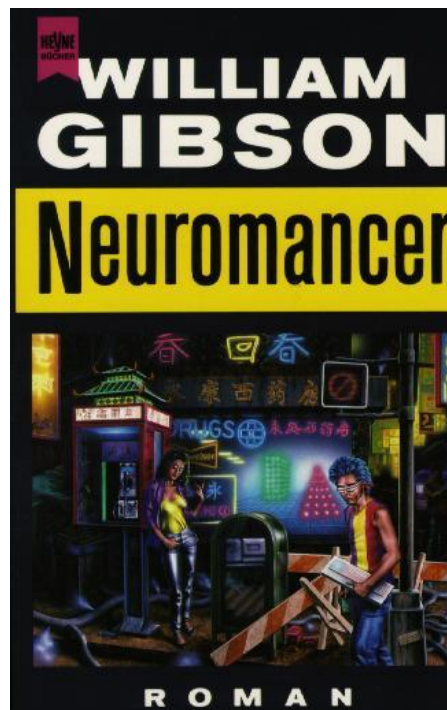


**Cyberpunk:
A True Representative Fiction of the Postmodern Period
Gibson's *Neuromancer*: A Case Study**

Gayadri Devi. G



Abstract

Cyberpunk, a sub-genre of science fiction, is considered chiefly an American movement. It became established as a sub-genre with the publication of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* in 1984. This paper would establish how cyberpunk became a representative fiction of its time, that is, the postmodern period. This is done by exploring the tendencies of postmodernist fiction as formulated by Brian McHale in the definitive cyberpunk text *Neuromancer*.

Cyberpunk is an avant-garde art form that understands these contemporary technological innovations and their implications on the human race. It seeks to understand the cyberspace and its features and then explore its effect on cyber society. This feature of cyberpunk has close parallels with the postmodern fiction. They both explore the problems like the role of multinationals, the crisis of subjectivity, the impact of technology (especially computers, information technology and genetic engineering), on society and the individual, etc.

The paper presents the characteristics of Postmodernist fiction and the contrasting or parallel world, dispersal of subjective, corporate hegemony, dystopic future, social consequences and change of culture codes.

Key Words: Cyperpunk, neuromancer, parallel worlds, dispersal of subjective, corporate hegemony, dystopic future, social consequences, change of culture codes.

Introduction

Cyberpunk¹ a sub-genre of science fiction is considered chiefly an American movement. It became established as a sub-genre with the publication of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* in 1984. The term was first used by Bruce Bethke in his short story in 1983. Later Gardner Dozois coined the term "cyberpunk" to describe Gibson's novels. As the name suggests, cyberpunk focuses on computers and information systems and accompanied by breakdown in social order. Rudy Rucker while expounding cyberpunk describes punk as somebody who is young and intelligent and asks the hard questions that would bug all old people. The punk is an individual who doesn't conform to society's comfortable assumptions but questions them.

This paper would establish how cyberpunk became a representative fiction of its time, that is, the postmodern period. This is done by exploring the tendencies of postmodernist fiction as formulated by Brian McHale in the definitive cyberpunk text *Neuromancer*. Brian McHale in his scholarly work *The Postmodernist Fiction* shows how postmodern science fiction shares the motifs of mainstream postmodernist fiction. Postmodernism², is defined as a condition of

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **14:10 October 2014**

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western society after “Modernity” and is marked by globalization and revolution in the digital means of communication. Will discussing Postmodernism, I have consulted works like *Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, Simon Malpas routledge series on Lyotard, and Jameson’s *postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* and the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*.

In postmodern culture people have rejected the universalization of paradigms such as religion, conventional philosophy, capitalism and gender. Postmodernism questions the rationality behind the earlier enlightenment era since knowledge is seen as constructed by factors like time, space and social position. It is seen as a reaction to mass broadcasting and a society conditioned to mass production. It rejects distinction between high and low art form.

Characteristics of Postmodernist Fiction

The emergence of postmodernist fiction is analyzed by Brian McHale by applying the Russian formalist concept of dominant. Roman Jakobson, a Russian formalist, describes the dominant as “the focusing component of a work of art” and it rules, determines and transforms the remaining components.” (McHale 6) McHale argues that the concept of dominant is in fact plural. There are many dominants and each literary form belonging to a particular period stresses on different dominants. The dominant of modernist fiction is epistemological. These fictions tried to interpret the known world and find out the role of human being in this world.

On the other hand, the dominant of postmodernist fiction is ontological. It tries to place questions like which is the world we are living in and which of our selves inhabits it and what has to be done. In other words, McHale defines postmodernist fiction as post-cognitive. McHale further adds questions on the ontology of the text or the world. He says

What is a world?; what kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; what happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; what is the

mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? And so on. (McHale 10)

Parallel Worlds

Science fiction shares the ontological dominant of postmodernist fiction by presenting a world, new or unknown to us and returns to confront the known world. Science fiction traditionally presents different worlds either by transporting us through time, space and other dimensions or the reverse; another world's intrusion into our own. The concept of parallel worlds or multiverse is followed by postmodernist fiction but independent of science fiction's historical development. This concept of ontological dominant and parallel worlds is explored by cyberpunk fiction too. Cyberpunk deals with many possible worlds which co-exist together like the human and non human worlds, 'real' and simulated worlds, past and future worlds and so on. It is concerned with which many of the worlds to belong and where is the being located.

In cyberpunk fiction one finds multiple worlds like cities in space, future worlds, cyberspace, etc. For instance, Gibson's *Neuromancer* is set in a near future world. The action takes place in space resort like "Freeside" with its hologram skies. There is another space colony called Zion which the protagonist, Case briefly visits. And the other parallel world presented is that of the virtual world. The virtual world or cyberspace is one of the unique characteristics of cyberpunk novels. The cyberspace projects the protagonists "disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix". (Gibson 5) As a result of this, the boundary between 'real' and virtual world is blurred at the interface through which they plug in. As both the worlds co-exist together, cyberpunk explores the idea of being. In *Neuromancer*, the protagonist longs to get himself plugged into the matrix, for it gives him the "bodiless exultation". (Gibson 6) While living in the 'real' world he feels like living inside the prison of his own flesh.

Dispersal of Subjective

Another dimension of ontological question explored in cyberpunk fiction is multiple belonging and dispersal of subjective. Some of these human/non-human dimensions explored in *Neuromancer* are the artificial implants, genetic engineering, holographic presentation of human beings' images, personality construct, and so on. Ratz, the bartender with his artificial body parts; Johnny with the chip in his head lending it to store data; Molly with her body enhancement parts; the yakuza clone which kills Johnny; the holographic presentation of Molly by Riviera; and Flatline Dixie, a ROM construct presents some of the ontological questions of dispersal of subjective.

Corporate Hegemony

In cyberspace there is not only flow of information but flow of money. It is a kind of new urban space similar to the workspace of the industrial period. Cyberspace is inevitably associated with the corporate hegemony and economic activity. Case, the protagonist, by jacking himself to the cyberspace penetrates the "bright walls of corporate systems, opening windows into rich fields of data". (Gibson 5) Case, the hacker, infiltrates the ICE which protects data and prevents unauthorized access, and steals information from the data bank.

Dystopic Future

Some of the other motifs shared by cyberpunk with postmodernist fiction are: The postmodernist writers always depict a grim dystopia as the setting for their novels. In *Neuromancer* we find the dark, crime filled 'Chiba city' as the setting for the novel. Gibson describes, "...Chiba was a magnet for the Sprawl's techno-criminal subcultures." (Gibson 6) In dystopian fiction the plot revolves around multi-cultural street scenes. The multi-cultural street scenes dominated by East Asian imagery and sense suggest the underclass and economically less fortunate suburb. It also suggests immigration and the fear of foreign threats to an American way of life. In *Neuromancer*, the Chiba city is full of sailors and business people from different countries suggests it is occupied by the economically poor and immigrant population.

Social Consequences

Postmodern writers are interested in the social and institutional consequences of technological innovations. Similarly cyberpunk deals with the problems of technological innovations like bio-technology and how it is used and misused by society. In *Neuromancer* there is a huge black market network which trades body parts and genetic materials. Surgery can enhance body's powers in countless ways. For instance, Molly can see in the dark because of the mirror shade implants over her eyes. She also possesses lethal retractable blades under her finger nails. In this novel, the beneficiaries of organ bank are the super rich. The donors give their body parts without their consent and even before dying. Case and Molly undergo enhancement surgery only to make them more able to serve the rich corporations. Whereas the aristocrats like the Tessier-Ashpool clan members use bio-technology for a different reason like postponement of death. Postmodern writers are preoccupied with the present problems like cloning created by the technological development. In *Neuromancer* we find cloned humans are used by the Yakuza mafia to commit murder. Cloning is also used by the Tessier-Ashpool clan to produce more family members to look after their assets and to run the corporation. This in turn causes confusion over the relationship between the family members.

Change of Culture Codes

Neuromancer, like most of the postmodern texts defies cultural codes that defines individual in sexual terms. For instance, Case experiences the world through Molly's body during the robbery committed in the Sense/Net headquarters. Molly performs the physical act of going to that place and robbing the ROM construct with the help of Modern Panthers, the terrorist group while Case sits in the hotel jacked to the cyberspace and breaks the security system of Sense/Net. Case is shown for the most part as a passive individual lost in his world of cyberspace. The passivity is displaced from the female body to the male body while female engages in deadly combats.

Overlapping of Genres

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **14:10 October 2014**

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Similar to postmodern fiction which borrows motifs from science fiction, we find overlapping of genres in cyberpunk where it borrows elements from detective novels, noir films and gothic stories. The novel contains the element of detective novels such as mystery, puzzle, robbery, chase, false suspect etc. In *Neuromancer*, first we encounter the mysterious death of Linda Lee. Then Case falsely suspects Wage as the one who is trying to kill him. Then we encounter the mystery surrounding Armitage and his unknown employer. As the story moves forward the mystery unfolds through the careful investigation of Molly and Case. We come to know that Armitage is General Willis Corto who led a team to inject virus into the Russian defense system and is presently hired by the AI, Wintermute. One also finds the elements of robbery and chase in this novel. Case is arrested by the Turing policemen in Straylight and Wintermute helps Case to escape by killing the policemen.

Cyberpunk also borrows elements from noir films of the post world war period. Noir film is a branch of crime or detective novel. It is not a genre but the style, mood or tone of the film. Fear, alienation, mistrust, bleakness, paranoia are evident in noir films. Often the story revolves around a cynical disillusioned male character who encounters a seductive femme fatale.

Cyberpunk is considered as tech-noir³. Pramod K. Nayar in his book *Virtual Worlds* uses the term tech-noir which combines the elements of high-tech, noir and MTV.

Cyberpunk also shares some elements of gothic stories. Gothic stories deal originally with crime coupled with mystery. The setting is usually an old castle where the characters are punished for having sinful thoughts by divine power. In *Neuromancer*, the artificial intelligence comes before Case in various personalities just like the supernatural powers coming from the inside of the castle's walls. The cyberspace itself can be seen as the castle setting. Case many times comes close to dying while jacked into the cyberspace.

Challenging Traditional Notions

After establishing cyberpunk as the apt representation of contemporary society, especially the western world, the paper then proceeds to show how cyberpunk has dealt with the traditional notion of 'real' and 'human' in this fast evolving technological scenario through Gibson's *Neuromancer* within the framework of avant-garde postmodern theories like hyperrealism and posthumanism. Cyberpunk depicts the struggle against the world that is increasingly dominated by technological capitalism. It is a struggle against "late capitalism" where all things are commodified and there are no genuine 'real' experiences but replaced by spectacle and simulations. These are some of the concerns shared by avant-garde postmodernist thinkers like Jean Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson as well as cyberpunk writers.

Simulations/Hyperrealism

The western world is dominated by simulations or hyperreal conditions. Hyperrealism is a product of technological development and hyperreal theory is a critique of this contemporary western phenomenon. . Hyperreality is a condition where two opposing concepts like real and illusion melt into one unified experience. Like Bruce Sterling has stated, Cyberpunk is an avant-garde literary vehicle in exploring these latest invasive technologies. And if one has to know about the significance of the virtual reality, one has to first know the other reality, that is, the 'real' world. The 'real' world is at the moment, under the onslaught of simulation/hyperrealism aided by the multinationals and the commodity culture. The hyperreal uses all kinds of medium including the cybernetic technology to create illusion. Cyberpunk primarily looks at these problems plaguing the contemporary world by asking various philosophical questions. The novel begins by describing how the world has become a simulation like a TV set. Gibson describes, "The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel." (Gibson 3)

Posthumanist Arguments

Posthumanism, an avant-garde postmodern theory shows the disharmonies that are rising in the subjectivity of a subject, because in the postmodern world, as Scott Bukatman in *Terminal*

Identity points out, the subject has become a “terminal of multiple networks” that poses ontological questions regarding the status and power of the human.

In the modernist period human beings are seen as universally identical, having total control over nature, and believing everything exists for their survival alone. In the postmodern period these views of humanism are challenged as humans are no longer considered as autonomous, universal, rational beings. Daniel Dinello, in *Technophobia!* (2005), explains this shift of human from centre to periphery:

Rapidly accelerating computer intelligence joins an escalating series of ego-smashing scientific breakthroughs that diminish human self-image. Copernicus pushed us from the centre of the universe; Darwin linked us to apes, slugs, and bacteria; Freud showed us that we often do not control our own minds. (Dinello 5-6)

Though the shift away from anthropocentrism has started long back, it looks more imperative now, when technology has penetrated every aspect of our lives. This thought is shared by Robert Peperell, in *The Post-Human Condition* (1995), when he states that our understanding of the world has changed. He states that many beliefs that were central to the humanist period have changed, including our belief about humans. One such belief is that consciousness is restricted to brain. Peperell explains that consciousness is the function of an organism and not an organ. According to him, the brain must be connected to the body, even if the body happens to be artificial. Similarly, Katherine Hayles confronts the mind-body dualism practiced by the humanists. In her book on posthumanism, she brings out the significance of body and embodiment.

Hayles narrates her own experience at Human Interface Technology Laboratory, where one uses a stereovision helmet and a body glove with sensors. One can see one's avatar or simulacrum on the computer screen, which reproduces the user's movements. The audiophones create three-dimensional sound field. She says, they give a multisensory interaction that gives the

user the illusion of being inside the computer. Hayles argues that she had a disorienting as well as an exhilarating effect “of the feeling that subjectivity is dispersed throughout the cybernetic circuit” (Hayles 27).

This concern of Hayles reflects in writings of other postmodern critics like Lyotard who has analyzed the postmodern condition where the status of knowledge has changed. Knowledge has become a commodity and the basis of power in society. He also explains how this power has shifted from nation states to multinationals that use patent laws to claim ownership of the knowledge generated in their research labs. This view is shared by Jameson and Baudrillard where everything in a postmodern world becomes commodified. There are similar resonances in Gibson’s works like *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero* and “Johnny Mnemonic” where human brains functions as storage banks and data is stored and sold as commodity.⁴

In Gibson’s short story, “Johnny Mnemonic” the protagonist Johnny allows his brain to function as a storage device and earns his livelihood through this means. Similarly in Gibson’s *Count Zero*, the character Angie Mitchell, has the valuable “bio-soft” stored in her brain by her father which makes her influential and powerful.

Conclusion

In today’s world any technological advancement has direct impact on the society we live in. we have to accommodate the fast growing technological advancements. For instance, the use of communication devices like cell phone, email and internet chatting has changed the way we have our social interaction. Cyberpunk is an avant-garde art form that understands these contemporary technological innovations and their implications on the human race. It seeks to understand the cyberspace and its features and then explore its effect on cyber society. This feature of cyberpunk has close parallels with the postmodern fiction. They both explore the problems like the role of multinationals, the crisis of subjectivity, the impact of technology (especially computers, information technology and genetic engineering), on society and the individual, etc.

In the contemporary world there is a crisis of subjectivity. With new technological innovations like mobile phone and internet that has become common place; the way we interact has changed. The self is divided and you are present at two places at the same time. This concept of divided self is explored in cyberpunk writings. The blurring of reality between the 'real' and virtual world is seen with respect to the impact of mass media where simulations or images are becoming more 'real' than the 'real' world.

While I agree with Baudrillard that the 'real' is fiction now, I propose that since reality is fiction, it is best depicted by fiction. If the virtual world represented in the cyberpunk fiction can stand for the contemporary hyperreal world, then cyberpunk can be seen as the representation of theory which cannot survive any longer because the world has become science fictional. What can better represent a science fictional world than science fiction, especially cyberpunk, for the cybernetic technologies aid in the recreation of simulation?

In the dystopian world of cyberpunk with contemporary cities filled with drug, crime, violence and technological onslaught cyberpunk stands closer in representing the present postmodern condition. Cyberpunk seems to be relevant to the current scenario where technology has penetrated every aspect of life; it is apt to be called the representative fiction of the late twentieth century and the present.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **14:10 October 2014**

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¹ My preliminary reading of cyberpunk includes the website “The History of Science Fiction: a Chronological Survey”, Rudy Rucker’s essay on “What is Cyberpunk?”, Dani Cavallaro’s *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture: Science Fiction and the Work of William Gibson* and Pramod Nayar’s *Virtual World*.

² Will discussing Postmodernism, I have consulted works like *Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, Simon Malpas routledge series on Lyotard, and Jameson’s *postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* and the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*.

³ Pramod K.Nayar in his book *Virtual Worlds* uses the term tech-noir which combines the elements of high-tech, noir and MTV.

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Ms. Gayadri Devi.G
Ph.D. Research Scholar
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS)
IIT Bombay
Mumbai – 400076
Maharashtra
India
gayadri@iitb.ac.in