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Cyberspace- The Virtual Reality or the Real Virtuality? -A Critical Study of Cyberpunk and Cyberfeminity

Arathi Anil

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Cyberspace- The Virtual Reality or the Real Virtuality? -A Critical Study of Cyberpunk and Cyberfeminity.

Arathi Anil (**Research Scholar**)

Abstract

"There they go, our brothers who have been educated at public schools and universities, mounting those steps, passing in and out of those doors, ascending those pulpits, preaching, teaching, administering justice, practising medicine, transacting business, making money. It is a solemn sight always- a procession... For we have to ask ourselves, here and now, do we wish to join that procession, or don't we? On what terms shall we join that procession? Above all, where is it leading us, the procession of educated men?"

- Virginia Wolf

The aforementioned oft quoted lines of Virginia Wolf, who emphasized on the inevitability of 'a room of one's own' for a woman who wants to assert her individuality could be identified as a refrain since A.D. This reality, or in better terms, constructed reality has

always been a determinant of women's position in the society, right from the Enlightenment wherein man dreamt to control the world to the 21st century where man himself is controlled by the technologies he gave birth to. When Donna Haraway alerts in her *Cyborg Manifesto*, 'how not to be a Man, the embodiment of Western logos', she tends to imply how every effort to build a world of man's own design has resulted in the development of a planetary network with its own

network of communication, circuits of control and flow of information. When she comments that, "The cyborg is our ontology: it gives us our politics", she seems to connect technology with femininity with regards to the fact that both the entities are being encoded in masculine terms. Here, she invokes the image of the cyborg, - 'a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creation of fiction.'- perhaps the icon of contemporary feminism. This idea is well evident in Sadie Plant's statement, "Silicon and women's liberation track each other's development", wherein she correlates machines and women since both have atleast one thing in common, that they are not men, but passive entities controlled by men. Cyberfeminism takes hold of the stage at this juncture with the agenda that patriarchy is doomed. It's neither a theory nor a practice, which seldom relies on any political principles or projects. However, the nexus between femininity and technology is quite evident like the connection between castration and blindness, the penis and sight, an idea that seals the fate of women within the phallic organization of a specular economy. Taking into account the previous researches done in the field, this paper aims at exploring the varied nuances of Cyberspace, Cyberpunk and Cyber Femininity inorder to shed light on the long-silenced nexus between women and technology.

Keywords: cyberspace, cyberpunk, cyber femininity, cyborgs, virtual world, gender hierarchy, technology, machines, and women.

Technology vs. Femininity: An Introduction

Technology has always been encoded as well as decoded in terms of masculinity. Yet machines have always been compared with women, since both are (considered to be) operated by men. This connection between women and technology has always been sedimented in patriarchal myth. Machines were, in such a context, attributed with effeminity since both women and machines had a common element of unpredictability as well as a high chance of getting break down. This

makes the machines to be associated with nature in the long existing debate of nature/ nurture binaries. No matter how sophisticated machines or women are, certain attributes like agency, autonomy, self-awareness, the ability to make history, and transform the world have always been accredited to men. This power relation shed light on the gender hierarchy that have always castigated women as the weaker section of the society. Women, nature, and machines have always existed to 'serve' man, organisms and devices intended for the service of a history to which they are merely footnotes. To put it in the words of French feminist theoretician, Luce Irigaray, this is a 'strategy which tends to suggest that there is only one human species, that's male homosapiens'. This relegates women to the realm of virtual reality- the stimulation of space or the pixelated manifestation of another zone. Cyborgs and cyber spatial integrated net, being the tropes of science fiction have always marked the shift from reality into virtual. Thus, it betrays every patriarchal illusion, dragging the human into a post-human world, where the intentions of the human species are neither valid nor the guiding force of global development. Every attempt to build a world of man's own design has only paved the way for the emergence of a planetary network with its own networks of communication, circuits of control, and flows of information. Though man has made the nature work via the development of self-regulatory systems, it no longer works for him. In the present scenario wherein man, hooked up to the screens and jacked into decks, become the user, or else, the addict, who can no longer insist on his sovereign autonomy and separation from nature.

When wares of technology, hard and soft, old and new, turn out to be the toys of boys, all the technical advancements could be only looked upon as man's attempt to perpetuate and exert his dominion. This extension of masculine power has its roots in a struggle against nature, which itself paves the way for repression of women. Women, who were directed to 'act like a woman' or to be girlish or lady-like, have been role playing for ages with their 'coercive' inclination towards imitation

and artifice, make-up and pretence. When they choose their disguises and assume their alternative identities, they tend to act out as puppets for a show directed by their male counterparts. Here, they are constantly persuaded to be like something, but never to be anything in particular, least of all herself. Across ages, in every nook and corner of the globe, people have failed to realize that there's nothing like a real woman. 'Women don't yet exist', except as she appears on the set. She is a wife. She is a mother. She is a sister. She is a daughter. She is supposed to perform the duties assigned to her without any fail. She has to keep up her appearances. She has to act head of the household. Derailing from any of these assigned roles would make her a 'characterless' woman, as per the societal norms. Here, a woman's tasks don't deflect much away from that of a machine. Both of the entities rather don't possess any identity of one's own or are forced to veil the same. In such a context, cyber femininity is an entirely different arena. It doesn't deal with a lack of identity, but concerns with a mere tactic of infiltration or rather a virtual reality. To be more precise, VR is basically a distortion of human identity far more profound than pointed ears, or even gender bending, or becoming a sentient octopus. It does tempt its users with the ultimate fulfilment of the patriarchal dream, leaving the proper body behind and floating in the immaterial. However, it is man himself who is adrift in this data stream wherein one loses his identity in the matrix, with his boundaries collapsed in the cybernetic net. For instance, every new computer virus which hacks through the filters of data protection means some more software, the proliferation of new codes, the proliferation and mutation of viruses and what not!

Cyberspace, Cyberpunk, and Cyberfeminity: A Critical Analysis

Cyborg, in fact, betrays every patriarchal illusion, dragging the human into an alien future in which all systems of security are powerless. This is why because, it acts as an undercover or a Robocop that enacts as or pretends to be the vanguard of human security, the more real man, the

military machine. But this itself is an inhuman mutation, which is neither man, nor machine, not even man becoming machine. The cybernetic invasion in such a sense is a destruction of the human identity, the spin off from man's attempts to exert his dominion over others. These cut ups of man and machine are, in such a context, intruders from virtual post humanity, which is well evident in popular films wherein muscular Cyborgs are in charge of law enforcement, security, policing, and surveillance, inorder to safeguard the values and interests of human security. However, this mission could be accomplished only by complicating control and proliferating chaos, disrupting security, while reinforcing it. Thus, cyborg informs the patriarch that his drive for domination has only resulted in cybernetics which encompasses self-designing mechanisms, self-organizing systems, self-replicating machines etc, and not in the technical advancement for ordering the world. This reminds one of how humans tamed nature like clockwork, which inturn controlled its creators in every aspect. The Jacquard loom holds credits here for having marked the power shift from humans and machines to a new software site in which machinery begins to learn and explore its own circuits of positive feedback. What we could decipher from all these instances is that just as the mechanical shaped the cultures in which it arose, cybernetics marks a fundamental shift from linear to cyclical to circuitry. Man's drive for domination, control and systematisation has only made him realize that his agency has its roots in virtual reality and that every attempt to heighten security, and erect the protective screens again, merely perfect its circuits. When cyborg embraces identity collapse, it clearly shifts reality into virtual, thereby pertaining techno security to evolve under the guidance of a virtual systems crash.

Conclusion:

Freud's idea that weaving is an act of veiling a women's desire had been automated for more than a century. What Ada Lovelace, the first computer programmer speaks about Charles Babbage's Analytical Machine is that, 'it weaves algrebraical patterns just as the Jacquard

loom weaves flowers and leafs. When the current American photographer, Esther Parada writes, 'I like to think of the computer as an electronic loom strung with a matrix image, into which I can weave other material... I hope to create an equivalent to Guatemalan textiles, in which elaborate embroidery plays against the woven patterns of the cloth', it tends to imply that weaving no longer veils women's desire, but allows it to flow in the dense tapestries and complex depth of the computer image. This is some way or the other, an equivalent to Hypertext, which distorts linearity for the user to enter the density of writing. The data streams and information flows of cybernetic machines are thus the transformation and return of sensuality and extra-sensory perceptions denied by the rational speculations of human history. This is the 'return of the repressed, the return of the feminine, perhaps even the revenge of nature', as Sadie Plant puts it forth. But that which returns is transformed to the extent that it is neither passive nor inert. Nature itself has emerged out as an intelligent machine, as a self-regulating system. Nature was always the matrix it becomes: once the passive womb, a space for man. Now, the same nature is weaving itself on the integrated circuit, perplexing man in a labyrinth which is hard to decode. If Cyborgs is an 'ontology' which gives one his/ her 'politics, as Donna Haraway observes, it is one's task to decide whether Cyberspace is a virtual reality or a real virtuality. What else could we do be 'chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism', caught up in the dual between nature and nurture for ages!!!

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