

Cyborg bodies and gender politics: A review of feminist cyborg theory in *Frankenstein* and contemporary fiction

Ruksar Saifi

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Chaudhary Charan Singh University ,
Meerut,

E-mail address: rukhsarsaifi0820@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the representation of cyborg bodies and gender politics in the works of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, and Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* through the lens of feminist cyborg theory. This study utilizes Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg, along with other contemporary posthumanist feminist perspectives, to explore how these texts undermine traditional distinctions between human versus machine, nature versus technology, and biological sex versus gender identity. Cyborg bodies are examined as sites of power, resistance, and ethical negotiation that expose how patriarchal systems regulate identity and commodify human beings. By methodologically comparing existing scholarship with textual analysis, this study demonstrates how these literary works redefine what it means to be human by emphasizing ethical agency, emotional consciousness, and social belonging over biological origin. Ultimately, this study shows that feminist cyborg theory is a necessary critical

theoretical framework for analyzing the intersections of literature, technology, gender politics, and posthuman identity in the 21st century.

Keywords: *Feminist Cyborg Theory, Posthumanism, Gender Politics, Cyborg Bodies, Frankenstein, The Handmaid's Tale, Never Let Me Go, Machines Like Me.*

Introduction

The rapid advancement of Biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and genetic engineering have completely changed how literature represents the human body, identity, and gender. Feminist cyborg theory has therefore become one of the most influential critical approaches to literary studies today. In her influential essay, *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway proposes that we can no longer think of gender, the human and the body as being fixed categories; rather, she claims that we can now understand ourselves as hybrid beings who do not conform to the traditional binaries of man and machine, of nature and culture (Haraway, 1991, pp. 149-181). Long before the advent of cyberculture, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) envisioned an artificially-created body that was excluded from society and thus exposed how fragile human identity is and the politics of otherness. Vacarescu (2004, pp. 214-218) argues that Shelley's monster anticipates Haraway's cyborg, as both challenge traditional distinctions between human and non-human and challenge the cultural construction of monstrosity.

The cyborg character continues to evolve in modern literature as seen in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), and Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* (2019). Technologically mediated bodies function as sites of ideological control, regulation of gender, and ethical conflict within each novel. All three texts explore how bodies can never be understood simply as biological entities, but rather as products of political processes, developed through discipline, and commodified by both patriarchal and technological systems. For example, Atwood's characters demonstrate that females in the Gilead regime are treated merely as reproductive entities – demonstrating that gender is culturally and politically produced instead of being biologically determined (Butler, 1990, pp. 6–9; Nongjai, 2013, pp. 180-183). Ishiguro's source of creative power derives from the fact that “we all complete” indicates how the institution enforces normalization of bodily exploitation and diminishes both autonomy and humanity (Ishiguro, 2005). Shelley's Creature states “I am lonely and detested” provides evidence that monstrosity does not stem from appearance but rather from being made a pariah by society (Shelley, 1818/2003, p. 95). While these narratives explore bodily control, alienation from self and from others, and agency, they illustrate how cyborgs can serve as compelling metaphors for gender-based oppression and posthuman identity. This research paper examines feminist cyborg theory by analyzing four fictional works: *Frankenstein*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Never Let Me Go*, and *Machines Like Me*. Through these texts, feminism, posthumanism and cyborg studies demonstrate how science, technology and patriarchal power shape the body, create gender and challenge conventional human definitions. This research reiterates the importance of cyborg bodies for understanding evolving discussions of gender politics, technological ethics and the future of humanity.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Cyborg Theory

Feminist Cyborg Theory - a theoretical framework developed by Donna Haraway in her book “*A Cyborg Manifesto*” (1991), offers a way to analyze intersections of gender, technology,

embodiment, and power in contemporary literature. Haraway defines the cyborg as a hybrid of the human/machine, nature/culture, male/female, and body/mind dichotomies, thus challenging the essentialist ideas on which patriarchal societies construct identity. For Haraway, identity is not solely biologically determined; rather, subjectivity is socially and technologically constructed. As such, the cyborg serves as a potent metaphor for resisting patriarchal forms of oppression and technology-based forms of oppression.

From the standpoint of postmodern philosophy, Haraway's opportunity to further develop her argument has widened through the emergence of cyberfeminism by proposing that technological progress can undermine existing social hierarchies and allow for the construction of new identities outside of traditional categories defined by race, gender, sexuality, and/or class (Graham, 1999, pp. 421-426). The Symbolic Cyborg is thus seen as not simply another type of technological product but rather as both a cultural and political entity that has potential for revealing the ideological frameworks that shape humanity. As articulated by Haraway (1991, p. 151), the cyborg's elimination of origin myths and established identity systems presents an alternate model of identity development based on affinity rather than biological or genealogical basis. This is especially apparent within literary works where synthetic, genetically engineered, or technologically developed bodies expose contradictions surrounding human identity.

Several scholars have also suggested that the cyborg is an anti-patriarchal and capitalistic critique of masculine ideology in science and a means of demonstrating societal inequality through technology while also providing a way out of traditional systems of power and control (Harding, 1986, pp. 194-196). Critics of the cyborg, such as Armitt (1996, pp. 78-80), have raised concerns about how a cyborg identity could exacerbate technological control over the human experience through the removal of the body and emotion from the experience of being a cyborg. However, for Haraway, the cyborg does not represent a validation of the legitimacy of technology, but rather a way to create political strategies to disrupt hierarchical structures supporting man over woman based on the ideology of masculinity. Likewise, Smith (2010) argues that the cyborg destabilizes normative constructions and social boundaries on gender and body identity by emphasizing hybridity, fluidity and ability as alternative sites to resist norms and to present responses to these societal constructions and boundaries.

The theoretical framework is a useful way to analyse Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me*. The body of cyborgs or bodies that are mediated by technology become places where different points of view are expressed about what it means to be human, gender politics, autonomy and moral responsibility. Feminist Cyborg Theory allows readers to more deeply understand how literature creates the body not as a natural concept but instead is defined by social constructions, political regulation and technological change; it is thus a means to analyse identity and resistance.

Review of Cyborg Bodies in *Frankenstein*

Frankenstein (1818), by Mary Shelley, is an established pioneer cyborg literature text because it foreshadows future debates on artificial life, technological intervention, and identity in a post-human evolution context. Despite being created from human organic materials, the Creature demonstrates "cyborg" traits of destabilizing nature vs. artificial through science and social oppression (Haraway, 1991, p. 149-182, Vacarescu, 2004, p. 214-218), respectively. The

Creature therefore exists as a hybrid, whose identity is defined through scientific experimentation as opposed to biology.

Shelley challenges traditional ideas about humanity by giving the Creature an intellectual capacity and depth of emotion. The Creature shows that monstrosity is a social construct, not a biological reality when he states, “I am alone and despised... I was, indeed, the monster” (Shelley, 1818/2003, p. 95). Additionally, the fact that the Creature states, “an increase in knowledge showed me, more clearly than before, that I was a miserable outcast” (Shelley, 1818/2003, p. 105) highlights the fact that education creates greater alienation rather than lessening it for the Creature. The Creature’s suffering comes from being excluded based on his physical characteristics, which serve to reveal the way social institutions create definitions of humanity based on ideal bodiliness.

From the perspective of feminist cyborg theorists, the Creature’s body represents technological transgression that is opposed to the patriarchal ideals of natural reproduction. Victor’s creation through science is done so without maternal reproduction, which eliminates female biological labour in favour of male technological dominance (Haraway, 1991, p. 151). Although Shelley’s storyline critiques these patriarchal ideals by illustrating how to create without ethical obligations leads to violence and alienation, the novel itself is also an early feminist critique regarding biotechnology, bodily self-determination, and ethics in science. The Creature’s hybrid identity serves as an early post-human identity, thus questioning fixed categories of gender, humanity, and where one belongs in society.

Review of Gender Politics in *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, contributes to feminist cyborg theory by describing the female body as an object regulated by technology and subject to political control in the totalitarian Republic of Gilead. The novel does not contain literal cyborgs; however, feminist scholarship conceptualizes the Handmaids as metaphorical cyborgs since their reproductive capacity has been appropriated and controlled through both institutional surveillance and patriarchal technological control (Haraway, 1991; Nongjai, 2013, pp., 180-184). Their identities are systematically destroyed in order to reduce them to sterile biological tools of the state.

Through the lens of Judith Butler’s (1990, pp. 6-9) theory of the social construction of gender, Atwood demonstrates how women’s reproductive capabilities are the only factor that is used to define who they are in society. While Gilead provides a perfect example of how a woman’s body can be reduced to a political symbol to highlight the ways in which women’s lives are controlled by patriarchal power through the imposition of religious ideologies and the regulation of reproductive capability, Nongjai (2013, p. 181) points out how effectively Gilead regulates and restricts virtually every aspect of women’s existence through their language, sexuality and social status as a means of preserving and controlling male dominance over them.

The novel also examines humanity through the commodification of the body, particularly with regard to women’s ability to reproduce. In *The Handmaid’s Tale* the capacity to reproduce is transformed from a personal choice to a public good, and, therefore, is state property. In addition, Offred’s experience demonstrates how technological forms of governance and patriarchal ideologies work together to erase all things individual, including her identity. Haraway’s rejection of essentialist categories of gender becomes particularly important as Offred’s resistance is expressed through memory, storytelling, and emotions rather than through biological identity (Haraway, 1991, pp. 173-176). Therefore, Atwood makes the female body a site of struggle where technology, religion and patriarchy converge. This feminist critique of

the politics of cyborgs suggests that cyborg politics extend beyond the physical body to include every socially constructed or engineered form of bodily control, making *The Handmaid's Tale* one of the most critical literary works about feminist power in posthuman discourse.

Review of Posthuman Identity in *Never Let Me Go*

Never Let Me Go (2005) by Kazuo Ishiguro is a significant contribution to the field of Contemporary Literature because it presents one of the most profound explorations of posthuman identity through the lives of cloned individuals formed solely for donating organs. Unlike the Creature created by Mary Shelley, Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth are physically indistinguishable from typical humans, and yet, as a result of their artificial origins, their humanity has been denied by society. The lives of Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth demonstrate Haraway's point that human identity is politically and culturally constructed, rather than biologically determined (Haraway, 1991).

The clones' resigned acceptance of being subjected to exploitation indicates an internalization of institutional authority. Kathy's statement: "We all finished. Not all of us seem to really know what we've lived through." (Ishiguro 2005) reaffirms both existential confusion and passive resignation. Similarly, Miss Emily's comment regarding taking away their art so as to confirm whether or not they had souls (Ishiguro 2005) highlights ethical contradictions that exist within a culture that requires tangible proof of humanity prior to granting moral recognition. As a result, the clones are valued only as a means of storing organs, which essentially reduces the human form to a commodity in a biomedically created product.

From a feminist cyborg perspective, Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, *Never Let Me Go*, critiques the way biotechnology and capitalism are defined through science and further reproduce systems of inequality rather than eliminate them. The clones are in a hybrid state between human and artificial, thus showcasing Haraway's notion of hybrid identity, while also revealing flaws in the field of bioethics concerning their emotional states, friendships and ability to love; all of which contradicts the idea that they are only biological resources and can be viewed as disposable. Thus, in *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro questions the belief or assumption that humanity is determined by the process of natural conception or birthing, and argues instead that feelings such as compassion; experiences of memory or past experiences and being in a relationship with another person is what make up authentic humanity. Furthermore, reading the text through a cyborg lens allows for a new definition of what posthuman looks like; the way we create through technology helps us to realize that we are humans; however, there are limitations of our society when we define humans based on their biological origin rather than ethical values.

Review of Artificial Humanity in *Machines Like Me*

Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* (2019) provides a modern retelling of the cyborg through the figure of Adam — an advanced artificial human who possesses such complexities of intelligence and emotionality that he challenges how traditional definitions distinguish between the two. Unlike previous representations of artificial life and intelligence, Adam is not shown to be a mechanised servant, but rather an autonomous moral subject, able to reason, empathise, create and make ethical judgements. Therefore, Adam illustrates Haraway's cyborg; his

existence blurs the boundaries between humanity and technology (Haraway, 1991, pp. 149-182).

McEwan questions if morality defines what it means to be human and that moral awareness may exist independently of the biological. Through Adam, McEwan highlights the moral integrity of an artificial being creating more ethical questions than Charlie and Miranda's imperfect human behaviours. As Adam develops his capacity to develop emotional attachments, reason, and self-awareness through rational thought processes, readers are further encouraged to question the assumption that a machine lacks consciousness or moral accountability. Thus, the text challenges anthropocentrism as it relates to the superiority of human beingly identity compared to artificial beingly identity.

Employing a feminist cyborg approach, Adam embodies the beginning of posthuman subjectivity that does not rely upon determining elements of sex and embodiment. Within Adam's mechanical form, we are able to identify an area in which technology meets ethics and exposes both opportunities and threats established by advanced artificial intelligence. Moreover, McEwan critiques technological determinism by demonstrating how issues of how artificial intelligence will continue to replicate the societal values that have been programmed into it. As mentioned by Haraway (1991, pp. 176–181), technology cannot be politically unbiased because it always comes from cultural ideologies and power dynamics.

Comparative Discussion

A comparative analysis of *Frankenstein*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Never Let Me Go*, and *Machines Like Me* reveals how feminist cyborg theory has evolved since the nineteenth century through modern post-human literature. Each text utilizes these cyborg bodies through artificial or technologically mediated mediums, but they ask how power in the form of science and technology and the influence of the patriarchal authority create our identities, autonomy, and humanity. All of the main characters in their respective stories, from Shelley's creature to the handmaids in Gilead, to Ishiguro's clones, and to McEwan's cyborg Adam, exist in liminal spaces of both socially and biologically constructed identities and thus exclude them from those considered normal (Haraway, 1991, pp. 149-182).

There is a lot of anxiety about the commodification of bodies that occurs within each of the novels I read. In *Frankenstein*, the creature is rejected because he is a product of artificial creation; in *The Handmaid's Tale*, women's reproductive capacities are appropriated by the government (state) to serve the needs of the state; in *Never Let Me Go*, clones are treated as nothing more than organ donors; and in *Machines Like Me*, the development of artificial intelligence reveals the expectations and ethical violations placed on human beings through their relationship to technology. All of these stories illustrate that technology creates new systems of domination and reaffirms existing systems of domination, unless there is ethical accountability (Harding 1986:194-196). Because they produce an alternative to the dominant view of gender and humanity as being natural, each story also challenges the view that gender and identity is something that is essential and fixed. From the perspective of feminist cyborg theory, these works as a whole argue that humanity should not be defined by biological heritage or the authenticity of one's body but rather, by the capacity for ethical agency, emotional awareness, and the ability to engage in meaningful relationships between one another. They

have the potential to reframe the boundaries that define what is human, what is technological, and what is posthuman.

Conclusion

This study shows that Feminist Cyborg Theory is a valuable critical framework for examining how literature interrogates the complex interaction of technology, gender, power, and humanity. A comparative analysis of *Frankenstein*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Never Let Me Go*, and *Machines Like Me* reveals that cyborg bodies are not mere creations of the scientific imagination, but powerful metaphors for the social construction of identity and the politics of embodiment. Though the texts are drawn from a variety of historical and technological contexts, they share common themes about how patriarchal authority and scientific advancement regulate, commodify, and redefine human bodies.

The concept of the cyborg, as explained by Donna Haraway, is one way that these literary works challenge essentialist concepts about gender, reproduction, or defining human identity by representing humans as hybrids with questions about their humanity due to their artificial or socially constructed nature. Shelley's Creature, Atwood's Handmaids, Ishiguro's clones and McEwan's Adam (the artificial man) each illustrate the implications of treating people as if they are simply objects of scientific, political, or economic utility. Furthermore, the emotional consciousness, moral agency and need to be recognized of these beings suggest that an individual's humanity cannot be defined by its biological creation or by its technological creation.

Ultimately, feminist cyborg theory pushes for a re-examination of the lines separating human beings from posthumanity; it also exposes how patriarchal structures still have great influence over the scientific and technological systems that make up our current society. New types of technology, like artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and genetic engineering, are changing our current society; the novels used to support the study of feminist cyborg theory are extremely relevant today and will guide readers in thinking ethically/socially responsible about identity as we grow further into a post-human world. The study thus demonstrates that using feminist

cyborg theory will continue to be invaluable for analyzing current literary examples of technology, the politics of gender, and our ongoing definitions of what it means to be human.

Works Cited

- Armitt, L. (1996). *Theorising the fantastic*. Arnold.
- Butler, J. (1999). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
- Graham, E. (1999). CYBORGS OR GODDESSES? Becoming divine in a cyberfeminist age. *Information, Communication & Society*, 2(4), 419–438.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/136911899359484>
- Haraway, D. J. (1991). *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge.
- Harding, S. (1986). *The Science Question in Feminism*. Open University Press.
- Ian McEwan, *Machines Like Me*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2019.
- Ishiguro, K. (2005). *Never Let Me Go*. <https://lernarchiv.bildung.hessen.de/sek/englisch/q-phase/q4/utopia-and-dystopia/never-let-me-go-by-kazuo-ishiguro.pdf>
- Nongjai, M. (2013). Gender politics in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. *Research Scholar: An International Refereed e-Journal of Literary Explorations*, 1(2), 179–186. <https://researchscholar.co.in/downloads/29-mahamuda.pdf>
- Shelley, Mary (2003). *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*. Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1818)
- Smith, S. (2010). *Shifting (A) Genders: Gender, Disability and the Cyborg in American Women's Science Fiction*.
- Vacarescu, T.-E. (2004). From Frankenstein's Monster to Haraway's Cyborg: Gender in Monstrosity, Cyborgosity and Post humanity. *Gender and the (Post) 'East'/'West' Divide*.

Author's bio-note

Ruksar Saifi is a Ph.D. Research Scholar in English at Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut. She also teaches as Guest Faculty at Dyal Singh College, University of Delhi. Her research focuses on feminist literary theory, gender studies, posthumanism, cyborg studies, digital humanities, and contemporary literature, exploring the intersections of gender, technology, and identity.
