

Chapter- 5

Cyborg Identity and Humanity in *Amped*

Shyni VS

Assistant Professor,

Department of English, Acharya Institute of Graduate Studies,

Bengaluru

Abstract

Cyborg, a term intersecting cybernetics and organisms, enhances the potentiality of human beings through high-tech modification to the body. When the same concept is being read through the lens of literature, it provides an important source of delectation in readers. This article aims to delve into the parameters of cyborgism in the science fiction *Amped* by Daniel H Wilson. In the novel, human beings are exhilarated to become amplified humans with the implantation of technological devices in their bodies, which endows them with capabilities to do things beyond human capacity. When cyborg blurs the boundary between human and machine, what if these amplified individuals or “amps”, in a sense, having superhuman powers, confront identity crisis and discrimination in society? When we picture a world without diseases with the advent of a technologically enhanced physique, which will secure the betterment of society by strengthening cognitive and physical abilities, what would be the aftermath of these “amps” becoming more machine than man? This novel gives ample space to examine how these cybernetic bodies challenge the traditional notions of being a human being who fits his society. By employing a multidisciplinary approach incorporating literary analysis, cybernetics, and post-humanism, this study probes into the crisis of having a semi-mechanic identity and the quality of being human.

Keywords- Amped, Cyborg, cybernetics, Discrimination, marginalization, science fiction, advanced technologies, enhanced human bodies, identity crisis, and humanity.

Introduction

Technology, which is being infiltrated in all the corners of modern life, appears to be an advent that may lead to a catastrophic end of the world. Despite all the negative impacts, it has become a part and parcel of human life. In a sense, it is obvious that it has surpassed humanity. The immense influence that technology exerts on human development is undeniable. Michio Kaku states, "We are entering an era where we will be able to transcend our biology and achieve things once thought impossible" (Kaku 34). He further says, "In the future, we might be able to enhance our intelligence and even achieve immortality through advanced technology" (Kaku 23). There can be a world governed by these cybernetic organisms with more potential in their abilities. Their powerful intelligence and confidence to overpower normal human beings may lead to the hegemony of bionic humans with dire consequences for humankind. Professor and world's leading expert in cybernetics, Kevin Warwick, justifies the capacity of enhanced beings with this example,

"A regular human. And let's say here I am and I upgrade from being a regular human. I have implants that allow me to communicate with others just by thinking about it. And then I'd have some others who also have implants that we can communicate by thought. Now, you're just a regular human. You have no idea what we are communicating. You are coming out with these silly human noises called speech, these mechanical pressure waves. Meanwhile, we are on a whole different plane, just in terms of communication". (Luke Robert).

It is a question to ponder, whether human enhancements result in good or evil. The journey from a regular human being to an augmented being can be full of obstacles and traumas. It can be possible for them to give up halfway as it is difficult to bear the weight of the process. Once they get physically and mentally enhanced, it can be a death knell for their human existence which will result in an identity crisis and marginalization by society. The accumulation of a different category may question the very ethics of the existence of human kinds and their co-existence with nature. The scope of this paper focuses on cyborg theory, which will be used to analyze the crisis of cyborg identity and humanity in Daniel H Wilson's *Amped*. A Cherokee citizen and author, Daniel H

Wilson, who has immense knowledge in robotics and machine learning, is one of the best sellers of 21st-century cyborg literature. The novel, *Amped*, weaves a world where social and ethical ramifications due to widespread amp use occur with its extensive display of cybernetic enhancement, amped uprising, and dystopian divisions. The novel explores the journey of Owen Gray from a human being to a cyborg and ultimately a posthuman. The pain and anguish one has to suffer throughout this odyssey will shed light on the conflict between identity and humanity.

A Glance at Cyborgism

Donna Haraway defines Cyborgism as the “hybrid of machine and organism, a creature that is a product of both social reality and fiction” (Haraway 149). Cyborg, an offspring of technology, is a human who is physically connected to a machine. The term, cyborg was coined by Manfred Clynes and Nathan S. Kline in 1960 in their work *Cyborgs and Space*. According to them, the purpose of the cyborg “is to provide an organizational system in which such robot-like problems can be dealt with, essentially by extending man's homeostatic controls to the nonbiological component, thereby making a more complete artificial man” (Manfred and Nathan 31). There is a clear margin between cyborgs and post-humans as post-humans' capabilities vastly exceed that of cybernetic organisms. Post-human capabilities enable them to have a better life span, cognitive abilities, and physical form. People with pacemakers, cochlear implants, and prosthetic limbs controlled by neural interfaces come under this category, where the integration of technology restores or augments physical and cognitive abilities in humans. Trans-humans or transitional humans are in the transitional phase from normal human beings to post-humans. All these terms, cyborg, trans-human, and post-human explore the relationship between human beings and technology. The scope of these different technologically integrated entities varies with each other. When cyborgism is a near future possibility, transhumanism involves a wide range of enhancements including cognitive, genetic, and life-extension technologies. Cyborg studies elucidate the concept of the interface of humans and machines resulting in cybernetic organisms. Cultural

discourse analysis through the perception of cyborg characters gives way to a better understanding of the development of these human-machine interfaces.

Neural implantations, where the device acts as a pacemaker for the brain, make it possible to be a cyborg by collecting information from the neurons, stimulating electrical activity, and giving the outcome. Augmentation from human beings to cyborgs can be either a boon or curse, not only to society but to the person himself. Kevin Warwick points out that "The potential benefits of cyborgization are immense, offering the possibility of enhanced human capabilities and new ways of interacting with our environment. However, these benefits come with significant ethical and social implications" (Warwick 12). Daniel H Wilson too explicitly reveals his opinion in *Amped* (2012) through Jim, when the character says, "All you got to do is curl your hands into fists and you turn into a weapon. Your body is just another tool. This technology changes nothing; it only amplifies. You decide how to use your tools. Whether to do good or evil" (Wilson 18). The 'amp', an electronic device that is being implanted in the body is capable enough to cure neurological conditions like autism, epilepsy, ADD, and even learning disabilities. People can get a brain implantation even to boost their IQ, consequently, there can be an anti-movement against this highly enabled human, out of the fear of compatibility.

Individual Conflict

The protagonist Owen Gray is one of the half million 'amps' living in the United States. Being a school teacher he has been leading a quiet life until he learns about the death of one of his students, Samantha, a 15-year-old girl, who was implanted with a neural autofocus in her brain to improve her concentration power, which led to her being restricted from school. She could not find a place for herself among the others. Being an amped made her a hybrid identity which was unacceptable by the non-enhanced humans. The added capabilities of the amps were adequate to sow the seeds of fear and self-doubt in the minds of other students as well as parents. The unexpected turn of events made Samantha, the cyborg identity, an outcast among her fellow students. Technology put her on the edge of the roof. Identifying herself as an unfit for the society,

she commits suicide. A society, where discrimination prevails on different grounds, unknowingly becomes the harbinger of such calamities. The anguished state of the girl's mental condition is let out through her words, when she says, "There is no place for me in this world, no matter how hard I try to fit in. I'm tired of fighting" (Wilson 15). These words ascertain the gravity of isolation these so-called amps were facing to get accommodated in society. Even she was aware that, she was evolving as a being beyond normal human and not the same girl. She knew that it was not only her plight but of all the amps. She says to Owen,

"The world has been changing, Mr. Gray. People have been waiting for permission to hate us. Now all the evil is going to come out. There are too many of them and not nearly enough of us. This has all happened before. It will end the same. In labor camps. Mass graves." She looks at me with pity. "You're a dead man walking. How pathetic that you don't even know it." (Wilson 10)

Owen was devastated by the excruciating news that resulted from the marginalization for being an amplified human being. The lingering thoughts of ethical dilemmas and upcoming social unrest left Owen with a heavy heart. The meeting with his father to get rid of the uneasiness in his mind unfolds the secret behind his cyborg identity. The amp that has been implanted in his body, turns out to be an arm capable of changing him into a bionic man, who can either be a gift or a disaster to the world. The revelation of the real potential of the device puts him in a state of bewilderment since he never thought of the device as useful more than his medical necessities. Owen's real identity crisis starts once he realizes that he is something more than human. He loses his job and home due to the troubles caused by this augmented identity. On the run, Owen loses his father. Left alone with nothing in his hand, Owen embarks on a journey to find out the truth behind the rebellion against his kind even though he had to suffer mightily at the hands of the society. Owen's skills beyond his considerable ones led to the miserable twist of his fate. It drives him from his normal life to the outer edge of society, where he is no callous swordsman and commits himself willingly to the fight for equality. Again, it is his search for identity that leads him to Eden in Oklahoma, where he meets the other victims of the anti-cyborg movement like Lyle, who is the leader of this amped community, Jim,

Nick, and Lucy, who were waiting to fight for their rights. The necessity of this battle is revealed when Jim, an old friend of Owen's father tells him, "I've seen a lot of good people die, Owen, you need to understand that this fight isn't just about us. It's about everyone who comes after" (Wilson 112).

The people of Eden were different, even the hardest task was effortless for them. The inhabitants of Eden could work harmoniously and efficiently with their enhanced abilities. The children of Eden played games that were not even imaginable by normal kids. They are faster, quicker and exactly act like a different species. But amidst this augmented life how they feel in society is reflected in the words of Jim when he says that they are not just surviving, they are thriving, the amps gave them an edge, and made them stronger, and smarter, but they also set them apart. They were aware of the fear and hatred of the outside world and always expected an attack from their side that could shatter their sanctuary. The inhabitants shared a mutual understanding and a sense of camaraderie since they shared memories of the same experiences and struggles. Some had to leave behind their family and jobs to live in Eden, where they could be their true selves. "For the people of Eden, their implants are both a blessing and a curse. They've gained extraordinary abilities but lost their place in regular society. Eden is their refuge, but also their exile." (Wilson 126). They speak a lot about the sad plight of this marginalized community. Enhancement is both a curse and a boon to them. They could attain abilities beyond human power, but at the same time, they had to lose a lot which they did not want to happen.

Social Implications

The 'amps' were stamped as fundamentally different due to their skills beyond human capacity. The fear of being dominated by cyborgs catalyzed the rise of the anti-cyborg movement which led to widespread discrimination and dystopian division. There emerged an anti-amp organization, The Pure Human Citizens Council (PHC) led by Pennsylvania Senator Joseph Vaughn, that advocated the segregation and control of the amps:

"The Pure Human Citizen's Council is reveling in the decision. The organization grew up organically in the last decade, responding to amps

like a foreign body rejection. At first, the PHCC was a religious nonprofit. Sanctity of the body, love what God gave ya—that sort of thing. But then they got support from all over and they got it fast. Middle-class families who worried their kids wouldn't be able to compete in the new future. Labor unions with an eye on keeping jobs for their human members. And politicians who knew a good bandwagon when they saw it" (Wilson 14).

It is Joseph Vaughn, the man responsible for Samantha's tragedy by pushing her case to the Supreme Court. He was a self-appointed watchdog for the human race. He not only promoted hate but also calls the struggle between pure humans and amps a war. He claims that among amps extremism is mainstream. He spreads the slogan "pure pride!" "level the playing field." "humans first!" (Wilson 18). The Supreme Court's decision to deny equal rights to the enhanced ones accelerates the unrest. The PHC was determined to suppress and destroy the amped population considering them as a threat to humanity. By using 'fear' as the propaganda the anti-amps could grow hatred in the people's minds towards the amps. The insurgence led to violent skirmishes and persecutions. The chaos reached its climax when the PHC attacked Eden, which resulted in a brutal battle. Owen realizes the real strength, speed, and cognitive capacity of his implant during the battle. He uses all his might to turn the tide of the battle in favour of himself and his friends, whom he wants to protect.

Identity and Humanity in Crisis

The conflicts between the amped community and the Pure Human Council put identity and humanity in crisis. Humanity dried up and it led the way to the legalized discrimination of the implanted ones. "Around a hundred thousand amped kids being sent home from school across the nation. Nearly half a million amped adults wondering if they've still got a job. And a couple hundred million normal people, celebrating" (Wilson 14). There were people like Owen, who didn't want to use their implants as a means to exert superhuman powers. He believed that he was a normal guy like everyone out there. He said, "I'm not an amp like Samantha. The neural implant in my head only kills seizures. That's it. Boring. No intelligence amplification or prosthetic memory or body diagnostics—just a run-of-the-mill medical implant" (Wilson 15). He

starts feeling isolated the moment he learns from his father that he is an amp. Prof. Gray is being killed in the uprising for his research and what he has done in the course. Charles, Owen's landlord, kicks him out saying, "State law says you amps can't go into contracts with normal people. Just like I can't sign no contract with a retard, you can't sign one with me." (Wilson 35). When he throws away Owen's belongings, it doesn't make any difference or feeling of sympathy in the passersby. Owen realizes that something fundamental has already changed and he is no longer a part of the system now. Whatever empathy glues society together dried up and became cracked and brittle. People started viewing them as a person-shaped, not a person. Owen is trying to identify himself but fails. His tormented mental state is evident in his words, "Whether I'm less than human or more than human—animal or God—it's all the same. I'm not a real citizen anymore. Rules no longer apply" (Wilson 36). Along with Owen, all the amps in Eden are facing the same identity crisis and lack of humanity from the normal community. Eden is an asylum for the amps. It may look calm but tension crackles just beneath every moment. They do not understand where the human ends and the machine begins. It is explicit to the readers that they feel a stranger in their skin when Lyle says to Owen, "The machine takes us deeper into our souls. That far inside, we're capable of anything. Way beyond right or wrong." (Wilson 175). They realise that the more they are enhanced, the more they will strip away from humanity. They will not be humans to humans anymore, but a problem to eradicate. In the outside world's eyes, they are just machines who look like humans.

Conclusion

Ethics have been called into question for the anti-cyborgs' inhuman treatment of these amped individuals. The journey from a mere human being, having only the human qualities, to an amplified human transforms their destiny itself. When their human qualities are being pushed beyond the natural, it would be challenging for them to retain their human identity. It is a different scenario when one opts for the technology oneself, but the outcome will be the same in the guise of discrimination. If this change happens with the consent of legal authority, that would not lead to such calamity. Prior analysis must be carried over

such advancements, to check the consequences and possibilities. Human frailty and limitation may lead to chaos in the world when they start doubting the advent of technologically enhanced humans. The implants might not have been done to elevate them with superhuman powers, but they ended up being one. The novel *Amped* vividly portrays the problems that may arise out of technological invasion in various realms. On one hand, certain people needed to shed humanity and attack the amps, On the other hand, some of them deliberately added oil to the fire. The amps had to struggle during the process of augmentation. It made rifts in their relationships. The external force aggravated their internal struggle. They were dehumanized by being imposed with restrictions on their fundamental rights. They lose connection with their emotions and they start feeling moral ambiguity in their existence. Thus, the use of enhancements needs further attention since it is a debatable question, whether they will enhance or destroy future generations.

Works Cited

1. Clynes, Manfred E., and Nathan S. Kline. *Cyborgs and Space. Proceedings of the Symposium on Engineering Aspects of Cybernetics and Space Exploration*, 1960, NASA, pp. 27-34.
2. Haraway, Donna J. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge, 1991.
3. Kaku, Michio. *The Future of the Mind: The Scientific Quest to Understand, Enhance, and Empower the Mind*. Doubleday, 2014.
4. Mason, Luke Robert. *The Cyborg Philosopher with Kevin Warwick*. FUTURES Podcast, 27 Feb. 2019, <https://futurespodcast.net/episodes/01-kevinwarwick>. Accessed 21 July 2024.
5. Warwick, Kevin. *I, Cyborg*. University of Illinois Press, 2004.
6. Watercutter, Angela. "Daniel H. Wilson: How to Build a Better Robot Apocalypse." *Wired*, Condé Nast, 13 June 2012, <https://www.wired.com/2012/06/daniel-wilson-interview/>
7. Wilson, Daniel H. *Amped*. Doubleday, 2012.