is done away with. On the other hand, if the gendered identity is to be retained, then the feminine aspect of

a cybernetic organ will be a puzzle or an enigma which the theorists stress on avoiding. Cyborg literature prognosticates, following the path of radical feminism, a self-transformed future of homo sapiens in the form of the cyborg, a genderless entity that holds the key to rise above the politics of the body.

The effect of technological invasion and intervention into human life and the consequent complexification of the issue of human soul and consciousness have been vividly explored by Friedrich Nietzsche, René Descartes, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Dona Haraway. In some way or the other, the Cyborg writers grapple with the same compulsive question of presenting human thought keeping the ‘ghost’³ alive in the ‘machine’, and of the possibility of a totalitarian society where there will be a loss of judgementality and the subsequent “total eclipse of moral values”⁴ in the man-machine. The battle against the ‘Author of Nature’ will involve sacrificing of spontaneity and instrumentalising of the human thought. But it is also possible that by divesting cybernetic organics of sentiments and emotions, the technological advance will enhance the process of evolution in a way as to lead to the emergence of Shavian ‘Superman’ or the Nietzscheian ‘*overman*’, equipped with what Sri Aurovindo, the famous Indian philosopher, calls “supramental consciousness” since evolution is primarily seen as an ongoing amelioration of consciousness.

Human body, like any material system, is technological, since it memorizes and processes information and draws inferences based on the regulating effect of behaviour pattern from memory to decide upon the appropriate course of action/reaction or response to a specific situation by applying its cognitive potency. It is probably drawing on this notion of the technologicality of human entities that Lyotard anticipates in his essay “Can thought go on without a Body?” the possibility of manufacturing a super hardware, that is, “the thinking or representing machine”, the software of which will not only simulate the perceived experiences of human mind, but will also be able to deconstruct that knowledge like a human brain can, thereby producing a ‘tabula rasa’ and start existing anew in a more efficient fashion than the humans. The limiting pattern of human thought with its perennial longing would thus get manifested in the created machines. Moreover, to battle with the ‘irrational and illogical’ self of the maker, the machine may serve as a wishful projection of man’s spiritual quest for the homogeneity of thought. Lyotard’s proposition indicates an unprecedented ambition which has been quite successfully explored in Sujoy Ghosh’s short film *Anukul*, adapted from Satyajit Ray’s short story of the same name. In this film, the robot protagonist has not only a human name, but it looks exactly like a human, acts like one and at

times even thinks like one. Anukul, the android, is an innocent looking ‘man’, who loves to read and is fascinated by the collection of books at his employer’s house. He does not sleep and so he spends all his free time reading. But his reading is not just mechanical; he knows how to interpret and that makes him better than most humans. Anukul and Nikunj, as their conversations show, share a student-teacher relationship. They discuss *The Gita* and Dharma, and the tenor of this discussion is related to the plot of the film as well. It has also been shown that though the android can be manipulated by man because a man’s capacity to think, interpret and feel is supposed to exceed the robot’s, but the robot is designed with a cognitive autonomy, which, though limited, enables him to react in his own way when he needs to resist the human effort of violation of his intellectual autonomy.

Scientific and technological invention stimulates the creative imagination and does leave its impact on various forms of art like literature and film. Naturally, the theme of designing and shaping up human thought by the application of advanced scientific techniques has appealed to a number of writers and film makers. They explore not only how technology has been working to simulate the ‘conditions of life and thought to make thinking materially possible’ for a cyborg but also where the issue stands in the perspective of global economy. For example, Isaac Asimov assumes that even in the early-twenty-first century, the humanoid machines are still under the control of private, capitalistic enterprises, competing unscrupulously with one another. Arthur C. Clarke suggests the notion that the evolution of intelligent species will eventually make them something close to gods in a Utopian setting with highly developed technology. To cite another example, Martin Caidin in his novel, *Cyborg* shows how technology can be wielded as a tool for enhancing human’s physical and cognitive abilities and thereby for removing human’s disabilities, vulnerabilities, and illnesses in order to make human immortal and superior through the process of prosthetic amputee rehabilitation or organ transplantation.

Also, the invention of cyborgs as they exist at present may exert a crucial socio-cultural influence on various aspects of the existential conditions of humans. Manjula Padmanabhan’s *Harvest*, for instance, is set in an imminent future in which the jobless, poverty-ridden and consequently desperate young men and women of a third-world country like India sell their body parts to the wealthy clients living in the developed countries in exchange for money, food, shelter and affluent living for themselves and their families. In fact, Padmanabhan’s play shows how, even after nearly seven decades of India’s independence, the First World countries still continue to dominate the Third World to fulfil

their own desires. The representative of the First World country in *Harvest* is Virgil who, for the healthy prolongation of his life and enrichment of his own living standards, invests a lot of money and purchases body parts from the economically poor people of the Third World country to replace his defective organs. In other words, Padmanavan's play reflects upon how international trade in human organs unfolds the economic constraints in former colonies and how consumer capitalism aggravates the onslaught of machines on human emotions and instincts, hinting at the continued invasion of neo-colonialism. . Thus, the human body is deprived of its privileged ontological position and serves as the metaphor for the evolving colonial aggression.

Technology arrives in the Posthumanist discourse through Donna Haraway's concept of mediation of the issue of feminism in the Cyborg. The fact that Feminism brought into question male symbolism as universal has been fundamental to the posthuman effort of decentring the human and its anthropocentric logos from the centre of the discourse. The cyborg dismantles the conventional gender order. Haraway notes that cyborgs, as 'hybrid creatures' are composed of 'special kinds' of organisms and machines. They can overcome certain human limitations like gender stereotypes and other that retard the desired level of development of Homo sapiens as a species. The lack of a definitive gendered body is likely to limit its capacity for normative human interactions, and thus, often results in a condition called 'gender bending' — a form of social behaviourist strategy adopted by the non-normatively gendered individuals to defy rigidly assigned gender roles and sex-role stereotypes, notably in cases where the gender-nonconforming persons find these roles oppressive. Haraway argues that women will be free from their biological restraints only when their reproductive obligations are dispensed with. True liberation will be achieved once they become post-biological or post-gendered organisms when the biological reproductive processes will be obsolete, as the future beings will be equipped with the inventions of techno science and reproductive technologies like prosthesis, human cloning, parthenogenesis and artificial womb, in such a way that both the partners can bear a child, if they choose to. Thus, there will be no need for a definite gender identity in the post-gendered condition. Much of the discussion on artificial intelligence centres upon the issue as to whether gendered consciousness is possible to instil in cyborgs. It has been argued, and quite legitimately, that a genderless body, one that is at once recognizable as both male/female and machine is likely to limit its capacity for normative human interactions because of its awareness of and allowance for infinite virtual possibilities. It is also undeniable that the specific qualities which distinguish a human from a machine become prominent, particularly due to the

existence of the force of sexual desire. The challenge for the creation of cyborgs, therefore, lies in retaining their sexual entity while overcoming at the same time the challenge of doing away with their gendered identity. The cyborg, as defined by Donna Haraway in *A Cyborg Manifesto*, is simultaneously a collective and a self; it is the “myth and meaning structuring our imaginations” (“Manifesto” 326). Haraway’s definition questions the completeness or wholeness of the gender identity of cyborgs in the first place, as meanings of gendered beings have shifted through the very emergence of the cyborgs. In fact, Haraway, a feminist at root, uses her exploration of the cyborg to draw attention to the fractured identity of the female and its elusiveness in attaining a concrete definition as a female. She states, “there is nothing about being ‘female’ that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as ‘being’ female” (“Manifesto” 319). For Haraway, the concept of woman *should* remain elusive. J. Halberstam draws upon Haraway’s work in her essay *Automating Gender: Postmodern Feminism in the Age of the Intelligent Machine*. Here, Halberstam acknowledges the technological nature of gender constructs: “gender, we might argue, like computer intelligence, is a learned, imitative behaviour that can be processed so well that it comes to look natural” (Halberstam 443). Thus, both Haraway and Halberstam resolutely resist a definition of gender. The lack of a complete gendered identity in the cyborg allows it to remain in pieces, yet retaining and exercising its power as a whole organism. In fact, the cyborg is ubiquitous; it exists in a realm where human fantasies of the self cannot sustain. At the end of *Harvest*, for example, Manjula Padmanabhan explores the nexus between sexuality and cultural difference to address the myth of the exotic, sexually available, and yet potentially dangerous Other that still circulates in western discourse. Virgil’s desire to impregnate Jaya, and his simultaneous fear that she would pollute him if their coupling were to happen anywhere but in the virtual realm, can be read as a modern instance of the ambivalence that infused imperial sexuality. Jaya refuses straightway to be party to a transaction that effectively puts Virgil in control of her sexuality, just as she has previously refused to suppress her sexual desires by playing the demure wife of Om. Her demand that Virgil meet her in the flesh before she will consider his proposal of sexual union functions as a more general challenge to Western societies to put aside their damaging stereotypes and obsessive fears about contamination in order to interact with other, inferior or shabbier cultures on a more equal footing.

Thus, a glimpse into the contour of cyborg literature indicates the evolution of man into an unprecedentedly evolved species. Recent developments in the field of the integral onto-epistemological approach to the post-human condition, however, may allow humans and

machines to fully develop their interconnected potentials, eventually facilitating an original interspecies venture into a far richer quest for existence. A posthumanist views human body as the prototypical prosthesis naturally evolved with technological progress. Also, the cyborg entity would put forward a potential threat to the traditional humanist and essentialist view of the human species. This ambition of cyborg sciences finds a ubiquitous representation in cyborg narratives. The selected Cyborg texts are attempts to engage with an imaginative and imaginary exploration of the extent to which cybernetic organs (including robots or artificial intelligences and evolved organisms that combine the characteristics of both human and machine) can evolve themselves with the help of the inventions of techno-science so as to adapt themselves to the post-biological condition for their survival.

Notes:

1. Today, technology allows for cultural production to communicate messages of hope, which explains Martin Heidegger's idea of technology as "a way of revealing" in his essay *The Question Concerning Technology*.
2. Cyborg is a fictional or hypothetical organism whose physical abilities are extended beyond normal human limitations by mechanical elements technologically built into the body. The term was coined in 1960 by Manfred Clynes and Nathan S. Kline.
3. Tom Wolfe in his article, *Sorry, But Your Soul Just Died* published in *Forbes Magazine* in 1996 referred to the 'Ghost in the Machine' to indicate the absurdity of traditional Cartesian mind-body dualism; presumably there was also an attempt to echo the phrase *deus ex machina*, or "god from the machine", i.e. an artificial solution to a complex problem. Originally, the phrase 'the ghost in the machine' was used by Gilbert Ryle in his 1949 book *The Concept of Mind*.
4. Nietzschean "eclipse of values" is shown in cyborg literature to contribute to the evolution of post-human existence or to affect it adversely.

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