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RESEARCH PAPER

Gender, Body, And Posthuman: A Selected Study Of Natural History by Justina Robson

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to explore the Posthuman cyborg bodies in cyberpunk fiction. The gendered bodies in cyberpunk fiction are complicated, unclear, and open to investigation in various ways. The researcher employs Baxter's FPDA as a theoretical and methodological framework to study how the writer presents gendered bodies in cyberpunk fiction and the roles of posthuman cyborgs in it. Data analysis of Robson's novel *Natural History* shows that modern cyberpunk fiction has the power to deconstruct and reconstruct traditionally gendered bodies and presents a new form of bodies that are fluid, complex, and sometimes beyond imagination. These bodies are robust and flexible and transform into many forms to give new meanings to gendered bodies.

Introduction

Science fiction is one of the discourses used to revise the historical and cultural significance of gendered bodies in the technological age and reimagine their physical manifestations in a hypothetical future society. It can be accomplished by rethinking how gendered bodies have been understood historically and culturally (Mitchell, 2006). A growing tendency, particularly in feminist cyberpunk fiction, is the examination of the gendered bodies of posthuman beings in the postmodern era. Posthuman cyborg bodies in cyberpunk fiction are gendered and contradict several preconceived notions about traditional human bodies. The gendered bodies of the future in cyberpunk fiction are complicated, unclear, and open to investigation in various ways (Mitchell, 2006). It is especially true when viewed from the perspective of Feminist Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis, developed specifically to analyze gender through different discourses. FPDA is a very adaptable approach that considers multiple perspectives on the study of discourse and gender. These perspectives include the poststructuralist approach to the study of discourses and gender and the feminist approach to the study of discourses and gender.

The transformation of humans into posthumans through nanotechnology and artificial intelligence is a common theme in cyberpunk fiction. This transformation takes place within the body of the individual. Human DNA, animal DNA, and machine DNA are incorporated into posthuman bodies to give them additional capabilities. The improved posthuman bodies can effortlessly travel through space and fight off diseases that frequently weaken and destroy human bodies in various ways. The current article is about the idea that the human body is primarily the result of our conceptualization of

it, our understanding of what constitutes "body," and the language we use to talk about them. However, the tremendous technological advances that occurred in the second half of the twentieth Century unquestionably amounted to and brought about a transition in both the material and discursive processes. According to Cranny-Francis (1995), "Working from the premise that bodies are socially constituted in and by material and discursive practices-and given that those practices are changing-it follows that bodies, too, are changing" (p. 2). However, this transformation needs to be qualified and moderated by understanding the social and material constraints that work against a radical and permanent shift in a single generation.

Although the body has undoubtedly been rethought and rewritten in recent decades, it has not abandoned its essential, troublesome, and complex corporeality. The works of Robson demonstrate not just the potential for technology to be put to beneficial use but also how the "progress" of technology can lead to the dehumanization of individuals. Therefore, her scientists and techno-buffs are sometimes masculine, sometimes female, and occasionally hybrid and nonhuman animals; Technology is neither homogenized nor clearly and reductively masculinized (Robson, 2001). Gender is not the only determining factor in these types of systems. Judith Butler's ideas on the body and the "materialization" of Sex are equally relevant to this discussion. In her book Gender *Trouble* (1990), she says, "The body is not a 'being,' but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality " (p. 139). One of the most fundamental aspects of gender is its association with performativity. According to Butler (1990), the first manifestation of gender occurred through performance rather than the actual body. Updating, revising, and consolidating cultural standards is something that happens continuously. Gender increasingly manifests itself in the "body." The sedimentary accumulation of symbols from other cultures over time helps to shape the gender identification of the body as it evolves throughout History. The concept of gender can be understood as a symbolic narrative influence or a collection of mental symbols imprinted on the physical form (Butler, 1990, p. 25). Butler (1990) further says that "bodies are and always have been impossible to fix and delineate clearly" (p. ix). Butler (2004) explains that even though "gender is a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowledge and without one's willing" (p. 1). That does not mean it is automatic or mechanical. Instead, she describes gender as "a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint" (Butler,1990, p. 1).

Culturally imposed categories reinforce and prolong inequities within communities and give rise to identity politics that may be both fruitful and harmful; these are just some of the issues that preoccupy Robson in his *Natural History*. The "Forged" and the "Unevolved," or those who are made and those born, are the primary categories in play in the narrative, not the characters' genders. People are born with varying degrees of adaptability (becoming cyborgs in a sense as they are implanted with "MekTek" technology—inbuilt Al systems), and these sub-categories further divide the population. There is a lot of ambiguity and blurring of lines, which highlights the indeterminacy of the various entities and, by extension, the arbitrariness and reductionism of binary categories like male and female (Mitchell, 2006). *Natural History* by Justina Robson is a work of feminist cyberpunk fiction that has been chosen for this article by the researcher to investigate how feminist writer depicts gendered bodies of posthumans and the roles that postgendered bodies play in cyberpunk fiction. The researcher has used the FPDA paradigm as a theoretical framework and method for this study. The study used a feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis (FPDA) framework

to analyze qualitative data. It draws inspiration from postmodern feminism and poststructuralism. Judith Baxter (2003) established FPDA as a method for analyzing speech in her book "Positioning Gender in Discourse: A Feminist Methodology." Specifically, it draws on a synthesis of Bakhtin's (1981) formalism, Derrida's (1987) poststructuralism, and Foucault's (1971) ideas about the relationship between power, knowledge, and discourse.

Literature Review

Science Fiction is a type of fiction that relies more on the Author's creative powers than on objective observation of the world around them. There can be little doubt that the United States, along with other technologically advanced countries like the United Kingdom, Japan, and China, is home to some of the finest examples of the science fiction genre. Science fiction, as defined by James E. Gunn (2005), is "the field of writing that deals with the influence of change on individuals in the real world as it can be projected into the past, the future, or to faraway locations" (p. 6). The term also describes stories that speculate on possible futures made possible by scientific or technical advances but do not present them as fact (Buran, 2014). In 1983, science fiction writer Bruce Bethke invented the word "cyberpunk" to describe novels and stories about the 1980s rapid evolution, which depicted a wide, urban, complex new world where most people were alienated. (Clute, 2003, p. 67). In cyberpunk fiction, the protagonists are described as "artificial humans with ragged clothes and poofy hair, and something very similar to that picture can be observed" (Attebery, p. 11). The novel Neuromancer (1984) by William Gibson is considered the first Work in the cyberpunk genre. This novel examines the influence of technology on an individual's subjectivity. In this book, Gibson sets "the aesthetic hallmarks of Cyberpunk's narrative conventions, dominated by the interaction of computers and people" (Melzer, 2006, pp. 6-7). This investigation will center on an example of cyberpunk literature called *Natural History*. The Work has characteristics typical of cyberpunk fiction, such as an emphasis on posthuman gendered bodies, the dominance of the capitalist market, and the employment of cyborgs as the protagonists. Cyborgs are usually portrayed as technologically improved humans in science fiction movies and literature (Clynes, 1995). The cyborg is a hybrid organism that challenges apparent differences between the real and the virtual, male and female, self and other. Still, most significantly, it blurs the line where the body ends, and technology begins. The Work of Donna Haraway has significantly impacted discussions about science, technology, and the body in the communication and cultural studies debates. Haraway writes in this regard: "Broadly within late-twentieth-century scientific discourse, the natural body is conventionally a biotechnological cyborg – an engineered communications device, an information generating and processing system, and a strategic assemblage of heterogeneous biotic components held together in a reproductive politics of genetic investment" (*p.* 177). Haraway further says that we do not mean that "we are cyborgs' in the sense that we are all fitted with mechanical parts and prosthetic devices but that developments in science and scientific discourses have broken down the distinctions that separate the human from 'Others" (p. 151-153).

In "*Post-Gendered Bodies and Relational Gender in Knights of Sidonia,*" Roger Andre argues that the body of Sodonia is postgendered. This contact between humans and machines is becoming increasingly prevalent in today's culture, which is profoundly influenced by science fiction's depictions of the development of technology. As a cultural phenomenon, Japanese robots and gendered representations have gained significant study attention (Robertson, 2010). They also constitute one of the areas in which cyborg posthumanism is continually pushing boundaries in modern Society.

Yuki Ohsawa (2015), in her thesis titled "*Changes in the Conceptualization of Bodily and Mind in Japanese Popular Culture, 1950-2015,*" provides a detailed analysis of the various posthuman body representations. In the end, most of the characters can be categorized according to their gender in the usual sense.

Steffen Hantke (1998) further explains that the intricacy of depictions of technology and masculinity in Heinlein's writing is another example of SF's involvement with gender problems. As technological advancement challenges organic limitations, it threatens the embodied characteristics of physical power that shape societal conceptions of masculinity. Thus, in SF, 'technology' is both a masculine symbol and a source of societal concerns about gender. In Heinlein's 1959 novel *Starship Troopers*, the prosthetically augmented troopers are seen as 'hyper-masculine.' The 1970s were a watershed moment in science fiction's engagement with gender, with the publication of many novels that Russ would later characterize as 'feminist utopias (Hantke, 1998). In the 1980s, there was a shift away from the concept of "androgyny" and toward works that critiqued or examined gender through dystopian visions, role reversals, and universes that divided men and women into different societies (Merrick, 2003). One of the most important sites of gender issues in 1980s science fiction was cyberpunk, which was particularly concerned with issues of masculinity. The portrayal of the body and human subjectivity in cyberpunk is a reincarnation of the classic humanist goal of transcendence - which is reimagined as a battle between 'meat and mind' (Merrick, 2003).

Feminist science fiction writers, according to Haraway (1990), can serve as "theorists for cyborgs" (p. 173). The identities portrayed in feminist cyberpunk are fractured and unstable, precisely the type of identities with which feminism must come to grips to survive. Feminism, racism, class, and sexuality are all problems that feminist cyberpunks are dealing with, and they are all controversial (Cardora, 1995. p. 359). According to Cardora (1995), "in feminist cyberpunk, there is no essential "woman." It is true that there is no identity that is fundamentally or distinctively "human" because of the blurring of the lines between human, machine, and animal, as well as truth and fiction. A cyborg, a multiple-positioned subject, is well-represented by feminist cyberpunk writers. They also illustrate how cyborgs can interact with the world. For a long time, feminists thought that only unity could defeat masculinist oppression. But Jewel demonstrates that a fragmented identity may function in a high-tech environment" (Cardora, 1995, p. 370). In cyberpunk fiction, on many occasions, we have seen fragmented identities like Shira, Malkah, and even Yod in He, She, and It. Shira is a divorced mother of a child, a computer programmer, a daughter, a granddaughter, and a lover to Yod. All her identities are socially constructed in different situations. Her mind is always hanging on two extremes: to love Yod or return to her son, Ari. It made her disturbed. As a researcher, Emily Cox-Palmer-White (2021) focuses on studying female cyborgs and gynoids in works of science fiction. The gynoid is helpful because it symbolizes female autonomy; its Posthuman and even transhuman qualities imply a sense of employing oneself as a tool to achieve one's own goals. Additionally, the gynoid body can reshape our conception of the biological features of female identity that, for such a long time, have been used to define femaleness.

Natural History, published in 2005 by a feminist writer Justina Robson, sheds light on the tension between biological and cyborg bodies and reassembles the concept of a plausibly modified body known as the Forged. The Forged are nearly identical to humans; however, as a direct result of the genetic modifications they have undergone, their psychical traits, as well as their physiology and mental outlook, are strikingly

distinct from those of the "natural" human. It is because the Forged have been created through a process known as "forging." Even though Justina Robson has the intention of conflating two distinct entities – natural human bodies, which are referred to as the Unevolved in the book, and posthuman cyborg bodies, which are referred to as the Forged – the continuing conflict between these two groups is the primary focus of the book.

Material and Methods

The researcher employs Baxter's (2003) FPDA framework in this qualitative and poststructuralist study. FPDA is very effective for in-depth analysis, i.e., a multifaceted and intricate study of a text focusing on the negotiating of gendered identities and exchange of power in different scenarios under the effect of certain discourses that are interlinked and, at times, don't seem to be so influential. FPDA provides these benefits without "transforming themselves into 'grand narratives' (Elliott, 1996, p. 19). FPDA's many strengths as a methodology lie in its emphasis on the performative aspects of gender, its rejection of binary opposition, its power on self-reflexivity, its recognition of discourse as a social act, its focus on a wide range of speaker identities, and the construction of meaning (Baxter,2008, p. 244).

Feminist critics have taken a particular interest in cyberpunk cyborg characters. Donna Haraway's 1985 "Cyborg Manifesto" proposed a speculative cyborg figure capable of dismantling social barriers and binaries by producing creatures who were neither exclusively male nor female, black nor white—beings capable of challenging gender preconceptions and other societal boundaries. Haraway cited science-fiction as a possible breeding ground for subversive imagery and acknowledged science-fiction authors as 'cyborg theorists,' Joanna Russ, Samuel R. Delany, James Tiptree Jr., Octavia Butler, and Vonda McIntyre (p. 173). When it comes to opposing the sexual status quo, women's science fiction has had to fight hard, "not just against the weight of the form's masculine bias, but also against the weight of a cultural and political male hegemony that underlies the form itself" (Lefanu, 1988. p, 4). According to Allen and Paul (1986), "Women, whether human or extraterrestrial, have always been regarded as essentially sexual beings, serving as fitting rewards for the male heroes who successfully resolve the dilemma. Women are considered wicked when they act autonomously; when they possess power, it is considered intuitive or magical; and when they possess different human skills, they are considered the problem" (Allen and Paul, 1986, p. 171).

The framework of The Study

The FPDA's three core concepts will be the basis for the current research work. The deconstructivist approach to discourse and gender, the feminist approach to gender, and self-reflexivity are the three principles that make up this perspective. After applying the fundamental concepts of FPDA, the researcher will investigate the power dynamics between various characters in various settings and the interplay between diverse discourses, the dominant discourse(s), and the alternative discourse(s).

Data Analysis of Natural History

The novel *Natural History* explores a fictional world in which humans and nonhumans coexist. Isol, a protagonist in the novel, has a posthuman form that is very confusing, complex, and ambiguous for the readers. Although both Isol and Zephyr Duquesne, an anthropology professor, are portrayed as female, it is clear that they are

fundamentally distinct from each other. Radically different socialization processes have shaped their bodies and minds. Isol's body is a piece of "stranded sea junk: an assembly of spars " (p. 138). One can't visualize her body and describe it in words. Even visualizing her figure with the help of metaphors like "stranded sea junk" and "assembly of spars" is problematic. Her physical shape is altered to become that of a posthuman, which is necessary for travelling through space faster than light. The human body is frail, so it cannot move at a speed greater than light. Because of this, her body transforms into a cyborg and possesses greater power and capabilities than a human being. Her primary goal is to venture beyond space and locate uncharted territory suitable for their people engaged in a never-ending war with humans. This tension between unevolved humans and the forged highlights a tension between the Creators and their creations.

However, Isol cannot respond appropriately when a sandstorm badly hurts her. When her life seems to be on the verge of being lost due to her bleeding out, a mysterious STUFF suddenly enters the picture and saves her life. In times of trouble, this STUFF is like an anonymous gift from God. STUFF immediately transports her to a new world with all the necessities for human survival. That's how She uncovered a brand-new planet teeming with crafted life. Although she has made a ground-breaking discovery, General Machen is not ready to accept it because she is a woman. No one in today's capitalist world would ever dream of believing that a woman can be an explorer and discover a new home for humanity. Piercy considers the potential for women to break into male-dominated fields like space exploration once they have had the physical and mental fortitude to do so. This is especially true in the postmodern world, where women are equal competitors to men in every sphere of life.

Nowadays, neither Sex is restricted to a single career path. Every field is open to anyone. Piercy harbours the optimism that the employment of posthuman bodies would one-day end gender discrimination and power imbalances in the world. This will be possible directly due to posthuman bodies replacing human ones. If women want to compete and thrive in this world, they need to possess a body that is not just multifaceted and adaptable but also robust enough to combat the predominance of men. For women to hold positions of power in Society, they need to demonstrate physical and mental resilience; if they fail to do so, they will be forced to submit to the authority of men otherwise.

Professor Zephyr is another female character in the novel that has been teaching and doing research in the field of anthropology at a prestigious American institution. General Machen relies on her to compile a report on a newly discovered land. She is superior and robust in her discourses because of her knowledge and social standing. Her strength and lasting impact come from the novel's emotional climax when she sacrifices her life for humankind.

From an FPDA perspective, we have learned that both the women in the novel are more powerful than the men. Most of the discourses in the novel show that women are negotiating for a position of power. Isol, a discoverer, is powerful in her discourse regarding the change of home. Zephyr, a professor of anthropology, also holds a powerful position in Society and a university as a well-known researcher. According to FPDA, "women in public and private discourses are often better placed than others to benefit from the experiences, interests, and goals of a particular context – by their more privileged positioning within a combination of dominant discourses" (p. 8). Isol and Zephyr are negotiating their power position in the public domain. They prove in the novel that they are more powerful than men.

The Ironhorse AnimaMekTek Pigeons are hybrid characters with a "graceful tail like a huge aerial manta ray." (p. 69). They act as "small helicopters and robot lifter flights," transporting humans inside their bodies while physically entangled with those passengers (p. 69). Passenger Pigeon Aurora carries the Zephyr within her body so that she can travel to other areas. Professor Zephyr is also astonished to see a new kind of posthuman cyborg created for a particular purpose. The unevolved and the forged are the two kinds of humans that symbolize powerfully versus powerless in our Society. The powerful always exploited the powerless. The resistance of the unevolved shows the resistance of the powerless against the powerful. According to FPDA, one cannot remain powerless in all discourses; rather, the powerless can be powerful in other discourses. However, "individuals are rarely consistently positioned as powerful across all the discourses at work within a given context – they are often located simultaneously as both powerful and powerless" (p. 9). Zephyr and other humans depend on AnimaMekTek Pigeons. Without them, they cannot move and transport into another land. Here we can see AnimaMekTek pigeons are in a position of power. The same may be said for Isol and Zephyr, who both have a powerful presence in their discourses but occasionally experience feelings of helplessness.

The posthuman cyborg body is more than the physical union of human flesh with technological enhancements; it also represents a way of thinking and reasoning that transcends conventional understandings. Their mental capabilities are ideally matched to the enhanced bodies of cyborgs. "Behemoths of metal and flesh across five kilometers that weren't even counting their Arms, Hands, Feet, Legs, and other appendages clinging with insensible grip to the platform's scant structure" are other striking examples of posthuman cyborg beings (p, 89). They were "monsters of another epoch, capable of moving mountains, drinking seas, planting continents, exhaling entire weather systems" (p. 88). When they fulfil their tasks, despite having been promised additional Work, they are "iced in space, asleep in the heavy, dreamless limbo of virtual death, their bodies folded, stowed, inert save for the occasional feeble pulse where hearts the size of factories had once pumped the bellows of creation" (p. 88).

From a deconstructive point of view, these hybrid posthuman beings are captivating and capable of doing anything, so it's odd to put them to sleep once their purpose has been served. They need to do nothing except follow instructions. The way they behave in each of their guises, though, makes them something other than human. Their top priority is to display their loyalty, expertise, and professionalism to their superiors. Metaphorically, these posthuman bodies symbolize those in our Society who have been exploiting the powerless and holding positions of power with the help of capitalist authorities who are busy engulfing the resources of developing countries. The presentation of massive and intricate bodies symbolizes power and dread. Someone who is powerful and maintains a societal position is likely to have a sizeable posthuman body that resembles a monster. Most posthuman bodies in cyberpunk fiction are inhabited by males, which illustrates the patriarchal nature of our Society's power structure. If someone is physically powerful and enormous, it indicates that they are also psychologically strong and can conquer the world, particularly women. In the same way, men in our culture face the same challenges. They have the misconception that they possess a strong physique, and with the help of that body's assistance, they can exert dominance and control over women.

Gritters have a posthuman gendered body because they result from unsuccessful experiments. They are called "ugly scarlet lizard heads" (p. 51). The primitives despised them for being lazy and physically repulsive. The conflict between General Machen

(Humans) and the degraded (Cyborgs) is evident throughout the novel. General Machen's wrath targets were forged (cyborgs) and degraded (cyborgs) because of their posthuman bodies and behaviours. He has a unique terminology for the degraded as "self-serving, little bastards, and more reptilian than they should have been" (p. 32). When viewed from a deconstructive standpoint, calling someone an insulting moniker is equivalent to wielding power over someone who has no power.

The *degraded* are not barbarians; instead, they are engaged in menial labour such as working as "messenger boys" or delivery boys or delivering people or items from one point to another. They are always willing to carry out the instructions given to them by their masters. Whoever gives the orders holds a significant position and power. As a matter of fact, "According to Robson, "humanity" is essentially a question of outward appearance, at least in terms of social and political stratifications: "The Forged were all humans... in the definition as it had been defined upon their formation. Many Unevolved were unable to treat them as such due to their appearance, which resembled that of other creatures, machinery, or monsters " (pp. 122-23). A person's outward appearance is often used as a primary clue to their identity and plays a role in influencing how they interact and the individuals with whom they do so. Natural History promotes the concept that hybridization can occur on many different levels and degrees; hence, Zephyr observes that "many people have profited from the odd piggy gene here and there to mend their otherwise faulty skins, hearts, or bones" (p. 123). But when this mixing of different races, types, and species is obvious, it is seen as unsettling. This is the case because it brings into harsh perspective the unnaturalness of humans. The concept that these science fiction "monsters" "reflect the collapse of conventional ways of being-in-the-world; they raise questions about what it means to be both female and human" is the key to understanding the relevance of these fictional beings (p. 133). The degraded have no say in Society and must keep their subservient status by doing as they are told. In the narrative, they attempt to manage their identity and powerlessness as professionals and experts.

Conclusion

This article aimed to investigate how feminist writer Justina Robson presents gendered bodies of posthumans cyborgs in cyberpunk fiction. The study conducted to answer the two research questions using a methodological framework of FPDA that documented Robson's discursive linguistic activities, gender, and ethnicity. Through this study, it became clear that the Author challenged long-held assumptions about women and posthuman Cyborgs to propose fresh perspectives. Some discourses are common to all analyses; for example, there is overlap between the discourses on gender, professionalism, feminism, and capitalism. Subjects like gender roles, feminism, social status, patriarchy, modern technology, and capitalist ideology are all examples of dominant discourses that the Author has challenged in their writings. The Author preferred discourses include fairness, expertise, professionalism, and loyalty. This research also addressed the ongoing problem of gender shifts in the technological and scientific fields. Robson's fiction *Natural History* shows that modern cyberpunk fiction has the power to deconstruct and reconstruct traditionally gendered bodies and presents a new form of bodies that are fluid, complex, and sometimes beyond imagination. These bodies are robust and flexible and transform into many forms to give new meanings to gendered bodies.

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