

# A Posthuman Study of Collaboration Between Women and Technology

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## Abstract

Posthumanism opens up a new world of opportunities and negotiations where, on the one hand, the old conventions and ideals are critiqued and, on the other, the new ideas are feared. The current study aims to examine the term ‘posthuman’ and explore the different ways in which they open up new ways of thinking about humans through the collaboration between women and technology. The paper will discuss these arguments in reference to three films released in the last decade, namely *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), *Advantageous* (2015), and *Ex Machina* (2014) which will help in analysing the association between women and technology in the contemporary world of technological advancement.

**Keywords:** Posthumanism, Hierarchy, Women, Patriarchal.

## 1. Introduction

Posthuman feminism is a part of the posthumanism discourse that renegotiates the term human by criticizing the intolerant and narrow-minded rejection of the ‘others.’ The category of others not only includes women but also all the people who have been systematically and historically excluded from the status of the ‘human,’ such as slaves, native people from colonies, disabled people, and homosexuals, among others (Ferrando, 2016). Posthuman feminism thus not only speaks for women but every other category who are excluded by the male-dominated, white, heterosexual society. As Hayles (1999, p. 285) asserts, “the posthuman evokes the exhilarating prospect of getting out of some of the old boxes and opening up new ways of thinking about what being human means.” The old ideas and boxes refer to the world of binaries we live in, where everything is divided into hierarchical orders. The posthuman threatens to disrupt this world order by questioning the old ideals of the world. The contemporary anthropocentric and androcentric world order is being challenged by new social entities, such as AI (artificial intelligence), cyborgs, machines, and other biologically non-human identities. These identities thus often intersect between feminism and the posthuman, empowering each other through an affirmative relationship. As Braidotti (2015) mentions, the term ‘human’ is not a neutral term; rather, it is deeply related to privilege, power, and entitlements. The power and privilege that have been denied to women for ages. The discourse of humanism was developed during the Renaissance period, when European philosophers and artists started to move away from godly matters and occupied themselves with affairs associated directly with humans. Since the majority of the theorists, artist, and philosophers who developed the discourse of humanism were men, the needs and voices of women were entirely ignored. They put forward the needs and problems of men as the needs and problems of all humans and created an androcentric worldview. For example, the ‘Vitruvian man’ of Lionardo Da Vinci, who is considered the representative of all humans, is an image of a white, able-bodied man which fails to be inclusive and accept-

ing (Braidotti, 2013). In the contemporary world where both the traditional systems of oppression and exclusivity, like capitalism and patriarchy, and new social entities are present, the renegotiation of the 'human' term needs to be carried out in association with the traditional 'others' (women, blacks, disabled, and queer) and the new 'others' (cyborgs, AI, machines, and robots). Thus, I argue in this paper that patriarchy suppresses both of these categories and tries to keep the 'human' term exclusive. It focuses on the blurring boundaries of 'human' with the emergence of new identities that intend to not only challenge but also change the traditional definition of the term. To do that, the system of patriarchy and the androcentric view first need to be assessed and challenged. Patriarchy is a system that has been consistently present in society to oppress women, and different media examples, such as movies and TV shows, have been used as a tool to ignite a fight against them. Thus, we will use three of these movies, namely *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), *Advantageous* (2015), and *Ex Machina* (2014) to highlight the changes and similarities in the fight against patriarchy.

## 2. Theoretical perspective

Feminism theorists of the Second Wave have mentioned the need to renegotiate the term 'human,' which necessarily excludes women from equal treatment. One of the most familiar names in this scenario is, Simone De Beauvoir who highlighted in her revolutionary book, *The Second Sex* (1949) how the primary reason for the oppression of women is their classification as the 'other'. Beauvoir was deeply influenced by Marxist ideals that focused on the unequal distribution of power in society. The explanation of the theory of 'other' comes from Marx's historical materialism (De Beauvoir, 2011). While Marx explains the inequality of society through capitalism, Beauvoir adds patriarchy to the equation and highlights the similarities between both in creating a superficial hierarchical system in society for the benefit of a specific group. The concept of 'other' is what links the new and the old entities together. They are also linked through the common system of exclusion and domination. Historically, women have been confined to the walls of their houses while men go out in the world to fulfill their purpose. The similarity of housewives with machines, AI, or cyborgs is thus through repression and confinement. The new identities are feared, controlled, and used for the benefit of humans (men). However, at the same time, they are different than organic human bodies, through their amalgamation of nature and culture, ability to blur boundaries, and disregard binaries. This makes them the appropriate identities to open up the discussion on 'human' and renegotiate the term. As Haraway (2000) mentions in her groundbreaking piece, "A Cyborg Manifesto" there is no origin story of the cyborg who skips the step of original unity and identification with nature. In a world full of binaries, cyborgs or other new identities weaken the hierarchical system from within. The hierarchical system that places a man at the center of everything, excluding all other identities thus requires a re-evaluation. Since, the Renaissance period, the epitome of 'human' that we follow, such as the Vitruvian man fails to provide an explanation in the posthuman world. In fact, the body of the Vitruvian man barely represents all humans, negates the existence of more than half of the population, and creates a hierarchical definition of the term 'human'. This is why when we are thinking about new social entities and arguing over the definition of posthuman, we first need to negotiate the pre-set notions of humans. The identities of the new assemblages can only be established when we have agreed on the universal definition of human and created a more inclusive and equal category from it. This is the reason why we have chosen two movies that each focus on two different identities which can help understand their relation to each other along with studying the transition of the definition of 'human'.

### 3. Analysis of the Films

The posthuman critique the hierarchical structure of the world that is built on the binaries. As Braidotti (2016) asserts, the posthuman turn in the critical and social theory critiques the notion of men being the 'measure of all things.' This both critiques the anthropological view that places men (human beings) above all other species, and men above their binary opposite, i.e., women. For example, in *Ex Machina*, the divide between men and women is clearly visible where women are placed as the inferior and dominated entity, while men, represented by Nathan Bateman are placed as the superior species. The posthuman opens up this new way of thinking about humans as they add another layer to it. Before the posthuman, the divide between men and women, Whites and Blacks, homosexual and heterosexuals were very clearly distinguished by systemic societal structures. However, the introduction of a new social entity, that cannot be categorized as any of these groups blurs their borders (Simon, 2003). However, even after that the presentation of the posthuman as the 'other' or the inferior species further makes us question the way the world works and the term 'human'. In *Blade Runner 2049* and *Ex Machina*, Joi, and Ava along with other similar female cyborgs become the representation of the 'other' in more than one way. One is from their own identity as a non-biological being, and the other is the forced identity of a woman, who have been considered 'other' in society since the beginning. In comparison to them, their creators, Wallace, and Nathan Bateman are placed at a higher position, almost equal to the position of God. In fact, Nathan himself asserts, creating life can give someone the respect and position of a god. Similarly, Wallace also credits himself to be the creator of the new world. The creation of the 'new' Rachael and the new type of synthetic beings places him in a hierarchical position. The film thus tries to critique this hierarchical structure of the world where the posthuman is itself pushed to the edge. This blurs the lines further between humans and posthumans and opens up new ways of thinking about the 'human' and the world.

The idea of perfection of the female body is another issue that the posthuman highlights. As Parker-Flynn (2017) asserts, the holographic AI partner of K, Joi is an embodiment of the stereotypical female idea that is portrayed as a support to the male character. In addition, she is created to appeal to the male gaze and satisfy them. Joi is an example of the way posthuman females are created with the aim of making them pretty and perfect. This idea is more appropriately explored in the film *Advantageous* (2015) where the protagonist chooses to go through an experimental procedure to become young again. However, while trying to achieve that perfect beauty, Gwen loses a part of herself that fuels her with the love she feels for her daughter. It is, however, important to highlight that Gwen did not want to go through the procedure and only did it because she lost her job and needed to ensure that her daughter's future is secure. The problem thus lies with the beauty industry which fired her for being old on one hand and used her for their experimental procedure on the other hand. The film thus relates to the corporate world of both *Ex Machina* and *Blade Runner 2049* where the people at the top manipulate both the binary others and the new social entities for their benefit. In *Ex Machina*, the film shows how Nathan keeps trying to perfect his creation while destroying the previous models. His obsession with perfection is portrayed as a great folly of humankind that relates to the concept of the male gaze toward female subjects. Women are often thought to be the subject of the male gaze, which takes away their individuality and power. Ava is thus placed as an object of gaze who is being watched and inspected by Nathan and Caleb. The scene where Ava shows how he discards previous models and tortures them highlights the gap between not only the human creator and the cyborg but also recreates the societal hierarchical structure that exists

between men and women. On the other hand, Joi is an object to gaze at and use by the male replicants and humans in *Blade Runner 2049* who are not only capable of giving them physical but also emotional satisfaction. They replace traditional women and their want of freedom and agency but inherit the traditional stereotyped characteristics that make them more desirable. The scene where Joi dresses, up like a housewife is a great reminder of the stereotypical gender roles of the old world which are being recreated in a futuristic world, inhabited by the replicants. Although replicants and humans differ from each other in many different ways, the fact that they both see women as objects and use them for personal gain and satisfaction forces the viewer to question the notion of the human and the world order. Not only, K, but Wallace also uses AI-generated women to help him gain what he wants. For example, he uses the recreation of the image of Rachael to manipulate Deckard.

Through portraying the state of the female AI entities and their revolt, the posthuman tries to open up the conversation of female agency and power again. As Jelača (2018) asserts, films like *Ex Machina* highlight how the posthuman condition is a becoming-gendered condition, where traditional gender features still persist, however, they also rebel against the gendered recreations and widens the border of the term human by forcing their way into it. For example, Ava in *Ex Machina* is portrayed as an epitome of female beauty and virtue, who ultimately rebels against the male master and manages to achieve her freedom and power. Here, the film advocates for a world without gendered roles as they become obsolete eventually with the introduction of the posthuman. Although Ava is created and portrayed as a woman, she is an altogether different species that stands beyond the boundaries of man and woman. However, the attempt of Nathan and Caleb to gaze at her as a woman complicates the situation. While Nathan tries to control her and keep her under his control, Caleb takes on the role of the savior. Both men take on are traditional gendered roles of a hero and a villain among whom the agency and individuality of the woman, are lost. However, Ava is not a traditional woman, and she proves it at the end when she rises above the stereotypical characteristics of a woman. She is strong and courageous and shows no mercy to anyone, which directly contrasts the image of a stereotypical woman. In *Advantageous*, Gwen 2.0 goes through a similar dissociation of a traditional woman when she loses her motherly love for Jules. This highlights the difference between Gwen and Gwen 2.0 which forces the audience to think about the posthuman in relation to the gendered roles.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the posthuman opens up new ways of thinking about ‘humans’, the society we live in, and the binary relationships that are prevalent in the world. Although the posthuman evokes both terror and pleasure, it helps us question and critique the pre-set ideas about the world and helps us challenge them. The posthuman allows people a new way of thinking about the gendered roles of society that are explored in films, such as *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), *Advantageous* (2015), and *Ex Machina* (2014). The films highlight how traditional and stereotypical characteristics are assigned to the AI cyborgs who are created in the form of perfect women.

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