The Identity of Female Cyborg in William Gibson's *Neuromancer*

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the identity of female cyborg in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) based on Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*. In *Neuromancer* the main character, Molly Million does not fit in the stereotypical female characteristics. When a male is the protagonist, females will be seen as a feminine stereotype and being depicted as helpless and weak. She is in fact the reversal of feminine stereotype. Henry Dorsett Case, the male protagonist of the story, was given a job opportunity and being partnered up with Molly to fulfil their mission. When Molly and Case are together, Case is always on the safe side while Molly aggressively moves around getting her things done. Being a cyborg is to be fierce, fast and bold just like Molly and being a goddess will be a typical female. It is a metaphor used to conceptualize socialist feminism in the modern society. The boundary breakdown between organism and machine portrays the boundary breakdown between Molly and Wintermute, an Artificial Intelligence (AI), because Molly and Wintermute are representatives of organism and machine, respectively. When Molly and Wintermute could put up with each other, it indirectly shows the connection between human and technology that can then be brought to another level as dualism of mind and body that are considered as one in the cybernetic world just like how high technology and scientific culture are interrelated. Mind which symbolizes Artificial Intelligence is the ultimate power which controls the body. The technological enhancements in Molly are the symbolised power which gives her the difference in stereotypical female role.

Keywords: Cyborg Feminism, Female Identity, Patriarchal Role, Cyberpunk

1. Introduction

William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) introduced the subgenre of 'cyberpunk' that emerged from the science fiction genre. The word 'cyber' derives from 'cybernetics' and 'punk' was a terminology used from the 1970s with the definition 'loud, fast and aggressive'.

Neuromancer is extensively well researched in postmodern literature due to its established genre as science fiction. The immediate subject that comes to mind when postmodernism is mentioned is the advancing and developing of telecommunication. The term 'cyberspace' and 'cyberpunk' has emerged from postmodernism known as 'computer-mediated communications technology'. However, many critics still argue that computers cannot be seen as intelligent simply because they are not alive (Stevens 414). Cyberspace or alternatively called as matrix is "a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts…A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights receding…" (Myers 887). While Myers thinks that matrix is a hallucination, to Stevens, "the metrics by which we measure intelligence are closer to our experience than we might think: we are already used to dealing with digital, intelligent life in the form of digital representations of other humans" (Stevens 414). The other human refers to the on-line friends whom has never been met before. How can we depict 'real' and 'conscious' human from internet?

Stevens answered that particular question and the measures by which answer the questions are both at times, implicit and explicit (Stevens 415). Being fully unaware of the "full implications of the creation of information technologies and theories" that have been around for over four decades, posthumanist theory was developed (Reilly 1). Gibson's *Neuromancer* along with other famous work such as Thomas Pynchon's *V* are suitable examples to understand "the development of the posthuman cyborg" (Reilly 2). The program produced by digital representations or electronic devices are human-produced and not 'simply' program-produced because there is a high chance that there is "just ghosts in the machine" if the programs are intelligent programs (Stevens 415). Many critics have looked into cyberspace as a social reality. For instance, Donna Haraway notes that the "boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (Haraway 117). Judging from the social reality perspective is a norm when critics talk about cyberspace but there are also critics who judge the other way round. According to this group of critics, "the

concept of cyberspace is valuable as a narrative strategy because it is able to represent 'unthinkable complexity' and to gain a cognitive purchase upon the welter of data" (Myers 887).

While social reality and narration of science fiction are being separately looked at, there are also other who think that combining them are more effective. Elaine Graham in her article "Cyborgs or Goddesses?" states that "dreams of merging humans and machines into new intelligent cybernetic organisms leave the realm of science fiction and enter everyday reality" (Graham 419). Science fiction in this 21st century is no more a science fiction but reality society lives to go through everyday so everyday reality equals to science fiction. In social reality, female representation is still the outcome of "patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism" (Haraway 122). Haraway commented that she would "rather be a cyborg than a goddess" even though "the cyborg subverts many of the dualisms of western culture" (Graham 419). In "Cyborgs or Goddesses?", Elaine Graham discussed two 'semi-mythical creatures' which are the cyborg and the goddess for these two elements serve as a "key figure by which some of the implications of posthuman technologies for the ways in which we think about our own human identity are explored" (Graham 422). Furthermore, according to Donna Haraway, a cyborg is a creature that was implanted with cybernetic organism, "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (Haraway 117). Haraway who has been fighting for the right of women for gender equality, claims that feminists should decide their affinity, just like the cyborgs who have no imperative identity rather than being given a rigid identity to follow.

2. Relationship between Organism and Machine

To determine the identity without incorporating the enforcement of new technologies, women are the ending result of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism. In other words, it is the traditional way of viewing women from the historical experience of social realities. In this 21st century, women have no 'place' in the networks, "only geometries of difference and contradiction crucial to women's cyborg identities" (Haraway 136). Cyborg is seen as a metaphor by Haraway to conceptualize socialist feminism in this modern society. It can change a woman's experience because cyborg is considered a lived experience and also a fiction but there is an ultimate thin layer that distinguishes between science fiction and social reality for it is an optical illusion.

Cyborg can be represented as a human who conceived coded devices in the body which will then lead to posthuman or it can be seen as a mean of survival to have machines implanted in the body system just like the main protagonist in *Neuromancer*, Henry Dorsett Case, an internet hacker who was nearly dead when he was caught with his hand in a proverbial cookie jar. Out of rage, his employer made sure that he would never be able to hack computer again so they "damaged his nervous system with a wartime Russian mycotoxin" (Gibson 5). Then Armitage appears to offer Case a job to repair his damage system. The organism that Haraway referred to is the combination of human and animal which is also considered as a kind of posthuman form. There are two distinct types of cyborgs in Gibson's *Neuromancer,* first is a posthuman body and second is a machine dominated beast. The distinction between posthuman body cyborg and machine dominated beast cyborg is the flesh or meat on the body in the cyborg biomedical technology.

A major female character in the story that portrays posthuman body cyborg is Molly Million, another major character besides Case. Aside from wearing fashionable "tight black glove leather jeans and a bulky black jacket cut from some matte fabric that seemed to absorb light", when "she held out her hands, palms up, the white fingers slightly spread, and with a barely audible click, ten double-edged, four centimetre scalpel blades slid from their housings beneath the burgundy nails" (Gibson 22). Machine dominated beast in *Neuromancer* can be Neuromancer and Wintermute who are called the Artificial Intelligence (AI). Machine is seen as the reproductive dream of masculinity although this boundary breakdown of organism and machine is adapted as a common theme among both male and female writers. Female writers will attempt this theme in order to turnaround the stereotypical judgement towards females. However, Gibson depicts Molly as a physically strong and fierce girl who can bravely voice out her thoughts.

In the story, Molly who is an organism cooperates well with a whole machine named Wintermute, even though she was at all times very curious about the AI who "aren't much smarter than dogs" (Gibson 74). Molly and Wintermute show no boundary in the story. This will come to a perception that "there is no boundary between ourselves and our encompassing computing environments" for "we are, though sentient, 'merely' machines" and "they are, though machines, sentient" (Stevens 415).

3. Female Cyborg Identity in *Neuromancer*

Although Gibson portrayed Case as the protagonist to generalize the stereotypical male hero in a novel, Molly highlights the portrayal of female in *Neuromancer*. She was illustrated as a physically strong, resilient and fast as to compare with any other male characters in the novel. With the help of her extravagant technological enhancements such as mirrored lenses eyes and her double-edged, four centimetre scalpel blade fingernails, she produced a cool effect that has outshined the male characters.

Haraway sees "deepened dualisms of mind and body" associated "with 'high technology' and scientific culture" (Haraway 121). In cyberspace, the mind and body has become one. In *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Haraway has listed out a chart of dichotomies in which she called informatics of domination. To list a few,

Family/Market/Factory	Women in Integrated Circuit
Family wage	Comparable worth
Public/private	Cyborg citizenship
Nature/culture	Fields of difference

Labour	Robotics
Sex	Genetic engineering
Mind	Artificial Intelligence
Second World War	Star Wars
White Capitalist Patriarchy	Informatics of Domination (Haraway 128-129)

As it has been listed above, the mind has been evolved into artificial intelligence during the technological era. The body of a cyborg, on the other hand, signifies the "natural sexuality" and the "physical gender identity" of their artificial body (Balsamo 39). The dualism of body and mind in Molly happens when her body was taken controlled by her mind. For Molly who craves for power, technology is a way to enhance and shape her identity to further protect herself from masculinity. Therefore, it explains the reasons why technologies enhancement is implanted on Molly's body. The "implanting of technology into the body is seen as a blurring or corruption of the body, reducing humanity from animate to inanimate" (Reilly 2).

The power that Molly possessed is shaped her character to look like she is masculine and at the same time, Case is downgraded to a more feminine side. When Terzibashjian, a street level informant from Turkey, takes an instant dislike on Molly because he disapproved a woman who endowed in her modifications, she immediately fights for her own right. His act of dislike towards Molly is prominently shown in the excerpt below:

> 'We must, as you say in Ingiliz, take this one very easy.'
>
> He seemed to stare pointedly at Molly, but at least he removed the silver glasses. His eyes were a dark brown that matched the shade of his very short military-cut hair. 'It is better, this way, yes? Else we make the tunel infinity, mirror into mirror…You particularly,' he said to her, 'must take care. In Turkey there is disapproval of women who sport such modifications.' (Gibson 68).

Male domination still exists in cyberpunk fiction but followed by the evolution of science and technology, female roles also evolve. Thus, Molly is in power when she shows her analytical, firm and boyish side of characteristics:

> 'What do we want out of that Riviera?' he asked, hoping to change the subject.
>
> She spat into the pond. 'God knows. I'd soon kill him as look at him. I saw his profile. He's a kind of compulsive Judas. Can't get off sexually unless he knows he's betraying the object of desire. That's what the file says. And they have to love him first. Maybe he loves them, too. That's why it was easy for Terzi to set him up for us, because he's been here three years, shopping political to the secret police…' She thrust her hands into her jacket pockets.(Gibson 74)

Molly is a reversal character for the traditional gender role. She is seen as a female who is trying to rebel against the patriarchy system. At the end of the story, Gibson shows that Molly is not emotionally attached to a man: "He [Case] never saw Molly again." (Gibson 203). Molly decides to leave Case after completing their task together and starts a new life in a new place.

Traditional gender characteristics should not be used when it comes to postgender characters because the definition differs. However, it will be a difficult change to view postgender characters as a postgender because the boundary between "science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (Haraway 117-158). If science fiction and social reality can be eclipsed, gender stereotype can then be solved. "Computer-assisted technologies" can alter the mind-sets of "body, time and space" by "merging humans and machines into new intelligent cybernetic organism" leaving "the realm of science fiction and enter everyday reality" (Graham 419). After all, everyday reality can be considered as science fiction since we are living in cyberpunk in the 21st century in which there are egalitarian gender roles by the help of technological advances.

4. Conclusion

Molly's character brought the boundary of organism and machine to a closure when the gap between science fiction and social reality has been filled. The relationship shared by Molly and Wintermute mirrors the relationship human has had with the technology mechanisms since the mid-twentieth century. It is somehow an irony to say that technology has overpowered human through Molly's character for she was obsessed with her technology enhancements. Having more advanced technology makes her more powerful and in control. Only by having power then she has the chance to leave the stereotypical female role that has been in the paradigm for many generations. In this story, she is not the so called end product of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism.

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