

Body and Power Dynamics in Posthuman Gendered Dystopia: A Reading of the Film *Alita: Battle Angel*

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Abstract

The transformation of science-fiction in the recent decade announces the procurement of the advent of a future beyond human existence. The emergence of posthuman criticism reflects upon the biotechnological enhancement where the idea of a human life transcends the boundaries of organic-avaricious. Thus, the idea of beyond human (post-human) existence transcends the binaries of gender, sex and race. Conceptualising the posthuman society in withdrawing the binaries of male and female peremptorily deals with the different markers of identity-based on technological modifications. Therefore, the cybernetic implantation on the human body becomes a prominent marker of identity formation. It is also an assumed state of the human condition of the non-naturalistic presence of a life force. The posthuman depiction of the future in films and literature experiments with the established boundaries of supreme human existence. It deals with the moral fear of man where the supreme being of nature confronts marginality. The posthuman representation of social structure de-centers 'man' and offers a superior bio-genetic capital to rely on. Therefore, the paper tries to analyse this new phase of human existence presented in the animation movie *Alita: Battle Angel*. The paper engages with a critical understanding of the social mechanism presented in the film.

Keywords

Posthumanism, Science-fiction, Film, Class conflict, Body.

The posthuman representation of the future reflects upon the sociological understanding of the body and the cultural construct of individuality. The origin of this genre stresses back to Norbert Wiener's work *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*. His theoretical proposition of Cybernetics is furnished in the posthuman exploration of the human-machine hybrid. Donna Haraway proposes this hybrid form as the transgression of physical and non-physical boundaries of human existence. In Haraway's understanding, the posthuman cyborg is a transcendental other, which is an "offspring of technoscientific wombs" (Haraway and

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Geopolitico 13). She further proclaims that the entity of the human-machine hybrid in the post-human reality accomplishes its existence but the “force of the implosion of the natural and artificial, subject and object, machine and organic body, money and lives, narrative and reality” (14). The dualism in human existence is thus manifested in the entity of the cyborg. The representation of this human-machine hybrid in the posthuman future amalgamated technological advancement with the idea of lost humanity in the corrupt social sphere with biased class consciousness. This idea of the sociability of a cyborg is presented in the animation, *Alita: Battle Angel*.

The animation, *Alita: Battle Angel*, is adapted from a manga named, *Gunnm*. It is a popular Japanese post-apocalyptic fiction. Yukiko Kishiro's narration centres around the cyborg named Alita. The animated version of the manga presents the same plot with some structural variations. The animation is named after the central character of the book, Alita. The dystopian setting presented in the movie started by capturing the discrepancies between the two worlds divided by class conflict. The opening scene of the movie captures the view where all the junks of the city of Zalem, floating in the sky and uprooted from the ground, are dumped in the place called Iron City. In the 26th century wasteland, the dismantled and dysfunctional robotic body parts of Alita were found in the junkyard by Dr. Dyson Ido, a cybernetic expert who was long ago banished from Zalem. Dr. Dyson named the newly formed body of the girl, Alita, after the name of her dead daughter.

Alita is presented as the embodiment of power, a higher unity of humans and machines. Her state of oblivion where she is not able to remember her past reflects Haraway's proclamation that “the cyborg has no origin story” (150). Alita's newly formed individuality encounters an oblivious subjectivity where she experiences a fusion of a new identity and a lost past. Alita is an empowered ‘cyber’ girl and has training in martial arts which helped her to fight back with strategic finesse against the criminals. Her self-determined nature makes her an independent fighter and her malleable character traits mark the cybernetic gender performance. The representation of Alita with the complexities of empowered mechanism adheres to the stereotype reflection of a feminine female. Samantha Holland argues that in “cyborg films, while boundary breakdowns between humans and technology are enthusiastically explored, ‘gender boundaries are treated less flexibly’, with cyborgs tending, in fact, ‘to appear masculine or feminine to an exaggerated degree” (165). The exaggerated masculine bodies in the film where the transformation and the cyborg body beyond the human form try to narrate the power structure of the society based on gender relations. But Alita with her cognitive faculty of mind enhances her feminine identity and fights back the evil. Alita's body is itself a weapon to fight social evils. Moreover, the gendered identity of Alita persists throughout the film as she reflects the idealised representation of fetish and sexual ideology of the society. Her female embodiment also is a result of the male gaze where she is rejecting the hierarchy of social structure that still exists as the result of the popular version of a female body.

The reconstruction of Alita's body represents the posthuman expression of commodified female body where the worth of Alita's existence depends upon the cybernetic invention. Dr. Dyson and Alita here share the cybernetic body where Alita's body becomes the sight of remembrance of human relations. Dr. Dyson remembers his daughter through the sight of Alita's body. The technologised body as Anne Balsamo marks is “recoded within discourses of biotechnology and medicine as belonging to an

order of culture rather than of nature, gender remains a naturalized marker of human identity” (9). The obscure identity of Alita thus is a construct of sociological order where her cyberization persists the gender traits. Alita in the film posits herself in a dominant position in the gender hierarchy. She fights back against the evil characters and even knows how to manipulate the situation according to her needs. Thus, in the scene in the bar where Zapan, a former hunter-warrior, addresses Alita as “sweets” because of her surface meek presence, indulges in a fight with Alita. Ignoring her strength, he mocks Alita’s position as a bounty hunter. He introduces her to the other bounty hunters present at that place: “Cupcake here is a bounty-hunter” (Rodriguez 57:14). Zapan, a representer of the false masculinist ideology ignores Alita's voice against Grewishka, a ruthless killer. Zapan is a posthuman hybrid who critiques human subjectivity in the post-anthropocentric socio-cultural environment. His appearance as a hyperbole of machine-human hybrid functions as an agent of, ‘hegemonic masculinity’.¹

The juxtaposition of cyborgs with humanistic values and the cyborgs with destructive consciousness weaves the transitory character of mind and matter and also reports the translucent boundary between masculinity and femininity. Further, the chuckles in the scene undermine Alita's power because of her feminine existence. She laughed back at the idealisation of the male body by defeating all present in the place. Her proclamation “I do not stand by in the presence of evil” (01:04:51-01:05:04) and indomitable spirit in the face of power structure makes the posthuman representation of gender where Alita is the representation of life and belief in the feminine self. The abrupt occurrence of Grewishka here disrupts the normal flow of conversation. His presence again marks the phallogocentric idea of power. He undermines Alita, as he says “From here, there are worlds above worlds above worlds...going farther up than you can imagine. And the trash of each one flows down to the one below... ‘til it all ends up here. it’s where I used to live... I was saved, remade by the same hands that shapes your destiny even now” (01:05:38-01:07:30). The words of Grewishka reflect the gendered power structure of where the voice (language) belongs to him. Thus, Grewishka marks the place where he lives as the place where the female embodiment of power, Alita, should die. Further, her tear-up body and indomitable spirit defeated Grewishka, and thus she strikes the dominant power structure. Alita here reconstructs the binary power structure of gender and the idea of feminine existence. Here the film reflects Haraway’s understanding of the world of cyborgs beyond the gendered world. Haraway reflects that,

Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism. That is why cyborg politics insist on noise and advocate pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions of animal and machine. These are the couplings which make Man and Woman so problematic. (176)

Here the female protagonist is portrayed as the counterpart of the male characters. The attitude of Alita reflects the desire for independence, strength and recognition to mirror the image of an idealised male hero. Thus, she becomes a female cyber-hero in the animation. Her self-determination and willingness to fight evil make her the hero of the film. Though the film is not complete as the final battle with the authority is not depicted in this animation, still, the powerful presence of Alita marks the new feminine identity in the posthuman world.

Alita is a true posthuman embodiment of human and machine as she is not devoid of human emotions. Her revived memory makes her aware of the evil presence of Nova, a renegade Tipharean scientist. Alita's cognitive posthuman presence makes her realise the world-order and also, she is able to comprehend the words of Dr. Dyson, who told her that the body is "just a shell. It's not bad or good. That part's up to you" (Rodriguez 01:13:25-01:13:34). As a part of the cognitive posthuman expression, Alita though a cyborg has consciousness and has the ability to judge the social structure. Moreover, the film also presents the advancement of posthuman fiction by introducing the emotive faculty of a cyborg. Alita's cognitive presence supports the sensory information she gathers from her past. Memory is one of the vital sensory parts of her being. Alita's new body with advanced nanotech registers the past. The transformation and accepting the relation between the techno-mechanical body and brain promotes the conversation between sociological advancement and human existence. Thus, the representation of "cognitive revolution" and the inauguration of the cognitive sciences as a way to understand the human brain and its relationship to computational technology" (Yaszek and Ellis 76). The cyborg body amalgamated with emotion explores the idea of humanity in the posthuman dystopic setting.

The film problematises the human and posthuman dichotomy of empathy and the idea of a creator. The replacement of God from the concept of creation defines the caricature of supreme authority, as cybernetics marks the fusion of living things with machines. The body parts comprise of transplants and replacement with mechanical enhanced models, challenging the natural order of things. Further, the romantic relationship of Alita with Hugo marks a new enterprise in the posthuman representation of human-machine. She loves Hugo and cries for him. In the scene where Zapan tried to kill Hugo, Alita leaves the important competition of the ball for him. She comes to rescue Hugo and tells Zapan "Touch him again and I will kill you" (Rodriguez 01:37:20-01:37:27). This threatening voice is more of a concerned protector than of a fighter machine reflects Alita's emotional attachment. Besides, Zapan tries to instigate Alita for a further fight: "Come on, Hunter-Warrior. Tonight, you become one of us. You know, there's no room for love and mercy in Hunter's Code" (01:37:46-01:38:05). These words of Zapan at the same time challenges Alita who does not follow the gender roles and her emotional faculty of the mind. Her relationship with Hugo presents the heteronormative idea of a woman, as she falls back from the fight with Zapan to protect her love. Thus, here Alita is represented with human emotions as she is twice projected as a helpless figure in the face of death, once when Zapan tried to kill Hugo and second at the rope to the city of Zalem when Hugo falls to the ground. In an event in the climactic scene, her love for Hugo provides her with the strength to fight back the evil. Though the film reflects the hero's journey still it is not devoid of human relations and emotions. The film is grounded on the theme of battle and it still contains humanitarian values.

The world divided in terms of power represents the apocalyptic version of society which instead of promoting the harmonious ideal, achieved the ideal state through marginalising the masses. The difference reflects the result of the "grid of control on the planet" (Haraway 154). The posthuman apocalypse is the result of idealising the metropolis society, which promotes the authoritative presence of the elites. The social discrimination reflected in the film is the outcome of discriminatory practices in the society where the elites to maintain the distance want to control the racialised

hegemony and class difference. Even the city of Zalem condemns illness as it reflects the defect within the perfect body. The physical illness is considered as an 'other' to maintain the biased sense of purity in the floating city. Therefore, Dyson and his wife, Dr.Chiren, were forced to leave the privileged place for their daughter's illness and physical disability. The desire to become one among the privileged class instigates crime in Iron City. Further, the young adults with the desire for an elevated life acted as the tool in the hands of Vector, a scrapyard businessman, who is attached to illegal Zalem. He maintains the hierarchy in the Iron City and misguides people and allures them with false promises for the way up to Zalem. Hugo is one of Vector's victims. Dr. Dyson thus mentions: "Vector was running a scam. If you're born on the ground you stay on the ground and no amount of money can change that. The only way to get from the lower world to Zalem is to become Final Champion. You can't buy your way up there" (Rodriguez 01:42:44-01:42:58). The idea of belonging and befitting a privileged place is criticised here.

The social disparity even does not allow the existence of individuality as the authoritarian presence of Nova watches everything. Dr. Dyson says "The watcher behind the eyes is Nova" (01:43:23). Thus, the death of Dr.Chiren defines the lack of tolerance for rejection. The authority, Nova, fails to handle the fact that Chiren rejects the city of Zalem for emotional connection with her family. When Chiren says, "What I want is not up there" (01:44:25), it diminishes the high value of Zalem, the emblem of ultimate happiness and elevated life. Chiren walks away from the desire for Zalem resembles the people of "Omelas"² who walked away from the civilisation of Omelas. Chiren dares to defy the understanding of ultimate happiness and ideal life at the cost of some people's suffering. The film portrays humanitarian hope in the dystopian setting as Chiren prioritises emotion and her family.

The film, *Alita: Battle Angel* brings the posthuman representation of gender and the socio-economic structure of a dystopic future. The film amalgamates human values with the cyborg's strength. The character of Alita is thus, not only a cyborg but also reflects the humanity in the posthuman Iron City and Zalem. The social discrepancies and centre-margin dichotomy are also well represented in the film. The film presents the narrative of cyborgs within the framework of humanity. The two cities mentioned in the film are symbols of class division. Moreover, the film represents Alita as the part of 'mass'. She rejects the idea of oppression. Thus, she considers herself as an 'insignificant girl' with the purpose of destroying the enemy of society, Nova. The proclamation that she is part of ordinary life makes her a hero in the posthuman structural interface of the distorted idea of the ideal life. Thus, the representation here challenges the popular gender depiction. It manifests Alita as revolutionary and reflects the potential of human growth in her. The cognitive part of Alita makes her illuminate the dualism in the existence of a cyborg. Nova's idea of masculine presence equates with a huge body along with enormous mechanical transfusion implies that the opposite to it does not construct a powerful entity. Thus, the feminine body of Alita without overtly appearing mechanical parts is a non-threatening element in general understanding of the sky city. Alita's existence in the city destroys the popular notion of power equals to male. She marks her presence in both the city and Nova's consciousness. Further, her existence challenges the marginalisation of females and the iron city. Her belonging in the iron city and undesired presence in the city of elites creates a paradox in Zalem.

Footnotes

1. "Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell 77).
2. "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" is a short fiction by Ursula K. Le Guin. The story depicts a dystopian village with all happiness and idealised live. The cost of happiness of the whole village is the perpetual suffering of a child.

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