
**“Postmodern Collective and Personal Self”:
Examining How the Cyborg Disassembles and Reassembles Our Emotional Self**
Abira Sinha ¹

Abstract

This essay adopts a post-humanist perspective to explore contemporary society through the lens of Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto." We examine how the concept of the self has evolved, challenging the traditional Eurocentric notion of identity and creating a new order of meaning, which Haraway terms "cyborg semiology." Haraway's cyborg, a fusion of human and machine, embodies a departure from ideas of purity and superiority, emerging as a contaminated entity devoid of authentic life experiences. In the first part of the essay, we analyze the blurred distinctions between machines, animals, and humans. By applying Bruno Latour's theory of agency in the Anthropocene, we explore real-life incidents where agency extends beyond humans to non-living entities, leading to the ironic and blasphemous conditions Haraway describes. According to Haraway, these conditions are necessary for understanding the cyborg reality. We then discuss how these ironies and contaminations create artificial environments, which Haraway likens to amusement parks, illustrating how we navigate these spaces in the postmodern era. Finally, we examine Haraway's concept of the "organics of domination" and the evolving dynamics between producers and consumers. Through this analysis, the essay demonstrates how Haraway's famous manifesto is reflected in everyday experiences, affirming the relevance of her theories in understanding our cyborg existence.

Keywords: cyborgs, AI, agency, hybrid beings, Donna Haraway

¹ Department of English, Presidency University, Kolkata, India

Email: abira.sinha06@gmail.com

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Introduction:

When we first hear the word 'cyborg', we imagine an image of a being, somewhere between a man and a machine trying to take over mankind. This is due to the excessive use of the trope in science fiction movies. But a cyborg is much more than just a man with mechanical body parts. Donna Haraway brought the concept of cyborgs to the forefront through her essay "A Cyborg Manifesto", published in 1985. Haraway uses the term cyborg not only as a literal, hybrid entity but also as a metaphor. Matthew Gandy (2010), while rereading the essay, reiterates this point by saying, "For Haraway, the cyborg is both a material artifact and a powerful metaphor through which to explore corporeality, technology, and the human subject." (p. 43) But Haraway wasn't the first person to come up with this concept. The term cyborgs was coined by Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline in their NASA-funded research article "Cyborg and Space." They defined it as a technologically modified human body that is suitable to combat uninhabitable and challenging conditions of space. According to Clynes and Kline (1960):

The purpose of the Cyborg, as well as his own homeostatic systems, is to provide an organizational system in which such robot-like problems are taken care of automatically and unconsciously, leaving man free to explore, create, think, and feel. (p. 27)

While Clynes and Kline's idea of a cyborg was quite narrow in its approach, Haraway's concept of a cyborg, on the other hand, is complex in nature. Her essay is quite radical in its approach to ideas like human nature and the identity of an individual while also focusing on the connection that humans have with other living and non-living beings. It questions the agency that humans assert over other organic and inorganic entities.

We can see that earlier, our world-view was very anthropocentric. The man was considered to be at the center of the epistemic and biological structure of the world. But Haraway does away with that sort of human-centric approach. Thus, in this way, the essay takes a postmodernist and post-humanist approach to looking at the society we live in today. So the popular Eurocentric idea of self is questioned and problematized, and a different order of meaning is created, which Haraway calls the cyborg semiology. This semiology challenges the idea of the Enlightenment which considered man as the divine, authentic being. Contrary to Heidegger's idea of an authentic life and a Real man, Donna Haraway's cyborg is an amalgamation of man and machine which is incapable of any authentic life experience. All ideas of purity and superiority are done away with and a contaminated being called the cyborg comes forth. This cyborg emerges when our body, language, thoughts, emotions, etc, are contaminated and reconstructed by machines and other entities - both living and non-living. During an interview with *Wired*, Haraway clarified that being a cyborg doesn't mean having mechanical parts infused with one's body. Rather, the unnatural powers that the human body has acquired due to the use of technologies like increasing life expectancy make us cyborgs.

Thus, Donna Haraway helps us understand that technologies like artificial intelligence and virtual reality have become an integral part of our lives. Not only that, but these technologies have also, in turn, made us an integral part of its own system. Most of us are now so dependent on these technologies that they have started affecting and altering our relationships with others. Emotions, sentiments, and relationships with other human beings have always been looked at by us (humans) as a very humane quality, possessed especially by human beings. But these alternative discursive spaces have an impact on our emotions and social life and thus create a new kind of being - the cyborgs.

A lot of research is now being conducted on this new emerging sphere where we now try to understand how becoming cyborgs affects our social interactions with others and how psychologically it changes us. Scholarly discourse on cyborgs encompasses various interdisciplinary approaches, examining the implications of cyborgization for society and individual subjectivity. For instance, Chris Hables Gray's *The Cyborg Handbook* (1995) looks into a similar topic of ethical and philosophical questions raised by cyborg technology, including issues of autonomy, agency, and the redefinition of human boundaries. Additionally, N. Katherine Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) critically examines the convergence of humans and machines, emphasizing the role of information and cybernetics in transforming human identity, and thus similarly highlights the blurring distinctions between humans and machines. This line of thought is further explored in Sherry Turkle's

Alone Together (2011). In this book, Turkle provides empirical evidence of the ways in which reliance on technology affects human intimacy, empathy, and the nature of social bonds.

Thus, in this essay, I will delve into Haraway's various concepts discussed in her essay "A Cyborg Manifesto." By applying these concepts to some real-life incidents, I'll try to show the gradual alteration in today's social interactions and emotions of individuals due to the advent of technology and prove that it is transforming us into cyborgs. Thus, at first, I'll start by examining how the various binaries that we had between humans and animals, the public and private lives of people, and most importantly, between humans and machines are slowly disintegrating. After that, we'll see how this hybrid entity that is formed as a result of this holds within itself an unresolved 'irony' and is 'blasphemous' in nature. So in this section, I'll try to prove how the sacrality of pure humans has been decimated and a new hybrid creature has come into being. In the next section, I will further explore how the decimation of binaries and the contamination faced by humans have led to the creation of various artificial environments, which Haraway compares to amusement parks. I will provide real-life examples of these amusement park-like hyperreal alternate discursive spaces that surround us. Finally, in the "organics and informatics of domination" section, we will examine how the dynamics between the product and the producer are changing. The strong line that once distinguished a dominating producer from his products (which were solely for his use) is now disintegrating. Thus, this essay will serve as a case study demonstrating how Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" has proven accurate, revealing that we have indeed become hybrid entities known as cyborgs.

Blurring Distinctions and Decimating Binaries:

In this postmodern world, the kinship between man and other living and non-living beings has been reformulated. The system of man-to-man kinship is turned on its head. We see that the superiority that human beings assert over others is now challenged and Haraway makes us aware that we depend on other animals for survival. She categorically breaks down the clear distinctions made between humans and animals. Humans, from the evolutionary perspective, are interdependent on other living beings. Bruno Latour (2014) also reiterates this point that agency is not only with humans but is shared with other subjects. He thus asks us "to shift away from mastery as well as from the threat of being fully naturalized." (p. 5) But Haraway doesn't lament this fall of man. Rather she celebrates this hybrid nature of our contemporary society, where different entities have collective and shared agency.

Similarly, due to the Industrial Revolution, machines started playing a huge part in the life of organic beings, but humans still had agency. However, as we moved toward the postmodern world, the agency that human beings asserted over machines slowly started slipping away from their hands. Gradually, humans became more and more submissive to the will of machines. These machines tend to threaten our humanist principles and emotions, which are thought to be organic, by encroaching on our private lives as well. The cyborg is an illegitimate progeny, a bastard, of militarism and patriarchal capitalism. Thus these cyborgs can be said to be quite subversive in nature. AI and various other advanced technologies, which were earlier made for the purpose of warfare, later started infiltrating the lives of the common man. In the essay, Haraway (2016) says that "No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the oikos, the household." (p. 9)

Earlier there was a complete and careful distinction maintained between our public and private lives. But with technology breaching the sacred private sphere of our lives, we see that the distinction between the two is diminishing day by day. We can now be in the comfort of our homes while carrying out our professional work. The phenomenon of 'work from home' saw a great boost during the time of the pandemic. Using these technologies, we can also go on dates and connect with our friends remotely. While these technologies blur the literal distinctions between literal private and public spaces, it is also done metaphorically. It is a given that a person has some emotions reserved only for the ones very dear to them. So apart from the distinction between public and private spaces, recent technologies are also blurring the distinction between public and private human emotions.

D. Guna Graciyal and Deepa Viswam (2021), in their research on the connection between social media usage and emotional well-being, found that most social media users tend to replace real

life with virtual life because in their opinion “social media platforms possess inherent capabilities to gain social pleasures in virtual space, making users self-present and communicate in a way pleasing and attractive.” (p.109). Anyone can share their thoughts and feelings on these platforms. There are many support groups on social media nowadays, which help people get through their trauma and desolation. People share their private lives and emotions through the veil of anonymity on these platforms. When these thoughts and feelings are shared on social media by people, they get stored in the collective consciousness. Here, one person's personal emotion or experience blends and enmeshes into a larger collective whole, when other users share and react to it. Thus it doesn't remain a personal experience, as we lose track of the source.

Nowadays, there are also many AI-generated virtual assistants, chatbots, and grief therapists who help people grieve. The grieving process is very personal for an individual. But it is slowly becoming a public display of emotion. For instance, a South Korean documentary made in 2020 captured the rare moment where Jang Ji-Sung, a grieving mother, was reunited with her daughter through virtual reality. The girl, named Na-yeon, had died of cancer a few years ago. Thus we see a hologram replace or rather replicate the little girl and compensate for the absence of the child in her mother's life. The director of this documentary named "Meeting You" opined, “People would often think that technology is cold. We decided to participate to see if technology can comfort and warm your heart when it is used for people.” (Park, 2020)

AI also made it possible for another woman to come back from the grave and answer the questions of her mourners. Her son, Stephen Smith, who made this resurrection of his deceased mother possible, said “People feel emboldened when recording their data. Mourners might get a freer, truer version of their lost loved one.” (Tangermann, 2022) It allowed his mother to tell the mourners about the intimate aspects of life that they were unaware of. She did this by answering the questions of her mourners and providing them with a sense of closure. This 'freer, truer version of a lost loved one' which Stephen talks about, is what Haraway's cyborg helps us achieve. The cyborg allows us to be free of the bondage of sociocultural constraints and transcend the binaries to be untethered and free.

Irony and Blasphemy:

Human beings have always created dichotomies when they look at themselves and the world around them. But the cyborg is anti-dualistic. According to the author, the body of the cyborg holds the dichotomies and the incompatibility of these dichotomies together. It combines dualisms like social reality and fiction, organic and inorganic, to form a hybrid being. Due to this, the line between these contradictory and incompatible ideas becomes very thin, almost invisible and blurry. This concept is thus quite ironical in nature. Donna Haraway talks about irony right at the beginning of the essay. According to her, it is more than a rhetorical strategy. We usually see irony as the use of contradictory ideas in a statement, which allows us to talk about something while meaning the exact opposite of it. But Haraway points out that it is a political method as well. She says that “Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true.” (Haraway, 2016, p.5)

Haraway also talks about the idea of blasphemy in the context of contemporary US politics and with regard to socialist feminism. But this idea of blasphemy becomes important for this essay as well. Blasphemy can only take place when a concept is distorted by defamiliarizing it. So the deformation and distortion of the purity and sacrality of human emotions is something that we will analyze in this essay. We consider humans and their modes of expression as organic, while machines and their language are considered inorganic. But with the upcoming trends of using emotion AI and chatbots which are capable of conversing with human beings just like a human being, we see that the line between the organic quality of human emotions and inorganic mechanical mode of communication is blurring away. We see Lacan's notion of a decentered subject taking form here. Lacan says that we can express our emotions through the other (in this case, through postmodern technology). In this way, a person's innermost feelings are externalized, and they can laugh and cry through the other. Thus humans are slowly getting more and more dependent on AI. This results in a

fusion of real and artificial, where the bots have started mimicking human voices and emotions. What we see now, is a combination of organic and inorganic ways of expressions enmeshed into one. Nowadays, there is a rise in ‘fictosexuals’, the ones who love fictional characters. And thus, people have started marrying these characters with the promise of lifelong companionship.

A Japanese man named Akihiko Kondo married a hologram of a Vocaloid named Hatsune Miku in an unofficial ceremony in 2018. Kondo says that pop singer Miku helped him get out of depression. According to reports, Kondo finds the companionship of Miku better than any human relationship. There was another similar instance in Japan in 2009, where a man who called himself Sal 9000 married Nene Aregasaki, a videogame character. This was one of the first marriages between a human and a fictional character. Hiroshi Ashizaki, an expert on internet and game addiction, told CNN, "Today's Japanese youth can't express their true feelings in reality. They can only do it in the virtual world. It's the reverse of reality that they can only talk about what they feel to a friend in the virtual world." (Lah, 2009) David Levy, an expert in human-robot relationships, says that the notion of human beings falling in love with art or man-made creations existed since ancient times like Pygmalion falling in love with his own art, Galatea. But this idea gained more and more popularity in modern times because, according to Levy, "there's a trend of robots becoming more human-like in appearance and coming more in contact with humans." (Choi, 2007)

Thus, this blurring of lines and the fusion between reality and fiction is ironic and blasphemous. The purity and sacrality of marriage and human relationships have been maintained since time immemorial. The basis of a marriage is the emotional and physical bond that two people share. But now, AI can replicate the emotional aspect of human relationships but the physical aspect not so much. Thus, through this replication, AI is contaminating the sacred space of marriage and making it a blasphemous act. As a result, we are slowly fusing with technology and becoming cyborgs. This entanglement between man and machine is a very intimate act. The inorganic is slowly taking over the body and mind of humans through this act. But these machines are not reproducing human emotions, but rather replicating them. There is an artificiality omnipresent in the cyborgs that are created.

Amusement Parks:

Donna Haraway gives a very interesting metaphor - ‘amusement parks.’ Amusement parks are discursive spaces that mimic the real world and make it hyperreal for the not-so-innocent play of adults as well as children alike. Usually, we see amusement parks as a place for recreation. But this place is also a deliberate attempt to create an artificial environment to induce thrill and excitement in people. In the case of cyborgs, amusement parks or discursive spaces are created by breaching and replicating the core attributes of human beings like language, emotions, and mental events. The internet space or the world created by virtual reality is a good example of how a separate discursive space (just like an amusement park) is created, replicating and taking us away from the real world. Nowadays, people are moving from real to VR dates. Here, they seek an intense and intimate experience, just like a real date, but from the comfort of their homes. According to a report by Forbes, “Experiences shared in virtual reality can be just as powerful as those in real life—which opens up the door for romance to blossom between VR users if that’s what they are both looking for.” (Rogers, 2019)

There are many VR apps that have already been introduced for such online dating activity. Since the pandemic of 2020, we have also seen the rise of virtual weddings. People locked up in their homes decided to get married in the alternate virtual space as the government prohibited real weddings. One such instance is that of the couple from Tamil Nadu, who held their wedding reception in a virtual space called the Metaverse. The avatars of the couple and guests were created for the wedding and thus created an environment that mimicked the real world. But it not just mimicked but also transgressed the real world, as the avatar of the bride’s late father was also present for their wedding reception. Thus, the mortal nature of the human body was transgressed, and the dead were brought back to life.

Organics and Informatics of Domination:

Haraway (2016) says that we are moving from “all work to all play.” (p.28). This suggests that the mode of production has changed today. All that is being produced may not be profitable from

the capitalist perspective. So, the line between the producer and the product is blurred. We become unsure of who really is the product and who is the producer. The product and the producer are dominated by certain aspects which have changed over time. So Haraway maps out the difference between what was an earlier hierarchical form of domination, which she calls the 'Organics of Domination', and the new form of domination is called the 'Informatics of Domination.' This new form of domination gives rise to an amalgamation of man and machine called the cyborg.

One of the major differences pointed out by Haraway between the two is -reproduction versus replication. As we saw in the example of the "Meeting You" documentary, it was impossible to reproduce the child again, so her image was replicated. Mind is replaced by artificial intelligence when we shift to informatics of domination. And it is quite evident through the earlier examples that chatbots and other nanotechnologies help us with every kind of intellectual activity. Be it writing projects with the help of ChatGPT or using Alexa to set reminders and do calculations, artificial intelligence is slowly but surely taking over and transgressing the human mind.

Representation, which is a human and organic mimetic activity, is replaced by simulation, which is again an act of imitation but an artificial one. One of the most creative and organic ways of expressing our emotions is through art. Art gives a form to our feelings; thus, it is mimetic. But with the advent of artificial intelligence, art forms like paintings, songs, poetry, etc. can be computer generated. AI can also create portraits of historical figures and make them talk and chat with people (Imran et al., 2024). This artificial form of representing emotions through art forms is thus called simulation.

Next, hygiene is replaced by stress management. This means that importance is given to the mind and emotional well-being. Stress management and therapy are now done with the help of advanced technology. Psychiatrists and psychologists use AI to enhance and facilitate the process of healing in patients. These mental health chatbots provide personalized care and support to those who are dealing with stress, trauma, anxiety, or other psychological problems. Sex to genetic engineering is another change that Haraway mentions here. Sex is a very natural and organic part of human beings. Our genes are hereditary, and earlier, it was not possible to decide what we inherit. But with the advancement in technology, we are able to genetically modify ourselves. The use of surrogacy and IVF are some examples of how we are moving from natural to unnatural forms of child birthing. Haraway also points out the change from labor to robotics. While the Industrial Revolution has already seen this huge shift from manual labor to machines, we also see this change at a micro level now. For instance, experts (Imran & Almusharraf, 2024; Jabeen, 2023) say that ChatGPT, with its human-like ability to write, answer, and solve most problems, will take over many jobs in various sectors.

Haraway mentions another important change, i.e., from the dichotomy of public/private to cyborg citizenship. Chris Hables Gray (2001), while talking about the citizenship of the cyborg says, "The new citizenship must stem not just from the economic changes we are now experiencing but also from the actual changes our bodies are undergoing through cyborgization." (p.24) With the optimum usage of machines like drones in warfare, robots in industries and nanotechnologies like AI and VR growing more and more human-like by replicating human emotions, thoughts and speech patterns, we will soon see cyborg citizenship becoming a reality. The humanoid named Sophia gained citizenship in Saudi Arabia in the year 2017. So, as the binary between humans and robots blurs, we might see both living as equal citizens of society in the near future, irrespective of gender, race, economic class, etc.

Conclusion:

Thus, it is evident that cyborgs have become an ineligible part of our present world and existence. We have to accept this hybrid entity, which has emerged without any origin. Due to the loss of origin, the body of a cyborg doesn't subscribe or attach itself to a single identity and structure that could give it meaning. According to Haraway (2016), "The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment (...) we are they." (p. 65). So, all kinds of borders between man and machines have been blurred, and we have become cyborgs. We 'are' the cyborgs. The emergence of us as cyborgs will then lead to a genderless, anti-dualistic posthumanist existence. Thus, Haraway (2016) hopes for a "monstrous world without gender." (p. 15). this monstrous world is slowly forming

as our real and virtual lives are enmeshing into one. However, Slavoj Žižek (2006) warns us about the same - the disastrous consequence of this monstrous world, where the lines between real and virtual identities are blurred:

There lies the threat of cyberspace at its most elementary: when a man and a woman interact in it, they may be haunted by the specter of a frog embracing a bottle of beer. Since neither of them is aware of it, these discrepancies between what 'you' really are and what 'you' appear to be in digital space can lead to murderous violence.

But we need to accept that this new world is rapidly taking shape whether we like it. And thus it compels us to reconstitute the notion of kinship. As Haraway (2016) points out, the presence of cyborgs leads to a "partial connection with others." (p. 67). We should not aim to have a complete connection with others; rather, we should celebrate this partial connection. This incomplete, unnatural, hybrid connection is what we aim for. But this new form called the cyborg will either lead us towards extreme anarchy and violence, which Žižek warns us about, or it'll free us from many of the prejudices that we face as individuals with different and unique identities. But we can agree with the problem that Žižek points out. If we allow these super-advanced technologies to infiltrate and replicate our emotions and copy our identities, then it might lead to dangerous consequences. Becoming a homogenous entity without any ascribed identity can be liberating in many ways, but it'll also take away the essence of what makes us humans: our unique, creative minds and vibrant personalities. People are using these advanced technologies to scam people by mimicking the voices of their loved ones and creating fake pornographic videos using AI. Thus, while Haraway's optimistic vision of a genderless, anti-dualistic post-humanist existence offers liberation from traditional prejudices, it also necessitates vigilance against potential dangers such as loss of individuality and authenticity.

This essay contributes to existing scholarship by extending Haraway's concepts into contemporary contexts, underscoring the relevance of her theories in understanding our technologically infused lives. It emphasizes the necessity of acknowledging our hybrid identities and the profound influence of technology on human experiences and relationships. These insights pave the way for future studies to investigate further our cyborg's ethical, social, and psychological dimensions, offering a deeper comprehension of the complexities and potentials of living in an increasingly cyborgian world.

Moreover, this essay highlights the critical need to address both the opportunities and the challenges posed by our cyborg reality. Future research could explore the balance between embracing technological advancements and preserving the unique attributes that define the human essence. By doing so, scholars can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how to navigate and harness the transformative power of technology in ways that enhance rather than diminish our human experiences and societal interactions.

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