

### **Cyberfeminism in Cyberpunk Science Fiction**

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#### **Abstract**

*Contemporary social, economic and cultural life is dominated by the recent technologies like use of computers, internet, artificial intelligence etc. Multinational companies try to create artificial intelligence to overpower the world. As a result new forms of technology like cyborgs, cyber-feminine characters and posthuman ethos are dominating the present world. William Gibson is considered as one of leading figure in Cyberpunk science fiction. His Bridge Trilogy is about the posthuman world dominated by cyberfeminist characters. The novels like Neuromancer, Count Zero and Mona Lisa Overdrive are about the role of cyborgs in techno-society. William Gibson has created virtual reality and virtual space for the intermediation of cyberfeminist characters. The author has made female character like Molly to hire computer hacker Case to work for the multinational company. Molly is fine example of cyber-feminism. Her struggle to assert herself in techno-society is best revealed in the Bridge Trilogy. Pat Cadigan is another cyberpunk science fiction writer who excels in depicting issues of cyberfeminism in her novels like Sinners. Cyber-feminism is the most recent development in feminist studies. Woman's involvement in techno-culture and international politics is the core of cyber-feminism. The present paper addresses the issues of cyber-feminism in Cyberpunk Science Fiction.*

**Keywords:** Cyber-feminism, cyborgs, posthuman world, artificial intelligence.

Feminism has undergone changes in the age of cyber-technology. Cyber-feminism is one of the recent trends in cyber literature in general and cyberpunk science fiction in particular. Cyberpunk science fiction is new trend in science fiction developed in 1980s and 1990s. It reflects both technophobic and technophilic attitude of techno savvy society. Posthuman ethos is at the centre of cyberpunk science fiction. Cyberfeminism is one of the gifts of cyberpunk science fiction. It aims to reconstruct the image of woman in digitalized cyber society. It opens the space for new imagining about woman's subjectivity, identity and politics. Donna Haraway uses the term cyborgs for the woman-machine interface: "I am making an argument for the cyborg as a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality and as

an imaginative resource suggesting some very fruitful couplings” (2004, 8). Donna Haraway sees technology as a boon to woman as technology especially computer does make necessary difference between male and female. She considers techno-society as a monster world without gender differentiation. According to Donna Haraway genderless society will help woman to have equality. She writes, “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess” (Haraway 610). Postmodern science fiction does not make a distinction between real and artificial and this blurring of boundaries between real and artificial, between men and machine help us to blur the distinction between male and female. She uses the term cyborg for the intermingling of human and machine. The weaker sex uses new technology to assert herself. Traditional gender identities have undergone tremendous changes in an age of cyber-technology. Cyber-feminist mode of thinking involves the fusion of woman and machine to forge online identity. Cyber-feminist employs technology for self expression. The cyber technology offers new weapon for women to break silence. The hybridity of human-machine fusion, blurring of boundaries and interdependence are the responsible for giving significant shift in feminism. No doubt cyber-feminism addresses the question of identity and politics. But it does so in the context of woman’s relations to technology. Donna Haraway in her essay entitled *A Manifest for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s* (2004), stresses the fusion of human and machine. She is optimistic in her combination of human and machine in that it empowers woman to redefine her identity and politics. She stresses that cyborg is way to forge new condition where genderless world comes into existence. She emphasizes to generate pleasure from diffusion of boundaries between human and machine that distinguishes cyber-feminism from the traditional feminism. No doubt, in feminism technology is used to assert identity but body and technology are separated. In cyber-feminism technological body is used as a weapon for pleasure and medium of woman’s liberation and not technology as a tool. This kind of attitude is described as liberal cyber-feminism. The critics who advocate this kind of feminism believe that computer and cyber technology will help women to liberate themselves because computer does not recognize the social dichotomies of male and female. Liberal cyber-feminism helps woman for sexual liberation.

However, another conflicting feminist response comes into existence. Another perspective grounded on reality believed that male uses computer and internet networks to harass the weaker sex. This kind of feminism is known as radical cyber-feminism. This kind of feminism claims that “pornography is inherently harmful to women and should be made illegal” (Kira Hall 149).

A number of feminists place greater importance on freedom of expression. They believe that sexual liberation will help the society to create gender free society. As a result they have embraced computer and new forms of technology as a new frontier of sexual activism and rebellion. The magazine entitled *Future Sex* publishes articles and books on cyberporn and woman’s use of technology to express herself. The present research paper

addresses the issues raised by liberal cyber-feminism with reference to cyberpunk science fiction. William Gibson and Pat Cadigan are the practitioners of cyberpunk science fiction.

William Gibson's first novel *Neuromancer* offers a new kind of approach to the study of literature – cyber-feminist approach to the study of literature. Molly is the central cyber feminine character in the novel. She plays a significant role in the development of the action of the novel. She is described as a cyborg in that she has a military body modified technologically to survive in cyberspace. She is also described as razor girl. Her eyes are sealed with sockets and “ten double-edged, four centimeter scalpel blades in housing beneath her burgundy nails” (Gibson 147). She carries a fair amount of silicon in her head from her father. As a result she looks more as a masculine and less as a feminine. She is strong, fast and tough. She experiences empowerment through the interface with machine. It is Molly who hires a hacker called Case for Armitage. Though she was a whore previously, she describes herself as a working woman and refuses to call her as a street samurai. Being a cyber-feminine character, she lacks traditional womanly attributes. Unlike traditional female characters, she does not like to nurture her family. Rather she earns money to enhance her technologically stout body. The Artificial Intelligence (AI), Wintermute hires Armitage to crack antivirus in Freeside. Armitage, in turn hires Molly to recruit the world famous hacker Case to carry out the work. *Neuromancer* is other half of Wintermute who tries to unite with its better half to become omnipotent. When Molly jacks in Freeside using Case's software (brain), she enjoys his masculine body. However, Case is rendered as more feminine and less masculine: “Case's presence masculinizes Molly and feminizes Case, highlighting that it is she, the woman, taking on the active role while Case, the man, remains safely at a distance, contributing his support” (Lauraine Leblanc).

Through the character of Molly, William Gibson reverses the traditional gender roles. Instead of allowing Case to recruit woman for the work in cyberspace, here the woman character Molly recruits Case for Armitage. Molly does not like to be a human being in woman's clothing, she is a cyborg woman in a masculine role. No doubt, Molly and Case succeed in cracking the Freeside. At the end of the novel, Case learns that their activities are controlled by *Neuromancer*. However, he cannot escape from the cyberspace without the help of Molly.

Pat Cadigan is the only women novelist who belongs to cyberpunk science fiction movement. Her novel entitled *Synners* (1991) is populated by the hackers and domestic exiles. She is responsible for the emergence of a new cultural formulation built in and around cyberspace through the central character of Sam. Cyberpunk science fiction has cultural significance in that it blurs the boundaries between the male and the female, the real and the artificial. It articulates the woman's efforts to assert her individuality with the help of computer and technology. Cadigan's *Synners* presents the world populated by ‘Homo datum’, people who lives in the cyberspace through net and disconnection from the information economy is not an option.

Pat Cadigan's *Synners* is about Multinational Diversifications' takeover of two small companies: Eye Traxx, an independent music-video production company, and Hall Galen Enterprises, a company that employs the medical researcher who invented and patented the producers for brain socket implants. Due to takeover of these two companies, the employees like Gina nad Visual Mark become Diversifications' corporate property. Previously Visual Mark was Eye Traxx's original synners, a human synthesizer who is fifty years old now. Diversifications intends to market its new brain sockets by offering virtual reality rock videos. Visual Mark is the best music-video sinner in the business. Diversifications' brain sockets not only allow music-videos to be fed into a receiving brain, they also provide a direct interface between a brain and a computer. This type of brain-to-computer connection proves to have dire consequences. On the one hand Diversifications can provide socket and music-video fed into the socket on the other. As a result their socket clients encounter a fatal side effect: 'intercranial meltdown' in the form of a cerebral stroke. Thus, the novel deals with social consequence of new technologies. The Diversifications Company plots against rival companies to stimulate society for electronic addictions. However, the novel may be interpreted from cyber-feminist point of view.

The seventeen year cyber-feminine character Sam is the real hacker in the novel. She has the ability to access to net. She is the character who combines the labour of computer hacking and the virtual acrobatics of cyberspace travel: If you couldn't walk on the floor, you walked on the ceiling. If you couldn't walk on the ceiling, you walked on the walls, and if you couldn't walk on the wals, you walked in them, encrypted. Pure hacking" (Pat Cadigan 351). Sam trades encrypted data and hacking talents for stray pieces of equipments and living necessities. She hacks information commodity for an insulin-pump chip nreader that runs off body energy. Unlike traditional female characters, Sam lives a quality life outside of any institutional structure. She refuses the heroic cowboy role. She is happy to provide the power. She hacks the information for insulin-pump chip reader that runs off body energy. When the draining virus infects every terminal connected to the system, Sam's insulin-pump chip reader is the only non-infected access point to the net. The chip reader is inserted in the abdomen of Sam. When the thin needle is inserted into her abdomen, the chip reader draws its power from Sam's body. In this way Sam is described as a provider of power and not receiver of power. Sam manipulates the dimension of cybernetic space in order to communicate with other people.

As a feminist text, *Synners* offers an alternative of cyberpunk identity that begins with the assumption that bodies are always gendered and always marked by race. Cadigan's novel *Synners* is implicitly influenced by Donna Haraway's cyborg politics: "The gendered distinctions between characters hold true to a cyborgian figuration of gender differences whereby the female-body is codedd as a body-in-connection and the male-body, as a body in isolation" (Donna Haraway 65).

Pat Cadigan's *Synners* sheds light on the gendered differences in the way that the characters relate to each the technological space of information. The female characters like Sam and Gina actively manipulate the dimension of cybernetic space in order to communicate with other people. Two male hackers like Gabe and Visual Mark, on the other hand, are addicted to cyberspace because it offers them release from the loneliness of their material bodies. As a work of feminist imagination, *Synners* narrates certain tensions and obsessions that animate feminist thinking across cultural discourses. Sam and Gina represent the female body as material, as a body that labours. On the other hand, the males like Gabe and Visual Mark represent as repressed and disappearing. Thus, as a cyberpunk science fiction, *Synners* opens sets the stage for elaboration of a feminist theory that insists on the relationship of material bodies to cyberspace. For female characters like Sam and Gina, technology serves as a site for reinscription and representation of self and identity. For Sam, technology is not means of escape from or transcendence of the body. For Sam, it is rather the means of communication and connection with other bodies. Gina and Sam make interesting subjects for feminist theory in that their technological competencies and sinner talents emphasize the need for feminist activists to encourage women to develop technological skills.

Cyberpunk science fiction allows women to use technology for self-assertion and not for survival. William Gibson and Pat Cadigan's presentation of women as cyborgs in their respective novels gives a radical shift in conceptualization of men and women. Technology and technological innovations alter age old traditional ideologies. In presenting Molly and Sam as cyborgs, both Gibson and Cadigan undermine traditional concepts of gender. Molly and Sam work more as males and less as females. In creating female-gendered cyborgs with male-gendered attributes, cyberpunk science fiction depicts post-gender beings. Cyber-feminism helps women to reject age old dichotomies like male and female and creates genderless society where dichotomies would not exist.

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