

## **Negotiating the Impulses of Cyber/Eco- Queer in the Japanese Sci-Fi Anime: The Scope of Technology *vis-à-vis* Gendered Identity**

Ananya Saha

Donna Haraway unhesitatingly voiced her preference towards the cyborg over the goddess in her *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991). Since then, the figure of the cyborg has imaginably mutated and proliferated, courtesy the prospering multimedial conception. The ‘cyborg’ is perhaps neither redundantly fantastical, nor situated in a post-binary utopia. The idea sounds apparently improbable, given the near- consistent appearance of the cyborg in science fiction texts which are primarily futuristic, whether post-apocalyptic or steam punk. Japanese science-fiction manga and anime from the second half of the twentieth century are peppered with plotlines which narrates tales of survival in a post-apocalyptic society. The impulse is fathomable, given Japan faced the mortal threat of nuclear annihilation during the World War II. Curiously, the cyborg figure decisively populates such texts as key characters. Further nuance is added to the idea when one takes into account, the layered queer tendencies of these (quasi) human figures, which are often normatively female.

In this paper, three such anime texts are taken into consideration for analysis of the interface between two seemingly opposed compulsions; the technophobic eco-feminism and the technophilic cyber-feminism. The first text is a film directed by Hayao Miyazaki, titled *Kaze no Tani no Naushika* or *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984). The second is another film titled *Kôkaku Kidotai* or *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), directed by Mamoru Oshii, and based on the manga created by Masamune Shirow. The final text is an anime series titled *Chikou Shoujo Arjuna* or *Earth Maiden Arjuna* (2001), directed by Shoji Kawamori. In all of these, the protagonists are adolescents or young adult ‘females’, whether a human, or a cyborg. I endeavor to explore how their normative identities are queered with the aid of technology over the course of the text, and the ramifications they tend to offer. The queering occurs at various echelons: (i) The mode of the deployment of technology, (ii) the intuitive modus

operandi of the lead, which necessitates the use of technology, (iii) the role that technology plays in the deliverance of the ontic 'female' being unto a supposed post-human plane, and (iv) the contribution of the male creators in the polemics of the eco-feminism is-à-this cyber-feminism dialogue.

Through the (con)-textual exploration aided by these four parameters, I would veer the discussion that focuses on the following questions:

- (i) Is the queered deliverance of the essentialised being; a human or a cyborg, necessarily post- human?
- (ii) Is the queering, whether post- human or not, a result of a choice exercised?
- (iii) In the dialogue between the technophobic and the technophoric, how is the ubiquitousness of technology negotiated with?

Kumiko Sato comments on how the nature of Japanese cyber (punk) feminism is influenced by the idea of *nihonjiron* in her essay titled "How Information Technology Has (Not) Changed Feminism and Japanism: Cyberpunk in the Japanese Context" (Sato 336). *Nihonjinron* is the generic name given to an interdisciplinary corpus of discourse that evolved after the World War II in Japan, informs Peter N. Dale in the introduction to *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness*. To be precise, it concentrates on the idea of the formation of Japanese national and cultural identity in differentiation to that of the West. One might perceive it as a means to counter the overwhelming influence of America, which was lauded in the occupation era. In both *Nausicaä* and *Arjuna*, the supposed ecofeminist impulse crystallizes the urge of a hearkening back to the past; whether in a historic-mythical approach or in a steam punk fashion. Tangibly conceived as a way to confront the upsurge of the present techno-euphoria that might bring about an apocalypse, the omnipresent agency of nature is summoned. While in the works of someone like Osamu Tezuka, the devastation unleashed by the War is depicted through hyper-realistic and graphic representation; in the cyberpunk texts, there is a detectable instinct to sublimate the devastating memories through nostalgic fantasia. The half-forgotten folktales, country wisdom, the urge to consort with nature et al are celebrated in the filmography of Hayao Miyazaki. Often, for Miyazaki, the protagonist who delivers human society from the clutches of schizophrenic technocracy unto its salvation is a woman. Sato writes:

Japanese cyberpunk is a symptom of the struggle with its duality, between subject and Other, West and Japan, science and occult, as well as machine and human organism. It aims toward the synthesis of the two in the rhetoric of cyberpunk, which also serves as the rhetoric of Japanese uniqueness in the modern formation of subjectivity. (353)

With the linear flow of time and projection of a futuristic vision which might not be consummately hopeful; these texts simultaneously commit to a regressive motion which subsumes the 'reclamation of nature' agenda. Within this context of bifurcated nebulous impulses, the protagonist executes her mission to counter hyper technocracy, a mission that might be deemed eco-feminist in principle. Herein, the scope can be further problematized. Early ecofeminism displays a tendency to homogenize female identity by inherently equating the oppression of women to the overall debilitation of nature, a tendency not welcomed by many. Comparatively, radical ecofeminism, which advocates an assimilation of multiplicities, or a 'chain of equivalence', as Catriona Sandilands suggests in *The Good Natured feminist: Ecofeminist and the Quest for Democracy* might be more acceptable. (Sandilands 86) The idea of a 'female' is an elusive one, which Haraway suggests in her manifesto. The ontic category by herself is flexible with inherent possibilities of queerness; which Luce Irigaray mentions in the seminal "This Sex which is Not One" in 1980. Herein, the palimpsest of the cyborg upon the woman in these texts queers the ontological boundaries even further. The breach is not merely between human and machine; but also between the gendered pigeonholes of heteronormative identity. How the role of technology becomes apparently counterintuitive, yet not counterproductive is unpacked hereafter.

### ***Goddess Reimagined: Nausicaä***

Nausicaä is a young girl who attempts to protect the *Valley of the Wind* from the clutches of the 'poisonous jungle', where cyclopean, mutated, monstrous creatures named 'ohms'/'ohmus' inhabit. The setting is post-apocalyptic, a thousand years after the previous world was annihilated. Mankind's belligerence has poisoned nature against their own kind. In this steam punk narrative, remaining humans have reverted to a feudal social structure. Nausicaä is the

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daughter of the sovereign by birth and the protector of the community. It is unclear as to how the role of the guardian befalls her. But she protects human and nature alike, unafraid of the jungle. It can be presumed that being the daughter of a benevolent sovereign, she has assigned herself with the responsibility. But unlike her father, she is tolerant towards the gigantic ohms. She could be the archetypal mother guardian that the conventional ecofeminist dotes on. Nausicaä has befriended the toxic jungle and secretly tends an organic garden of detoxified saplings. The valley is blessed with the purifying ocean air. She maneuvers a glider, as if it is an integral part of her being which is synchronous with the steam punk mode. The glider is the first technical aid that initiates the elaborate nexus of queering. Timothy Leary in “The Cyberpunk: The Individual as Reality Pilot” discusses the etymological root of the word ‘cyber’;

The word cybernetics comes from the Greek word *kubernetes* – pilot. The Hellenic origin of this word is important in that it reflects Greek traditions of independence and individual self-reliance [...] the Athenian cyberpunk, the pilot, made his or her own navigational decisions. (254)

Miyazaki’s Nausicaä is the self-reliant pilot who chooses to protect the two antagonists of a long drawn battle. Yet when it comes to her mission, she does not suffer from a presumable technophobia. Her eco-friendly glider does not only fly on wind currents; but is also equipped with a sophisticated jet launcher. Neither does she shy away from excavating the unbreakable shells from the dead ohms for weapons, albeit in self-defense. In one corporeal body, she is the nostalgic mother goddess as well as the female cybernaut. But the queering per excellence of her normative self occurs at the climax of the film, as the second apocalypse approaches. In its wake, Nausicaä fulfills a prophecy about a Messianic male warrior in blue, walking on the ‘fields of gold’. She injures herself fatally in the process of protecting the jungle which her fellow humans have committed an arson. The dying Nausicaä is healed by the ohms that connect with her body through golden conduits to channelize life force. The ducts resemble medical apparatus which is used for fluid transfusion. In a sense, the outrageous by-products of technology resuscitates Nausicaä who becomes one with the ohms. She is rejuvenated in a new avatar, magically clad in blue, gliding on the golden prosthetics, becoming the ‘male’ messiah from the prophecy. But her corporeal body is still that of an adult young female.

The catalyst of her identity is unchanged. She is still the guardian, only now superimposed on the male figure of the redeemer. The idea reiterates the ambivalence associated with the 'woman' who refuses to be limited by a single definition or the unitary principle of identity. Haraway suggests;

With the hard-won recognition of their social and historical constitution, gender, race, and class cannot provide the basis for a belief in "essential" unity. There is nothing about being "female" that naturally binds women. (Haraway 17).

***Goddess Pulverized: Kusanagi***

The next film, *Kôkaku Kidotai* or *Ghost in the Shell* serves to further complicate the issue at hand. In a futuristic, pre-apocalyptic world, the lead is one Major Motoko Kusanagi, a trained assassin at the intelligence bureau, who happens to be a cyborg. The setting is futuristic as the opening lines of the film relay, 'In the near future - corporate networks reach out to the stars, electrons and light flow throughout the universe. The advance of computerization, however, has not yet wiped out nations and ethnic groups.' (Oshii) She is 'born in the net' and the opening credits show her highly refined birthing procedure, far removed from the organic conception and delivery. Motoko is an android who operates on artificial intelligence, yet her body is designed upon the model of a generic young woman. She seems unaware of her own sexuality and unabashedly displays her nude form in the film. Sergeant Batou, her part android colleague sees her as a sexualized female and keeps covering her body with his coat at every possible opportunity. The breach in ontic entities herein is instrumented by technology sans the ecological impetus. The queer is inherent within the cyborg as Haraway claims that, "it is oppositional, utopian and completely without innocence(7)." For Kusanagi, this statement holds partially true. Her queerness is further crystallized when the schizophrenic cyborg questions her own reality by calling forth her 'ghost', or soul. During the final stage of her birthing process, Kusanagi is shown to emerge from the surface of a fluid; similar to the water breaking in the womb. Though the text does not exhibit a pronounced ecofeminist impulse, water is a recurrent image in the film. The protagonist is fond of diving, which is dangerous for her synthetic body. When asked by Batou about her unorthodox hobby, she says that diving is her private search for hope. Kusanagi is a cyborg infused with a 'ghost'/soul/consciousness (can be used

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interchangeably in the context of the film) which makes her capable of more than just mechanical/artificial intelligence. She says in the film;

There are countless ingredients that make up the human body and mind, like all the components that make up me as an individual with my own personality. Sure, I have a face and voice to distinguish myself from others, but my thoughts and memories are unique only to me, and I carry a sense of my own destiny [...] I feel confined; only free to expand myself within boundaries. (Oshii).

Her empathy towards human emotions leads her down a spiral of self-doubt, wherein she begins to suspect the reality of her own memories which she had considered unique. The film features the idea of false memories being implanted within human brains by a clandestine hacker, 'the master puppeteer'. His existence is elusive, disembodied; neither human nor cyborg. He is shown to inhabit both male and female, human and cyborg bodies as per his convenience, yet always speaking with a man's voice. He claims himself to be a sentient, intelligent, life form; who wants Kusanagi as his perfect 'other', and with whom he wishes to merge and achieve the final transcendence into the 'higher structure' as he calls it. This is how their conversation proceeds in the climax, after Kusanagi willingly dives into the mind of the 'puppeteer';

- Puppeteer: [...] I refer to myself as an intelligent life-form, because I am sentient [...] but in my present state, I am still incomplete. I lack the most basic life processes inherent in all living organisms, reproducing and dying.
- Motoko: But you can copy yourself.
- Puppeteer: A copy is just an identical image. There is the possibility that a single virus could destroy an entire set of systems, and copies do not give rise to variety and originality. [...] I want us to merge.
- Motoko: Huh? Merge?
- Puppeteer: A unification. [...] We will both undergo change, but there is nothing for either of us to lose [...] The time has come to cast aside these bonds and to elevate our consciousness to a higher plane.(Oshii)

Although a synthetic, Kusanagi seems apprehensive of death and the loss of her own unique identity. Though she suggests a copy to the puppeteer, she herself does not want to be merely duplicated as her own 'ghost' is sacrosanct to her. Kusanagi wants to dive into the puppeteer's mind of her own accord,

“being paranoiac of her existence” as she puts it. But she is not allowed to make a choice in favor or against the final culmination of the two existences. The puppeteer, through the agency of another female cyborg body, forces himself on her consciousness and creates a superimposed self; which is a “part of the higher structure” as he claims, terminating her previous existence which was akin to innocence. And herein Kusanagi differs from Haraway’s claim; that the cyborg is omniscient, without the hint of innocence. Kusanagi is not innocent in the moral sense of the term. She is a trained killer. But the puppeteer compels her to engage in the act of a psychic consummation and makes her traverse a territory which is a part of the vast unknown network. She is no messiah entrusted with the responsibility to solve the metaphysical questions of existence for either human or cyborg. That the sequel to this film is titled *Innocence* (2004), where ‘sexaroid’ cyborg dolls are infused with ‘ghosts’ stolen from human female children, further complicates the questions of queerness and choice. Most interestingly, the film also features a scientist whom others address as ‘Haraway’, without a gendered honorific. It seems that the scientist, who appears to be female is a human. But later she is shown to use cyborg ocular enhancement. Hence the audience remains unsure about her corporeal identity.

***Goddess Consummated: Juna***

The final text, *Earth Maiden Arjuna* (2001) features Juna Ariyoshi, a high school girl of sixteen who is entrusted with the responsibility to protect the dying earth. The setting is present day Japan, but the vision is fictional, where Japan awaits an apocalypse unaware. As Juna lies dying from a road accident which she suffers from while biking with her boyfriend Tokio, she encounters an out-of-body experience wherein she meets someone named Chris. Identifying Chris with Krishna from the Indian epic *Mahabharata*, the one who charioteers the warrior Arjuna on to action, might not be far-fetched. In Japanese, the Christianate spelling of Chris may not be sacrosanct, and the name can indeed be orthographically represented as ‘Kris’ instead, to make the connection even more pronounced. Either way, the name written in the katakana script used for foreign words would read as *Kurisu*. Manipulating Juna, Chris barter the promise of returning her to life if she agrees to become the guardian of the dying earth against the *raja*(s), the mutant demons that have been created out of the irresponsible action of humans towards nature. *Raja* is one of the

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three basic human propensities or *guna*-s, and in Sanskrit means the propensity of human beings towards material accretion, which is exactly the malady afflicting earth. The affinity towards excess in terms of materiality, the desire to over consume is exhibited through a substantial rendition. The earth is nauseous and suffocated, from the accumulation of the non-bio degradable waste that is produced daily, owing to irresponsible ingestion. Juna is compelled to take up the responsibility of being the 'avatar of time', known as *Arjuna*. He is a male hero of epical proportions from the *Mahabharata*. Her real name is Ariyoshi Juna, which can be shortened to 'Ar-juna'.

Juna is a human girl who adopts the persona of a male hero from a foreign culture and wields the *gandiva*, presumably named after the bow that Arjuna used in the *Mahabharata*. But when she transforms from Juna to the 'avatar of time', the body remains normatively gendered- the body of a young female in a skinny pink bodysuit. The queering herein is tiered. First of all, ecofeminism has majorly advocated green peace. But Juna's method to achieve a peaceful end is not entirely non-violent. There is a double- entendre in action. Juna's primary weapon is a bow, which happens to be a pre- industrial armament. It harnesses the energy of the earth to create arrows. The other major deterrent that Juna possesses is a *Jomonian magatama* bead on her forehead, which generates 'earth sympathy waves'. The comma shaped magatama beads were popular during the ancient *Jomon* period in Japan, as a symbol of good fortune (Harris 112). But, the third weapon that Juna is bestowed with is the *ashura*, a herculean cyborg that is summoned by the avatar from the recesses of her consciousness when she is unable to counter the *raja*(s) by herself, thus resorting to committing technophilia. In the Indian mythological narratives, an *ashura* is a demon who usually embodies vice. However, Juna's warrior *ashura* is concomitant to the Messianic project. An audience familiar with the *Mahabharata* cannot help but recognize the echo of the queer relationship between Krishna and Arjuna in that of Chris and Juna. Juna is the defender of peaceful coexistence and has to become one with the target or the *rajain* the end, fulfilling her final purpose, wherein the porous walls between the human and the mutated non- human are dismantled. Kumiko Sato writes:

The emergence of female cyborgs in Japanese cyberpunk, who

replaced the role of the male hero that characterized the first wave of American cyberpunk, explains how Japanese cyberpunk enacts its claim on the dual subjectivity of Japaneseness. Strong female cyborgs and androids so dominant in recent Japanese science fiction are actually presented as referencing signifiers of the empty subject at the center, who is often embodied in the form of a passive, powerless male character. (353)

For Nausicaä, it is her invalid father who perhaps prompts her to take up the role of the protector. Chris' failing health is presumably instrumental in his decision to choose a successor. For Kusanagi, the plot thickens. Although the master puppeteer is shown to be omnipresent, he lacks the onticity that would perpetuate his existence through an offspring and offer him release. Hence, he seeks the agency of Kusanagi for whom, the process is not entirely consensual. Nausicaä chooses to die for her cause, but neither her becoming the messiah is left to her choice, nor is she seen objecting against it afterwards. She is overjoyed that her people and the jungle were both saved. For Kusanagi, choice meets compulsion halfway through as the master puppeteer takes control over her consciousness after she willfully dives into his mind. In the case of Juna, she is forced to sign up for the role at first. But she grows into the role and starts loving what she is assigned to do, going to the extent of making independent decisions as the avatar. In the end, the question of choice for her is left ambivalent. Though Juna says in the final episode, "I actually knew it. It's true. So no matter how happy I may have been, I might suddenly feel empty [...] I must have been feeling it in my heart, the pain and sorrow of this planet. But I kept pretending that I didn't know (Kawamori)".

To some, it might sound like a compulsory justification on the part of the creator. While she says she felt miserable for the earth; the cause of her moroseness could have been any other; problems with her broken family, the issues in her love life and so on. Yet in a manner of speaking, all three characters are cybernauts to certain degrees of self-fashioning.

The problematization in the scope of queering might be further fleshed out, considering the fact that all three creators of the texts are male who have

created female leads. These figures are given a mission, an amount of agency and an individual identity, irrespective of the fact whether they are organic or synthetic. Positioning the women at the centre and rendering them with apparent agency, while simultaneously depriving them of choice without any strings attached could provoke a double binary that might not actually empower, but perpetuate the idea of oppression. Whether the queering empowers the cybernauts is another issue. The normatively gendered bodies of the protagonists do not qualify Haraway's claim that the cyborg is post-gendered, liberated from the sexual binaries. Judith Squires writes in "Fabulous Feminist Futures":

We cannot assume that the current cybernetic developments will not also result in ontologies that, though redrawn, are nonetheless still highly gendered [...] one might even conjecture that cyber culture is a particularly masculine exploration of the continuity between mind and machine, of particular import to the masculine notion of the self which had defined itself in terms of the mind as distinct from the immateriality of both body and machine. (362)

Another question is whether the queered transformation is instrumental for the deliverance of the subject to a necessarily post-human plane. For Nausicaä, there is the hint of queering prior to her transformation; when she becomes the surrogate ruler of instead of her father. Post transformation, she is shown to revert her old persona, shedding the blue garments of the majestic messiah. For Kusanagi, the borders are again already ruptured because of her possession of the 'ghost.' Haraway writes; "pre-cybernetic machines could be haunted, there was always a specter of ghost in the machine" (Haraway 10). But Kusanagi, being an advanced cybernetic being also possesses the 'ghost'. Also, when Batou recovers her post-consummation; she is seen within the pre-pubescent female synthetic body. The perverse creative process occurs in a plane which is perhaps beyond human cognition; but the creation descends back to the ontic plane. It is perhaps no coincidence that the product of the consummation is entrapped within the body of a child; reminiscing the puppeteer's desire for an offspring to continue the flow within the higher structures of the net. The

desire for release as well as perpetuation through an offspring is a primordially organic instinct. Deleuze and Guattari state:

Hence the coupling that takes place within the partial object-flow connective synthesis also has another form: product/producing. Producing is always something “grafted onto” the product; and for that reason desiring-production is production of production, just as every machine is a machine connected to another machine. (6)

The ‘desiring machine’ by Deleuze and Guattari suggests a chain, where every machine breaks the flow of the other; but also constitutes a consistent flow by itself and it is the ‘desire’ that makes it more real than fantastical. Kusanagi, as others knew is terminated, but another existence becomes functional in her place, ending one flow and starting another within the ‘infinite scope of the network’. For Juna, the hint of the queer prior to transformation is subtle. Before she becomes the avatar, her boyfriend tells her that he wants to ‘become one with her’. It is a queer choice of words while he expresses his sexual desire. Juna does not disagree, but is rather shown to take a bite of his ice-cream, which could be indicative of an oral stimuli. Post-transformation, she keeps on shifting between the two identities and never completely gives up the human counterpart of her existence. Haraway did not consider the cyborg as an object of a post-human reality herself. In an interview with Hari Kunzru she says:

I try to avoid terms like post human ... there is no such thing as ‘human’ in a historical sense - that human beings as we know them and as they are always already immersed always already producing what it means to be human in relationship with each other and with objects - obviously - and so there is no post human here - it’s not giving up all these things you feel organically in order to live in the machine.

Technology is ubiquitous, whether techno-queering leads to post-humanity or not. It is not always renounced vis-à-vis ecological tendencies. In *Nausicaä*, technology is harnessed to its optimum for the reclamation of nature, in accordance with the steam punk trope. On the other hand, though

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technology is the key in Juna's quest, there is a general undertone that tends to complete renunciation of technology where ideas such as organic farming are proliferated. Kusanagi, a cyborg, is not afraid to connect to the natural impulses of the 'ghost'. Though there is a possibility, her cybernetic body does not betray her under water and she comes back safe from her diving escapades. But even without an ecological impulse, the text breaks into techno- euphoria at the end. The position is uncertain as either in termination or preservation of Kusanagi, technology is indispensable.

Haraway's 'ironic' cyborg is meant to challenge all ontic binaries, without dissolving into totality and yet become a post-gendered entity. The three cybernauts herein could be partially subsumed into Haraway's vision; as they internalize 'differences' without their complete dismissal, while challenging normative binaries. Techno-queer cyber-feminism, which offers a new interface of resistance in the normative politics of identity, perhaps bears the capacity to engender multiplicities within the discourses of gender.

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