READING CYBERPUNK: A STUDY OF GENDER AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

SYNOPSIS

Submitted to

The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Vadodara

in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by

Foram Chandarana

Supervised

by

Dr. Madhurita Choudhary

Professor,

Department of English,

Faculty of Arts,

The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda,

Vadodara

2018

INTRODUCTION:

Cyberpunk, a subgenre in Science Fiction that emerged in the 1980s, began as a form of near-future fiction depicting a dystopian capitalist society in the throes of socio-cultural change owing to the transformations caused by invasive technology. Built upon the ways in which technology has already altered our lives, it projected a noir world where the "four Cs" of cyberpunk as delineated by Francis Bonner (Fiction 2000 191) – Crime, Corporations, Crimes and Corporeality – were loosely used as plotlines, and later, became stylistic elements that came to define the subgenre. Largely, the combination of such grim stylistics and a general pattern of the plots resulted in a seemingly homogenous, yet figuratively diverse subgenre, which later expanded in its inclusiveness and prevented the subgenre from being bound to specific elements, while simultaneously remaining identifiable as a whole.

Cyberpunk emerged on the literary scene in the 1980s, a decade identified as "classic cyberpunk", characterised by a rather strict adherence to cyberpunk tropes such as the Four Cs, loner cowboy hacker protagonists who were legal, social and economic outlaws, thriving on the amoral margins of the new world order signified by a celebratory relinquishing of the "metal" over the "meat" (*Neuromancer 36*). Characterized by "hi-tech and low-life", as David Ketterer elucidates, cyberpunk "features advanced science, such as information technology and cybernetics, coupled with a degree of breakdown or radical change in the social order" (Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy 141).

Increasingly criticised for its narrow patriarchal outlook, described by Ross as "a limited narrative, shaped in very telling ways by white masculinist concerns" (*Strange Weather* 152) and "the most fully delineated urban fantasies of white male

folklore" (145), new writers began to pen cyberpunk fiction that became more inclusive of concerns such as gender, sexuality and identity, among others, as they were rapidly impacted by technological change, bringing a Second Wave in cyberpunk, a phase known as feminist cyberpunk, or alternatively, *Postcyberpunk.*

Synchronous with the emergence of American cyberpunk, was the explosion of cyberpunk in Japanese cultural narratives, such as manga and anime, which were consumed by children and adults alike, and were objects of serious study for both the Japanese, and the West. However, the journey of cyberpunk in Japan was asynchronous in its ideology, where the chronological waves in American cyberpunk were visible simultaneously in Japanese productions.

Naturally, a comparison between the two cyberpunks produced by countries with a complex political-cultural-economic relationship emerged, and a neo-Orientalist streak described as "Techno-Orientalism" emerged in the critical lexicon of analysis, implying an Orientalist tendency in the narratives of American cyberpunk that vilified the imagined Japanese despots of the future. This phenomenon was further complicated by the sudden and complete removal of anything Japanese in postcyberpunk, prompting a further examination of the places that had replaced Japan, and to draw conclusions from such a drastic change.

The final analysis of cyberpunk is undertaken in the realm of computer games, which extensively employs cyberpunk motifs, plotlines and narratives, to examine gaming as yet another subculture where contemporary concerns are reflected, amplified and draped in a futuristic garb.

Thus, the thesis looks at cyberpunk written since 1980s from multiple perspectives: on one hand, American and Japanese cyberpunk, in their more

prominent, popular forms of cultural media (novels, manga, anime and video games) are read to understand and analyse their widely different perceptions of gender and cultural identity; on the other hand, a naturally visible comparison of American and Japanese representations and envisioning of gender and cultural identity are studied within their historical, political and economic contexts, aligning them with mainstream literary perspectives on these issues.

The result of this attempt is two-fold – one, on the internal changing landscape of the American classic cyberpunk tradition from the 1980s to a postcyberpunk shift after the 1990s, to the present, and an asynchronous non-linear Japanese tradition of cyberpunk that, right from the 1980s, falls in the Western connotation of postcyberpunk; second, on a comparative look at American and Japanese cyberpunk reading their representations of gender, sexuality and race, embedded within the classic themes of posthumanity, postmodernism, and individual identity crisis.

Thus, within the scope of the thesis, a study of Gender in cyberpunk points to not any specific understanding of the feminine, feminist, or female experience; rather, it refers to the expanding inclusivity of all gendered experiences (whether LGBTQ+ or the cyborg-AI engagement with gender) as a frame to map the relationship between the body and the social structures in the future. In the process, it also raises the question of the importance of the body as the seat of gendered expectations, in futures where bodies are commodities in a hyper-capitalist future.

Similarly, Cultural Identity in the thesis refers to the analysis of various cyberpunk texts, spread over cultures, decades, and forms, to seek patterns of racial stereotypes perpetuated in futuristic narratives. While some form of identifiability of any culture rests on its familiar stereotypes, the thesis engages with Techno-Orientalism to analyse if these stereotypes are merely recognizable elements

employed to depict a culture, while simultaneously projecting the complex history of that stereotype, or whether it recedes into a Baudrillardian simulation framed by contemporary political narratives.

Thus, the thesis looks at the projections of two spaces of marginalisation: gender and cultural identity, in a largely "straight, white male" American narrative interrupted by Japanese, or Third-World dystopian futures, to read, decipher and analyse the patterns of patriarchy and White-superiority re-inscribed in subtler, imaginative futures.

The selected primary sources span the period of 1980s to present, with some of them being the representative canonical works of the subgenre, and the rest being texts that defy the conventions of the subgenre, while still being evidently, cyberpunk works even within a fairly strict context. This enables a fair reading where the very definition of cyberpunk opens itself up to reconsideration, exposing the political-economic-cultural phenomena that constitute the understanding of the canon within cyberpunk.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

The literature review for the thesis includes research that has primarily focused on gender and identity at various stages of cyberpunk, and has been published after 2000. Works such as Carlen Lavigne's *Cyberpunk Women, Feminism and Science Fiction: A Critical Study (2012),* which looked at the transition of classic cyberpunk to Second-wave cyberpunk from the lens of gender representation, Leonard Patrick Sanders' *Postmodern Orientalism: William Gibson, Cyberpunk and Japan (2008),* which examines classic cyberpunk through the lens of Techno-Orientalism, Darko Suvin's lifelong works

on the equation of Japan and America in American Cyberpunk, and Dani Cavallaro's *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture: Science Fiction and the World of William Gibson (2000)* have been utilised as the basis of my thesis, and the thesis focuses on building up on the ideas laid down by such researches to further examine cyberpunk works, trends and ideological shifts not addressed by contemporary researches.

Thus, important gaps have been identified by a literature review of the important works published especially after 2000, and addressed appropriately.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES:

The thesis examines the shift from classic cyberpunk to postcyberpunk as it evolves into a less focused but more varied and flexible garb and in the process, lends itself to a politically charged discourse that can be situated within and argued from the larger discourses of Ideology, Gender studies, Orientalism and Postmodernism.

It traces the roots of classic cyberpunk and its distinguishing features, to its gradual transition to a subgenre (postcyberpunk) that was replete with concerns not unrelated to the larger feminist discourse. In discussing the causes and the nature of this transition, its features and its points of departure from the older form, the study also takes a sweeping look at other issues not taken up by classic cyberpunk that feminist cyberpunk addressed, consequently blurring the lines of the subgenre itself. Also, such a study would necessarily lend itself to an Orientalist discourse, tracing what cyberpunk and feminist cyberpunk, including both American and Japanese cyberpunk, have done to alter or reinforce stereotyped images of Japan, or of other places. The objectives of the research would be:

1. To analyze the emergence of the sub-genre cyberpunk in English literature from a historical and cultural perspective, noting its distinctive features as well as studying the roles and depiction of women/queers in classic cyberpunk, followed by an inquiry into the allegations against classic cyberpunk.

2. To analyze the emergence of a new trend in English cyberpunk literature that consists of a prominent feminist slant, comparing the features of this transition from classic cyberpunk to feminist cyberpunk and situating it in the framework of larger feminist discourse.

3. To explore other popular forms of media, namely manga, anime and cyberpunk games, that employ cyberpunk and applying a similar analysis to their features, noting, if any, transition towards becoming a politically and ideologically charged genre.

4. To analyze how classic cyberpunk started off from a narrow premise, transitioning into a subgenre that reflected present-day and future concerns and in the process became less focused but more flexible.

5. To search for and analyze neo-Orientalizing tendencies in classic cyberpunk and feminist cyberpunk, especially with respect to the changing settings as cyberpunk gives way to its feminist counterpart.

6. To analyze the differences between the representation of Japan in the productions of Japanese cyberpunk authors/artists and their Western counterparts and probe into the cultural consequences of such representations.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

The thesis seeks to address the following questions:

1. What is classic cyberpunk and how is it different from other sub-genres of science fiction?

2. How and why did it make the transition to a sub-genre focusing on feminist and post-humanist concerns?

3. How is feminist cyberpunk different from classic cyberpunk and how does it relate to a postmodern discourse of feminism? Apart from a prominent championing of women's stories and experiences, how does feminist cyberpunk act as an umbrella term for themes of ecological destruction, religion, sexuality and post-humanism via the concept of cyborgs?

4. How does classic cyberpunk re-enact Orientalism through cyberpunk? Does feminist cyberpunk address this issue, or does it participate in a different form of Orientalism by replacing Japan with the Middle-East/Third World?

5. How do other popular forms of literary and visual art, such as manga, anime and cyberpunk games (PC games) reflect the cyberpunk culture, values, ideological stances and other relevant concerns?

6. How different is Japanese cyberpunk from Western cyberpunk? Do the differences amount to anything more than a nominal difference or is it symptomatic of deeper differences in culture? Does that, in any way, alter our perspectives and definitions of what cyberpunk is? Do the differences, in any way, imply that what we generally consider today as cyberpunk, is nothing but the dominant Western view of cyberpunk?

7. Do the Japanese portray and interpret Japan in cyberpunk differently than Western authors, critics and audiences? If so, why, and what are its implications for the larger world?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

For the study of classic cyberpunk works, representative works of the canon, with special emphasis on women writers will be chosen. For feminist cyberpunk works, apart from representative works, other lesser-known and/or relatively recent works of fiction too will be studied and included for comparative analysis of trends. For critical analysis of content, style, themes, politics and ideology, theories of feminism, cultural studies, postmodernism and science fiction studies are chosen. For other media, popular representative anime, manga and cyberpunk games (PC games) are included for cross-examination with literature as well as a concise, independent inquiry into their representations of literary cyberpunk concerns.

CHAPTER DIVISION:

I have divided my dissertation into four core chapters, with an introduction and a conclusion:

Introduction

Chapter 1: Gender in Classic and Japanese Cyberpunk

Chapter 2: Gender in Postcyberpunk and Games

Chapter 3: Cultural Identity in Classic and Japanese Cyberpunk

Chapter 4: Cultural Identity in Postcyberpunk and Games

Conclusion

A SHORT SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTERS:

Introduction:

This chapter begins by problematizing the term cyberpunk – reduced to a set of superficial elements such as the visible punk, crime, corporeality and capitalism, that even the authors were uncomfortable with. I trace the problematic history of the term, pointing to the ever-expanding connotations of the subgenre.

The chapter moves ahead with an overview of both classic and Second-wave cyberpunk, trying to accommodate the shift in perspective in the mood, tone, and underlying gendered and cultural assumptions of the fiction of each wave.

The study then undertakes the chronologically parallel, yet asymmetric development of cyberpunk in manga and anime, their roots in post-Occupation Japan, both as a source of anxiety and hope, while also tracing gender and sexual assumptions in the subgenre.

The chapter concludes with observations on the gaming industry, in view of Anita Sarkeesian's attempts to locate gender in popular, much-loved, classic video games, and attempts to apply a similar analysis of gender and identity to cyberpunk games.

Chapter 1: Gender in Classic and Japanese Cyberpunk

In this chapter, I have introduced the term "feminism" and "masculinity studies" as they have been utilized in the thesis, to point to the inclusion of various non-heteronormative and gendered practices as a marker of the shift from classic cyberpunk to Second Wave cyberpunk, instead of attempting to define what "feminine experience" consists of. The framework is then used to examine various

canonical Classic cyberpunk texts, based on their engagement with gendered behavior in a supposedly genderless cyberspace.

Further, I look at the constructions of AIs and Cyborgs in allegedly genderless futures, and argue that because of a material body, these artificial creations also get entrenched in gendered and racialised identities. In the final section of the chapter, I examine Japanese anime and manga for their gendered representations, and their departure from Classic Cyberpunk. I look at the representations of gender in Japanese manga and anime in general, to look at their understandings of gender and sexuality.

Anime and manga have, for years, and especially in the post-Occupation period, occupied an important place in Japanese entertainment and education. With its own diverse genres such as *Mecha, Ecchi, Harem* and *Super-Robot,* and to appeal to its own sets of demographics, such as *Shoujo, Shounen, Kodomo, Seinen* and *Josei,* Japanese cyberpunk tends to be extremely different from its American counterpart. While on one hand these cultural considerations mean that the portrayal of genders, sexuality and ideological depth will vary with the demographic it is aimed at, it also means that the view of gender and sexuality will be located in its Japaneseness, and thus, Japanese contextualization of a text would unearth references, meanings and conclusions quite different from the assumptions made by Western Gender Studies.

Thus, the chapter aims to understand the position of women, sexual liberty and gendered roles in a Japanese society that is scarred by its own history. The chapter also explores if Japanese cyberpunk carves a different world in its future than the Americans do.

Chapter 2: Gender in Japanese Cyberpunk, and Games

Similar to Chapter 1, in Chapter 2, I look at the constructions of gendered bodies, gendered behaviours and transgressions of sexuality that remain integral to the plot of the chosen novels – rather than simply being the "table lamp substitutes", a yardstick to measure the utility of a trope - these reimagining of the characters, the worlds and the plots re-inscribe the invisible Foucauldian power structures of contemporary life into a future where they are most likely to be carried forward.

The primary sources analysed defy a monolithic understanding of gender – it does not provide an answer, or promise a future free of contemporary social issues – rather, it engages with the possible narratives seen primarily from the lens of characters, for whom, the future is invisibly oppressive, on account of their gender and sexuality.

A trope that is significantly utilised for such an examination is that of artificial, disposable bodies that stand in a conflict with fixed, organic bodies as the seat of gendered identity where the central concern shifted from the reframing of the humanist metanarrative to an explosion of the varied understandings of gender, performativity and sexual identity in a cyberpunk world.

The chapter refrains from calling these second-wave cyberpunk works as Feminist Cyberpunk, a celebratory term applauded for many years in the academia, as the essence of the second wave. Rather, I build up on Lawrence Person's nomenclature of postcyberpunk to utilise the term for the Second Wave cyberpunk narratives that points to the ever-expanding multiplicity of issues examined by different authors.

The chapter, thus, examines works that do not reduce these traits to be the proverbial table-lamp substitutes, and lays bare the possibilities of cyberpunk worlds to move beyond the narrow confines of classic cyberpunk.

Similarly, games, being a widely popular source of entertainment, and through that, being a ripe site for the examination of player perspectives on gendered behaviour, and acceptance of sexual variance, are also examined through the lens of tests such as the Mako Mori test and the Bechdel test.

Chapter 3: Identity in Classic and Japanese Cyberpunk

In this chapter, two issues have been investigated: first, the place of Japan as the Other in American classic cyberpunk as well as the suitability of the term *Techno-orientalism* to understand such depictions arising from economic-political conflict from the World-War battlefield to the economic battlefield, and the examination of American classic cyberpunk as a subgenre obsessed with not just the repercussions of technology on humans, but the representation of the Japanese as a technological threat to the peace of the future world; and second, Japan as depicted in its own manga and anime, as the location of the future.

To understand this, the troubled histories of American and Japanese political relations are taken into consideration, especially since the Second World War, to understand how the ensuing rise of Japan, first as a technological superpower; then, as a strong threat to America in terms of gaining "soft power" through the popularisation of manga, anime and other Japanese cultural media; and finally, as an economic threat to America as it overtook American companies, economy, and virtually most of Hollywood studio ownership, led to a paranoid American writing community reflecting the 'Yellow Peril' in its literary works.

Japanese cyberpunk, on the other hand, is characterized by introspection, rather than paranoia emerging from contemporary political threats and prejudices, as well as the role of buffoonery, rather than threat, to represent the Americans. The thesis examines popular manga and anime to understand Japanese's preoccupation with technology.

Japan's own discomfort with science, torn between the trauma of the technological warfare in the World Wars that nearly destroyed Japan, and the bland reality that only science would help the country regain its foothold, became the ground on which most cyberpunk narratives were imagined. Moreover, Japan's post-Occupation disasters with technology, such as the Tokyo Subway Sarin Attack, and the Fukushima explosion, caused the Japanese to introspect into their own ideas of nationality, duty, technology and the future of humanity in a highly-technologized society, rather than contemplate a paranoid world driven by other evil countries, the way American cyberpunk did.

Chapter 4: Cultural Identity in Postcyberpunk and Games

This chapter examines postcyberpunk works for the conspicuous and complete removal of Japan from *all* cyberpunk narratives of the Second-wave American cyberpunk, replaced by random Third-World countries, to locate if the removal can be effectively considered an erasure of Techno-orientalism, or a re-enactment of the same, with merely the locations being changed.

Similarly, games are analysed to see if the architecture of their cyberpunk world is trapped in an Orientalist narrative in line with classic cyberpunk, or if it has broken away from the stereotyping, and if it has done so, whether it marks other landscapes with other forms of Othering.

Conclusion:

The concluding chapter attempts to understand cyberpunk in its various prominent forms: American Classic cyberpunk, postcyberpunk, and Japanese cyberpunk, across literature, manga and anime, along with video games, to study how the perceptions of gender, sexuality and cultural identity, shaped by various socio-political-economic concerns, have resulted in a vast body of work.

This, however, raises grave concerns regarding the understanding of the very term cyberpunk, as wholly representative of merely the American form – while the Japanese form differs substantially ideologically, the common understanding of cyberpunk is unapologetically American. This raises questions regarding the Othering of all forms of cyberpunk except for the American form, and on the possibility of the same being true in line with the tendencies of *Techno-orientalism*, extending to the process of canonization itself.

LIMITATIONS:

Owing to the wide scope of the thesis, both in terms of the media chosen and the cultural complexities of each, one limitation of the research is that no conclusive assumptions can be made, regarding either the treatment of gender, or cultural identity. Rather, the research points to the ever-expanding scope of issues dealt with the subgenre, using myriad approaches, thus, simultaneously expanding the understanding of our present through the lens of the future, which Marshal McLuhan terms as “rear-view mirrorism”.

Another limitation is that these texts, in no definitive way, can be considered as representative texts, in that they have been consciously chosen to reflect the

different ways in which cyberpunk has been written over a period of time, and thus, the research does not attempt to locate the essence of cyberpunk in any particular philosophy after trying to dislocate it from the vantage points previously associated with the movement.

Hence, the thesis has been an attempt to address and open up problematic representations within cyberpunk traditions, in the hope that a wider understanding of the subgenre can be achieved, in both its canonical and non-canonical, literary and popular, aesthetic and political forms and contexts, from the lens of gender and cultural identity.

PRIMARY SOURCES:

American Works: American cyberpunk works included in the thesis are: William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, Marge Piercy's *He, She and It*, Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl,* Maureen F. McHugh's *Nekropolis* and *China Mountain Zhang.*

Japanese Works: The anime and manga that are a part of this dissertation are: *Ghost in the Shell*, *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence, Psycho Pass,* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion.*

Video Games: The games chosen for the thesis are: *Syndicate, Shadow Run Returns, Invisible Inc.* and *Deus Ex: Human Revolution,* with a brief discussion of the trailer of the much-awaited *Cyberpunk: 2077*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Bonner, Frances. "Separate Development: Cyberpunk in Film and TV." *Fiction 2000: Cyberpunk and the Future of Narrative.* Ed. George Slusser and Tom Shippey. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press. 1992. Print.

Ketterer, David. *Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy.* Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. 1992. Print.

Ross, Andrew. *Strange Weather: Culture, Science and Technology in the Age of Limits*. New York: Verso. 1991. Print.

Gibson, William. *Neuromancer*.1984. New York: Ace Books. 2004. Print.