CHAPTER 2

GENDER IN POSTCYBERPUNK AND VIDEO GAMES

2.1 Postcyberpunk and Gender

In contrasting two popular AIs of cyberpunk, i.e. *Neuromancer*'s AIs (1984) and Yod in Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991), June Deery notes that "both cyborgs and artificial intelligences offer a concrete demonstration of that great postmodern theme, the construction of human identity. But the embodied cyborg provokes more questions about body, gender, reproduction, kinship and cultural identity than does the artificial intelligence" (92). AIs, as Deery says, transcends, humanity, in that it eschews the need of a body, and hence, does not probe into the quagmire of possessing a gendered, though artificial body, the way a cyborg is forced to.

Yod, in *He, She and It,* is completely an AI who is embodied in a male adult body, but who cannot grasp the differences in genders and gendered roles. The only identification he is able to make is that of lack of belongingness. Acknowledged by Piercy as a fictionalized rendering of Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Yod finds himself disconnected with humanity, lacking a sense of history, reminiscent of the movie *I, Robot,* where the sentient robot Sunny finds his heightened consciousness become a leader of robots, a community that thinks like humans, but are separated by the history of their species. The only association Yod makes is with Malkah and Shira, fighting for the anti-technologist town they have against the giant capitalistic corporate ruling the technologized world, based on what Haraway called "strategic assemblage" (212), rather than politics of identity – the affiliation being the battle with the corporates for control over what is their own town, their own bodies.

He, She and It is set in a near future where 23 corporations, called multis, wielded power greater than governments, destroying the ecology, making the atmosphere toxic, and various cybercultures existed on the fringes, connected to a virtual Base. Yod was a cyborg originally built by the scientist Avram in the Jewish freehold town of Tikva, designed to be a sophisticated killing machine – the biological features are male, given that Avram was a stereotypical macho figure. Projected as the most sophisticated cyborg in terms of its imitation of human behavior, Yod slowly occupies the central space in the novel.

He, She and It, according to Piercy, is partly a response to Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto", in that it revels in the confusion of boundaries. Unlike the standard understanding of a cyborg as a primarily biological being which has been enhanced with robotics to a significant degree, Yod is "a mixture of biological and machine components" (67), and mimics human behavior as it is "self-correcting, growing, (and as) dependent on feedback as we are (357)." Endowed with a male body, he not only looks male, but is also given characteristics by his "father" Avram stereotypically associated with patriarchal males.

Assuaging Shira's fear of Yod's sexual desire for her becoming a violent trait, Malkah, Shira's grandmother as well as the scientist who gave Yod more "feminine" characteristics in secret, reveals that, "Avram made him male – entirely so. Avram thought that was the ideal: pure reason, pure logic, pure violence. The world has barely survived the males we have running around. I gave him a gentler side, starting with emphasizing his love for knowledge and extending it to emotional and personal knowledge, a need for connection…." (142).

Similarly, Yod's confession of his need for intimacy being greater than that for physiological sex, and Shira's remark, "It's usually thought to be women who want sex for the intimacy, among humans (184)," coupled with Gadi's promiscuous and jealousy-induced

attraction towards Shira that disappears as soon as he realizes that Yod is a machine and not a real human being, complicate the understanding of gender as from a very contemporary mindset. Yod, despite his male body and primary programming as a "masculine" sentient being, displays traits stereotypically associated with women – the gentleness of sex with Shira, the need for intimacy over sex, deceit, the loneliness at being a marginalized entity, the coyness in confessing love, and his ultimate sacrifice for the larger "family", destroying himself so that another cyborg intended for violence would not be made again, and so on.

While it can, on one level, be argued that for once, the male cyborg was anything but masculine in its violence and lack of vulnerability, it is also worth noting that Piercy's human characters are drawn in black and white – every male in the novel (Avram, Gadi and Joshua) is projected as cold, insensitive and violent, while every female (Malkah, Nili, Riva and Shira) is strong, vulnerable, yet soft and sensitive at the core. At the centre of these two stereotypical extremes stands Yod, neither male, nor female, neither human nor machine, violent and gentle at the same time, tempering the violent urges programmed into him by Avram with the more humane sensitivity furtively programmed into him by Malkah.

Yod's positioning as a "person" situated nowhere between the extremes of gendered behavior puts him in a framework delineated by Jane Donawerth, who notes:

> The masculine in Science Fiction by women often represents both dehumanized male science, from which women are excluded, and also the woman-as-alien, the object which differs from the dominant norm, the other literally objectified. The woman-as-machine in Science Fiction by women is not dehumanized as men are, by technology and modern life, in the masculine gender role that requires suppression of feelings. Instead, the woman-as-machine is dehumanized, rendered mechanical in her responses, by the scripts she is expected by society to play: she is dehumanized by the

> function of servant. The trope of woman-as-machine exposes the objectification of women as the machinery of society that carries out men's desire. … In novels by women offering portraits of the woman as machine … the subordination of woman-as-machine does not carry the proof of man's rational powers that it does in Science Fiction by men, for the mechanical women created by women writers will not stay in the servant mold men have designed for them (60).

In contrast to the philosophical ramblings of the sheltered Yod who finally sacrifices himself for the equally marginalized town, is Emiko, a Japanese gynoid designed to function as a prostitute in Paolo Bacigalupi's novel *The Windup Girl.*

The Windup Girl (2009), with a multitude of characters that can be defined as protagonists, is sharp in its critique of global capitalism on various fronts – personal, community, national and global. Marxist criticism of the body's value inherent in the productive labour it produces is integral to the novel's central concerns, where every character is forced to be useful in order to survive, even on the exploitative, precarious margins. Besides the Marxist and ecological criticism, issues of gender (albeit interwoven with the Marxist framework) and race, and the future of humanity in the face of AI are important themes addressed in the work. The only white character in *The Windup Girl* is Anderson Lake, while the other characters are Thai (Jaidee, Kanya), Japanese (Emiko) or Chinese (Hock Seng).

Of particular importance is Emiko, the titular windup girl, a genetically engineered being grown in test tubes and trained to be biological machines, as either farm labour ("ten-hand" workers), military grade fighters, attack hounds, or "heechy-keechy" (42) meant for sex and companionship. Emiko belonged to the last category, and was promptly discarded in Thailand by her Japanese businessman owner who did not find taking her back economical.

While legal (though a marginalized entity) in Japan, windups are illegal in Thailand, and her "stutter-stop flash-bulb strange" (35) movements render her painfully visible in the hostile environment. Designed to be never mistaken for a "real" human, Emiko can best survive only in a brothel where men pay money to watch her beaten and raped by another prostitute, or sleep with her themselves, in the most brutal manner.

Her body clearly is programmed to orgasm for her clients, even as her eyes leak tears as she climaxes in her daily ritual of humiliation, torture and rape in front of jeering spectators. Her skin, akin to a machine, overheats in the absence of pores, and though she has sentience, she has no autonomy.

The world in the novel is characterized by agricultural terrorism inflicted by the West, and Thailand, with its foresight in preserving old seeds, is the only country to have escaped this attack, prompting businessmen like Lake to try to steal the country's reserves and render it weak for the corporations they work for. In doing so, "Bacigalupi's vision of a future ecological and economic transition complicates the idea of the Global North as the primary, if not exclusive, engine of development for global economics" (Hageman 285).

Emiko's character is reminiscent of labors in global capitalism, especially women labour, who are trapped in jobs that devalue labour while simultaneously requiring a high degree of obedience and effort. Emiko, then, faces double marginalization as a sexed female body, and the market framework that views her body through the economic gaze. To reduce Emiko to a cyborg without addressing the framework that traps her in economic exploitation would be to miss the point of the entire novel.

In an attempt to escape and free herself, she accidently kills the protector of the Child Queen, and triggers a political catastrophe. Built as a part of the Japanese effort to counter

shortage of labour, Emiko worked as a "Personal Secretary: translation, office management and companion" (Bacigalupi 126). She is just one of the "artificial human being(s) of organic nature" (Parrinder 59). Thus, "(t)he Japanese were practical. An old population needed young workers in all their varieties, and if they came from test tubes and grew in crèches, this was no sin" (Bacigalupi 40). In contrast to Thailand, she remembers having a better life in Japan:

> (T)hat had been in Kyoto, where New People were common, where they served well, and were sometimes well-respected. Not human, certainly, but also not the threat that the people of this savage basic culture make her out to be. Certainly not the devils that the Grahamites warn against at their pulpits, or the soulless creatures imagined out of hell that the forest monk Buddhists claim; not a creature unable to ever achieve a soul or a place in the cycles of rebirth (…). (Bacigalupi 40)

Nevertheless, "the Japanese position of non-discrimination does not go far enough to enact complete hospitality toward these new posthuman beings, as the New People exist in a structure that defines them as property" (Hageman 294). After her employer took her to Thailand for a business trip, he "concluded that leaving his secretary in Bangkok was more economical" (Bacigalupi 126). He preferred "upgrading" by employing a newer version of android. The only recourse available to her where her status is illegal, is to work as a prostitute:

> She forces Emiko down on the table. The men gather round as Kannika begins her abuse. Slowly, it builds, first playing at her nipples, then sliding the jadeite cock between her legs, encouraging the reactions that have been designed into her and which she cannot control, no matter how much her soul fights against it. (Bacigalupi 279)

Moreover, she is not just built to respond to any demands that her employer might have, she is also disciplined by strict training reminiscent of Geishas. Already marginalized as a commodity with no inherent value beyond utility, she is further devalued in her objectification, pushing her into despair, "Inside, she is dead. Better to be dead than a windup (…). (…) She can simply lie there, and let them mulch her … thrown away as Gendo-sama should have discarded her. She is trash" (Bacigalupi 281).

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* Michel Foucault understands discipline as an "art of correct training" (Foucault 170) and basic to his perception is the notion of bodies as docile bodies. The underlying assumption is that the human body is a social construct shaped by social forces. Foucault proposes that the examination of the body is the starting point to analyse the concrete effects of power because power relations are always inscribed on the body (McNally 15). Docile bodies in particular are always subjected to power. Foucault says further,

> (…) Discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies. Discipline increases the forces on the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns into an 'aptitude', a 'capacity', which seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of energy, the power that might result from it, and turn it into a relation of strict subjection (138).

Moreover, she is an object of mockery:

> She is nothing but a silly marionette creature now, all stutter-stop motion – herkyjerky heechy-keechy – with no trace of the stylized grace that her mistress Mizumisensei trained into her when she was a girl in the crèche. There is no elegance or care to her

> movements now; the tell-tale of her DNA is violently present for all to see and mock. (Bacigalupi 42)

Scott Selisker observes that "(t)his training – with the invasive connotation of 'training into' – adds 'elegance' and 'care' to Emiko's strange movements, and it recalls the movements of a geisha or consort, or even the many years of training that bunraku puppeteers undergo in order to make their puppets graceful and lifelike" (510).

Moreover, her genetic makeup forces her into obedience, "My body is not mine," she told him, her voice flat when he asked about the performances. "The men who designed me, they make me do things I cannot control. As if their hands are inside me. Like a puppet (…)" (Bacigalupi 202). It is, however, crucial for her later emancipation that the possibility for free action remains. Kaushik Sunder Rajan addresses this changing relationship between labouring bodies and capitalism. He emphasizes that technology and the "life sciences represent a new face, and a new phase, of capitalism and consequently, that biotechnology is a form of enterprise inextricable from contemporary capitalism" (3). In *Bodies of Tomorrow. Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction*, Sherryl Vint remarks that it is especially in discourses on marginalized groups that the body becomes a crucial site of investigation:

> The ability to construct the body as passé is a position available only to those privileged to think of their (white, male, straight, non-working-class) bodies as the norm. This option does not exist for those who still need to rely on the work of their bodies to produce the means of survival, for those who lack access to technologies that can erase the effects of illness, and for those whose lives continue to be structured by (…) body-based discourses of discrimination. The body remains relevant to critical work and 'real' life, both because 'real' people continue to suffer or prosper in their material bodies, and because the discourses that structure these material bodies

> continue to construct and constrain our possible selves. The material action of ideology on the body is not something that technology has erased; in fact, technology can be and has been used to enhance this action. (Vint 8)

Emiko serves as an allegory to the struggle for women's fight against institutionalised marginalization with reference to their bodies, and the alienation it creates. Catherine MacKinnon's observations on the alienation of women are echoed in Emiko's experiences:

> (A) woman is not simply alienated from her product, but in a deep sense does not exist as a subject, or even potential subject, since she owes her existence as a woman to sexual appropriation. To be constituted by another's desire is not the same thing as to be alienated in the violent separation of the labourer from his product. (Haraway summarizing MacKinnon 159)

It becomes clear that "Emiko's exploitation in the Thai sex trade demonstrates that she has been programmed with directives to please, and it is this automation to meet market demands that in fact makes her an object that humans can treat with repugnance or with utilitarian apathy" (Hageman 295).

In tandem with Marxist comments on the body and the rise of science to be able to invade these bodies, Timothy Morton explicitly points out: "What's wrong about genetic engineering is that it turns life forms into private property to enrich huge corporations" (86). As her employer Raleigh says, "You were useful to someone, once, so I see how a windup like you might forget herself. But let's not fool ourselves. I own you" (Bacigalupi 176).

Bacigalupi presents a way out of this mess by proposing a change in genetic environment in the form of Gibbons, a benevolent scientist, who offers to help Emiko after her escape, "A strand of your hair would do. You cannot be changed, but your children – in

genetic terms, if not physical ones – they can be made fertile, a part of the natural world" (Bacigalupi 386), stressing on the need to fight injustice at whatever personal cost it may come.

Maureen F. McHugh's novel *Nekropolis* (2001) traces the fate of two characters similarly trapped between technology, and the way it ensnares their bodies, and hence their identities. It takes place sometime in the near future in Morocco, in a theocratic Islamic state, where the reader is first introduced to Hariba, recollecting her memory of "jessing" – a neurological implant that pushes her into institutionalized slavery, and "is supposed to enhance natural loyalties" (1), and sold thrice to various owners, one being Mubarek. Mubarek's wealth is obvious, as Hariba is just one of his technologically enhanced possessions, the other one being a *harni*, a male AI, designed to keep Mubarek's wife company while simultaneously protecting her, all within the confines of orthodox Islam. Hariba remarks:

> I have no problems with AI. I don't mind the cleaning machine, poor thing, and as head of the women's household, I work with the household intelligence all the time. I may have had a simple, rather conservative upbringing, but I've come to be pretty comfortable with AI. The Holy Injunction doesn't mean that all AI is abomination. But AI should not be biologically constructed. AI should not be made in the image of humanity.
>
> It's the mistress's harni. It's a very expensive, very pretty toy, the kind of thing that the mistress likes. It cost more, far more than my bond. For what it costs my widowed mother could stop selling funeral wreaths and live comfortably in her old age.
>
> It comes over to our side sometimes-the master says that since it isn't human, it's

allowed. There is no impropriety-it's never alone with the mistress. (2).

However, the fact that it is *intelligent*, is underscored by the very next description. “It thinks of itself. It has a name. It has gender. It thinks it's male. And it's head of the men's side of the house. It thinks we should work together.” (2). Like AIs, they are programmed, they have, in Mubarek’s words, “social training, but no practice” (3).

Akhmim is, in a way, the cyborg imagined by Donna Haraway. What he challenges is more than the traditional binary of man and machine. Akhmim’s gentleness, and brazenness in being shouted down by Ayesha in the middle of the road, or his desire to please Hariba, above all, indicate a break from the cultural expectations of assertions of manliness.

Emiko and Akhmim, here, share a similarity – both of them are AIs, constructed from part human DNA sequences, and part artificial sequences, for the primary purpose of “companionship” – thus programmed to please their owners sexually. However, while Emiko struggles with despair and attempts to escape, Akhmim is passive in his resistance, seeking only to please Hariba, and bending unquestioningly to her will. While Emiko bursts with bitterness at the injustice, Akhmim only recognises his loneliness as a result from his social isolation.

Alem, employed as Akhmim’s foil, who Ayesha finds to be “a good husband”, is as cold and hard as other Moroccan men, and a brief moment of contemplation on Ayesha’s end marks Akhmim as a person in a male body, rather than a cultural construct of a man.

For Donna Haraway, cyborg ideology transcends the contemporary scientif definition, into a new ideological framework of an “ironic political myth”, where the contemporary cyborg is the “illegitimate offspring” of the “inessential” cyborg militaristic “father” (151). This illegitimacy is based on the cyborg’s innate ability to erase hierarchical and traditional

dichotomies, which ignores genealogical history (151). Consequently, this allows the cyborg to "set aside the Enlightenment figures of coherent and masterful subjectivity" (87), unified in 'nature', free to questions the foundational structures of human thought and subsequent ideology.

Akhmim fulfils these boundary transgressions of the cyborg. Haraway (150) blurs the distinction between reality and fiction by asserting "the cyborg is a creature in a postgender world", while proposing "we are cyborgs". In this fashion, Haraway (181) underscores the value of the cyborg as a "utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender", meaning the cyborg should be embraced in "the promises of monsters" (295). Although Haraway acknowledges the utopian and dystopian history, contemporary scene and the future of technoscience, she locates cyborgs primarily as "bodies… maps of power and identity. Cyborgs are no exception" (180); she focuses on cyborgs "as an imaginative resource suggesting some very fruitful couplings" (153).

Akhmim presents a possibility – a chimera – as the E.C.U., or the Western world in the novel would like to imagine him – of a post-gender world built on understanding, no discrimination, supported by good governance, where social order is a product of a demolition of cultural constructs like binaries of gender and gender roles.

If Akhmim is the docile male looking to please Hariba and putting her preferences first always, and taking the gender role traditionally attributed to women usually, it is Hariba, with her stubbornness, and a rashness characteristic of passionate men in love, with both themselves and the idea of freedom, who marks another gendered transgression. She is a cyborg solely by definition on account of her brief experience of "jessing" – however, she represents this cyborgean imagination much in line with Haraway's expectations.

In her "Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway employs the figure of the gendered cyborg, "a hybrid of machine and organism," as a liberatory, euphoric metaphor for connections between marginalized social entities, especially women, across the traditional binaries that restrict human existence, such as the distinction between human/machine, straight/gay, male/female or the supposedly mutually exclusive locations of race, class, and sexuality (149). Haraway's idea of the cyborg refutes essentialist perspectives, allowing for a potentially successful political alignment of diverse interest groups. Eschewing a monolithic understanding of "Women" orany other identity categories, the focus on “affinity, not identity” as the basis of future coalitions of interest groups offers a new reading of the cyborg figure (155). This seamless invasiveness of technologyin human existence allows the cyborg to be able to not identify “Eden”, and thereby, metaphorically, derecognize established notions of identity. Instead of being bound by their gendered, racialized bodies, Haraway’s cyborgs are "nothing but signals"; they "are ether, quintessence" (153).

Hariba finds affiliation in the E.C.U., as she transgresses every code she learnt at home – her affiliation with a *harni*, rather than a man; in her pre-marital sex at her own will in Spain; in running away as a jessed worker; in chopping her hair off; and in her new-found independence even from Akhmim in Spain, as she realises she did not really love him.

Haraway imagines a "postmodern collective and personal self” (163) made possible through the categorical fluidity and mobility that offers the cyborg a powerful role in the formation of "new couplings, [and] new coalitions" (170). Far from being a solitary technological superhero, Haraway's cyborg is "needy for connection" (151) and in search of "joint kinship" with a wide variety of others (154). In common with Hayles's posthuman subjects, Haraway's cyborgs seek a fuller connection with the world in which they are embodied, not an escape from it. Akhmim and Hariba, in essence, reflect the possibilities

theorised by Haraway, to imagine a free world inhabited by free people, with affiliation at the core of that freedom, rather than identity.

Resonant in how cultural standards of acceptability of women's, (and men's) bodies are shaped in telling ways by market forces, and singular narratives of body representation and images, and ideas of sexual normativity are reinforced both culturally and legally, Maureen F. McHugh's novel, *China Mountain Zhang* explores the lives of three marginalized figures in the 22nd century China.

> In Science Fiction, as in life, sexuality is a complicated and remarkably intransigent subject of inquiry, one whose material consequences can be ignored only at the peril of both individuals and cultures. Representation matters. In sf, indeed, bodies also matter, even at those times when they appear to have failed to matter or – often simultaneously, as is so frequently the case in cyberpunk – to have transcended matter (Pearson 2).

While gender has often been the focus of much postcyberpunk and its critique of social norms of acceptability, queer characters have long been a part of the Science Fiction tradition. Many of the older novels have been discussed already, such as *Trouble and her Friends*, for the lesbian hacker protagonist in an American world, yet, it has been difficult to locate a fictional world where sexual marginalization happened on multiple levels for different characters. Moreover, sexuality, in most novels, had rarely been integral to the plot – hence, no outcome of the novel really hinged on sexuality, taking the focus away from sexuality in the cyberpunk setting. Deviance from standard heterosexual practices was merely a social disadvantage, much like being ugly. On the other hand, works like Joanna Russ' *The Female Man*, and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* radically examine sexual norms in a science-fictional setting that will most probably never take place, and hence, is at

two removes from lived reality.

However, with a multitude of approaches to sexuality studies, queer theory moves from a binary understanding of good or bad, and locates it within the larger socio-political context, or rather, discourse (Turner 88).

China Mountain Zhang imagines a future wherein China has replaced America as the world's dominant political, economic and cultural capital, following a political revolution in America that has displaced its capitalistic economy and brought in an era of socialism.

It is a plausible future where China takes precedence over the States – the latter becomes akin to a third-world dump following a financial crisis, while China rises in economic importance, and consequently, in cultural importance. Chinese phrases, Mandarin itself, Chinese dress and cuisine and Chinese genes suddenly become the next-gen cool things, the way everything symbolizing America/the West is hip now. With the Great Cleansing Winds in the US, followed by a Second American Revolution and a Second Civil War, the status-quo has changed.

Zhang Zhong Shan (Rafael), the protagonist, is a young gay man of mixed heritage, a Chinese father and Hispanic mother – born in Brooklyn and having undergone gene splicing in infancy in order to look more 'Chinese' (the reverse of what the Chinese are doing today – double eyelid surgery, for instance, to look more 'Western') and therefore attempting to gain social leverage as well as possible opportunity to study and live in China, his life takes a series of unexpected turns as he navigates through the turmoil of sexuality, cosmetically altered genes, identity and cultural legacy in and out of America, China and the Arctic.

The novel takes place simultaneously in roughly the same time, following different threads that sometimes merge, and sometimes merely touch each other. While Zhang comes

to terms with his life, Martine and Alexis, on Mars, try to eke out a living that ensures them a different kind of security, but at the same time, demands of them a hefty price. San-Xiang, a young Chinese girl in the US struggles to come to terms with her own marginalization on account of her ugly face, and then with the consequences of her cosmetically-enhanced beauty. The shortest-lived character Haitao, along with Xiang and Zhang, are three marginalized entities, exploring homosexuality and heteronormative standards of beauty in an unforgiving future.

San-Xiang and Haitao are two of the many people who enter Zhang's life, and as he works through his own troubles, perhaps he is the only one who emerges hopeful after all the trauma. We are introduced to Zhang as he broods over his precarious state in the now-dump-like USA, unsure whether he will be accepted in China as a student:

> … ABC engineer. ABC--American Born Chinese, or like the *waiguoren*, the non-Chink say, Another Bastard Chink (McHugh 1).
>
> He likes me; I work hard and I speak Mandarin better than most ABC. I am almost like a real Chinese person. My manners are good. An example of how breeding will out, even in a second-rate country like this (1).
>
> But just looking Chinese is not enough to get someone to China. My parents weren't rich and tinkering with genes is expensive. Maybe I would map close enough to Chinese standard to pass, then again, maybe something in them would prove me Hidalgo. I don't apply so I don't ever have to take the medical. (2).

His sense of loneliness is heightened further as he says,

> There is a game I play when I am out by myself among people. I play it on my way home, descending into the bowels of the city, taking a three-hundred-year-old train to the bottom of the island and under the choked harbor to Brooklyn. The subway sways and like idiots we all nod together. My game is this: I become other people. (4)

It is later explained, in very vague terms, that his lack of surety emerges out of both racial isolation and sexual isolation – we find out that he is gay, and his anxiety regarding his place in China is as much a product of the knowledge that "deviances" are illegal in China, as much that his half-Spanish lineage will render him disabled in the pure-blood obsessed Chinese system. At one point, he ruminates, "In China, deviance is a capital offence, I don't know living in a country where my natural tendencies could see me end up with traditional remedy of a bullet in the back of the head" (9).

Haitao's suicide after a long period of anxiety and fear of being caught by the Chinese government for not conforming to sexual norms is, more than a critique of heteronormativity, in that it also turns to the Foucauldian discourse in which heteronormativity is enforced through a panoptical urge to discipline the self, to ensure that the individual, no matter how small, constantly fits into the discursive norms.

Queer, in this sense, is not merely a biological deviation from the heterosexual practice – it is simultaneously an ideological positioning from which subversive ideas are mapped, to strive to create equality, and to look at the same world from a sexually subaltern position. With the focus of one part of the novel on the meditation of normative cultural standards of sexuality and beauty, and the price people pay for both, it also draws attention to

> a text's subversive potential… on how it maps and motivates the antagonisms constituting the subject(s) of representation, and on how it transfigures and recathects

> the available forms of cultural expression… This rewriting is coextensive to the articulation of gay male identities-in-process as these deviant subjects confront culture and enter into representational agency within it. The most radical representational practices of deviant subjects not only challenge the official versions of their lives, but also transvalue the notion of deviance, and interrogate the mechanisms and meanings of representational practices – including their own (Jackson 44).

An important juncture at which the conditions of Haitao, Zhang and San Xiang intersect is in their fate being in the hands of elements they never chose – Haitao's homosexual nature, Zhang's homosexuality coupled with half-Chinese, half-Latino lineage, and San Xiang's state before and after beauty-enhancing cosmetic surgery. Reduced to a subhuman status on account of their failure to measure up to current social standards, the work is important "to the extent that desire is implicated in social norms, it is bound up with the question of power and with the problem of who qualifies as the recognizably human and who does not." (Butler 2)

Queerness, in the novel, therefore, is more than a sexual orientation – it is simultaneously a commentary on the necessity of a political choice. Indeed, the centre of politics is rarely fixed on issues such as gender and sexuality, though it has often been found to focus on similar categories such as the poor, or the socially disadvantaged, aptly reflected in Zhang's ruminations, "I know that politics is important I just don't like to think about it. I don't know what my opinions are, I just know that very little I hear ever seems to have much to do with me, or with my life" (14). It is such apathy that allows for unspeakable torture in the name of state laws criminalizing natural tendencies of sex, as when, Haitao says about a friend,

> They are arresting him on a morals charge, but it's more complicated than that. They'll

> send him to Xinjiang Province, to do Reform Through Labor. Do you know, if you misbehave in a labor camp, one of the punishments is to wire your thumbs together? They draw the wire very tight. It cuts off the blood. You have to eat rice out of a bowl like a dog, without using your hands. And then gangrene sets in and they cut your thumbs off. Or maybe you die (81).

San Xiang, on the other hand, wishes to die every day, and saves up money for a cosmetic surgery to correct her ugliness. It is particularly revealing when she says,

> I don't want to be the old San-Xiang anymore. Poor, ugly San-Xiang who had no jaw and had little squinty eyes and who looked like she was congenitally stupid. This is it, my chance. I'm going to change my life. I'm going to look for a new job, have new friends, be a new person (120).

Only to be contrasted with,

> It occurs to me that he could come and see me at work. He knows where I work. Or he could be waiting in the subway when I get off.
>
> I watch for him in the subway. Once I think I see him when I am shopping. I wish I could have my old face back to wear on the subways. But we can never go back (132).

While the old San Xiang struggles to find friends, or even have people treat her decently, the new beautiful San Xiang, has friends, and yet, the cruelty of a new world that admires beauty in a very patriarchal network sets in when she is raped by a friend who apparently was charming just moments before. Ultimately, being a girl, ugly or beautiful, had a price.

2.2 Video Games, Cyberpunk and Gender

The final space from which I will examine cyberpunk, is that of video games. Video games have long been a contentious space. Mostly framed as an addictive, harmful aspect of media cultures that have sprung in the last 40 years, video games have mostly been analyzed for their utility, or lack of, rather than as a reflection of cultural ideologies.

However, in 1988, Leslie Haddon, in his essay “Electronic and Computer Games: The History of an Interactive Medium” argued the moment games begin to have “at least some narrative content”, they would immediately be fit to be studied as “media”:

> The storyline of the games allowed commentators to see the new form as a medium, and thus comparable to other media texts. Indeed, it was this feature which enabled the transfer of concerns about 'violence' from areas like TV and film to the new entertainment machines (Haddon 62).

One can situate gaming in a Gramscian definition of hegemony, the purpose of which is to exert power with the subject’s consent. Gramsci wrote that:

> A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise 'leadership' before winning governmental power (this indeed is one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to 'lead' as well (Gramsci 57-58).

While such leadership cannot be built without consent, popular culture becomes a way to attaining that consent on which the foundations of hegemony lie. Eugene Provenzo remarked that games "reflect a larger cultural hegemony" (Provenzo 116), and that they are an integral part of the mechanism that normalizes patriarchy and other ideological structures.

Games, Provenzo maintains, "...are neither neutral nor harmless, but represent very specific social and symbolic constructs" (75).

In *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture,* Alexander Galloway argues that play “is a symbolic action for larger issues in culture” (16) and that video games “render social realities into playable form” (17).Provenzo further locates video games in the discourse of gender, saying. "Video games are instruments of information that serve important hegemonic functions in their perpetuation of bias and gender stereotyping" (138).

As a regular gamer since childhood, I have noted the consistent presence of men as the sole protagonists of nearly all the games I played. Men were either protagonists rescuing a damsel in distress, or pursuing a material goal. Female characters were restricted to playing either the prize for the male victor, essentially providing a motive, either in the form of revenge motive, or a rescuer. At the most, she appeared as a minor help to further the cause of the male protagonist, for instance, in *Prince of Persia*, *Dink Smallwood,* or *Super Mario*. *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider,* claimed to personify "an ongoing culture clash over gender, sexuality, empowerment, and objectification" (Flower),*Pocahontas*, etc. were some rare games that utilized a non-changeable female lead – an agreeable change – however, only to be made delectable sexually to the male gaze, a trait that was not a consideration for the framing of a male lead. Regarding tropes in female characterization, Tremblay notes:

> In video games, the major stereotyped myths of women are typically the damsel in distress, hyper-sexualized villain (Sylvia Christel from *No More Heroes*) and the sexy/strong best friend (Tifa from *Final Fantasy VII*). ... In all of these instances, the female character is, more likely than not, in love with the male protagonist or trying desperately to bang him (Tremblay).

In their 2007 essay, Dill and Thill define three major delineation strategies, or tropes of female characters in gaming: “sexualized, scantily clad, and vision of beauty” (859). More than 80% of women in video games were represented as at least one of these depictions, and more than one-fourth female characters embodied all three categories at once. The other variation, as Dill and Thill note,was a trope referred to as "eroticized aggression" (859), or a combination of aggression and sex. According to Milkie, women are mostly delegated wither traditional family roles, or sexualised with a focus on beauty and attractiveness (358).

GamesRadar writer David Houghton, in an article on sexism in video games, criticized sharply the stereotypical tropes of male characters, outlining them as "the primeval hunter/gatherer type [with] arm-cripplingly ripped biceps, necks too muscley to turn, emotion dials stuck on 'aggressive grimace' and a 50% lack of chest coverings" (Houghton).

Jamin Warren from*PBS Game/Show* noted that video games promoted "unreasonable body expectations, or an inability to express emotion, or the pressure to 'man up' and be a leader". Also, it was men who would be perpetrators/victims of violence, while women were usually damsels in distress (Warren). The delineation of characters, whether male, or female, thus is bound by conventional notions of femininity and masculinity.

Dante Douglas of *Paste Magazine* identifies this "power fantasy”, on a plane parallel to two other male stereotypes - males as “Gender Performance” and as “Fan Interpretation.” In the heteronormative perspective, men cannot be sexy, although they are to be masculine, as masculinity exerts power, while sexiness performs submission to an external power. Douglas further notes that:

> When the masculine is coded as being in opposition to femininity, male characters that are coded as “sexy” often do so by performing femininity (in some fashion).

> Traditionally-coded "sexy" male characters are "sexy" via their vanity, their attention to personal attire, etc. In this way, their status of being "sexy" is founded on their ability to perform as an object of sexual desire (this is also often queercoded and/or played as a joke) (Douglas).

An examination of gender in video games, specifically cyberpunk games, is necessary in the light of the reaction meted out to Anita Saarkesian.In 2012, Anita Sarkeesian, a 28-year-old graduate student in social and political thought attempted to raise funds through Kickstarter, to produce feminist analyses of video games. Originally planned as a multi-video series to identify and address common tropes regarding female representation and the gendered roles available to female characters, her goal of raising $6000 was met in 24 hours. Not much later, a group of gamers targeted and trolled Saarkesian, accusing her of maligning the gaming community by focusing on gender, and the trolling snowballed into hacking of her accounts, rape and death threats, followed by actual harassment as the perpetrators identified her residential address. (Watercutter 2015).

While such aggressive behaviour only caused more funds to flow in, up to 25 times the amount originally intended, and the release of six videos by Saarkesian on her work by 2014, what is worth noting is that not just is the gaming content so lacking in fair gender representations, but even a study of such representations prompts violent, virulent outrage on the part of players scattered around the globe.

While gender has been sufficiently analysed and theorised in popular video games, cyberpunk games have mostly escaped the radar, and yet, I find that cyberpunk is one of the most macho subgenres ever invented in gaming, prompting a study into specifically cyberpunk games. The games discussed would be analyzed on the three characteristics Espen Aarseth proposes in his essay "Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game

Analysis":

• Gameplay (the players' actions, strategies and motives)

• Game-structure (the rules of the game, including the simulation rules)

• Game-world (fictional content, topology/level design, textures etc.) (Aarseth).

Syndicate (2012) is a multi-player first-person shooter game developed by Starbreeze Studios, as a reboot for the original Bullfrog Productions. Set in 2069, the player Miles Kilo is an agent for EuroCorp, a megacorporation, sent to eliminate people from rival corporations, who discovers malpractices of his own corporation in the process. Armed with a variety of cybernetic as well as standard weapons, such as hacking, rifles, rocket launchers, etc. and sporting a computer chip DART-6, that allows him to hack and breach antagonist security systems. Player-choices in gameplay involve choices between "Backfire" (causing enemy weapons to backfire), "Suicide" (causing enemies to kill themselves), and "Persuade" (leading enemies to defect to the player's side before committing suicide).

The multiplayer mode is cooperative, and not competitive, allowing four players to play together, choosing from four character classes: Medic, Spec Ops, Assault and Generic, each with separate abilities. Syndicate, the title, refers to the megacorporations that wield more power than governments, as they release chips that make most electronic devices obsolete, leaving half the world aka "unchipped", without access to benefits of the technology. The agents are bio-engineered augmented enforcers who engage in corporate espionage and warfare to protect the corporation's interests.

Of particular interest is the plot-line, which features Lily, the scientist who develops the DART-6. Classic cyberpunk tropes of gender are reenacted as feminine tropes of "wile" and "untrustworthiness" (Lily is secretly engaged in passing on confidential information to a rival), "damsel-in-distress" (Lily is abducted helplessly and confined, and subsequently freed by Miles who apparently recovers from far worse mortal and cybernetic attacks) and "submissiveness/side-kick/Girl-Friday" (Lily handing over a gun to Miles in a symbolic gesture of his freedom, with no reflection on her fate). Despite being a major figure in the game, she acts only as the "damsel-in-distress" in the sense Anita Saarkeesian explores in her vlog *Feminist Frequency* as a trope that is the beginning and the end-point of substance in female representation in games.

Shadowrun Returns (2013) allows the player to choose their character's gender and appearance, from a wider range of five races (humans, elves, dwarves, orcs and trolls) and six classes (Street samurai, Mage, Decker, Shaman, Rigger, Physical Adept, or no class at all), to navigate through a conspiracy involving tracing a serial killer. Improvement of characters is left upon the player's karma. While classes control what skills and equipment the character start with, the player can choose any skills they wish.

The plot presents thrilling twists at regular intervals, similar to crime-fiction in many ways, but a recurrent trope is that of women being either the masterminds, or instrumental to the future of the world. Jessica, the twin sister of the serial killer Sam and also a high-ranking member of the Universal Brotherhood, an organization attracting the disenfranchised, turns out to be the mastermind of the series of murders she makes her brother commit, a fact revealed only after the player kills Sam. Jessica is also revealed to be a Shaman, preparing to unleash havoc in the form of extra-dimensional insects, with another character Mary-Louise designated to be the Queen (as in Queen Bee). Mary-Louise flees and tries to save the world,

while another antagonist Lynne shows up to further the demonic cause. Eventually, on success of the player in thwarting the disaster, the player is given a choice between arresting or killing Jessica, while Lynn is sent to a mental asylum. Females in the game, then, are reduced to being antagonists to further the male cause, rather than being entities with their own stories.

While there is significantly more variation in the characterization of females, like much of classic cyberpunk, it provides little insight into the burgeoning issues of the day like biowarfare, gender equality, or the risks of technological warfare. Instead of being sucked up into the narrative, cyberpunk merely becomes a layer of façade upon which the game is played out, much akin to Shiner's lament of "Cyberpunk is dead."

Other notable cyberpunk games like *Invisible, Inc.* (2014) either employ female AI (reminiscent of VIKI in *I, Robot*) as the destructive robot, or a protagonist like Red in *The Transistor*, (2014), who unwittingly gets embroiled in a cybernetic warfare, or Eliza, an AI constructed to influence the media who turns back on her programming to help the male

Figure 2.1: Cyberpunk 2077 Poster

player save humanity in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (2011).

An overview of these cyberpunk games hints towards the absence of any revolutionizing forces that reshaped classic cyberpunk literature, manga and anime. Surreptitiously avoiding any change of outlook in the way any entity apart from "the straight, white male" is viewed, or given agency, the game zone is unique in its resistance to change, despite the major transition visible in the other media surrounding and influencing it. Symptomatic of deeper problems in the gamer psyche that refuses to embrace even a virtual network where patriarchy is reworked to become more inclusive, or representative of the dilemmas of the lived world, cyberpunk games enhance the finer points of gameplay, plot and player choices without touching upon the social structures that make up the world-building.

Cyberpunk 2077, the most hyped game so far, whose teaser trailer was released in 2013, and whose release is estimated somewhere between 2019 to 2021, also employs the same gendered markers as classic cyberpunk – a beautiful, unnecessarily scantily clad woman revealed to be a cyborg as she is repeatedly shot by the police forces, who wakes up from her injuries to find herself a part of the same elite police forces that shot and captured her. While the exact nature of gendered representation can be commented upon only once it is released, it is reasonable to note that no cyberpunk game so far has moved beyond classic cyberpunk adequately.

The Bechdel Test, derived from Alison Bechdel's comic *Dykes to Watch Out For*, set three simple rules for a feminist reading of any text:

1. Two named female characters

2. Who talk to each other

3. About something other than a man.(Romano)

Pacific Rim introduced the Mako Mori test to pop culture, whereby a movie passes the test if it has:

1. At least one female character

2. Who gets her own narrative arc

3. That is not about supporting a man's story. (Romano)

While neither of the tests' passing makes a movie (or literature, for our requirements here) feminist, it definitely makes a work somewhat women-friendly, according women a place equal to men when it comes to representation, and making a female character's role not dependent on the male's.

It is interesting to note that while there are instances of manga, anime and novels in abundance that have moved beyond their narrow worlds of representation among the sea of classic cyberpunk works still churned out, it is games, that without exception, fail on every count of these tests, while simultaneously failing to provide any new yardstick of evaluation of female/LGBTQ representation in the medium.

Gender, thus, has taken a multitude of forms in cyberpunk in media, ranging from deviance from stereotypical binaries, to post-gender narratives of future, to posthuman selves where gender is irrelevant by its conspicuous absence.

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