

Limitations of Cyborg feminism in India and Misinterpretation of feminism in Western Cyborg science fiction movies in the light of Haraway's *The Cyborg Manifesto*

Nesie Dalvin

MA English Language and Literature

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Abstract

In the light Donna Haraway's work *The Cyborg Manifesto* this paper analyses the difficulties of adapting Cyborg model of feminism in a developing country like India. Initially the concept of cyborg feminism (Bell, 108) as introduced by Haraway is used to analyse the implicit ideology of Western cyborg science fiction movies. Through the analysis of popular western cyborg movies like *Alita: Battle Angel* (2019) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), the absence of gender duality in cyborg world as predicted by Donna Haraway is proved wrong. Later the concept of cyborg feminism in the present society is shown to be inadequate showing the glass ceiling effect and how technology is sided with patriarchy. Finally the limitation of Cyborg feminism especially in a third world country like India is revealed considering its historical, political and cultural diversity. Socialist feminism and identity politics is more essential in the present society than a foreseeing women's liberation in a technically developed future.

Keywords— *Cyborg, feminism, western science fiction, Indian context.*

“A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway, 272). Haraway uses the term cyborg literally and metaphorically to explore a new form of feminism which is representative of all those who come under the category of women. Cyborg literally relates to feminism as it breaks the gender binary created by the patriarchal society. Cyborg is a genderless being which challenges the entire western patriarchal essentialism thus it literally supports feminist initiatives. Cyborg can be envisioned as a precursor to the forthcoming of a post-gender society. Haraway thus turns the cyborg from a symbol of Cold War into a representation for feminist liberation.

Cyborg metaphorically relates to feminist agendas by being a creature of fiction. Cyborg though a product of militancy and capitalism fights back to its own creator for their independent existence.

Though differently, the cyborg can challenge the places from whence it came; this is part of its irony. So part of the cyborg's challenge is that its

existence –including its existence in science fiction as well as social reality –threatens fundamental boundaries that have long structured ways of understanding the world. (Bell, 100-1)

Metaphorically the ancient coded notions of patriarchal norms can be decoded in the society just as cyborgs decode themselves. Similarly women can unlearn the deep rooted concepts of patriarchy from their lives. The famous cyborg movies like *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), *Alita: Battle Angel* (2019), *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), all overtly show the rebellion of cyborgs against their creators. Just as Haraway puts in her essay:

The main trouble with cyborgs . . . is that the illegitimate offspring of militarism, patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential. (273)

This model of rebellion can be viewed as the fight against rooted systems of patriarchal ideologies in the existing society.

Donna Haraway rejects the previous forms of feminisms and introduces Cyborg feminism as a replacement. She says that the distinct feminisms and intersectionality creates more divisions rather than unity. She has major criticisms against identity politics as they further deliberately complicate identities. Haraway is of opinion that cyborg feminism revises the whole concept of gender. Cyborg helps to envision a future with no gender identity or construction of a gender identity of choice, rather than following the rigid western tradition of exclusive identifications. She discards radical feminism and socialist feminism as it cannot address the issue at hand without creating further dissections. She also criticizes the totalizing assumptions made by feminists and the idea of speaking for others in the generalised term of 'woman'. Thus cyborg feminism is a new kind of approach where multiple feminisms even ones based on identity politics can be amalgamated. Cyborg feminism at the same time represents universal experience of women as well as the individual experience to deconstruct and recreate the gender identities. "Cyborg gender is a local possibility taking a global vengeance. Race, gender, and capital require a cyborg theory of wholes and parts" (Haraway, 66). She answers the necessity of cyborg feminism with a question:

What kind of politics could embrace partial, contradictory, permanently unclosed constructions of personal and collective selves and still be faithful, effective—and, ironically, socialist-feminist? (278)

The new form of feminism suggested by Donna Haraway in ideal of Cyborgs as suggested in her seminal work *Cyborg Manifesto* is critiqued in this paper. The paper brings out the flaws in the cyborg model of feminism as Haraway proposed in fictional works, by exposing the gender duality in Western sci-fi films like the *Alita: Battle Angel* and *Blade Runner 2049* and its insignificance in the Indian context.

Why the concept of cyborg feminism fails in Western films?

It is true that the concept of cyborg breaks the essentialist idea of women being weaker to men. With the aid of technology the anatomical differences between genders can be modified and thus gender identities can be easily reconstructed. As Haraway mentioned in her essay that Cyborgs being the creature of reality and creature of fiction metaphorically helps to break the essential gender identities. But sadly the situation in fiction- especially in the western popular cinema is quite contradictory. Haraway rightly mentioned that, "Contemporary science

fiction is full of cyborgs—creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted."(272) yet these ambiguous creatures are unable to shatter the duality of male- female gendering.

Gender divide can be seen easily in western cyborg science fiction movies. In *Alita: Battle Angel* the protagonist lives in a world full of cyborgs which has distinct gender identities of man and woman. In the movie *Alita: Battle Angel* the one who fixes the cyborg protagonist (Alita) and then protects Alita is a male figure, Dr. Dyson Ido. This again reinstates the patriarchal values and the clear-cut gender roles. Even after being cyborg themselves they are reduced to their gender identities Not only in *Alita: Battle Angel*, but in movies like *Blade Runner 2049*, we see such distinct gender distinction. In *Blade Runner*, the cyborgs are discriminated for their abilities and artificiality, at the same time the secret that female cyborg's ability to give birth is protected by men around her. The similar pattern occurring in both films indirectly restores the idea that females need to be protected. Even using gender specific pronouns to call Cyborgs can be debatable. The protagonist is referred to as "she" and in many instances in the *Alita: Battle Angel*, which contradicts Haraway's claim for a post-gendered society in the cyborg era. Not only the binary division of genders is problematic but it takes away the whole argument of cyborg feminism.

In cyborg science fictions like *Ghost in the Shell* the cyborgs with female anatomies are explicitly sexualized. The politics behind such representation of female bodies for the visual pleasure of audience is again problematic. The cyborgs are then merely seen as female bodies which are sexualized for visual experience of male gender. Films are written and directed by men even more questions the objective of such portrayals. The solid concept of Cyborgs as shown in most movies is yet to be realized in the current reality. Most Cyborg fictions take place in a distant future and thus making it even difficult to actualize it in present day. Even though Haraway claims the use of science and technology can improve the conditions of women, the fact that it is men who control the technologies leaves little hope. The admittance to top positions despite the access of technology for women is still a challenge in the current patriarchal run capitalistic society. In Haraway's words the 'informatics of domination' needs to be toppled by playing in the system, but the way she suggest it is by disregarding the differences among the broad category of women.

Cyborg feminism in India

India is the second largest country in the world in its population. With the fifth NFHS survey that came out in

2021 India has more women than men. Yet with this high number of female population the number of female ministers and women holding high positions in India are comparably low. These statistics can be seen as the direct impact of Glass ceiling effect. This stark gender disparity is seen in technological fields as well. India being a developing nation and post-colonial nation has its own trajectory of feminist movements. When Haraway in her essay *The Cyborg Manifesto* blatantly rejects socialist feminism and intersectional feminism a country like India needs to give more importance to economic and social differences.

India's position as a developing country puts it in a different scenario compared to developed countries like United States and China. Due to high population and consequent economic problems in India, feminism needs to have a better judgment and understanding of various issues. Cyborg feminism which fights for issues beyond economic inequality is far more unreachable when women fight for equal opportunities and equal pay in India. The necessities that feminism demands in India is quite different from that of western feminism. The difference in struggle can be seen with the example of cyborg science fiction in India. While Haraway talks about Cyborgs fighting back to its creators as seen in western fictional movies, Indian film industry completely lacks cyborg movies of that kind. The only science fiction related popular movies in India are *Enthiran* (2010), *Ra one* (2011) and *Koi Mil Gaya- Krish* series (2003-2013) in which none of them can be named cyborg in its real sense except *Krish 3* released in 2013. Even in the movie *Krish 3* the cyborgs are never shown as normal but as something to be destructed as they are artificially built. The hatred, disgust and fear shown towards cybernetic creatures in the movie further moves away from the post-gender society Haraway envisioned in the cybernetic era. It is not just the thematic difference which shows the ineptness of cyborg feminism in India but also the huge difference in number of cyborg science fiction created in India stands as the evidence for itself.

India is different from other nations in many ways especially considering its cultural diversity. Just as the West fight against class and racial discrimination India needs to fight against religious and caste discriminations as well within feminism. Being a postcolonial nation which gained its independence in mid twentieth century also has its impact on feminism. Thus the influence and development of science and technology considering the various factors that influence the condition of women in India need to be addressed adequately. Considering the historical, political, economic and cultural differences of India identity politics which can address the issues of Dalit

women and transgender women separately is the need of the hour. Also to fight back the white capitalist patriarchy in its basic level more of an economy targeted feminism proposed by Socialist feminism seems more suitable for a third world country like India. Cyborg feminism as envisioned by Donna Haraway seems not only distant for the India, but is also quite utopian in its ideals to be realized anytime.

The hidden patriarchal values implicitly seen in Cyborg movies reasserts gender identities and revokes all the hopes for a post gendered society as envisioned in cyborg era. The lack of Cyborg science fiction movies in Indian film industry shows the lack of technological advancement in a third world nation like India. Technology as a means to achieve gender equality is challenged as the new information technology era is also under man's control. Considering the cultural diversity of India the necessity of identity politics and socialist feminism is more practical and adaptable. Thus it is argued that Cyborg feminism is highly idealistic and impractical to be applied in the present, especially in developing country like India.

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