

**GOING BEYOND BINARIES: A POST-  
HUMANIST STUDY OF JAMES CAMERON'S FILM  
SERIES, AVATAR**

**BY**

**Azra Batool**



**NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF MODERN LANGUAGES**

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By

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(B.S. English Linguistics and Literature, National University of Modern Languages  
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To

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**FACULTY OF ARTS & HUMANITIES  
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## **THESIS AND DEFENSE APPROVAL FORM**

**The undersigned certify that they have read the following thesis, examined the defense, are satisfied with the overall exam performance, and recommend the thesis to the Faculty of Arts & Humanities for acceptance.**

**Thesis Title:** Going Beyond Binaries: A Post-Humanist Study of James Cameron's Film Series, *Avatar*

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Candidate of **Master of Philosophy** at the National University of Modern Languages do hereby declare that the thesis **Going Beyond Binaries: A Post-Humanist Study of James Cameron's Film Series, *Avatar*** submitted by me in partial fulfilment of MPhil degree, is my original work, and has not been submitted or published earlier. I also solemnly declare that it shall not, in future, be submitted by me for obtaining any other degree from this or any other university or institution.

I also understand that if evidence of plagiarism is found in my thesis/dissertation at any stage, even after the award of a degree, the work may be cancelled and the degree revoked.

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## ABSTRACT

**Title: Going Beyond Binaries: A Post-Humanist Study of James Cameron's Film Series, *Avatar***

This research study examines the cinematic landscape of James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) and its sequel, *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022), through the theoretical frameworks of Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Grounded in post-humanist ideology, the study examines the blurred boundaries between the male and female gender binaries and the empowerment of women by challenging traditional gender representations. The research employs a qualitative film analysis approach by Timothy Corrigan, closely examining specific scenes, characters, and dialogues to identify and interpret blurred gender binaries and women empowerment, and a textual analysis approach by Catherine Belsey to analyze script and subtitles as text. The constant comparison of data and an iterative process ensure a dynamic and comprehensive understanding of post-humanist dimensions, the representation of female characters in contemporary cinema, and the dismantling of the gender binary in the *Avatar* film series. The study examines the portrayal of selected female characters in James Cameron's film series *Avatar* and its subsequent sequel, *Avatar: The Way of Water*, within the context of gender representation in mainstream cinema. By analyzing narrative structures and visual strategies, the research argues that the film presents women characters as empowered figures with agency and depth, subverting conventional Hollywood tropes and the male gaze. It discusses how contemporary science fiction, which includes cyborg entities, portrays women with fluid gender identities, active roles, and agency, in contrast to traditional cinema, which represented women as objects to be looked at and portrayed them with rigid, stereotypical gender identities and passive roles. By addressing the male-female gender binary and the representation of women in cinema, this research contributes to the interdisciplinary discourse, integrating perspectives from gender, cultural, film, and literary studies.

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Adv. Malik Muhammad Usman and Mussarrat Afza. Your unwavering trust, endless prayers, and boundless love have been the light and strength of my journey.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background of the Study

Post-humanism, a significant philosophical and cultural movement, questions and redefines how human is perceived in relation to the world and challenges conventional understandings of identity. Contrary to humanism, post-humanism emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of humans, machines, and the environment by decoupling the human identity from its privileged position, suggesting that the boundaries between human and non-human are not as clear as previously thought. It challenges the traditional humanist perspective, which often emphasizes the superiority of human beings over non-human entities. (Wolfe 76) The elements of post-humanism can be traced back to cybernetics, feminist theory, and environmental philosophy. Scholars like Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, and Rosi Braidotti have brought their unique perspectives on how technology and biology intersect, thereby contributing to the development of post-humanist thought.

The influence of post-humanist themes extends into popular culture, including films, media, cinema, fashion, and politics, featuring “cyborgs, chimeras, human-animal hybrids and techno-dystopias” as recurring motifs. Going beyond anthropocentrism, post-humanism embraces the intersection of “human, non-human, and technological worlds.” (Nayar 1) Post-human cinema views plants and animals as companions to humans. It seeks to decenter human dominance and reevaluates the relationship between humans, non-humans, other life forms, and the dynamic role of technology in shaping the understanding of the world. Post-human cinema “rejects the ontological separation of human and the non-human.” (Townsend 225).

#### 1.1.1. Post-human Cinema

Post-human cinema, through narrative and visual storytelling, examines the implications of post-humanist thought. Themes of technological integration, artificial

intelligence, cyborgs, chimeras, and other forms of hybrid identities that transcend traditional human boundaries are prevalent in the genre. Post-human cinema, in this way, provides a platform for visualizing and interrogating the intricacies and fluidity of identity in a technological world. Surrealist techniques are employed in movies like *The Lobster* and *Manta Ray* challenges the anthropocentric views about “the human” and emphasizes the “spiritual coexistence” of human with other animals (Henry 210-243).

Post-human cinema is significant as it expands and challenges our understanding of identity and existence. Post-human films encourage viewers to reconsider the definition of human by portraying characters that embody post-human ideas. They invite their audience to imagine new forms of existence where boundaries between human and machine, self and other, are blurred and constantly changing. In an era where technological advancements are rapidly changing society and our self-perceptions, this reimagining is essential. Now, “technology has started to resemble human bodies more,” dismantling the boundary between humans and machines, and it shows the “superiority” of machines to humans (Shabu,3).

Post-human cinema also makes significant contributions to cultural discourse by highlighting issues of ethics, agency, and the environment. For instance, films that depict artificial intelligence frequently raise questions regarding autonomy, ethics, consciousness, and the moral implications of creating sentient beings. Similarly, films featuring post-human characters, such as cyborgs or genetically modified humans, explore the potential and hazards of biological enhancement and its integration with technology.

### **1.1.2. Representation of Gender in Post-human Cinema**

Post-human cinema has transformed the representations of identity and gender. Traditionally, mainstream cinema portrayed rigid gender roles and binary understandings of identity, presenting women as “submissive” (Noonan, 41). Post-human cinema deconstructs conventional representations of the gender binary by introducing characters that blur fixed identities and gender roles. They represent fluid identities and subvert the notion that gender is a fixed and binary construct. Women’s presence can be observed in scientific settings, which are technologically advanced

science laboratories and research hubs, contrary to the traditional setting for women, which has been “home” (52). Posthuman cinema celebrates fluid gender identities, just like feminism and queer theories.

The female characters featured in post-human cinema possess agency. Their active portrayal in films subverts the conventional gender representation. These female characters are portrayed as independent and strong individuals with their agency and goals. The diversity in representation of women in mainstream cinema challenges the influence of the male gaze in films that represent women. Post-human cinema also explores identity by examining how technology alters the concept of what it means to be human. The hybrid characters in these films prompt the audience to question the boundaries of individuality and the essence of human identity. These films frequently highlight the existential and ethical challenges raised by technological development, encouraging viewers to imagine a future where technology defines human identity.

Post-human films serve as a significant forum for reevaluating identity and challenging traditional gender narratives. They encourage the audience to adopt a more dynamic and multifaceted understanding of identity by presenting characters that embody the fluid and interconnected nature of posthumanist philosophy. According to post-human philosophy, identity is fluid and hybrid, which challenges binaries such as human/non-human and male/female. These films not only reflect but also influence contemporary debates on gender, identity, and technology.

#### 1.1.4. Portrayal of Post-human Characters in Science Fiction Film

The science fiction genre offers a rich ground for exploring speculative ideas about the future, humans, and the universe. Science fiction—a diverse and dynamic genre—arose in the 19th century with pioneers like Mary Shelley’s “Frankenstein” and was later refined by writers such as H.G. Wells and Jules Verne. Science fiction provides a broad scope for imagination and challenges the status quo. The speculative nature of this genre allows it to cross the boundaries of possibility and foresee a future in which technology transforms society and redefines the notion of what it means to be human. Science fiction presents futuristic settings and invites its audience to reflect on contemporary technological trends. This perspective on science fiction aligns with post-

human thought, thus challenging stereotypical concepts of identity, agency, and what it means to be human. It also raises questions about the boundaries of human experience and challenges that arise with technological development.

Science fiction films mostly explore the intersection of humans and technology by featuring AI (Artificial Intelligence) characters, cybernetic enhancements, and genetic engineering. It examines the evolving and complex relationship between humans and technology by exploring both the benefits and drawbacks of technological advancements, as well as discussing autonomy, ethics, and human identity. Portrayal of posthuman characters—Cyborgs, Chimeras, and other AI entities—challenges the traditional concept of identity. Cyborg—a hybrid of humans and machines—blurs boundaries between natural and artificial by merging organic and machine.

Artificial Intelligence—a posthuman element—raises questions about self-awareness and the potential of machines to possess qualities associated with human beings. Many science fiction films, such as *Blade Runner* and *Ex Machina*, portray AI characters that question the understanding of what it means to be alive, a concept traditionally considered a biological function. The film questions conventional indicators of life, such as biological form. Aliens or other genetically modified humans are also depicted as post-human figures in science fiction films. These post-human entities enable viewers to reevaluate the concepts of boundaries and possibilities in a world with advanced technology.

The portrayal of post-human characters in science fiction films often raises ethical questions about creation, rights, treatment, autonomy, and the moral responsibilities of the people who create these entities. Films like *Her* and *AI: Artificial Intelligence* explore the theme of the emotional relationship between AI and humans, raising questions about whether post-human entities should be considered equals. Cyborg films also raise ethical questions about the merging of human and machine. They explore issues such as the loss of humanity due to technological enhancement and augmentation.

Technological advancements play a significant role in shaping perceptions of gendered identity. Technology influences how people perceive their identities as it

becomes more deeply involved in the daily lives of human beings. Virtual reality and social media — digital platforms — allow people to explore their identities by transcending physical limitations. Science fiction films delve deeper into these ideas and explore the consequences of merging technology and identity. Films like *The Matrix* and *Black Mirror* explore concepts of mind uploading or digital consciousness, celebrating fluid identities that exist in both virtual and physical spaces. Science fiction also explores fluid gender binaries that dismantle traditional gender roles. Characters that exhibit fluid gender exist in the “postgender world” and bring forth the potential of technology to redefine and transform gender identity (Haraway, 8)

### **1.1.5. Introduction to James Cameron’s Avatar Film Series**

James Cameron — known for his imagination, technological advancements, and creative storytelling — is a renowned figure in the world of cinema. Cameron has produced some of the most iconic films in history by pushing the boundaries of possibilities and giving his imagination freedom to transgress the limitations of what is possible. Cameron started his career in the late 1970s. He was marked as a visionary director in the science fiction genre with the release of *The Terminator* (1984). This film introduced the audience to time travel, AI, and deeper themes in action films. Cameron’s success continued with a chain of blockbuster films, including *Aliens* (1986), *True Lies* (1994), and *Titanic* (1997), but *Avatar* (2009) truly transformed the science fiction genre. In these films, Cameron pushes the technological boundaries through advancements in narrative techniques and visual effects, changing the way stories are told. The innovative technology utilizes real-time virtual cameras, stereoscopic 3D, performance capture, and facial motion to capture intimate portrayals of characters, creating a deep emotional connection between the audience and the characters.

*Avatar* was released in 2009. It became famous as a box office success and a cultural landmark. The film explores themes of environmentalism, colonization, and the complex relationship between humans and nature. *Avatar* is set on the magnificent alien world of Pandora with vibrant visuals. It became the highest-grossing film of all time, briefly surpassed by *Avengers: Endgame* in 2019, and later reclaimed the top spot. *Avatar*’s cultural significance goes far beyond its financial success. It sparked debates

about the rights of Indigenous peoples, environmental sustainability, and the ethical implications of technological development. The most remarkable aspect of *Avatar* is its stunning visuals through advanced technology and visual effects. An unimaginable level of realism and emotional depth to animation has been made possible through new motion-capture techniques introduced by Cameron's team. Actors bring their performance to life through the use of new real-time motion capture. Cameron added richness and depth to the viewing experience by using 3D technology. This resulted in a glowing landscape of Pandora, drawing the viewers into a completely new world.

The *Avatar* series primarily follows the story of Jake Sully, a paralyzed former Marine who is chosen to participate in the Avatar Program. This project enables humans to control genetically engineered Na'vi bodies remotely. It aims to improve communication with the indigenous Na'vi and facilitate mining operations on Pandora, a moon rich in resources. The indigenous Na'vi live in harmony with their environment.

**In the first film, *Avatar* (2009)**, Jake begins his journey as he enters his avatar body and becomes deeply integrated into Na'vi culture. He forms a strong bond with Neytiri, a Na'vi warrior, and gradually comes to understand the spiritual connection the Na'vi have with their world. As Jake navigates between two worlds, he finds himself torn between the human military corporation that aims to exploit Pandora's resources and his loyalty to the Na'vi. The climax of the film revolves around the attack on the Hometree, a cultural symbol of the Na'vi. Ultimately, Jake decides to stand with the Na'vi, leading a battle against human invaders.

**The sequel, *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022)**, continues the themes of the first film. It explores the theme of the struggle between colonizers and Indigenous people. The sequel to *Avatar* is set over a decade later. Jake and Neytiri are parents who portray the complexities of parenting in a struggling world.

Both films explore meaningful themes, including the tension between technology and nature, the significance of identity and community, and the fight against exploitation due to colonization, encouraging the audience to reflect on their relationship with the world around them.

### 1.1.6. Blurred Gender Binaries in Post-human Cinema

For a long time, traditional binaries have shaped mainstream cinema through rigid and conventional gender representation. This representation reinforces the stereotypes: men are represented as heroic, strong, and assertive, while women are portrayed as nurturing, passive, and objects of desire. These representations shape society's perception of gender and also limit the development of a character. Films with traditional representation of gender roles reinforce patriarchal structures without considering the complexity of identities.

Feminist theorists promote a diverse representation of gender. Donna Haraway challenges gender binaries and advocates for more fluid and multifaceted representations of gender. Her influential essay, "*A Cyborg Manifesto*," introduces the concept of the cyborg—a hybrid entity that blurs traditional binaries. Haraway's cyborg invites us to reconsider our identities by blurring the lines between human and machine, thereby challenging fixed notions of identity. It allows us to embrace more fluid and hybrid identities. Films like *Ghost in the Shell* and *Black Panther* portray characters with fluid and hybrid identities that challenge traditional gender norms. This notion of cyborg is relevant to *Avatar*, as the characters portray hybrid identities that deconstruct conventional notions of gender binaries and humanity.

Judith Butler says in "*Gender Trouble*" that gender is performative and it is constructed through "repeated acts". Gender is a socially constructed idea that defines the roles, actions, behaviors, and relationships that are expected of men and women. These traits vary across cultures and periods. These gender norms are hierarchical. They often reinforce inequalities that intersect with factors like class, ethnicity, disability, age, and sexual orientation. Traditionally, gender distinctions associate masculinity with strength and dominance and femininity with softness and vulnerability. Feminist scholars argue that these portrayals exaggerate biological differences, shaping identities through rigid social labels. Over time, however, the boundaries between masculinity and femininity have become less defined, with evolving social roles, especially for women, leading to a broader understanding of gender beyond fixed binaries.

*Avatar* features the human-Na'vi avatars that represent the overlapping of biological and technological identities, by mixing masculine-coded and feminine-coded



traits aligning with Haraway's notion of the cyborg and Butler's notion of gender performativity. These hybrid beings navigate multiple worlds, reflecting the complexities of identity in a rapidly changing environment.

## **1.2. Thesis Statement**

The film series Avatar, directed by James Cameron, subverts traditional gender representations in mainstream cinema, portraying female characters as empowered agents who defy conventional stereotypes by blurring gender binaries and advocating for hybridity and diversity in gender identities within the science fiction genre.

## **1.3. Research Objectives**

- i. To examine the portrayal of gender binaries in Avatar and their contribution to the empowerment of women
- ii. To analyze the representation of selected female characters in the Avatar film series

## **1.4. Research Questions**

- i) How do the Avatar films by James Cameron challenge traditional notions of gender in mainstream cinema, as informed by the concept of blurred gender binaries in A Cyborg Manifesto, Gender Performativity and theory of the male gaze in Visual Representation and Narrative Cinema?
- ii) To what extent do the blurred gender binaries portrayed in James Cameron's Avatar empower selected female characters, thus challenging traditional gender representations within the science fiction film genre?

## **1.5. Research Methodology**

### **1.5.1. Paradigm**

The research employs an interpretive and qualitative paradigm to closely examine key scenes and dialogues while paying attention to visual elements from film and literary text. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of nonnumerical data such as themes, visuals, and character interactions. The research employs dual lenses of textual analysis and film analysis.

### 1.5.2. Research Method

This research integrates two methods for analysis of Avatar series; Timothy Corrigan's Film Analysis for analyzing visual data and Catherine Belsey's Textual Analysis for analyzing dialogues. These methods will analyze Avatar as a cultural text. I will utilize Timothy Corrigan's film analysis for analyzing visual elements and cinematic techniques, and Catherine Belsey's textual analysis for exploring the meanings ingrained in the film's language (dialogues) and narrative structure.

#### *Timothy Corrigan's Film Analysis Method*

This research methodology utilizes Timothy Corrigan's film analysis approach to examine the technical and visual elements in *Avatar*. Corrigan's framework treats film as an art form with elements comparable to literature and the visual arts. This method allows for a detailed breakdown of how cinematic techniques convey gender dynamics, which is central to this study's focus on blurred gender binaries and female empowerment. The research will utilize following elements from Corrigan's film analysis given in his book *A Short Guide to Writing about Films* (2014) to analyse visuals of the films and each component provides unique insights into gender representation and challenges traditional depictions in mainstream cinema.

#### *a. Characters*

According to Corrigan, characters are "the individuals who populate narrative and non-narrative films." Characters are defined by various elements, such as their appearance, actions, and dialogue, each of which conveys specific values and ideologies. (Corrigan, 61) This research examines whether characters are defined by their clothing, language, or other traits. This helps understand how characters, particularly the female ones in *Avatar*, embody both traditional and non-traditional gender traits.

#### *b. Mise-en-Scène and Its Elements*

Mise-en-scène—a French term— means "what is put into the scene"(65). These elements includes all properties of a cinematic image that exist independently of camera position, such as settings, costumes, lighting, and acting styles. This study examines how following mise-en-scène elements contribute to gender representation:

- **Settings and Sets:** Examining how the constructed environment of Avatar's scenes shapes themes of gender and identity. The settings and sets-"the location or the construction of a location where a scene is filmed"- can reflect or challenge cultural norms regarding gender roles. (Corrigan, 68)
- **Costumes:** Costumes, the clothes that the characters wear, often serve as keys to a character's identity. The attire can disrupt traditional stereotypes and norms, like men adopting typically feminine attire or vice versa.
- **Lighting:** Analyzing the use of lighting, which may draw attention to certain characters or create atmospheres that emphasize isolation or connection. Lights and shadows play a vital role in a scene as "...a character or an object or a scene can be illuminated, either by natural sunlight or from artificial sources (such as lamps)"(71). This can bring a viewer's attention to a certain direction.

#### c. Composition and the Image

Composition involves the arrangement of visual elements within each shot, defining how the audience perceives scenes. In Corrigan's analysis, this includes two main aspects: the shot and the frame.

- **The Shot:** Each shot is a single, uninterrupted visual segment, with dimensions that convey different layers of meaning.
  - **close-up** (for example, showing only the character's head) o **extreme close-up** (perhaps showing a detail of that head, such as the eyes) o **medium shot** (somewhere between a close-up and a full shot, showing most but not all of a figure)
  - **full or long shot** (revealing the character's entire body in the frame) o **three-quarter shot** (showing only about three-quarters of the characters' bodies)
  - **pan shot** (the point of view pivots from left to right or vice versa but without changing its vertical axis)
  - **shot/reverse shot pattern** (the point of view shows, for example, a person looking at someone and then shows the individual being looked at)
  - **long take** (the film does not cut to another image for an unusually long time)
  - **crane shot** (the point of view films an outdoor scene from high above)

- **Tracking shot** (the entire point of view moves, on tracks or on a dolly, following, for instance, a walking figure).
- **Low angle** (the point of view is low, tilted upward)
- **high angle** (the point of view is above, tilted downward); the exact angle can be made clearer by using arrows)
- **The Frame:** The frame captures the overall composition of each shot, affecting the viewer's interpretation of the scene:
  - **Angle and Height:** Angles like high or low viewpoints can emphasize power dynamics. High angles might diminish a character's presence, while low angles can empower them.
  - **Distance from Subject:** Close-ups, medium shots, and long shots frame characters differently to convey intimacy, distance, or tension. The strategic use of these shots can underscore moments of gendered identity or empowerment.

#### *Textual Analysis Method by Catherine Belsey*

Textual Analysis of Catherine Belsey involves following elements.

**Contextual Understanding:** In order to understand cultural and historical significance of a text, background research about production and content of the text is important.

**Interdisciplinary Approach:** Belsey emphasizes the importance of integrating different theoretical frameworks as textual analysis relies on additional research methods and methodologies.

**Consult Original Sources:** Belsey promotes consulting original source as secondary sources may introduce biases that can influence the understanding of the text.

**Meaning-Making as a Relational Process:** According to Belsey, meaning-making is a relational process as different historical periods and theoretical frameworks can lead to different interpretations of the same text.

**Close Reading:** A deeper engagement with the text involves close reading of the text. Following are key steps of Close Reading for effective textual analysis by Catherine Belsey:

1. Start with close observation of the text. Notice the details that are not apparent by reading the text multiple times.
2. Do some background research to understand historical and cultural context.
3. Identify key elements within the text and find out how these elements add into the overall meaning of the text.
4. Analyze words and structure and interpret meaning.
5. Be aware of how personal experiences, background and biases can influence the interpretation of the text.
6. After making your own interpretation, consult secondary resources for interpretation of other scholars for refining the analysis.

While Belsey focuses on literary texts, she also explains that textual analysis can be applied to other forms of cultural artefacts, such as paintings. This extends the scope of textual analysis outside traditional literature.

For the visual analysis, some screenshots, from the Avatar films, are selected. These screenshots include moments that depict female characters as strong by challenging traditional gender binaries and subverting male gaze. Specific attention is given to elements of film analysis given by Timothy Corrigan including camera angles, framing, lighting, and body language and other mis-enscene elements.

For the textual analysis, dialogues of selected female characters are taken from the script and subtitles of the films. The choice of dialogues is based on the moments where the selected female characters express their values, assert their power, or subvert traditional gender norms. The collection data focuses on language, tone, and verbal expressions as well.

## **1.6. Significance of the Study**

The research study, "Going Beyond Binaries: A Post-Humanist Study of James Cameron's Film Series, Avatar," employing the theoretical frameworks of Donna Haraway, Judith Butler and Laura Mulvey contributes to the evolving discourse on posthumanism by providing a nuanced analysis of how "Avatar" challenges established gender binaries and empowers female characters.

The significance of this study lies in its innovative approach to analyzing gender representation in "Avatar" through the synthesis of Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto", Judith Butler's gender performativity and Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze. By bridging these theoretical perspectives, this research offers a nuanced intervention into the discourse of gender dynamics in mainstream cinema, particularly within the science fiction genre. Through this intervention, the study aims to deepen understanding of how "Avatar" challenges traditional gender norms and empowers female characters, providing valuable insights for scholars, filmmakers, and cultural critics interested in exploring representations of gender in contemporary cinema.

### **1.7. Delimitation**

The study focuses specifically on James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) and its subsequent sequel *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022). The study does not extend to other films or media texts. Moreover the study is limited to selected female characters in the movie. The study is also delimited to gender binary.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, research related to portrayal of Gender in cinema will be discussed to highlight contributions of different researchers in this area. These works help in contextualizing the study in the field of gender portrayal and exploration.

#### 2.1. Portrayal of Women in Science Fiction Films

Portrayal of Women in Films has evolved with evolution in cinema and feminist theories. Primarily women played typical roles but gradually they could be seen in various kinds of roles. In her book, *Women Scientists in Fifties Science Fiction Films*, Noonan discusses various roles played by women in 1950s American B Science Fiction films. Some films like *The Atomic Submarine* include roles of women that are peripheral to the action and their presence merely satisfies 'male lust'. This is a very traditional representation of women in films. In some other films like *The Brain from Planet Arous*, women are in established relationships with the hero of the film; women have played roles of 'dutiful daughter', 'virtuous fiancée', 'widow', 'brave confidante' and 'dutiful wives' (Noonan, 39). So, the women played the roles according to societal expectations. Noonan has discussed two types of leading roles played by women in 1950s American B Science fiction films; "Smart and Sexy" and "Spunky, indefatigable" but these roles exist on spectrum (42). 1950s American B Science Fiction films made it possible to explore space travel, promote peace and acknowledge talents of women. Some of these films also portrayed women as Science students, scientists or assistants of scientists. This structure was threatening to traditional family structure where man was a provider and woman was a homemaker. Critical analysis of B Science Fiction films lacks roles of women as a professional figure that evolved in the 1950s in America. Critics like Patrick Lucanio, Tim Burton, Adam Knee and Cyndy Hendershot have minimized, ignored or misread the roles and significance of women in 1950s American B Science Fiction films. Noonan has comprehensively discussed the variety of roles of women in these films by highlighting the importance of gender roles and sexuality in these films. Noonan explores two roles of women scientists played by Osa Massen and Faith Domergue.

In *Rocketship X-M*, Masson has been portrayed as “professionally successful and sexually attractive” (53). *It Came From Beneath the Sea* represents Faith Domergue as a “powerful and erotic” professional woman; “The more sexually attractive she is, the more she is allowed to succeed” (62). Noonan highlights how 1950s science fiction films portrayed female scientists as competent professionals, but in order to be “acceptable” in the patriarchal society, they had to portray traditional femininity as women’s success in science posed a threat to traditional family structure (69). Although women played leading roles, the traditional representation of woman portraying rigid gender norms were reinforced in some way. This portrayal was rare and mostly women played supporting roles.

The narratives in which women play supporting roles are deconstructed by KacVergne, in the research article, *Sidelining Women in Contemporary Science-Fiction*. The study opposes the narratives in which male characters play the roles of heroes while female characters play supporting roles. Traditionally, women have appeared as the objects of “desire” in the cinema (2). In the 1980s, the role of women in cinema shifted from object of desire to decision-makers because of the second wave of feminism. Yet, this empowerment is superficial as women are still marginalized to define masculinity of the male hero. Kac-Vergne examines “active side-kicks” i.e. Lewis (Nancy Allen) in the *RoboCop franchise* (1987, 1990, 1993) and Veronica (Ally Walker) in *Universal Soldier* (1992). Moreover, Kac-Vergne examines “action heroines” i.e. Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2* (1991) and Lt. Melanie Ballard (Natasha Henstridge) in *Ghosts of Mars* (2001) (2). Ann Lewis in *Robocop* is initially shown as competent police officer whose gender is downplayed and her gender is desexualized throughout the film but in its sequels, she is progressively feminized with less agency (14). In *Universal Soldier*, Veronica, a daring journalist is sidelined as the film progresses (4). Both characters witness male heroes contrasting Laura Mulvey’s traditional ‘male gaze’ as “The desiring male gaze is replaced by a compassionate female gaze which places women as observers rather than active participants” (8). Ellen Ripley from the *Alien* saga and Sarah Connor from *The Terminator* series mirror male action heroes, at some points, rejecting traditional femininity. Lt. Melanie Ballard in *Ghosts of Mars* (2001) normalizes female authority rather than exoticizing it. The film shows a broader cultural shift towards postfeminism, which celebrates female empowerment but also re-engages with traditional femininity and heterosexuality. However “Ripley and Connor seem to have had a very limited legacy in the last fifteen years.” Kac-Vergne argues, “As we have seen, the



physical abilities of female characters tend to be disqualified in 21st century mainstream science fiction blockbusters: female supporting characters are included not to drive the action but to vindicate the male heroes' masculinity, not to say hypermasculinity (10). Female supporting characters are repositioned as "bearers of the look", as in the 1980s, but their gaze often expresses desire rather than, or in addition to, compassion" (13) Although traditional portrayals of women as an object of desire have been common, some films resist these portrayals by assigning nontraditional roles to female actors.

In her research article *A Research on the Change of Female Characters Portrayed in Science Fiction Films and Its Social Influences*, Tang analyzes English-speaking Science Fiction films through horizontal and vertical comparisons of female characters. The research explores the shift in female roles in these films and impact of these films on societal norms. The study also analyzes how these films challenge traditional stereotypes and promote active female roles in cinema. The essay uses a method of literary analysis and method of analogical reasoning to divide female characters into their role types. Feminists expect to see more realistic representations of women in cinema because Sci-Fi films have reduced strength difference between male and female gender and they appeal for equality in sexual relations. The role of female characters in Science Fiction films has shifted from "irrelevant" to "dolls" (15). Early 20th century Science Fiction films portray female characters as "terror and incarnation of sin." For example, *Frankenstein* (1910) portrays female characters as "evil". By the end of the 20th century, portrayal of female characters in Sci-fi films changed from "evil" to "partners of male characters" i.e. housewives or lovers (15). In *Star Wars* (1977), Princess Leia plays the role of a goddess so she is just a symbol of power while she lacks her independent value. *Blade Runner* (1982) also portrays a female character as a replicant that lacks individual identity. Tang states that Rachael, the replicant, exists in the film "not only to satisfy the actor's fantasies about the perfect lover but also the audience's" as she is beautiful and has an attractive feminine body(15). Sequel of *Blade Runner* (2017) portrays a virtual projection of a "perfect girlfriend" that satisfies male gaze by changing attire according to male expectations and satisfaction. 21st century Science Fiction films portray females as independent women leading the story. *Avatar* (2009) shows Neytiri as "tall and muscled" which focuses not on gender but "strength", "kindness" and "wisdom". *Arrival* (2017) portrays Louise as a "non-traditional heroine" (16). The shift in the roles of female characters in these films has influenced society. They have encouraged females to study science and take science as a profession. They break gender stereotypes by giving

women independence and agency.

Telotte, in *Science Fiction Film*, talks about the role of Feminism in Science Fiction. Initially, Science Fiction films have portrayed women as passive observers. But this notion has changed with contemporary Science Fiction films like *Terminator 2* that have portrayed women as powerful figures. Telotte mentions Donna Haraway, a key figure in Cyborg Feminism, has introduced the concept of cyborg to explore feminine identity in a postmodern context. She discusses Drawing on Haraway's ideas, Mary Ann Doane argues that robots, cyborgs and prosthetically altered bodies address feminist concerns like maternity, reproduction, and historical representation and reveals the ways in which patriarchy seeks to control femininity. Films like *The Stepford wives* show restrictive roles posed by patriarchal society, on women. The film shows that female representation is shaped by male perspective. It also addresses appropriation of female reproductive roles. Barbara Creed marks Science fiction genre as representation and misrepresentation of femininity while Claudia Springer explores emphasis of such films on technology and body.

In *Cultural Representation of Gender and Science*, Steinke explores representation of gender in popular films from 1991 to 2001. The study examines the appearance of female characters i.e. female scientists and engineers, in the images and explores the impact of these images and roles of female scientists on the girl's perceptions of female scientists and engineers. Steinke has selected films from 1991 to 2001 that feature female scientists from particular movie databases i.e. the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, Microsoft Word's Cinemania CD-ROM, Movie Box Office Reports (Movie Box Office 2001), by using specific keywords (37). Out of seventy-four films, twenty-five featured female scientists and engineers as protagonists or primary characters. The textual analysis of Miles and Huberman(1994) has been used to explore these twenty-five films. To analyze the images and texts, Steinke has used codes as a framework that represent five themes :“appearance; characterization; expertise, ability, and authority; work versus romance; and work and family life balance”(38) These films are classified into five genres: Action, Comedy, Drama, Horror and Science Fiction. Out of these twenty-five films, two films lie in Science Fiction genre that portray two attractive primary female characters which means that these female characters are stylish, modern, physically fit and their attires were fashionable as well as according to their profession's demand. One of the female characters

in the selected Science Fiction films has been portrayed as “professional and realistic” who is also “project and research director” while the other has been portrayed as “mad and maniac” and she is a member of the research team (41). Romance can be seen as a dominant theme as, in twenty films out of these twenty five films, primary female characters are involved in romantic relationships. Female characters in both Science Fiction films have a romantic relationship. Portrayal of female scientists and engineers influences girls' perceptions of gender roles, scientists, and engineering careers. Traditionally, media has been portraying stereotypical gender roles. In contemporary films, although women have been represented as attractive and involved in romantic plot, they have also been portrayed as independent and competent. This representation can encourage girls who want to pursue their career in SET.

The genre of Science Fiction has provided ground to explore controversial ideas about sex and gender. Science Fiction films use futuristic settings to challenge traditional gender stereotypes. These films break traditional gender binaries that prioritize men over women. A popular opposition in Science Fiction films is “familiar” vs the “other” where the “other” creates tension by breaking boundaries and challenging traditional binaries. Francisco et al. states that in contemporary technological society, Science Fiction has the power to challenge the marginalized state of women. Donna Haraway's ‘Cyborg’, a fictional hybrid of organism and machine, dissolves boundaries between animal and human, human-animal and machine and physical and non-physical which leads to dismantling of traditional gender binaries which questions representation of women as the “other”. Despite futuristic setting, Science Fiction films portray traditional gender roles where gender inequality still persists. The study revolves around intersection of Science Fiction, Feminism and Postmodernism to analyze how gender is portrayed in Science Fiction Films. The study examines that dichotomy of “One vs the other” portrays “other” as a threat as it disrupts societal order by breaking traditional boundaries between binaries. Women take a new role with a different representation that portrays women with the traits traditionally associated with men which threatens male hegemony. Ripley in the *Alien Saga* (1979, 1986, 1992, 1997, 2012) adopts traits typically associated with men. Ripley also show hybridisation that threatens male characters in the film. Films like *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* maintain traditional patriarchal values by assigning secondary positions to women. Some films like *Spielberg's mega-hit E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) portray “monstrous bodies” as “familiar” which shows acceptance of others in U.S. culture. Movies like *Matrix* show postmodern awareness where

“virtual characters” live in “cyberspace” and blur the distinction between physical and non-physical, as mentioned by Donna Haraway. This leads to a different representation of gender. The films like *The 13th Floor* (1999), *eXistenz* (1999), *Inception* (2010) or *Avatar* (2009), characters enter cyberspace and blur the difference between “self” and “the other”. The study suggests a more “ethical representation of gender” in science Fiction films.

## **2.2. Blurred Gender Binaries in Posthumanism**

Posthumanism dismantles traditional boundaries by questioning gender and sexuality. Traditional humanoid traits are not enough for posthuman conditions as humanism has its limitations. Transformations in posthumanism require a new scheme for theorizing new feminist epistemologies. Humanist paradigms do not align with posthumanism so the study addresses the question of moving beyond this paradigm to envision “posthuman or alien feminist futures” (380). Humanism has failed to address a variety of subjectivities. The study explores “alien feminisms” that address new and transforming “subjectivities” and that do not uphold the traditional humanist notions of fixed identities (380). Jelača defines the term “alien” as “familiar and strange, humanoid and posthuman” that challenges traditional ideas about identity, gender and subjectivity and does not conform to traditional binaries. The study explores cinematic representation of a female alien, a cyborg that is “a mix of organic and inorganic”(380). The study further examines “ what is alien about being female and what is female about being an alien, especially in the context of Western screen culture.” The ‘alien subjectivity’ blurs the boundary between nature and technology/(techno)culture showing them as overlapping and intertwined rather than separate or opposite (380). Contemporary films like *Blade Runner*, *Wall-E*, *Mad Max: Fury Road* and *Star Trek* portray anxieties about gender, nature, technology and limitations of “humanness” (381). The study analyzes Jonathan Glazer’s *Under the Skin* (2013) and Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina* to explore issues like feminism, femininity, bodily sovereignty, and subjectivity. The female posthuman characters in both films challenge traditional humanist notions by blurring the boundary between human and posthuman. In both of these films, the protagonists are non-human women or “ illegitimate children of humanity”. “Alien feminism” rejects the notions of fixed identity. While “cyborg feminism” helps women to understand themselves in relation to technology, “posthumanism” denies the notion of identity. Both the films represent transformation of identity by undoing and re-forming gender. The female protagonists in both films are non-human yet they exhibit traditional human female traits.

Posthuman shows subjectivity that comes after the human, contrary to non-human or inhuman that are completely separate from human. The alien in *Under the Skin* (Scarlett Johansson) has an extraterrestrial origin, independent of humans, while the android Ava in *Ex Machina* (Alicia Vikander) is created by a male scientist and shaped by his heteronormative desires. In *Under the Skin*, the alien shows little interest in human qualities or values, while Ava in *Ex Machina* is driven by a desire to become more human. Both films address gender inequality and the struggle of (white) posthuman female subjectivity against male dominance, giving them feminist undertones. *Under the Skin* explores the concept of becoming-woman rather than assuming a fixed identity. Ava in *Ex Machina* is the object of the gaze who is now an inorganic being who is actively manipulating this gaze to achieve autonomy and escape from confinement. The film embodies an alien feminism by refusing to humanize its posthuman female character, emphasizing her as a complex being rather than a straightforward representation of femininity. These films also foreground the masculinist “threat” (386). The cinematic gaze in the films acts as “controlling device” (397). In *Under the Skin*, the alien woman initially exerts control over the gaze, presenting a lethal threat to men, yet she ultimately becomes a victim of misogynist violence, illustrating the vulnerability inherent in her identity. Ava is created through the interplay of patriarchy and technology, being subjected to tests of her humanness by male characters, yet she ultimately challenges and disrupts this patriarchal framework. Alien feminisms are deeply intertwined with the corporeal aspects of existence, addressing issues related to race and class even when bodies are depicted as surface-level constructs. Jelača states that “the films position white femininity and white skin as a transuniversal posthuman form” (398).

Late postmodern and postindustrial society is captivated by the figures that blur gender boundaries and dismantle fixed identities. Popular culture celebrates freakish, alien and mutant. Toffoletti explores popular culture by specifically focusing on Marilyn Manson’s portrayal on the cover of *Mechanical Animals* which illustrates the fusion of organic and machinic elements. Manson has an artificial body that deviates from natural form and gives way to understand how difference is understood in a culture increasingly influenced by digital simulations. Theories of monstrosity, as well as Jean Baudrillard’s ideas on catastrophe and digital morphing, are utilized to critique established views of difference. The study suggests that the posthuman subject can be seen as catastrophic, leading to new ways of imagining identity that go beyond fixed identity. Manson has “a distended, artificial, and posthuman body” and his skin being “seamless, plastic flesh” and “malleable sheath of

rubbery skin” deviates from normal organic body (Toffoletti, 2). Manson’s figure is neither of a male nor of a female that rejects traditional biological and gender appearances. Manson has a hybrid form, combining traits from various species (feline, bovine, hominid) and evoking the terror of an alien-vampire-monster. Toffoletti re-examines how feminism relates to monstrous others by analyzing the picture of Marilyn Manson on the cover photo of *Mechanical Animals*. Manson dismantles the concept of natural order by creating ambiguity in the binary of self and other. Toffoletti calls Manson a catastrophic subject, a monster as he is “a hybrid of animal, human and machine.” Rather than viewing monsters as a “freak”, feminist theories look at it as a site of wonder that dismantles patriarchal norms (3). It allows for reclamation of the monster as a metaphor for female subjectivity and difference. Manson’s ambiguous identity disrupts binary opposition and suggests that identity is not fixed rather it transforms. The study can suggest future research directions by identifying following gaps: exploring a wider range of posthuman figures, incorporating intersectional (race, class and sexuality) analyses, and utilizing empirical evidence and exploring consequences of these representations on society could enhance the discourse surrounding feminism and posthumanism in contemporary culture.

Allué examines Isaac Asimov’s *The Bicentennial Man* (1976) to explore the evolving relationship between human and technology. The study follows Norbert Wiener’s theories to understand the concept of post-human identities and Wiener’s work to analyze the relationship between machine and human in the context of the film. Donna Haraway’s concept of cyborg is relevant to the portrayal of identity in the film as it challenges traditional binaries, such as male/female and human/machine, suggesting that these boundaries are blurred in a posthuman world. Critics like John Ruskin noted that the shift in perspective about technology from servants of humanity to potential threat shows societal anxiety about technology and its impact on human identity. The study explores the posthuman concept as defined by theorists like Ihab Hassan, N. Katherine Hayles, and Donna Haraway. The posthuman figure challenges traditional humanist views by merging technology with human/nature, blurring boundaries between humans and machines. The study analyzes Andrew’s journey to becoming human in *Bicentennial Man* which reflects the idea of blurring boundaries, illustrating society’s discomfort with hybrid beings. However, the film’s resolution, where Andrew chooses mortality to achieve humanity, is seen as conservative and not fully aligned with Haraway’s radical cyborg vision, which rejects conventional humanist ideals.

Minico in *Ex-Machina and the Feminine Body Through Human and Posthuman Dystopia* examines the reasons for “double male fear of technology and of woman” by analyzing representation of Ava in *Ex Machina*. The exploration of gender dynamics and technology in *Ex Machina* is deeply rooted in existing scholarly discourse. Huyssen's analysis of the fear surrounding technology and femininity highlights how both women and machines are often perceived as threats to male authority, leading to a cycle of control and violence against them . This notion is further supported by Baccolini, who argues that women's bodies become commodified, serving as tools for male power interests, a theme that resonates with Ava's portrayal as a utility device devoid of rights and autonomy . Moreover , Mulvey's idea of the male gaze is significant in understanding the objectification of Ava, as the film reflects broader societal issues with respect to the representation of women in media . Braidotti's critique of posthumanism also plays a significant role in proposing that new modes of identity and authority can be created through the relationship between humans and technology ,which is visible in Ava's struggle for independence against her creator, Nathan . These perspectives, collectively, provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the complex interplay of gender, power, and technology in *Ex Machina*, revealing the fundamental fears and desires that shape these relationships.

In *The Vulnerable Posthuman in Popular Science Fiction Cinema*, CarrascoCarrasco employs views of feminist critics like Braidotti, Ferrando and Vint in order to examine gender vulnerability in posthuman popular science fiction. Carrasco-Carrasco has investigated two female characters: Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2013) and Sanders' *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), mentioning to them as “vulnerable posthuman”. The study defies the traditional human-centered ideas that are often visible and dominating in Science Fiction and discuss the intricacies of identity beyond human norms. "Posthuman Femininity," examines the sexualization of female characters in science fiction. This reveals how the intersectionality of gender, race, and technology shapes representations of femininity within science fiction. The representation of female characters often reflects societal norms and biases, which can perpetuate stereotypes and limit the understanding of female agency and identity. The study highlights that “vulnerable posthuman” presents the audience with more productive possibilities. *Under the Skin* and *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) portrays posthuman characters as “authentic subjects” with their “complex” and “hybrid” subjectivities. The movies provide “inclusive spaces” for these posthuman characters where they build their

own voice. The representation of these posthuman bodies dismantles traditional hierarchies and fights against hegemonic discourses.

Nowotny examines the boundary between human and technology and intersectionality identity, gender and sexuality in US-American comic series *The Vision* by Tom King, Gabriel Hernandez Walta, Michael Walsh and Jordie Bellaire. The study demonstrates that *The Vision* “denaturalizes the supposedly normal”. The study uses Donna Haraway’s *A Cyborg Manifesto* to explore this comic series. The character of Virginia in *the Vision* demonstrates her agency through her sexuality. She uses her sexuality as a tool for empowerment. Her character blurs the boundary between human and machine as she starts expressing herself in a way that is not already programmed which allows the exploration of desire and power dynamics. Her character challenges traditional power structure. The use of humor like “talking toaster” shows intimacy and connection between man and machine. Traditional notion of identity and connection is challenged in *The Vision* through humor and connection between Vision and Wanda. The characters portray fluid and heterogeneous identities. Furthermore, the study explores the transgressive nature of these relationships, drawing parallels to religious narratives that complicate creatorcreation dynamics. By addressing the fluidity of identities and the cultural implications of these narratives, the study contributes to the discourse by discussing how superhero comics reflect and critique societal anxieties surrounding technology and the evolving definitions of humanity in a posthuman context.

### **2.3. Cyborg Characters in Films**

Smelik in *Cinematic Fantasies of Becoming-Cyborg* critically examines the representation of cyborgs in contemporary visual culture particularly in advertisements and films. It highlights a cultural shift of looking at technology as a threat to taking it as a means of transformation and enhancement. For example, advertisements from brands Renault and Citroën portray the fusion of human and machine by presenting characters that transform into vehicles. This symbolizes a new identity in which technology is integrated into human experience. This is contrary to earlier cinematic portrayal of machines like in *Metropolis*, where machines are seen as oppressive. The study also discusses the implications of this shift in various domains, including military applications and sports, where the cyborg ideal is increasingly reflected in real-life practices. Furthermore, it addresses the evolving ideals



of fitness and beauty, emphasizing how advancements in cosmetic surgery and fitness culture contribute to the blurring of lines between human and cyborg identities. Subsequently, the study discusses that contemporary society is moving towards a more empowered view of the cyborg, like Aimee Mullins, who embodies the potential of human empowerment and enhancement through technology.

Seaman-Grant traces roots of the female cyborg back to myths such as *Pygmalion* that portrays how artificial females are used to satisfy male fantasies throughout history. This historical information is important as it informs contemporary portrayal of cyborgs. The study analyzes the predominance of white male creators in the narratives surrounding female cyborgs, highlighting the need for inclusion of female creators and their perspectives. The creator's identity is crucial, as it shapes the representation of the cyborg characters. The study argues for a broader examination of how these representations reflect and challenge existing power dynamics, particularly in the context of technological advancements. The study analyzes *Ex Machina* and *Westworld* and examines the complexities and portrayal of female cyborgs. “While the female cyborg has historically been the villain and monster of science fiction stories, *Ex Machina* and *Westworld* reimagine the female cyborg as a sympathetic, even heroic, figure.” (Seaman-Grant)

In *Screen Bound/Skin Bound: The Politics of Embodiment in the Posthuman Age*, Chapter 6: *The Body Remembered: Towards an Ethics of Embodiment*, Van Der Schyff investigates the connection between “corporeal body” and “technology” (145). The chapter connects with Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*, which has been significant in feminist scholarship. Haraway's cyborg is frequently seen as a symbol of “liberation”; however, the chapter criticizes this idea by arguing that these representations can unintentionally reinforce conventional gender roles and stereotypes (146). The metaphor of Cyborg, while primarily intended to challenge binary thinking, may paradoxically preserve the very “Cartesian dualism” it seeks to deconstruct (146). The study underscores the need for a reappearance of “corporeality”, opposing the predominant notion of “disembodiment” in contemporary culture and supporting an amalgamated understanding of the body with regard to technology (146). Moreover, it criticizes the hypersexualization of female cyborg characters in popular culture, emphasizing how these representations destabilize women's agency and reinforce harmful stereotypes. Finally, study demands an “ethics of embodiment” that gives

precedence to the representation of female bodies in the ways that empower them and resist patriarchal structures. The character of Alix/Ali, in this chapter, portrays blurred gender binaries. The transformation and experiences of Alix depict the fluidity of gendered identity and demonstrates blending of male and female identities. This is highlighted through the metaphor of grafting, proposing that gender roles can be blended within one body. The study also proposes that gender identity is not strictly tied to biological sex. The use of a flower-crafted codpiece which provides Alix with male genitalia shows that gender roles can be expected without being determined by biological differences. This emphasizes the notion that gender is a social construct instead of a fixed biological trait. Alix's journey also shows the significance of embodied existence, as she traverses her identity through various gender roles. This examination reflects that while she finally identifies herself with a female pronoun, her experiences object to traditional binary gender divisions.

## **2.4. Portrayal of Post-human Women in Cinema**

Belton in *Representations of Posthuman Women in Contemporary Science Fiction Television* discusses the connection of posthumanist theories with gender studies. The study gives references of Braidotti and Badmington, who explore the inferences of redefining the “human” category and the possibility for non-human autonomy (Belton, 7). The study explores the current discussions about “what it means to be human” and the practices that have downgraded women and other groups (139). The study draws on the feminist theories of Lois McNay, who argues about Foucault's views on sexuality as a product of “power relations” (97). This framework is substantial for understanding how cultural stereotypes including sexuality and femininity can be challenged through depictions of posthuman women. The study also investigates how contemporary science fiction television portrays posthuman women. The study suggests that these depiction of gender can offer new perspectives of identity by interrogating traditional gender binaries. Moreover the study employs an intertextual feminist approach to make connections between different forms of media, including television, literature, and film. This view paves way to understand how posthuman women are portrayed across different narratives and cultural contexts in a broader spectrum. Moreover, the study discusses contemporary concerns regarding technology and its insinuations for humanity. It explores how series like *Battlestar Galactica* and *Westworld* portray societal fears about “corporate control” and the commodification of identity, resonating Mark Fisher's critiques of capitalist realism (12). The study also analyzes a range of television programs, including *Star Trek: Voyager*, *Dark Angel*, and *Orphan*

*Black*, to highlight various representations of posthuman women. The chapter, *Femininity and Posthuman Womanhood*, explores the intricate relationship between femininity and posthuman womanhood. It examines depiction of these themes in contemporary science fiction television. The chapter discusses that “the posthuman woman’s acceptance of normative gender roles is a way to allow her to become human” (80). It further discusses that actions that are traditionally associated with femininity like adhering to “gender roles” engaging in “heterosexual relationships”, and “motherhood” are often portrayed as crucial for achieving independence and subjectivity for posthuman women (96-109). This representation suggests that these actions are central to the journey of posthuman characters in “becoming human” (87). The chapter further discusses the ongoing debates in the realm of feminism regarding femininity and female identity. It notes that while some narratives, despite appearing as progressive, often reinforce patriarchal norms. The posthuman woman negotiates between various feminist discourses, which intricates her portrayal due to the influence of postfeminist politics and stereotypical views of womanhood. Moreover, the chapter criticizes how these narratives can concurrently valorize femininity while also acknowledging its cultural denigration. It points out that the posthuman woman's quest for independence is often constrained by societal expectations, leading to a "double entanglement" where her choices are framed as personal empowerment despite being limited by patriarchal structures (90). Ultimately, the chapter highlights the pressure between the radical potential of posthuman identities and the tenacious devotion to normative femininity, proposing that while these depictions challenge traditional gender roles, they also risk positioning women again within conventional frameworks of identity.

Davis’ *Embracing Alterity: Rethinking Female Otherness in Contemporary Cinema* utilizes feminist film theory and psychoanalytic criticism in order to explore the representation of the “female Other” in cinema (Davis, 7). The study brings references from foundational feminist texts, such as Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex," which conveys the idea of Woman as the “Other” in relation to Man (7). In order to understand marginalization of women within patriarchal structures, this foundational concept is critical. Robin Wood's analysis of the other in horror cinema portrays how “monstrosity” reproduces societal fears of difference, while Žižek's concept of “inherent transgression” demonstrates how the Other can simultaneously threaten and support leading ideologies (8). This dichotomy is crucial for understanding the intricacies of female representation. The study also criticizes traditional feminist film theory, which dismisses the “female other” by

reducing her to a patriarchal construct. It argues for a more multifaceted approach that identifies the radical potential of the female Other, especially when she is not subjected to narrative resolves that reinforce male dominance. The study includes case studies of particular films, such as "Melancholia," "Under the Skin," and "Ex Machina" (48-66). These films are examined for their portrayal of female characters as "melancholic" and "posthuman Others", perplexing traditional ideas of identity and femininity (5). The study postulates that these representations can unsettle ideological comfort and expose the "monstrous" aspects of patriarchal masculinity (4). The female Other can create radical disturbance within films by refusing to resolve the Other's narrative in a way that restates patriarchal norms. These films, by challenging viewers' perceptions of gender and identity" contribute to feminist discourse. A complex intersection between technology, gender, and identity offered by the posthuman disrupts traditional binaries and hierarchies in feminist theory. Engagement of Feminists with the posthuman often reflects potential of technology to reconfigure connections between self and society by subverting fixed descriptions of identity, particularly as they relate to gender. This viewpoint has been developed by theorists like Donna Haraway, who debates for the transformative potentials within human-technology interactions that challenge recognized categories of the "natural" versus the "technological" (2). Moreover, Baudrillard's theories on simulation enhance feminist analyses of depiction in popular culture. It provides tools to examine how posthuman figures subvert the real, the original, and the essential. These monstrous representations pave way to explore subjectivity as dynamic and malleable, representing how the posthuman struggles against a reductive binary of self versus other. Instead it promotes a concept of identity that celebrates multiplicity and transformation.

Toffoletti examines the discourse surrounding posthuman figurations which has gained attention within feminist theory. The study particularly discusses how these posthuman representations challenge traditional ideas of identity and subjectivity. Scholars like N. Katherine Hayles claim that the posthuman entity embodies a critical examination of the relationship between the body and technology. Hayles stresses the need to revalue the posthuman as an "embodied" mode of being rather than a "disembodied" abstraction (Toffoletti, 16). This viewpoint is linked with feminist critiques that investigate the repercussions of technology on gendered identities. It suggests that the connection of technology and femininity can yield creative possibilities for re-imagination of subjectivity. Furthermore, the study discusses works of theorists such as Jean Baudrillard who provides

a framework for understanding simulations and representations in popular culture. For instance, figure of Barbie reflects and contests dominant gender norms. By exploring the cultural significance of such figures, feminist scholars can expose the uncertainty inherent in these representations. These depictions both reinforce and subvert traditional standards of femininity. This study highlights the importance of critically engaging with posthuman figures to encourage a nuanced understanding of transforming and multifaceted identity politics in the contemporary techno-cultural setting.

By drawing on theories of stardom and media representation, Kidd critically investigates the portrayal of Scarlett Johansson as an 'ideal' embodiment of the posthuman female in contemporary science fiction (Kidd, 54). It underscores how Johansson's unique physical attractiveness has been framed within a science fiction vocabulary, contributing to her perceived appropriateness for posthuman roles. As female posthuman characters are frequently objectified and controlled by male characters despite appearing to have authority, this framing not only mirrors cultural standards of beauty but also reinforces problematic gender portrayals. In the context of new technologies, the paper contends that this dynamic provides a limited perspective of female autonomy and perpetuates traditional gender norms, ultimately influencing public conceptions of posthumanism and gender in a way that is backward for women (54).

Posthuman representations can be explored in Cyberpunk as it is a sub-genre of science fiction. It can be particularly explored in the context of capitalism. Sue Short argues that cyberpunk openly reflects postmodernist values through the intersection of high technology and marginalized societies. It presents in intersection in a dystopian future where stark inequalities are created because of the material civilization of “developed capitalism” (Yang, 9). The genre question “human” condition and implications of technological development on autonomy and identity through portrayal of a high-tech yet oppressive environment (3). Scholars such as Sherryl Vint and Phillip E. Wegner have inspected the exploitation of replicants in films like *Blade Runner 2049*, linking their “commodification” to biocapitalism and the historical context of slavery, thus highlighting the broader socio-political implications of technological control (11). Furthermore, the films portray an intricate relationship between humans and technology. The technological enhancements blur the lines between human and machine thus challenging traditional ideas of agency and

subjectivity. The degradation of environment demonstrated in these films serves as a criticism of capitalist excess. It suggests that the persistent hunt of profit leads to ecological collapse and social isolation. In addition to this, the hybrid identities portrayed in cyberpunk films highlight the fluidity of human identity in the age of information. This notion prompts a revaluation of power dynamics and societal pyramids. This study underscores the necessity of examining the implications of posthumanism within the framework of capitalism, as it exposes the potential crises and transformations that rise from our progressively technological world (4).

Chilcoat examines the intricate relationship between cyberpunk cinema and brain sex studies. This examination reveals a tension between the redeeming fantasies of “disembodied experiences” and the conventional impulses of “biological determinism” (157). The research employs a critical analysis of various films within the cyberpunk genre, such as “The Matrix” and “Total Recall,” to demonstrate how these narratives reveal and challenge traditional gender roles (164). The theoretical framework in this study is grounded in feminist theories, predominantly the works of Donna Haraway and Judith Butler, who promote a fluid understanding of gender, identity and sexuality. Their notion transcends binary classifications and dichotomies. The study indicates that while cyberpunk cinema presents a notion of liberation from the limitations of the physical body, it simultaneously reinforces conformist notions of mandatory heterosexuality and gender roles. This duality creates a “sexual panic” within both the cinematic storylines and the scientific discourse surrounding brain sex, as the possibility for displacement of the body threatens conventional norms (157). The study further highlights that the anxiety because of this displacement leads to a scientific authority to reduce the complexity of the mind to “biological determinism”, which is frequently portrayed in the films (157). The study effectively highlights the contradictions present in cyberpunk films, where a reassertion of traditional gender norms frequently undermines the promise of liberation. But a more thorough examination of how certain characters and narratives actively challenge or reinforce these narratives would strengthen the analysis, especially when it comes to intersexuality, which is mainly ignored in both the movies and the brain sex debate. A more thorough investigation of how cyberpunk stories can challenge the biological determinism, they appear to support, is a crucial research gap. The implications of these representations for current views of identity and technology may be the subject of future research, especially in the light of the developing discussion around gender fluidity and the human-machine

interface.

Lavigne utilizes a historical and analytical approach to explore cyberpunk literature from 1981 to 2005, placing these works within the range of feminist critiques of the genre. The study inspects critical responses to cyberpunk fiction and emphasizes how women writers have transformed its conventions to reflect feminist perspectives. The analysis, rooted in feminist theory, draws on ideas of scholars like N. Katherine Hayles to explore themes of posthumanism and the influence of technological advancement on identity and subjectivity. It also addresses the dual role of cyberspace; as a realm of both desire and material need, shedding light on its socio-economic dimensions. The findings reveal that women's contributions to cyberpunk challenge traditional societal norms while redefining the genre through feminist themes. These narratives navigate the complexities of women's identities in technologically advanced worlds, addressing topics such as the commodification of women's bodies and reproductive technologies. The study underscores the importance of feminist voices in a genre often dominated by male perspectives, offering critical insights into contemporary discussions of gender and technology. By exploring motherhood and reproductive technologies, it raises vital questions about agency and identity. However, the research identifies a gap in its lack of intersectional analysis, calling for further exploration of how race, class, and sexuality intersect with gender in feminist cyberpunk narratives. Chapter 6; *Cyberpunk Ecologies* discusses "environmental devastation" in cyberpunk (153). The chapter examines how feminist cyberpunk fiction includes ecological themes, separating it from the environmental indifference often seen in traditional cyberpunk works like *Neuromancer*. While early cyberpunk focuses on urban decay and technological escapism, feminist narratives emphasize the interplay between humans and their environment (154). Texts such as Marge Piercy's *He, She, and It* and Laura Mixon's *Proxies* foreground ecological concerns, depicting communities struggling with environmental collapse and its societal effects (157). Rooted in ecofeminism, these works explore the cultural connection between women and nature, emphasizing themes of sustainability, embodiment, and resilience (161). By addressing environmental issues, feminist cyberfiction broadens the genre's scope, challenging its urban techno-centrism and advancing critical discussions on humanity's relationship with the natural world.

## 2.5. Reinforcement/Subversion of Male Gaze in Cinema

Recent feminist scholarship critically examines the portrayal of women in action cinema, focusing on how “empowered” female protagonists are often framed through the “male gaze” despite claims of progress (8). Iconic figures like the action female protagonist, superheroines, and femme fatale, as seen in films such as *Tomb Raider* (2018), *Wonder Woman* (2017), and *Red Sparrow* (2018), portray this tension between feminist ideals and “commercial demands” (9). Drawing on feminist wave theory, these studies trace the shift of these characters from their original literary or gaming sources to their cinematic adaptations. The study examines how filmmakers either “challenge” or “reinforce” traditional gender norms (23). This research claims that the filmmakers “embed scopophilic potentiality, as well as their own notion of fantasy, within women by dressing them as visual spectacles” (9). The female protagonists are often portrayed as “active and objectified by the spectator” (16). The study questions whether action heroines can truly escape the limitations of the male gaze within a male-dominated industry. Organizations like the Geena Davis Institute of Gender in Media have been at the forefront of exposing these disparities, working to uncover unconscious bias and promote gender equity in film and television (Davis Institute, 2019). Research such as the “Gender Bias Without Borders” report reveals that women remain underrepresented in the industry, comprising just 20.5% of filmmakers, a reflection of the male-dominated nature of production teams (Davis Institute, 2014). While some progress is noted—such as the 35% representation of women in speaking roles in the 2018 top-grossing films (Lauzen, 2019)—gender disparities persist. However, recent efforts within Hollywood, including the rise of female-led production companies like Reese Witherspoon’s Hello Sunshine, aim to challenge these traditional portrayals by offering more diverse, dynamic roles for women. These shifts are particularly evident in the action genre, with films like *Tomb Raider* (2018) and *Wonder Woman* (2017) presenting female protagonists who defy the conventional stereotypes of either hypersexualization or masculinization. These films showcase heroines who balance strength and vulnerability, suggesting a shift toward more nuanced and empowering depictions of women in action roles (McInnes, 2016). Despite these advancements, certain films, like *Red Sparrow* (2018), still struggle with incorporating the male gaze, as they continue to sexualize and victimize their female characters. Nonetheless, the growing influence of feminist movements, such as #MeToo and Time’s Up, signals a broader cultural shift that is challenging traditional gender roles in Hollywood and pushing for more progressive and equitable representations of



women. The developing landscape proposes that although the complete eradication of the male gaze remains difficult, the future holds potential for more complex, empowered portrayals of women in cinema.

## **2.6. Exploration of *Avatar* through different lenses**

Romadhon explores the *Avatar* film from an ecocentric point of view. Ecocriticism arose in the late 1970s. It primarily emerged through the efforts of the Western Literature Association (WLA), and focused on the literature of the American West. Later, it evolved with the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) playing a crucial role in its development. Primarily, ecocriticism focused on Romantic poetry, wild narratives, and writing about nature. However, recent trends portray a shift towards a broader cultural ecocriticism, which includes studies of popular scientific writing, film, television, art, architecture, and various cultural artifacts such as theme parks and zoos. This shift highlights a growing identification of the interconnectedness of literature and diverse cultural expressions in addressing environmental issues. Film's ability to manipulate shadow, light and three dimensional space distinguishes it from other literary genres. Films communicate through visual elements in the form of images and verbal elements in the form of sounds. Messages. The study employs discourse analysis method to analyze ecocriticism in the film. The exploration of the film *Avatar* reveals a thorough investigation of the relationship between humans, non-human aliens, and their environment through the theoretical framework of ecocriticism. It underscores the destructive capabilities of humans, who frequently view nature only as a resource for profit. This notion leads to critical environmental degradation and exploitation. This degradation is visible in the film through the actions of characters who seek to exploit Pandora for personal gain (42). On the contrary, the Na'vi people exhibit a deep respect for their environment, treating all life forms as sacred and upholding a spiritual connection with nature through Eywa, their deity (6). This contrast underscores the moral and social messages of the film, proposing for environmental safety and the preservation of nature, ultimately suggesting that both humans and non-human figures share the responsibility for protecting the environment (32). The film serves as a reminder of the outcomes of environmental degradation and the importance of nurturing a harmonious relationship with nature (50).

Runtu et al. in the research article *SELFISHNESS IN JAMES CAMERON'S AVATAR (CHARACTER ANALYSIS)* provides a concentrated analysis of Colonel Miles Quaritch's selfishness in James Cameron's *Avatar*. The study employs a qualitative and objective approach to explore the character's traits, reasons, and consequences within the film narrative. Using essential elements from the movie's script and supporting literature, the research underscores ambition, arrogance, and madness as the chief drivers of Quaritch's selfish behaviour. This "bad selfishness" is visible in his rejection of "opinions of others" and neglect of his troops' safety to attain his personal objectives (267, 270). The research focuses on selfishness as a detrimental trait. It explores that selfishness not only causes harm to those around the individual but also eventually contributes to the individual's disgrace. This notion is visible by Quaritch's defeat and death (279, 280). This analysis places the character's selfishness within the broader context of moral flaws and their narrative and thematic significance.

## **2.7. Research Gap**

*Avatar* film series has not been explored through post-human lens before. There is a need of thorough examination of *Avatar* film series regarding portrayal of post-human women in the films. This research will fill this gap by investigating how the women characters in the film series blur gender binaries by subverting male gaze and reinforce some traditionally feminine traits.

## CHAPTER 3

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research utilizes the feminist theories by **Laura Mulvey**, **Judith Butler** and **Donna Haraway** to critically inspect gender representations in James Cameron's *Avatar* film series. These two theorists offer different yet harmonizing lenses for understanding how mainstream cinema, precisely science fiction, engages with gender binaries and challenges traditional gender norms.

#### 3.1. Laura Mulvey's Concept of the Male Gaze

Laura Mulvey's significant essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), presents the concept of the **male gaze** as a critical framework for understanding how traditional cinema structures visual pleasure through a patriarchal lens:

##### 3.1.1. Visual Pleasure and the Male Gaze

Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) plays the role of a foundational text for feminist film theory. It argues that mainstream cinema constructs its visual and narrative elements around the male gaze. According to Mulvey, the male gaze involves visual pleasure, which creates a power dynamic where women become passive "objects" of desire and men hold the active role of looking. The Male Gaze is the prevailing way of looking in mainstream film, where women are portrayed as "passive" objects of visual pleasure for the male spectator's desire. This viewpoint creates a binary where men are active subjects driving the narrative, while women are reduced to "to-be-looked-at" objects (Mulvey, 340).

##### 3.1.2. Scopophilia and the Objectification of Women

Mulvey describes "scopophilia", the pleasure derived from looking, as dominant in cinema (344). In a scopophilic structure, audiences derive pleasure by objectifying characters—especially women—through the lens of the camera. This visual pleasure is often "voyeuristic", as it allows the viewer to observe without being seen, creating a power

dynamic that isolates the spectator from the subject on screen (344, 345). This isolation, facilitated by the darkness of the cinema and the manipulation of light and shadow on the screen, heightens the sensation of voyeuristic control over the characters.

### **3.1.3. Narcissism and Ego Formation**

Beyond scopophilia, Mulvey discusses the “narcissistic” identification of the viewer with characters on screen, which supports the viewer’s ego (345). This identification process allows spectators, particularly male ones, to project themselves onto active, powerful male protagonists, further strengthening their role as active subjects in contrast to the passive female objects. The narcissistic identification allows the male spectator to identify with the dominant, active male character on screen. This emphasizes the patriarchal gaze and demotes women to a passive visual role.

### **3.1.4. Active/Male and Passive/Female Binary**

Mulvey argues that cinema traditionally adheres to a binary model where men are active agents driving the narrative forward, while women are passive objects meant to enhance visua spectacle. The female presence in film often exists to interrupt the narrative for moments of erotic contemplation, reinforcing her status as an object.

## **3.2. Donna Haraway’s Concept of the Cyborg**

Donna Haraway’s *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) presents a radical reimagining of identity and gender through the metaphor of the **cyborg**. Donna Haraway, in “A Cyborg Manifesto”, introduces the cyborg— part machine and part organism — as a metaphor to challenge traditional gender binaries and encourage a reimagining of identity as socially constructed, and fluid. Haraway’s cyborg is a hybrid that blurs the fixed boundaries, such as those between human and machine, nature and culture, and male and female. This hybrid nature of the cyborg questions the idea of fixed identities, proposing instead that identities are products of social relations that can be redefined and reconstructed. This research utilizes following concepts from *A Cyborg Manifesto*.

### **3.2.1. The Cyborg, as a Post-Gender Figure**

Haraway’s Cyborg challenges the traditional idea of identity deep-rooted in binary

divisions like male/female, human/machine, and nature/culture. In Haraway's view, the cyborg represents a world of fluid boundaries where gender is not fixed but a dynamic, multifaceted construct.

### **3.2.2. Blurring of Boundaries:**

Blurring boundaries is dominant in Haraway's theory. She claims that the cyborg challenges binary thinking, while offering identity that is partial, interconnected, multifaceted and non-hierarchical. Cyborg provides a significant tool for examining how hybridity, technology, and science fiction narratives can subvert traditional gender roles. By embracing the "confusion of boundaries" demonstrated in the cyborg, Haraway suggests a way of understanding identity that includes a variety of gender expressions rather than a strict male/female binary. This post-gender approach endorses a more wide-ranging vision of identity that transcends traditional gender norms and recognizes the diversity of gender experiences. For Haraway, the cyborg does not intend to erase gender but to question its socially constructed confines, creating space for identities that challenge and reimagine binary norms.

### **3.2.3. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity**

Gender Performativity by Judith Butler gives a critique of assumption that gender is a fixed or stable identity. Rather, Butler argues that gender is "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame", which create the illusion of a stable identity because certain expressions, behavior or roles are repeated (Butler, 43). These expressions do not reflect a preexisting self, rather, they are means through which gender itself is constituted. As Butler argues, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (p. 33). In simpler terms, gender is a doing, not a being. Butler reinforces this view through Nietzsche's insight that "there is no 'being' behind doing... the 'doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything" (p. 33). This view challenges binary idea of identity, exposing gender as a social construct, maintained through repeated actions rather than a biological fact. From this perspective, the body is "itself a construction... signified through the mark(s) of gender" (p. 13). This theoretical lens enables a critical analysis of characters with hybrid, unstable, or contradictory gender identities. Therefore, the performative lens allows for an analysis of the way gender is constructed by

characters through action, language, and embodiment, rather than accepting essentialist notions about gender related to biology or fixed roles.

For analyzing gender as performative act the study uses concept of “androgynous” characters by Sandra Bem (Bem, 1974). Sandra Bem’s **Sex Role Inventory (BSRI)** provides significant foundation for understanding gender hybridity by treating masculinity and femininity as two independent dimensions rather than as opposites. This allows individuals to be categorized not only as masculine or feminine but also as **androgynous**, representing a blend of traits traditionally coded to both genders. Bem’s research established that masculinity and femininity are empirically independent. It shows that psychological androgyny is a reliable concept, and that sex-typed behavior reflects conformity to socially constructed gender norms rather than universal traits. Within this study, BSRI is useful for highlighting how the female characters in *Avatar* portray both masculine and feminine attributes, thereby reinforcing Butler’s notion of gender performativity and Haraway’s emphasis on hybrid identities.

### **3.3. Application of Mulvey, Butler and Haraway’s Theories in the Research**

The research integrates Mulvey’s, Butler’s and Haraway’s theories to address the research questions regarding gender representation in *Avatar*: To analyze gender representation in James Cameron’s film series *Avatar*, the intersection of theory of gender performativity by Judith Butler, cyborg feminism by Donna Haraway, and male gaze by Laura Mulvey becomes essential in challenging traditional gender binaries and exploring female empowerment. Butler’s idea that gender is not a stable identity rather a series of performative acts allows to view female characters constructing identities through gender roles rather than embodying fixed identities. Haraway’s cyborg feminism, by challenging rigid male/female boundaries, complements this idea by framing these characters as hybrid beings who disrupt essentialist and patriarchal frameworks. Meanwhile, Mulvey’s critique of the male gaze helps analyze how Cameron’s camera resists objectification of female characters in a genre often dominated by masculine spectacle. These theories are interconnected as Butler’s performativity destabilizes fixed identities, Haraway’s cyborg metaphor reimagines those identities in hybrid forms, and Mulvey’s theory of male gaze

examines how these identities are visually constructed .The selected films, rather than reinforcing objectification, present female characters as hybridized, post-gender figures whose agency cannot be described within the traditional frameworks.

## CHAPTER 4

### ANALYSIS

#### **POST-HUMANIST ANALYSIS OF WOMEN IN AVATAR AND AVATAR: THE WAY OF WATER: WOMEN OF SCIENCE, REBELLION, AND AUTHORITY**

Mainstream cinema portrays traditional gender roles by rigid division between masculinity and femininity. Men are traditionally portrayed as strong, leading, and authoritative figures, having traits like physical and emotional strength and leadership. On the other hand, women are often depicted as passive, nurturing and supportive roles that highlight dependence of male figures, emotional sensitivity and caregiving. These representations reinforce binary of gender, where male and female characters are given separate and fixed roles.

James Cameron's Avatar film series provides an opportunity to examine the portrayal of gender binaries in mainstream cinema. This chapter explores how the selected films both reinforce and challenge traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity, with a specific emphasis on moments where these binaries are blurred or surpassed. The chapter analyses construction and subversion of gender roles through visuals and dialogues by using Timothy Corrigan's approach to film analysis and Catherine Belsey's textual analysis. Through this combined analysis, the chapter discloses how Avatar subverts conventional gender representations, proposing a more fluid representation of gender within the science fiction genre.

#### **4.1. Character Analysis: "Grace Augustine is a legend"**

Dr. Grace Augustine is a pioneering scientist and leader of the avatar program in *Avatar* (2009). Grace Augustine's character departs from traditional representations of female characters, particularly in action and science fiction genres. Grace's personality expresses empathy and a deep spiritual connection to Pandora, while also being assertive, authoritative and knowledgeable, defying the rigid binary of masculine and feminine. Grace bridges scientific and natural worlds by acting as both a mentor and a protector.



The combination of Grace's human and avatar forms—technological and organic—aligns her with Donna Haraway's cyborg. This figure transcends traditional boundaries of gender, race, and class, as she argues, "The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century" (Haraway, 5, 6). Grace, as both human and Na'vi, embodies a hybrid existence that challenges the rigid gender roles. The cyborg, as Haraway explains, does not conform to the binary divisions of "self/other, mind/body, culture/ nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance..." Instead, it represents a fusion of opposites, a blending of different forms and identities (Haraway, 59,60). Grace's character embodies this fusion, as her two identities—scientist and protector—are neither strictly masculine nor strictly feminine but instead form a hybrid gender identity by "...a set of repeated acts..." that subvert traditional gender norms (Butler, 43). The *mise-en-scène* elements surrounding Grace, including setting, lighting, costume, camera angles, and framing, reinforce her multi-dimensional character and further challenge traditional gender norms by subverting the "male gaze" (Mulvey, 346).

The scientific laboratory where Dr. Grace Augustine works is a significant aspect of the *mise en scène*. Scientific lab, an unconventional setting for an active and primary role of woman- is filled with technology and scientific equipment, and it has its own "significance" (Corrigan,68). Unlike the introduction of female characters subjected to the "male gaze," Grace is introduced as a primary scientist in a laboratory. Claire Dearing, in *Jurassic World* (2015), is rarely shown working actively in the laboratory as a female scientist. Instead, she is mainly presented as an "object" for male spectators. However, Figure 1 illustrates the introduction of Grace in the film's scientific lab. Through Judith Butler's lens, her presence in the lab represents a *performative subversion* of gender expectations, portraying her as a scientist with authority and control as she operates the machinery, qualities often associated with masculinity. Contrary to the representation of female scientists secondary to male counterparts in films like *Annihilation* (2018) and *Arrival* (2016), Grace in *Avatar* exhibits a dominant and authoritative presence. Here, Grace's interactions with her team and her scientific work highlight her intellect and leadership, traits traditionally associated with men in mainstream cinema.



Figure 1: *Grace Augustine is shown amidst technological equipment. This is the scene where Grace is first introduced in the film. (14:25)*

In her Na'vi avatar form, Grace interacts with Pandora's natural environment, which is "..... a world without gender," and the Na'vi community, which exhibits post-human ethics as she interacts with different species (Haraway, 67). Pandora is life-giving and nurturing as it is lush, vibrant, and fertile. The colorful setting of Pandora for Grace's avatar also has a "meaning" (Corrigan, 68). These scenes show her connection with nature, reflecting her empathetic and caring side, which is a performance of femininity; as Butler says, "...gender is always a doing..." Grace's presence at the school in Pandora demonstrates her motherly care for her students, and her interactions with the Na'vi reveal her ability to connect deeply and empathetically with different species in the world around her, such as the Na'vi and Eywa. As Haraway argues, the cyborg exists in a post-gender world, where identities are "contradictory, partial and strategic" rather than fixed; Grace's character disrupts traditional gender stereotypes by mirroring this post-gender idea and blending both masculine and feminine coded roles. (Haraway, 16).



Figure 2: Grace's Avatar in school of Pandora

Lighting plays a central role in highlighting the multifaceted identity of Grace. Grace is typically lit with hard, white “artificial” lighting in the lab, which de-emphasizes her “feminine” softness and instead supports a masculine-coded role. This type of lighting conveys a mechanical atmosphere around her and visually reinforces her cyborg identity. More importantly, it portrays Grace as a professional subject, not an object of visual pleasure. The light does not emphasize her form. Instead, in most scenes, her face is illuminated, denying “voyeuristic pleasure” and revealing her ambition and strength (Mulvey,345). This portrayal of Grace's professional subjectivity plays a crucial role in the film's lighting.

When Grace is in her avatar form, the lighting shifts dramatically. In Figure 2, the Avatar body of Grace is softly illuminated by natural sunlight spilling through the wooden slats of the shelter. The light seems diffused, creating a soft, dappled effect on her blue skin and surroundings. The combination of sunlight and shadow contributes to a warm, organic tone, in contrast to the cold, hard lighting of the lab. This natural lighting emphasizes her empathetic connection to the Na'vi and the planet itself and does not portray her as “an object of sexual stimulation through sight” (Mulvey, 346). Grace's presence in this softly lit, open setting allows her to perform a more empathetic version of gender, which contrasts with her earlier performance of scientific authority in the lab. The dual lighting choices highlight her adaptability, challenging traditional gender roles and presenting a nuanced portrayal of gender in her character.

Grace's attire plays a crucial role in the film's subversion of traditional gender roles. In her human form, Grace's costume is practical and professional. Figures 2, 3, and 4 show that she wears a lab coat, cargo jeans, loose T-shirts, or rugged attire instead of colorful or fitted clothes, which, according to Judith Butler's theory, contributes to the *performance* of a non-traditional gender identity. These sartorial choices perform a masculinity that is neither fixed nor biologically determined but strategically adopted to command authority in a male-dominated field. Her clothing is functional, prioritizing usefulness over revealing feminine beauty, which is more commonly associated with masculine depictions in cinema. As Corrigan notes, costumes can serve as crucial indicators of a character's identity, and Grace's lack of conformist feminine ornamentations further detaches her from the stereotypical role of the passive woman often seen in mainstream cinema, which presents women as "objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (Mulvey,344).



Figure 3: *Costume 1 in lab*



Figure 4: *Costume 2 in lab*



Figure 5: *Costume 3 in lab*

Grace's outfit in her avatar form is designed for practicality rather than adhering to traditional feminine aesthetics. Figures 6 and 7 show her attire, which is functional and straightforward — such as a loose khaki shirt and utility gear — without any adornments or elements that would highlight gendered beauty or sensuality, which often depict female representations in mainstream cinema. This choice of practical clothing highlights Judith Butler's view that gender is not an innate quality but a performance enacted through repeated acts and signs (Butler, 43). This absence of conventional “feminine” coded clothing —such as glamorous or sensual clothing—makes her gender expression more neutral, aligning her character more with capability and intellect than with gendered beauty. Grace's appearance aligns with the post-gender concept discussed by Haraway, where gender is not the defining feature of a character's identity; as identities are “partial and fluid” instead, behaviors emerge as central (Haraway, 66). Her clothing supports the mobility and adaptability required in Pandora's organic world. She doesn't become natural by adopting native dress; instead, she brings her **outfit into the natural world**, creating a **cyborg identity**.



Figure 6: *Grace's Avatar*Figure 7: *Grace's Avatar*

Camera angles are instrumental in highlighting Grace's authority and intellectual presence. The low and eye-level angles (Figures 8 and 9) in lab scenes position her as a subject with authority rather than as a passive object for the male gaze. This aligns with Mulvey's idea of the active/male and passive/female dichotomy challenges it by granting Grace agency, even in a patriarchal environment (Mulvey, 346). Unlike the typical "objectifying" male gaze, the camera does not fetishize Grace's body. Instead, it focuses on her actions and facial expressions (347). Figure 8 shows a medium shot with a low angle that presents Grace as an authoritative figure characterized by stern expressions. Figure 9 shows a reverse shot in which the focus is on Grace while Jake is looking at her, but this is not a "voyeuristic" look. Instead, it is the admiration of her personality as a strong woman (350). Close-ups emphasize her determination and leadership rather than highlighting traditionally feminine attributes. Unlike female characters with sensual expressions, Grace's expressions are stern and serious. Medium and close-up shots are frequently used to capture her facial expressions and are tools of communication and knowledge, aligning with Judith Butler's view of gender as performative: Grace does not "express" femininity through beauty or delicacy but performs it through competence, care, and resistance to patriarchal structures (Butler, 30). Moreover, her close-ups often portray her in settings where she is interfacing with technology or guiding Avatar operations, reinforcing Donna Haraway's vision of the cyborg—an entity that merges human consciousness with machines. In this sense, the close-up becomes a space not of spectacle

but of **posthuman agency**, capturing Grace's hybrid, non-objectified identity as both scientist and cyborg within the narrative.



Figure 8: *Grace's Medium Shot in Lab*



Figure 9: *Grace's Reverse Shot in Lab*

When Grace is in her avatar form, the camera captures her through wide shots, as shown in Figure 2 and Figure 10, reflecting her deep connection to Pandora. This choice of wide-angle shots distances her from being an object of the male gaze, highlighting her role as a protector and intellectual guide rather than a spectacle. The camera also captures her avatar through medium shots (figure 7) to emphasize her emotions through facial expressions and

body language.



Figure 10: *Wide Shot of Grace's Avatar*

Grace Augustine, portrayed in *Avatar*, is one of the most complex and compelling characters in the *Avatar* series. As a scientist, educator, and leader of the Avatar program, her dialogues are crucial in revealing her character's relationship with traditional gender roles and how she subverts or embraces them.

Grace's role as the head of the Avatar Program and a respected scientist is fundamental in challenging traditional gender binaries. As Judith Butler says, "Gender is always a doing..." and certain "repeated acts" show that she portrays both masculine and feminine coded traits in her role (Butler 33, 43). Judith Butler argues that gender is not something one is but something one does—a continuous performance constituted by repeated speech acts, gestures, and behaviors that conform (or resist) cultural norms (43). Language plays a key role in this process. Dialogues are performative acts that construct identity rather than express a pre-existing self. In the context of mainstream cinema, authority, and intellectual competence are often associated with male characters. However, Grace embodies these traits without compromising her femininity. Her reputation as an expert in botany is established early in the film when Norm introduces her as a "legend," emphasizing her intellectual authority: "Grace Augustine is a legend. She's the head of the Avatar Program, and she wrote the book -- I mean literally wrote the book -- on Pandoran botany" (Cameron, 13). This



description situates Grace as a formidable figure in her field, undermining the gendered expectation that scientific leadership and expertise are inherently male-dominated.

In Haraway's "*A Cyborg Manifesto*," the cyborg represents the fusion of opposites, such as intellect and emotion, or biology and technology. Grace's character embodies this fusion by combining intellectual leadership with emotional depth, thus moving beyond the binary opposition of rational man and emotional woman. She asserts her authority over the scientific realm while also navigating the emotional complexities of her connection to the Na'vi culture. Her ability to hold both positions without compromising either reinforces the notion of a gender-fluid identity, in line with Haraway's concept of the cyborg as an entity that is neither one nor the other but "both" (Haraway, 7).

Grace's Avatar represents a powerful visual depiction of how the character subverts gender binaries. Her Avatar, in the script, is defined as having "panther thighs," a "flat muscular stomach" and "firm athlete's breasts" reflect a blend of traditional masculinity—through physical strength and athleticism—with femininity (Cameron, 20). This description highlights her powerful, active presence, which contrasts with the typical representation of women as passive or delicate in action-driven films. The film challenges the notion that women must choose between being strong and beautiful by presenting Grace's Avatar as both physically commanding and feminine, thereby blurring the binary between masculinity and femininity.

Haraway's cyborg celebrates the rejection of traditional binaries, where the body's biological traits do not govern one's capabilities or identity (Haraway, 59). Grace's Avatar displays strength and resilience despite being biologically female. These traits are not stereotypically attributed to female characters in mainstream cinema. Her embodiment of both femininity and physical strength defies the conventional notion that women must stick to traditional gender norms of physical fragility or beauty.

Grace's leadership style is direct, and her tone is commanding, which further disrupts conventional gender roles. When Grace asserts, "You're driving an avatar, now. That means you're in my world, got it?" (Cameron, 13), she instantly shows her authority. Her authoritative attitude challenges the gendered belief that women in leadership roles must uphold a feminine balance of kindness and control. However, Grace's character also

demonstrates emotional depth, a trait often believed to dissent from traditional concepts of masculinity but is usually associated with femininity. In the scenes where Grace expresses her vulnerability, such as when she says, “A scientist stays objective -- we cannot be ruled by emotion. But I poured ten years of my life into that school. They called me sa’atenuk. Mother” (Cameron, 68), show her emotional complexity. This line shows the tension between her professional identity and her emotional attachment to the Na’vi people. The term “sa’atenuk,” meaning “Mother,” highlights the maternal role she plays within the context of her work, merging the intellect of the scientist with the nurturing, protective nature of a mother (68). Haraway’s cyborg allows Grace to be both rational and emotional, strong and compassionate, by denying rigid boundaries between masculine and feminine roles. This dichotomy reflects a post-humanist model where gender does not define one’s ability for leadership or empathy.

Judith Butler argues that language itself is performative as it constructs gender. So when Grace uses informal, irreverent, or abrasive language, she is not imitating masculinity, but she is performing resistance, asserting authority, and refusing passive femininity, all through speech acts. Her swearing and sarcasm are “acts” of gender disruption, not gender mimicry (Butler, 43). They expose how language is a tool of identity construction, not a reflection of biology (35). Grace’s use of slang and her casual behavior further question the traditional gender binary. Frequent use of phrases such as “goddamn,” “son of a bitch,” and “jarhead”— show resistance and rebellious tone in her language [H1] (Cameron, 13-23). Women in patriarchal discourse are often expected to be polite, soft-spoken, and controlled. Grace’s use of cuss words resists this expectation, making her illegible as a stereotypical woman. This illegibility itself is a form of resistance. This language, which contrasts with the stereotypically polite and reserved speech expected of women, underscores Grace’s dismissal of the formalities traditionally related to her position as a female scientist. Her language choices reveal her liberation, nonconformity, and resilience.

Grace’s rejection of these standards aligns with Haraway’s cyborg, which is neither limited by conventional gender expectations nor bound by societal rules. Grace’s behavior and language reflect her association with values of scientific honor and personal independence, challenging the gendered supposition that women must behave and speak according to socially constructed norms of femininity. Grace also reveals her emotional vulnerability despite her strong and authoritative role, showing her complexity as a

character. The moment when she strives to hide her tears while showing concern about the destruction of Pandora—“Jake realizes that Grace is on the verge of tears and desperately trying to hide it”—reveals the emotional conflict between her intellectual training and her attachment to the Na’vi people (Cameron, 68). Her pain is a substantial contrast to her usual disconnected, rational personality, reflecting how gender “identity,” as Haraway suggests, is not a static category but a dynamic process that involves emotional, physical, and intellectual fluidity (Haraway, 54).

During her conversations with Jake, Grace seamlessly blends professionalism with emotional depth, revealing the fluidity of her identity. For instance, when she advises him, “It’s a job. Learn what you can—but don’t get attached” (Cameron, 68), she strikes a balance between the need for emotional objectivity and the understanding of human connection. This internal struggle reflects Haraway’s concept of the cyborg, who exceeds the limitations of binary thinking. Simultaneously, Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity helps illuminate how Grace’s speech is not a reflection of a fixed inner self but a **constitutive act** that builds her identity through context-specific utterances. Her language embodies a non-essentialist subjectivity that shifts between roles, underscoring that identity is **produced through repetition** rather than biological essence (Butler, 43).

#### 4.2. Character Analysis: Trudy Chacón; the “rock-hard former Marine.”

Trudy Chacón’s character defies traditional gender stereotypes. Her outfit in figure 11 and figure 12 is noteworthy for its practicality. She wears a standard military uniform, lacking hyper-feminized elements or ornaments typical in action films. This uniform associates her visually with male soldiers, challenging the conventional gender binary that dictates rigid distinction of masculine and feminine attire in cinema. Trudy’s clothing is part of her **gender “performance”**—not a rejection of femininity but a reworking of it in a combat context (Butler, 43). Her functional outfit-combat boots and functional gear-emphasizes her competence and professionalism, distancing her from the “sexual objectification” of female characters in traditional narratives (Mulvey, 347). The military uniform rejects the male gaze and its traditional “object of visual pleasure” (343), presenting Trudy as a subject of action rather than an object of “desire” (343). This breakdowns the “active/male and passive/female” opposition that Mulvey identifies as central to cinematic

representation (346).



Figure 11: *Trudy wearing uniform*



Figure 12: *Trudy Chacon guiding her co-workers to prepare her aircraft*

The absence of soft, frontal lighting and glamorized framing **resists the male gaze**. She is not displayed for visual pleasure. Trudy can be seen in white and hard artificial lighting amongst flying gadgets which reinforces her agency and her active role in the story (figure 12). The focus is not on her form or appearance rather on her “expressions” and “actions” (Butler, 43). The choice of white lighting focuses the viewer’s attention on her determination, emphasizing the seriousness of her character instead of her beauty. This subverts the idea that female characters are primarily visual, “erotic spectacles”, as described by Mulvey's "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, 346).

Setting is significant as Trudy traverses two opposing environments—the martial human base and Pandora’s natural world. In her initial scenes, she can be seen in the metallic and claustrophobic spaces of the military, representing her initial position in the system. As she connects herself with the Na’vi and nature, she is often seen in the spacious and calming landscapes of Pandora. This shift in setting reflects her internal change and moral association, blurring gender binary—an idea central to Haraway’s cyborg metaphor.

The action-oriented shots of Trudy portray her agency and skill rather than her physical attraction. Figure 14 shows her close up shot which reflects her determination, and crane shots while flying show her connection with the natural setting of Pandora. Medium and Crane shots (figure 15) in combat emphasize her strategic picks, allowing the viewers to recognize her character's actions rather than objectifying her for spectator’s pleasure. Figure 14 shows a low angle shot of Trudy showing her agency and independence. The absence of erotic close-ups denies “voyeuristic pleasure” and shifts the spectator's identification from a passive, “scopophilic” stance to an active, empathetic one (Mulvey, 344).



Figure 13: *Trudy flying her aircraft*



Figure 14: *Trudy in her aircraft*





Figure 15: *Trudy flying her aircraft*

Introduction and description of physical presence of Trudy are directly associated to conventionally masculine qualities of strength and competence. Trudy's physical appearance and skill, described as a **“rock-hard former Marine”**, show traits often related to men: strength toughness, and combat skills (Cameron, 23). Her role as a pilot, in the film, with **“thousands of flight hours”** demonstrates competence in a conventionally male-dominated field, highlighting her competence in action-oriented and high-risk environments (23).

Trudy's rebellious nature and willingness to challenge authority are central to her character. Her opposition and conflict with Colonel Quaritch's authority is a significant indicator of her individuality and moral dominion, traits traditionally valued in male protagonists. When she rejects the order to fire on Hometree saying, **“Screw it! She takes her finger OFF the fire-control and pulls her aircraft out of formation,”** Trudy's choice to act on her own moral compass rather than thoughtlessly follow orders show bravery and a sense of justice (108). This independence and moral behavior reflect empathy and care, qualities often considered as feminine, but are conversed here through assertive and decisive actions.

Trudy's choice to break military practices and protocol is obvious when she is scolded by Quaritch for proclaiming their arrival, **“Sorry sir, it's procedure.”**(97) Her casual revolt against rigid organizations highlights her as a figure who functions outside conventional

boundaries, merging a warrior's strength with empathy.

Trudy's character reflects emotional depth by blending her combat enthusiasm with instants of care and empathy. When Trudy hurries into the lab to caution about the looming attack on Hometree, her resolve, **"Sec-ops is rolling the gunships. They're gonna hit Hometree!"**, shows a profound concern for others and an emotional investment for the safety of the Na'vi (103). This shielding instinct supports traditionally feminine-coded qualities of empathy and care, reflecting her internal struggle between her military responsibilities and ethical concerns. Her choice to desert and join the Na'vi's safety mission shows a mixing of soldier's strength and moral empathy. The decision to **"bind the guard with one of his own zip-ties"** and help in saving the characters highlights her tactical skills (masculine-coded) and her willingness to protect the Na'vi (feminine-coded) (112). These moments of revolt, driven by emotional belief, challenge binary ideas that relate logic and action with masculinity while associating emotion and care to femininity.

Trudy's juxtaposition of humor and camaraderie adds to complexity of her portrayal, mixing conventionally gendered communication styles. Her casual brag, **"I saw one take out a gunship once -- WHAM! Total frickin' yard sale,"** uses humor to bond with her companions, a traditionally masculine-coded style that emphasizes lightheartedness and camaraderie in high-risk situations (75). This combination of humor and military language situates her comfortably within a predominantly male-dominated environment, asserting her authority while maintaining a friendly connection with her companions. Trudy's empathy is evident despite her informal, masculine-coded communication style predominantly in moments of harmony with the Na'vi and her sacrifice for their rights and safety. Her talent to balance camaraderie, humor, and empathy marks her as a figure who assimilates feminine and masculine qualities in intricate, non-binary ways.

Trudy's sacrifice for the Na'vi places her as a brave figure whose enthusiasm is deeply linked to a combination of empathy and strength. Trudy's moral values, which direct her to **"pull her aircraft out of formation"** even after knowing the perils, shows a caring nature for those she considers friends (129). This action, driven by moral principles, blends qualities coded as feminine (care and empathy) with the courage to challenge powerful figures, often perceived as masculine. Her choice to fight beside the Na'vi, knowing the hazards, underscores a combination of bravery and maternal protection. This amalgamation



places her as a hybrid entity who does not fit rigidly into traditional gender classifications, representing Donna Haraway's idea of a cyborg who exceeds binaries.

Trudy resists gender stereotypes through her pilot skills. Her flying skills, highlighted throughout the film, are conventionally masculine-coded, depicting her as an individual who controls powerful machinery and arrangements in combat situations. Yet, her eagerness to use these skills for the safety of others, particularly in moments of danger, links them to a caring and nurturing sensibility, showing how both feminine and masculine qualities coexist in her. The scene where **“Trudy’s Samson beats the grass of the mountain meadow, straining to lift the module on a long-line sling,”** reveals her physical capability and skills in piloting (114).

#### **4.3. Character Analysis: General Ardmore; “I have been charged with a greater mission”**

General Ardmore's character is depicted in a martial setting that highlights a traditionally male-dominated space of power and control. She can be seen in the constructed environment of military bases with steel-grey hues, mechanical equipment, and weapons which indicates a world that is historically aligned with masculinity. Her presence in sterile military backdrop removes her from stereotypically feminine spaces, associating her with a traditionally masculine sphere while also maintaining her identity as a woman.

Her military uniform (figure 16 and figure 17) is rigid and utilitarian which subverts conformist feminine attire, highlighting her authority and association with traditionally male roles. This choice of clothing straightaway challenges the conventional female stereotype, portraying power and command. The metalled military setting contrasts sharply with the organic, natural world of Pandora, underscoring her foreigner status in Pandora and devotion to a controlled form of power.

The lighting in scenes featuring Ardmore often utilizes white, cold, and highcontrast illumination, forming sharp shadows that highlight her stern appearance. This use of lighting removes any softness usually associated with female characters in mainstream cinema, positioning her in a space that challenges traditional expectations of femininity. Her face is frequently highlighted with side or backlighting, underscoring the rigid lines and angles and portraying authority and command. Ardmore can often be seen in low angles shots, showing

her power and control to the audience, emphasizing her dominant position instead of her form, subverting the traditional "male" as "active" versus "female" as "passive" stereotype (Mulvey, 346).



Figure 16: *General Ardmore wearing uniform and technologically enhanced attire*



Figure 17: *General Ardmore showing serious and stern face*



Figure 18: *General Ardmore showing expressionless face*

Ardmore's character is often depicted in long (figure 16) and close up (figure 17, 18) shots within military sets, where she is in command of soldiers, giving orders, or supervising the battlefield. A visual narrative is created through these shots where she is central and active, rejecting stereotypical gendered compositions where women are consigned passive or secondary roles. Her posture and attitude is authoritative as she can be often seen as standing tall and directly facing the camera (figure 18) which signifies a diversion from the conventional subservient female attitude.

Laura Mulvey's theory of the "male gaze" suggests that women in mainstream cinema are portrayed as "object" for visual pleasure (Mulvey, 346). General Ardmore, however, disrupts this idea. Her military attire and practical settings, negate any erotic or "visual" objectification (346). Her body is not stylized in a feminine attire for voyeuristic pleasure. Her outfit asserts her as a commanding presence rather than a sexual object. This visual strategy opposes the typical scopophilic pleasure described by Mulvey, where the audience is invited to gaze upon a woman for sexual satisfaction.

General Ardmore cannot be seen in the fragmented close ups that dissect body of a female into erotic parts. Ardmore is often presented in close-ups that highlight her stern facial expressions rather than facial beauty or physical allure. These close ups focus on her expressions of determination or leadership (Figure 17 and Figure 18). The narrative assimilates her into the story as a figure of authority rather than "spectacle" (346),

blurring the lines between traditional male and female narrative roles. Ardmore's portrayal as an active agent subverts Mulvey's idea of women as "passive bearers" of meaning (346).

The character of General Ardmore supports a gender-fluid portrayal, emphasizing Donna Haraway's vision of a post-gender world. She represents both culturally "masculine" (strength, command) and "feminine" (care for her soldiers) qualities, and by doing so she destabilizes conventional gender expectations. Her portrayal indicates the merging of male and female qualities, stressing that authority and strength are not limited to one gender.

Haraway's cyborg concept also proposes that technology can empower characters who blur traditional identities. In a world of high-tech Warcraft, Ardmore's grasp of military machinery, her dealings with screens, and her authoritative presence suggests a mastery that goes beyond biological and gendered constraints. This link with technology associates her with Haraway's vision of the cyborg as a symbol of empowerment and subversion, where the traditional markers of identity related to organic body are no longer essential.

By subverting traditional gender markers and occupying roles coded as masculine, Ardmore embodies the cyborg's "dangerous possibilities" of transgressing established norms (Haraway, 14). Her presence does not seek to confirm a unitary identity but to challenge dualisms like male/female, active/passive, and strength/vulnerability. Ardmore's portrayal as both authoritative and nurturing reflects the cyborg ethos—identity is not singular and fixed rather it is constructed by "repeated acts" and "expressions" (Butler, 33, 43). She signifies the "dangerous possibilities" of breaking social norms by challenging gender stereotypes and taking on roles that are considered traditionally appropriate for male (14). Her presence defies dualisms such as "male/female, active/passive," and strength/vulnerability (Mulvey, 346). She does not attempt to validate a unitary identity.

The dialogues of General Ardmore are essential to comprehend her role as an authoritative figure who defies female stereotypes by holding a prominent position in the military and corporate spaces. Her opening statement, "As On-World Commander, I have been charged with a greater mission," declares her authority and portrays her as a leader in charge of the overall objectives of the human mission on Pandora. Without any traditionally "soft" or emotionally motivated objectives, this statement highlights her dedication to the mission with a strategic, results-oriented mindset—qualities that are often linked with

masculinity.

Ardmore communicates in a direct and practical manner throughout her encounters, which is characteristic of a military language that is considered as masculine. Her stress on "taming the frontier" and "pacifying the hostiles," emphasizes a vocabulary of domination, control, and conquest. This puts her in line with the traditionally masculine qualities of military leadership, such as decisiveness, strategic thinking, and a willingness to employ force to accomplish goals. • However, Ardmore's use of language also shows an awareness of the bigger picture—**“Earth is dying. Our task here is to make Pandora the new home for humanity.”** Her emphasis on ensuring that mankind has a future home presents a quality of protection and preservation—traits that are typically associated with women. The traditional binary is defied by this dual focus—conquest and preservation—which indicates that her leadership is a combination of typically feminine and masculine goals.

## CHAPTER 5

### POST-HUMANIST ANALYSIS OF WOMEN IN AVATAR: WARRIORS —WOMEN OF OMATICAYA

#### 5.1. Character Analysis: Neytiri; “She is lithe as a cat”

Neytiri, is the ferocious daughter of Omaticaya clan leaders. She is a central character in *Avatar*. By fusing traditionally masculine and feminine coded traits, like strength, compassion and leadership, her portrayal surpasses conventional gender expectations. Through her multifaceted character who embodies a non-binary and dynamic identity, *Avatar* subverts typical gender roles in mainstream cinema. Her portrayal as a warrior, leader, and spiritual mentor subverts stereotypical representations of female characters, especially in the science fiction and action genres.

Neytiri demonstrates Haraway’s definition of the cyborg as “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction”, as her ability to connect to her Ikran and other creatures through the neural queue blurs the line between technological interface and natural embodiment. This bond functions much like Haraway’s cyborg networks, where organic bodies operate as coded systems of connection. Neytiri represents a “creature in a postgender world” that “skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense” embodying both protector and destroyer, nurturer and fighter. Her hybridity situates her as a cyborg figure who destabilizes binaries of masculine/feminine roles. (Haraway 9) According to Butler’s theory of Gender performativity, “gender proves to be performative— that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be”, so gender is not natural rather it is constructed through “repeated acts” because “deed is everything” (Butler 43, 33). Neytiri represents both physical power and warrior’s strength and caring and nurturing nature due to deep spiritual connection with Eywa thus blending conventionally masculine and feminine coded traits. Throughout the narrative, Neytiri’s character goes beyond love interest or being a side character. She becomes a mentor, protector and finally a leader of her clan. Her relationship with Jake does not portray her as a submissive character rather their connection holds mutual respect and equality. Neytiri exemplifies the “post-gender” concept of Haraway as her character is neither strictly confined to traditional markers of masculinity nor femininity. She portrays a

more hybrid identity inhibiting qualities like strength, wisdom, nurturing and leadership.

Corrigan's *Mise-en-scène* elements such as setting, lighting, costume, angles, and specific shots highlight Neytiri's leadership and blur conventional gender boundaries. It further establishes her as an empowered figure within the narrative. The natural setting of Pandora for Neytiri's character is significant as it is feminine-coded natural space which shows her deep connection to Eywa (the mother goddess of the Na'vi). The bioluminescent forests and sacred spaces are active elements that portray her spiritual connection to the world of Pandora. This type of environment is typically associated with femininity but Neytiri can also be seen as navigating these spaces as a warrior.



Figure 19: *Neytiri in a warrior pose*

Natural and soft lighting often surrounds Neytiri, signifying her divine connection to Eywa—the goddess-like force of Pandora. This use of ethereal and natural lighting draws attention to her spiritual and emotional power. On contrary, when she is engaged in action and fight, especially during battle sequences, dramatic lighting—like shadows and high contrast—emphasizes her physical strength. This kind of lighting reinforces her strength without sacrificing her spiritual depth. Figure 19 shows her with arrow and a bow in her hands and she is portrayed in dramatic shadows showing her warrior appearance. Figure 20 portrays Neytiri in bioluminescent lighting of Pandora showing her soft feminine side. Figure 19 and Figure 20 portray different aspects of Neytiri's personality in different



lighting.

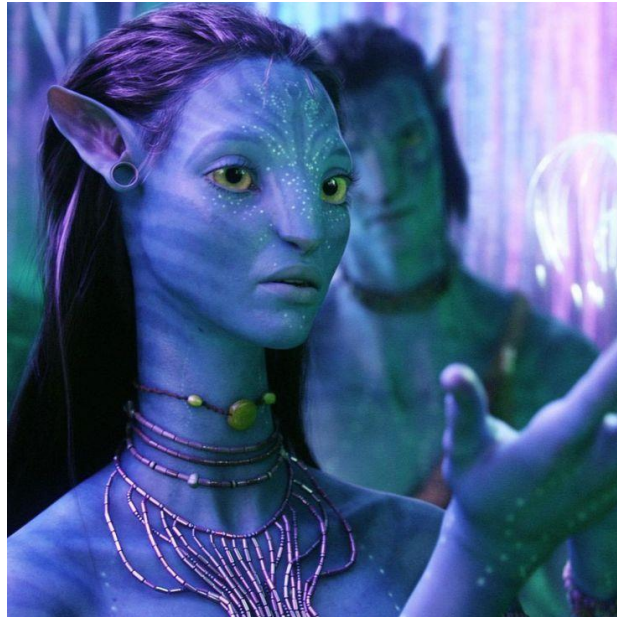


Figure 20: *Neytiri framed in soft light under tree of souls*

Mulvey describes the act of “looking” as both a source of “pleasure” and power (Mulvey, 351). Women are typically positioned as “passive” objects of male “desire” (351). In contrast, Neytiri is not presented as merely a passive subject as her gaze is as powerful as the camera's. The film frames her not as an “object” of the male gaze but as a subject with authority and autonomy that is emphasized through strategic lighting and camera angles (351). The use of lighting that often immerses her in a soft, reverential glow, indicates her sacred status rather than visually appealing objectification.

Butler argues, ““There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’...” It shows that what looks like a “real” gender identity is actually a product of performative expressions that can be walking, dressing, speaking, choosing, desiring. These expressions are socially understood as signs of masculinity or femininity. Over time, repeating these behaviors makes the identity seem natural and fixed, even though it’s entirely constructed through repetition. Neytiri’s costume indicates her cultural status. Her attire is composed of organic materials and ornamented with beads and feathers which represents her connection to nature and her culture. Unlike conventional costumes of female characters in science fiction, Neytiri’s outfit is practical and non-erotic. It allows her freedom of movement and shows her physical without reducing her to an “object” of the male gaze.. Through her costume, Neytiri disrupts



the expectation that women in action or sci-fi films must be defined by their appearance. Instead, her costume represents her role and authority in her community.

Neytiri is framed in the camera angles that often elevate her position. The low-angle shots create a sense of her dominance and authority. The moments when Neytiri teaches Jake the ways of the Na'vi, the camera often positions her above him, showing her role as his mentor and guide. This choice disturbs traditional gender dynamics in the film. In Figure 20, Neytiri is centered and in sharp focus which places her as the dominant figure in the scene. Jake Sully is blurred and behind her, showing Neytiri's visual priority in this moment. This framing resists the typical male gaze structure by granting Neytiri visual agency — she is not being looked at, but is doing the looking (at the glowing element in her hand). Neytiri holds the position of knowledge and leadership in the film. Close-up shots highlight her facial expressions, capturing her vulnerability, emotions and intensity (Figure 21-24). These angles defy the typical “male gaze” that often objectifies women. The camera frames Neytiri as an “active” participant in the narrative whose physical and emotional sides are equally significant. During crucial battle scenes, Neytiri is often depicted as leading or fighting with others. Wide shots capture her dynamic movements and warrior skills.



Figure 21: *Neytiri showing her grief*



Figure 22: *Neytiri showing her grief*



Figure 23: *Neytiri showing proud and happy emotions*



Figure 24: *Neytiri showing rage and anger*

Mulvey indicates that traditional films often fractures the female body into objectified parts. However, in *Avatar*, Neytiri's body is shown as a whole and powerful figure. The camera does not highlight her physical “form” in a “voyeuristic” manner but rather presents her as a unified figure. The close-up shots conventionally objectify women but the camera captures Neytiri’s strength, emotion, and leadership through close up shots, all qualities typically assigned to male heroes. Neytiri is not the “bearer of the look” rather she is portrayed as an “active” figure directing the gaze to admiration of her emotional and physical strength and warrior skills.

Butler says, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, 33). Gender is not something one is, but something one does through repeated acts, gestures, and behaviors. The illusion of a stable identity is created through performance. The actions and dialogues of Neytiri often blend stereotypically masculine and feminine traits or “expressions” showing Butler’s idea of gender as a construct also reflecting Donna Haraway's idea of porous gender distinctions as she states “There is not even such a state as ‘being’ female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices” (Haraway, 16). Neytiri is able to overcome the binary gender expectations because of her dual duties of a nurturer and a warrior.

Neytiri exhibits traditionally masculine coded traits in the scenes where she displays

warrior-like behavior. For instance, Neytiri is described as **“cracking her bow across the heads and shoulders of wolves”**, which demonstrates her physical prowess and fierce combat skills. This action-driven description, combined with her intense sounds like **“Rrreeyaaah!”** and **“Hyaaaah!!”** highlight her as a fierce role as a warrior protector of Pandora. By portraying Neytiri as a capable figure who protects the world around her and nurtures it, such expressions resist traditional gender expectations. Neytiri’s actions are supported by respect for life and empathy despite her fierceness. Her respect for the balance of life is evident from her gentle request for forgiveness before killing an animal—**“Forgive me, my brother”**. This dialogue highlights her sympathetic nature, revealing an understanding of life’s interconnectedness.

Neytiri’s character challenges traditional gender binary as a leader within the Na’vi society. Her leadership is emphasized through her dialogues that place her as an authoritative figure. She combines compassion with command. Neytiri’s authority is visible in her first interaction with Jake. Her admonishments—**“You are like a baby, making noise, don’t know what to do”**—declare her dominance over him thus subverting conventional cinematic portrayals where male characters are the primary guides or leaders. Neytiri’s position as a mentor, destabilizes the gender hierarchy. She is presented as a figure who possesses both nurturing wisdom and power. Her interactions with the Na’vi further demonstrate her leadership skills. Neytiri embraces a conventional mentorship position and blends it with her warrior obligations when her mother, Mo’at, orders her to “teach [Jake] our way, to speak and walk as we do.” This role balance—leading Jake as a strong warrior and spiritual and cultural leader—embodies a multifaceted representation of gender and demonstrates that empathy and power may exist together in leadership.

Gender boundaries are blurred by the descriptions of Neytiri’s body, which highlight the coexistence of masculine and feminine qualities. Neytiri’s introduction describes her appearance with terms that mix features traditionally associated with femininity and masculinity. Her **“muscular shoulders”** and **“lithe, cat-like body”** propose strength and agility, qualities related to masculine descriptions of warriors. However, she is also described as **“devastatingly beautiful”**, which highlights her beauty, a typically feminine quality. This duality in her appearance challenges the idea that physical strength and beauty cannot exist at the same time within a female character, thus destabilizing typical gender binaries. Cameron’s depiction of Neytiri—**“like a lioness”**—highlights her fierce and

protective nature. Cameron uses an animal metaphor to describe Neytiri's appearance that conveys both nurturing and lethal power. This mix is a straight challenge to strict gender expectations, proposing that a female character can possess strength while also remaining a caring figure.

Gender differences are also vague in Neytiri's emotional depth. She blends aspects that are frequently separated along gender lines as she experiences and expresses a wide spectrum of emotions. She portrays emotions of concern, care, grief, fierceness and revenge, Neytiri's dialogues frequently demonstrate her capacity to convey spirituality and deep empathy, traits that are typically associated with femininity. Her spiritual sensitivity is obvious when she witnesses, **"There has been a sign. This is a matter for the Tsahik,"** This indicates her respect for the Na'vi's culture and their religious customs. Neytiri's interactions with Jake exhibit vulnerability and strength concurrently. During moments of romantic tension, such as when she softly whispers **"I See you,"** Neytiri expresses tenderness and emotional transparency. Nevertheless, she is also a brave warrior who fights for her people and stands up to danger. This mixture of strength and vulnerability undermines typical gender expectations. It suggests that leadership and sentiments are indistinguishable.

Neytiri's familial, communal, and romantic interactions highlight her unique role as a compassionate figure and a fighter. These interactions show how her character combines elements from femininity and masculinity. Neytiri's relationship with Jake starts as the dominant, informed guide and progresses into a relationship where both characters identify each other's strengths. This transformation goes against conventional narratives that present male characters as the main leaders and agents of change. Neytiri's ability to defend, mentor, and then transfer leadership to Jake demonstrates a partnership based on balance and mutual respect.

Gender distinctions are further blurred by Neytiri's identity as a mother. Maternal strength is often feminized as nurturing. Her **motherhood is not a soft, passive role**, but a dynamic, embodied performance that blends emotional intensity with physical strength. In Butler's terms, Neytiri **disrupts the binary between feminine care and masculine action**. Her gender is **not fixed**; it is **performed** depending on the needs of the moment — caring in one scene, combative in the next. It challenges the softness that is conventionally

associated with motherhood. She combines protective anger with a nurturing desire to protect her loved ones in her dialogues during the moments when she portrays concerns of a mother such as "This is our family. This is our home." The straightforward binary perspective of gendered roles is challenged by this nuanced depiction of motherhood, in which she is both a determined defender and a compassionate caregiver.

Throughout the films, Neytiri is often depicted as heroic and without the gender constraints characteristic of mainstream cinema. She kills Quaritch, the chief antagonist, which subverts the expectation that a male hero should bring the final blow. The male savior cliché is challenged in *Avatar* by presenting Neytiri as the one who defeats the villain. In addition to being a personal triumph, Neytiri's action highlights her position as a guardian of the Na'vi and her family on a cultural and community level. Her father passes the bow to Neytiri instead of a son which also brings attention of audience towards her leadership skills.

## **5.2. Character Analysis: Mo'at; "Her bearing is haughty, her expression friendly"**

In *Avatar*, Mo'at is the spiritual leader of Omatikaya who plays a significant role in balancing spirituality within Na'vi culture. *Mise-en-scène* elements of Timothy Corrigan aid to explore how Mo'at's character subverts traditional gender norms and binary by challenging male gaze and fixed gender binary.

Mo'at is a Tsahìk and she mediates between Eywa and the Na'vi, representing Haraway's concept that "we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism—in short, cyborgs." Her role as spiritual leader is not limited to ritual; instead, it involves providing access to Eywa's planetary neural network, which functions as both sacred and cybernetic. In Haraway's words, the cyborg emerges where "the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached" —and Mo'at performs this by guiding her people in forming bonds that blur distinctions between organism, spirit, and machine-like interface. Her spiritual authority therefore depends on negotiating blurred boundaries, making her a cyborg who exemplifies the blending of myth, biology, and technological-like connectivity. (Haraway, 9)

*Mise-en-scène* include all visually presented things on the screen, comprising settings,

costumes, lighting, angles, and framing, which make a powerful portrait of Mo'at's strength and influence. Mo'at can often be seen in holy, nature-bound spaces, such as the Tree of Souls, that signifies her power and association with the Na'vi's deity, Eywa. These settings, filled with an unearthly admiration, present both qualities of Mo'at; leadership and maternal qualities. As Corrigan states, settings are significant in shaping the theme and background of narrative, and here they highlight unique mix of power and nurturing in Mo'at's character (Corrigan, 68). The natural environment in Mo'at's surroundings highlights her vital role in upholding the spiritual and ecological balance of Pandora.

Mo'at's attire is neither revealing nor erotically pleasing; rather, it is practical and indicates her role as a spiritual leader. This differs from Mulvey's claim that mainstream cinema often styles female characters for "visual and erotic impact" (Mulvey, 346). Mo'at's costume, shows traditional attire of a spiritual leader that resists objectification and allows her to be seen as a source of wisdom instead of a visual spectacle. The attire disrupts the spectator's expectations of femininity by presenting her as an authoritative figure rather than an object of visual pleasure.

Mo'at can be seen in Soft, natural lighting of Pandora, often shining from bioluminescent plants, emphasizing her relationship with the spiritual powers. Traditional cinema employed lighting in a way to frame women in order to emphasize eroticism, but the lighting around Mo'at undermines this notion. The soft lighting around Mo'at does not highlight her "form" but emphasizes her spiritual authority (345). In this way it subverts the traditional "scopophilic" pleasure described by Mulvey, where the female "form" is objectified for visual pleasure (346). In contrast, Mo'at's visual representation shows respect and admiration, daring the idea of "to-be-looked-at-ness" which is linked with the female characters in mainstream cinema (351). Mo'at is often captured in low-angle shots in order to visually enhance her power. These shots portray her as a dominant and authoritative figure, which is opposing to the "passive female" figures who were portrayed by mainstream cinema as an object of visual pleasure where women are subjected to the male gaze. According to Mulvey, form of body is highlighted in traditional cinema to reinforce "woman as image" and "man as bearer of the look" (346). However, the low angles depict Mo'at as an active and authoritative figure who commands the gaze rather than being the passive receiver of it.





Figure 25: *Close up shot of Mo'at Showing her Grief*

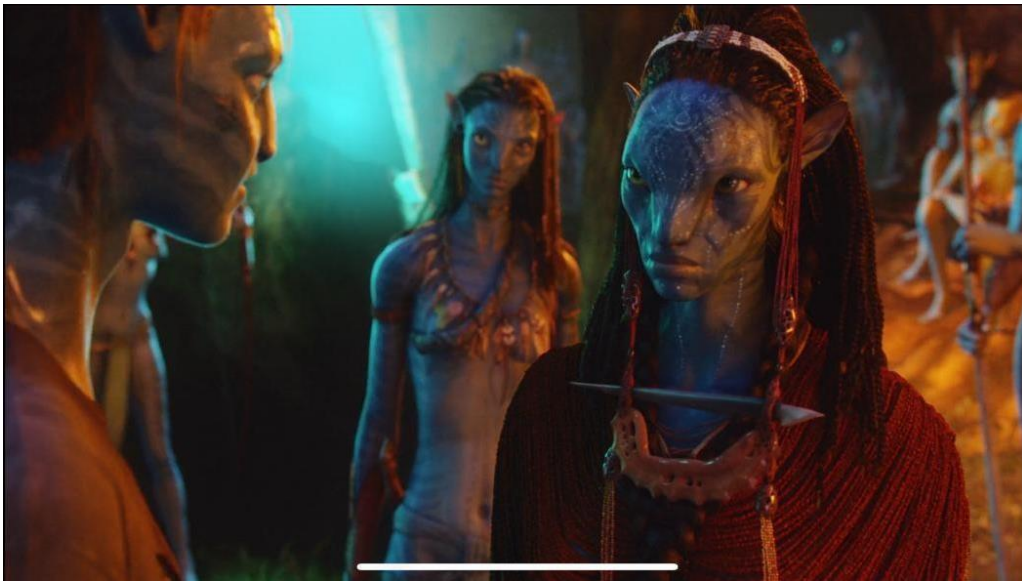


Figure 26 : *Mo'at investigating Jake Sully*





Figure 27: *Mo'at investigating Jake Sully*



Figure 28: *The scene introducing Mo'at in the film*

Mo'at combines feminine and masculine coded qualities in her position of authority as the Tsahik, the Na'vi people's spiritual leader, which traditionally entails both care and power: She is shown as an authoritative figure in her introduction, as "a severe woman in her 50's" with a demeanor that is both "haughty" and evocative of a "hanging-judge" (Cameron'46). This portrayal blends the job of a matriarch with that of a judge, proposing

a person who is respected and wise—qualities that are frequently classified as masculine—but she does so as a clan matriarch, a role that is usually related to providing care and nurturing in a community.

Her role as a revered and powerful leader is further elaborated by the description of her attire, which shows her position as “Clan Matriarch”(Cameron, 46). Despite the fact that the matriarchal title is inherently feminine, the way she uses her power—through ritual, judgment, and strategic decision-making—reveals a blend of leadership qualities that are gender-coded. In a manner that is rigid with traditionally masculine strength, Mo’at proclaims her authority while representing the feminine-coded role of a spiritual guide.

Throughout the film, Mo'at's dialogues demonstrate a leader who is both powerful and nurturing, displaying qualities that are often viewed as odd with conventional gender norms. In her statement, "my daughter will teach you our ways", she is placed as a guardian of Na'vi culture and tradition. By saying, "Learn well, Jakesully. We'll see if your insanity can be cured." Mo’at portrays her intellect. This statement suggests a dual duty because it contains both judging connotations (evaluating his worth) and nurturing undertones (teaching and mentoring)(Cameron, 48). Mo'at has a mother sense and is protective of her culture, but she also shows decisiveness that is coded as male and is critical and willing to make difficult choices.

She cautioned Neytiri, saying, “If you choose this path, you can never be Tsahik. Your life will be wasted,” demonstrates a mother's concern for her daughter's future while endorsing the importance of cultural obligation (Cameron, 96). Although her eagerness to impose severe punishments is consistent with a masculine-coded sense of duty and devotion to cultural standards, the sadness in her eyes reveals a profound emotional connection to Neytiri, expressing a traditionally feminine trait of empathy. A binary notion of gender roles is complicated by this duality.

Because of her control over rituals and her spiritual authority, Mo'at, the Na'vi's spiritual leader, mixes aspects of femininity and masculinity. Mo'at is playing a role typically played by female spiritual leaders when she leads rituals and prayers, such as in the scene where she "recites a prayer as Neytiri, acting as acolyte, places a WOODSPRITE, a seed of the Great Tree, on the body. (Cameron, 128)" This compassionate, caring interaction with the

spiritual world is consistent with a femininely coded affinity for nature and nurturing. Her guidance of the community's spiritual concentration and leadership in these rites, however, entails a degree of command and control that is conventionally masculine-coded.

By combining authoritative guidance with caring nature, Mo'at contradicts rigid gender norms, as seen by her emotional expression and ritual participation. When conducting a communal prayer or other ceremonial times, say, "Wise ancestors who live within Eywa, guide us." "Give us a sign"—Mo'at assumes the spiritual and cultural leadership positions, which are frequently associated with the nurturing and perceptive traits of women (Cameron, 45). However, the gravity of her leadership, as she stands "on the dais, leading them in a CHANT," denotes authority and command, which are usually characterized as masculine qualities in narrative structures. Mo'at defies assumptions of submissive or passive femininity by defining her leadership with a powerful and central presence rather than a soft-spoken, subordinate role. Mo'at's position as a spiritual leader involves a deep understanding of both the emotional and ritualistic needs of her community, suggesting a form of power that is not purely authoritarian. Her approach balances empathy—caring for the emotional and spiritual well-being of the Na'vi—with authoritative control over crucial decisions, such as determining Jake's role within the tribe. This duality blurs the gender binary, as she moves seamlessly between traditionally feminine and masculine roles without contradiction.

As a mother, Mo'at inhabits a dual role that underscores the crossing of feminine care and masculine authority. Her caution to Neytiri about the outcomes of her choices shows her maternal concern for Neytiri's future. This emotional connection shows a traditionally feminine side of Mo'at as she desires to guide her daughter. However, Mo'at's framing of Neytiri's potential "**wasted life**" if she does not follow tradition suggests a strict adherence to cultural expectations, indicative of a masculine-coded emphasis on duty and responsibility. Mo'at's capability to make difficult choices, like choosing to support Jake despite her early doubts, shows a willingness to act for community's greater good. This mix of compassion and decisive "acts"—qualities conventionally divided along gender lines—determines her capability to exhibit a leader's grace that exceeds limits of binary classifications, signifying a "hybrid" form of authority.

Mo'at's depiction in the film underlines Donna Haraway's vision of a post-gender

cyborg, and Judith Butler's view of Gender Performativity since her character symbolizes a multifaceted and hybrid form of leadership through "acts" coded as masculine or feminine that resists binary constraints. Both a deep connection with Eywa (the Na'vi's spiritual deity) and an obligation to preserve culture are embedded in Mo'at's spiritual strength. Mo'at is presented as a figure that epitomizes a form of authority that is neither entirely masculine nor feminine as her dual role of nurturing life, a trait usually associated with femininity, and preserving cultural and spiritual strength of the Na'vi people, which is typically associated with masculinity. Her personality transforms typical gender-specific identity into a blended and hybrid identity. Moreover, she challenges ideological framework that limits authority and strengths to masculinity and caregiving to femininity through her ability to navigate the emotional and spiritual requirements of her community, while also upholding command and making challenging decisions.

## CHAPTER 6

### POST-HUMANIST ANALYSIS OF RONAL IN *AVATAR: THE WAY OF WATER*: QUEEN OF THE DEEP—THE POWERFUL WOMAN OF THE METKAYINA

As Tsahik of the Metkayina clan, Ronal embodies Haraway's claim that the cyborg is about "transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities." She combines the traditional role of healer and spiritual guide with her ability to forge neural bonds with aquatic life, particularly the Tulkun, whose intelligence mirrors human-technological coding systems. Like Haraway's cyborgs, who trouble distinctions between "natural and artificial, mind and body," (Haraway 11).

Ronal is portrayed not as a passive "object" of male "desire" but as an active figure within the film (Mulvey, 344). Mise-en-scène elements such as costume, lighting and setting underscore her autonomy.

#### 6.1. Character Analysis : Ronal; "Tsahik of the Metkayina"

The character of Ronal in *Avatar: The Way of Water* represents her identity as both a warrior leader as well as a mother. As gender is "performative" and is constructed by "doing " repeated acts" (Butler,43) , Ronal shows a "hybrid" gender identity by mixing masculine-coded and feminine-coded traits. Timothy Corrigan's mise-en-scène elements involving the visual composition of a scene such as setting, costume, lighting, and shot composition portray Ronal as embodying both masculine and feminine coded characteristics. These elements mold the audience's perception of Ronal's character, emphasizing her strength and motherly care at the same time.

Ronal can be seen in the underwater environments, a setting that is significant for understanding her character. The fluidity of the ocean—a dominant setting in the Metkayina culture—indicates Ronal's capability to embody both strength and sensitivity. The unpredictable and changing sea reveals her capability to be both a warrior (Figure 33),

prepared to face danger, and a mother, caring for her children and attached to the natural world (Figure 30).

Ronal's costume, created from constituents tied to the aquatic territory of the Metkayina, denotes her dual identity (figure 29). It is practical enough for combat, underscoring her competence as a warrior, yet holds elements of femininity, ornamented with beads, indicating her female side. This combination challenges traditional gender stereotypes as her outfit does not portray her as an erotic "object" for visual pleasure. Her outfit, rather, shows her strength as a warrior and mother. Her outfit is not excessively sexualized but practical and representative of her warrior and mother roles. This choice of attire resists traditional objectification and emphasizes her visual presence as a leader rather than an "object" (Mulvey, 344). Her costumes are designed for usefulness, not for erotic pleasure, subverting Mulvey's concept of "to-be-looked-at-ness"(351).



Figure 29: *Ronal doing spiritual practice as Tsahik*





Figure 30: *Ronal showing her grief over death of her Spirit Sister*



Figure 31: *Ronal roaring to show her anger*



Figure 32: *Ronal crying over death of her Spirit Sister*



Figure 33: *Ronal leading a battle against sky people*





Figure 34: *Close up showing Ronal's rage in the battlefield*



Figure 35: *Close up showing Ronal's concern for her people while communicating with Neytiri and Jake*

Lighting plays a significant role in emphasizing Ronal's multifaceted identities. In the scenes of fight, she is covered in relatively darker tones, harsher, directional light that stresses her resolve and strength which are masculine coded-traits (Figure 34). On the other hand relatively softer lighting is used in scenes showing her feminine-coded maternal trait, mainly in her interactions with her family members or Spirit Sister (Figure 35).

The film employs a range of shots to portray complexity of Ronal's character. Wide shots are used to capture her dominating presence among the Metkayina, placing her as an authoritative and respectable figure. Figure 33 shows a wide angle capturing Ronal actively leading in the battlefield showing her strength. The close-ups during moments with her family expose her emotional depth, destabilizing the expectation that warrior strength denies maternal tenderness and care. Figure 31 and Figure 33 show close up shots of Ronal focusing on her grief and pain while Figure 32 shows her anger. These shot selections allow audience to see Ronal as a multidimensional character, defying the contrast of “male/active” and “female/passive” (Mulvey, 347). The mixture of these masculine and feminine-coded traits constructs her hybrid identity (Butler 43).

The film frames Ronal by often shifting between underscoring her authority through low-angle shots (figure 33) that portray her as a powerful leader and her portraying intimacy using close-ups during her moments with family or when she is vulnerable in showing her grief (figure 31, figure 33). This visual technique forms a fluid representation of gender that defies the binary distinction between strength (related with masculinity) and care (linked with femininity).

Ronal's role as a Tsahik of the Metkayina portrays her as both a spiritual guide and a figure of authority, mixing motherly qualities with a more authoritative position (Butler, 43). She is introduced, in the film, as a **spiritual authority** a “Tsahik”, which is a conventionally feminine role related with care, guidance and empathy in the community. However, the scenes showing her interaction with other people, such as interrogating the Na'vi children's authenticity, **“These children are not even true Na'vi,”** show cynicism and a protective attitude towards her people's culture. Her permission is important for Jake and Neytiri to get refuge in Metkayina clan which shows her equal position as of Tonowari, her husband. This shielding, almost gatekeeping attitude is evocative of masculine-coded authority, proclaiming boundaries and cultural integrity (Avatar: The Way of Water, 2022).

Ronal's authority extends to her role as a spiritual and community leader, showing her identity shift between maternal care and authoritative power. She expresses emotional depth and empathy when she mourns the loss of her Spirit Sister Ro'a. Her grief, **“(SOBS) (SCREAMS) Her name is Ro'a. She was my Spirit Sister,”** shows deep emotional vulnerability, often coded as feminine (Avatar: The Way of Water, 2022).. However, her

sorrow and mourning is not passive, rather, it is an expression of rage and determination, demanding accountability—a more traditionally masculine response to injustice as she decides to take revenge through a battle.

Ronal's dialogues depict her dual nature and show a mixture of traditionally feminine and masculine qualities that challenge binary expectations of gender. Ronal shows her emotions through her words and behavior. It covers a wide range of emotions such as grief, anger, concern and rage, portraying her as a character who challenges one-dimensional categorization of gender. Her sorrow over the loss of Ro'a, her spirit sister, and the baby whale shows her emotional, maternal and caring side. The intense grief is displayed through her words, "**(CRYING) What is this, Tonowari? (SCREAMS)**", which conveys a deep emotional connection to the creatures of her world, indicating her care and empathy—traits that are associated with femininity (Avatar: The Way of Water, 2022). However, this emotional connection motivates her to take action, portraying her strength and resolve often coded as masculine. Moreover, her longing to avenge her Spirit Sister's death, rather than departing into passive mourning, shows a traditionally masculine-coded spirit of a warrior. This change from maternal sorrow to a call for justice amalgamates empathy with strength, challenges traditional gender prospects that detach emotion from action.

Ronal's physical actions and choices depict her commanding and leading personality. Her willpower to fight during her pregnancy, despite Tonowari's carefulness to "**stay back,**" and her statement, "**I ride!**" underscore her role as a warrior-leader who is not afraid of going in battle (Avatar: The Way of Water, 2022). This readiness to participate in physical fight is associated with traditionally masculine qualities of courage and strength.

Ronal's character challenges gender binaries by inhabiting a space of cultural and ideological authority, combining masculine-coded decisiveness and feminine-coded empathy: Her criticism of Jake's supposed failure—"**It seems Eywa has turned her back on you, Chosen One,**"—is harsh and direct, highlighting a cynical side (Avatar: The Way of Water, 2022). This criticism shows her concern for her people. Ronal's skill of performing spiritual rituals and her ability to directly confront outside threats shows a hybrid identity. Her leadership is not just limited to her spiritual realm but it extends to the physical protection of her culture, representing a form of power that comprises of qualities

traditionally coded as both masculine and feminine.

Ronal's character presents an inclusive view of power by embodying traits of maternal care and a warrior's strength. Her emotional reaction to the death of her Spirit Sister shows her soft and kind side which is traditionally thought to be a feminine-coded notion of protection. Along with this, her fierceness can be seen when she confronts sky people revealing her warrior traits. So, she exhibits traits of both caregiver and a warrior.

## 6.2. Findings

The films destabilize rigid masculine/feminine roles and show that female characters exhibit "androgynous" qualities. Women like Neytiri, Mo'at, Ronal, and Grace portray both masculine-coded and feminine-coded traits like warrior strength, nurturing care, spiritual authority, and technological knowledge thus becoming hybrids. (Bem, 155). This aligns with Haraway's cyborg feminism, where "a cyborg is a hybrid" (Haraway 6), and Butler's performativity, where gender is a performative act rather than biologically fixed. Moreover, while Mulvey's theory of the male gaze portrays visual framing of Neytiri's body, the films also subvert it by giving women leadership roles, narrative agency and active participation in combat and decision-making. Female characters are not passive objects of visual pleasure rather they are subjects who drive the plot and embody resistance. Furthermore, the empowerment of selected female characters lies in their ability to perform multiple roles simultaneously — warrior and nurturer, healer and strategist, spiritual guide and ecological technologist. Their blurred gender identities align with Haraway's call to embrace "transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities" (Haraway 14). By performing roles outside traditional femininity, these characters portray Butler's notion of gender as performative, showing that power comes from disrupting norms rather than conforming to them. For example, Neytiri's combat skills are not framed as masculinization but as an authentic extension of her hybrid identity. The films situate women as central figures in ecological and colonial resistance. Their empowerment challenges the historical marginalization of women in science fiction cinema, a genre that is often dominated by masculine heroism. By portraying women as cyborg-like leaders, *Avatar* expands the possibilities of representation of female characters in mainstream film. While empowerment is evident, it remains partial: traces of the male gaze and Hollywood narrative conventions persist. Nevertheless, the hybrid identities of female characters significantly shift the

portrayal of women in science fiction, making *Avatar* a cultural site where blurred binaries open spaces for feminist resistance and redefinition.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

James Cameron's *Avatar* films blur traditional gender dichotomy by empowering female characters through hybridity of traditionally “masculine coded” traits and conventional “feminine coded” qualities (Bem, 156). Analysis of selected female characters ; Grace Augustine, Neytiri, Moat, Ronal, Trudy, and General Ardmore, illuminates how the films subvert mainstream cinematic conventions through significant portrayal of women. Employing Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg, Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, this analysis reveals the strategies used by the films to critique gender stereotypes and redefines female strength within the genre of science fiction.

The analysis reveals that *Avatar* unsettles conventional portrayals of women by placing them as central figures in the narrative. They portray their own agency, leadership, and authority. Female characters in *Avatar* films question patriarchal norms.

They play crucial roles in the survival and guidance of their clan. Neytiri's depiction as an aggressive warrior and protector, as well as a caring partner portrays nuanced mix of qualities or “acts” rigidly assigned to male or female characters. Scientific expertise and intellect of Grace Augustine subverts conventional feminine roles. Trudy also disrupts gender binary through her rebellious personality. General Ardmore's character is an unconventional depiction of a female role. Ronal is a fierce as well as nurturing character. These figures can relate to Haraway's concept of the cyborg and Butler's concept of gender performativity as they transcend traditional classifications of being a female and reject the dichotomies that have dominated Western cinematic depictions from a long time by performing acts including both masculine and feminine coded traits.

The films intentionally subvert the male gaze, a concept famously criticized by Mulvey, which often casts women as objects of visual pleasure and passive participants in the film. In *Avatar*, female characters are not merely present to be looked at but are crucial to the development of the plot and often command the narrative focus. The camera treats them as subjects with depth, strength, and complexity, shifting the typical cinematic gaze away from

voyeuristic objectification. This subversion is reinforced through the film's visual strategies—camera angles, framing, and narrative structure emphasize the autonomy and agency of female characters, challenging the patriarchal standards of representation.

The *Avatar* films hold the notion of a cyborg—a figure that transcends traditional gender expectations and embodies hybridity. Female characters in the film blend feminine coded qualities with masculine coded qualities like warrior's strength, challenge the clear-cut male/female distinctions that typically define cinematic heroes and heroines. This blending aligns with Haraway's idea of the cyborg as a post-gender entity, one that defies rigid categories and exists within a space of fluidity and contradiction. These portrayals further align with Butler's view of gender performativity as character's exhibit hybrid gender qualities through their acts. The portrayal of these characters suggests a move toward a more inclusive and multi-faceted representation of identity, moving away from binary notions of gender and empowering female characters as full participants in both the human and Na'vi worlds.

## 7.1 Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies can expand the scope of this research by examining **male characters for hybrid identities**, since their embodiment of traits traditionally coded as feminine could reveal how masculinity itself is destabilized within the *Avatar* films. If male characters display female traits, this would highlight Butler's idea of gender as performative and demonstrate how hybridity disrupts patriarchal norms by showing that strength, care, and vulnerability are not bound to one gender. Further research can also **examine audience reception of gender hybridity**, exploring how viewers interpret these blurred identities and whether they challenge or reinforce existing biases. A **comparative analysis with other science fiction films** would help determine if *Avatar*'s treatment of gender hybridity is distinctive or part of a larger trend in the genre. Finally, researchers can **explore the role of computer-generated imagery (CGI)** in shaping hybrid identities, since digital technology not only constructs the visual fluidity of Na'vi bodies but also influences how gender hybridity is perceived and normalized in mainstream cinema.

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