

Gender Dynamics in Artificial Intelligence: Problematizing Femininity in the Film *Alita: Battle Angel*

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the representation of women characters in Robert Rodriguez's 2019 film Alita: Battle Angel. Considering the conflicting traits of female characters, this paper employs Julia Kristeva's theory of Abjection to analyse the characterisation of hyper-gendered and semi-robotic cyborg feminine characters, Alita and Nyssiana, in the film. The study highlights the patterns through which the film genderises artificial intelligence by introducing deformed female characters. It also discusses the implications of artificial intelligence for concepts of subjectivity and humanity and focuses on gender and the positioning of women as commodities in science fiction movies. Drawing on Kristeva's ideas of Abjection, the paper posits that female characters are dehumanised and deformed to the extent that they come across merely as objects of fear and desire.

Keywords: Abjection; Artificial Intelligence; Science Fiction; Gender; Masculinity

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is often characterised as the era of artificial intelligence. It has tectonically shifted the world towards infinite possibilities in every human endeavour. Modern cinema is arguably one of the finest examples where we witness the impeccable exploration of artificial intelligence. This article explores Julia Kristeva's idea of Abjection in the context of Robert Rodriguez's film *Alita: Battle Angel* (2019). The paper specifically focuses on the intersection of technology, identity, and gender and how these intersections impact the subjectivities of the two characters, Alita and Nyssiana. The film effectively demonstrates how the lines between subjectivity and machines become blurred, and the interactions between cyborg characters, artificial intelligence, and humans become increasingly complex. At its core, the film's fundamental thematic structure revolves around the influence of artificial intelligence on the construction of human identity and the resulting crisis of identity. The film poses a larger question: How does cyborg identity raise fundamental questions about gender stereotypes and perceptions?

Drawing upon these ideas, the paper sheds light on the intricate relationship between artificial intelligence and its embedded gendered nature. A comprehensive content analysis aims to highlight how technology operating with male-driven structures is instrumental in dehumanising

the female characters, Alita and Nyssiana. This objective is examined by drawing upon Barbara Creed's idea of female Abjection and monstrosity. Creed explores how objectification of female subjects leads to dehumanisation and Abjection. Locating 'abjection' on the content level helps to investigate the intersection of technology and patriarchy, exposing the broader apparatuses of manipulation reflected in the film *Alita: Battle Angel*. By doing so, the paper maps how artificial intelligence can perpetuate stereotypes about women and affect the social reality of the feminine gender.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva (1982) explores the concept of Abjection. It is a feeling of revulsion or disgust towards an object that is perceived as completely intolerable or entirely out of one's control. Kristeva contends that it generates a kind of separation between the self and the object of disgust, thus erasing the boundary between the subject and the object. The quality of the abject is that it feels opposite to oneself or, as Kristeva (1982, p. 11) explains it is, "the jettisoned object, [which] is radically excluded and [which] draws me toward the place where meaning collapses It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game." There are different forms of objects that generate feelings of Abjection. Julia Kristeva primarily discusses physical impurities like filth, dung, waste, spasm, and vomiting. She gives the example of food loathing, which, for her, is the most fundamental instance of Abjection:

When the eyes see, or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk — harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring — I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, nausea makes me balk at that milk cream and separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. "I" want none of that element, a sign of their desire; "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not assimilate it, and "I" expel it.

(Kristeva, 1982, pp. 11-12)

These things and sensations trigger the feeling of revulsion and discomfort and lead to the rejection of the object. However, Abjection is not simply caused by a lack of health, cleanliness, or purity; it has broader connotations. Abjection is also caused by objects that disturb our identity and defy social norms. It is a feeling of ambiguity or in-betweenness and one that does not obey order, harmony, and borders. It "is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 13).

Appropriating the ideas of Abjection, the study demonstrates how Abjection is performed in a male-centric society against the feminine body as an untenable object. Women characters are made objects of Abjection due to their bodies, which are often presumed to be unsettling and loathsome. The female body could become a loathing object, and her identity can collapse into the deformed, creating a sense of desire and fear. Patriarchal societies have labelled women as abject because, in contrast to men, their reproductive functions draw attention to bodily boundaries. Kristeva (1982, p. 69) suggests that any substance that comes out of bodily orifices such as "[s]pittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears" has traversed bodily boundaries and, as such, is "abject." Thus, women become abject creatures as their body challenges the normative boundaries regarding the concept of body.

In discussing Kristeva's theory, Kelly Oliver (1993) explains that the abject is relative and can change concerning social prohibitions:

[Abjection] is a relationship to a boundary and represents what has been 'jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin' Although every society is founded on the abject — constructing boundaries and jettisoning the antisocial—every society may have its own abject. In all cases, the abject threatens the unity/identity of both society and the subject. It calls into question the boundaries upon which they are constructed.

(p. 56)

Barbara Creed, in her book *Return of the Monstrous Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema* (2022), similarly employs Abjection to explore contemporary cinema to understand how women are depicted as objects of Abjection. The purpose of interweaving these theoretical threads is to explore the impact of cinema and artificial intelligence on gender stereotypes and how they participate in the process of female Abjection.

METHODOLOGY

The study conducts a qualitative analysis and a thorough content analysis of the film. Specifically, visual figures and character dialogues are utilised. This exploration is augmented by drawing upon the critical insights of Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed about the Abjection and dehumanisation of female subjects in a male-dominated society. For this purpose, specific scenes with relevant figures are explored, where the female characters Alita and Nyssiana are shown to be objectified and dehumanised. Their bodies are deformed and desiccated by male roboticists. The paper builds upon this methodology and argues that in a male symbolic order, artificial intelligence technologies are permeated with gender biases and masculine apparatuses, thus playing a vital role in the manipulation and Abjection of female subjects. To achieve this, visuals of Dr. Ido's lab experimentations are presented to highlight the ethically compromising use of AI by showing the loathsome body parts of female characters. These experimentations come across as potent symbols of gendered designs proffering control and domination.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Abjection as a critical lens has started getting more attention in contemporary Women's and Film studies. Highlighting the science fiction revolution, Trevor Richardson (2017) identifies the genderisation of Asian women as female robots. In doing so, he comments on their treatment by film producers as "fetish and monstrous" characters, who "are dehumanised to suit the desires of characters and viewers which wish to sexualise or objectify them" and regards this dehumanisation as "problematic values about Asian women" (Richardson, 2017, p. 1). Richardson's attempt to engage his debate over the Abjection of female characters in his work helps to understand the representation of females as an unsettling subject that invokes both desire and fear in male characters.

Defining abject as the collapse of subject and object positions of female characters, Amy Leigh White, in her Ph. D dissertation *Reframing the Subject: Abjection in twentieth-century American Literature* (2004), identifies the "lack of recognition or misrecognition" of the subject as an abject from its other variables which "cast aside" its subjectivity (pp. vii-viii). She has

employed the theory of Abjection as a theoretical lens to analyse those variables that are linked together and affect the subjectivity of female characters in terms of gender, economic status, social position, and race. White's study helps to understand the fault lines responsible for reframing an unsettled subject into an abject form, and it also highlights the fault lines behind the act of Abjection.

In exploring Abjection in science fiction films, J. P. Telotte (2009) draws attention to the strong female television characters that emerged in the later period of the 20th century. She emphasises the disturbance and instability that has come out of the female characters who are different from other human characters in a film like *Blade Runner* (1982). Her analysis helps to understand the emergence of gender categories beyond the "human and non-human binary." She also argues that "the representation of [female] identity [in the film] carries a potentially heightened significance" as it transcends the cultural and natural norms (Telotte, 2009, p. 110).

Sophie Halliday (2014), in her dissertation, investigates the abject positions of women in sci-fi films. In her words, the presentation of a female body in sci-fi films aligns with the archetype of "femme fatale," which shows the interplay of power and gender within the social-cultural context of female characters in these films (p. 61). Focusing on the literal representation of women characters as femme fatales, she argues that in sci-fi films, feminine characters are the kind of creatures that are simultaneously dangerous and desirable to men (p. 62). Halliday's work helps to understand how the destabilization of female characters in sci-fi films fractures the embodiment of female characters.

In the twenty-first century, critics such as Tina Chanter, Trevor Richardson, Omar Mohammad Abdullah, and Sarah Ablett have analysed the films *The Celebration* (1998), *Ex-Machina* (2014), and the play *Blasted* (2014), respectively, to deliberate upon their artistic manifestation of the Abjection of female identity. In *The Celebration*, Tina Chanter (2008) explores how the film portrays Abjection through the disturbing family structure and the revelation of sexual abuse, challenging the traditional roles of father and son. Trevor Richardson's (2017) analysis of *Ex-Machina* highlights the film's vital role in exploring complex gender and racial power dynamics through the dehumanisation of female Asian robots, shedding light on the film's reflection of evolving gender values and human-AI interactions. Similarly, Sarah Ablett's (2014) analysis of *Blasted* delves into the abject nature of the protagonist, Ian, who embodies a dual and ambiguous identity as both a killer and a saviour, highlighting the psychological conflicts within contemporary society.

Gaining traction, artificial intelligence has, in the last decade, been studied and explored at length in interdisciplinary parlance. The intersection of artificial intelligence, cinema, and humanities has given rise to new ethical and political debates. Spyros G. Tzafestas (2015), in the book *Roboethics: A Navigating Overview*, explores the ethical complexities involved in the creation and development of robots and how the application of artificial intelligence bears some of the fundamental moral responsibilities. Suleyman and Bhaskar (2023), in their book, *The Coming Wave: Technology, Power, and the Twenty-first Century's Greatest Dilemma*, provide an insider perspective on the prospects and threats posed by artificial intelligence technologies. They hint towards the fragilities of such technologies and the existential dilemmas of control over them. Raquel Oliveira and Elmira Yadollahi (2023), in a paper "Robots in movies: a content analysis of the portrayal of fictional social robots," examine the depiction of AI and robots in popular movies and how they present polarised views of either extreme threat or complete social abilities of AI-driven technologies. Mohamed and Ahmed (2024), in a paper, "A New 'Mammy' in the Age of Digitalization; Human Insecurity Versus Utopian Affective Algorithms in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara*

and *The Sun*,” highlights the collapse of the distinction between humans and machines as explored in contemporary fiction and the human desire to subjugate the powers that threaten its freedom and supremacy.

Filippo Santoni De Sio (2024), in his book *Human Freedom in the Age of AI*, discusses the impact of artificial intelligence on human freedom. He claims that “AI is a set of technologies produced by and operating as a part of . . . a socio-technical system, a set of social, political, economic, and cultural norms and practices . . . AI is not only a technology but also a part of a power structure” (p. 15). This implies that technology is embedded within an already evolving social structure and has a potential to curtail or promote freedom in different directions because there is a “complex network of material, cultural, economic, political, and social-psychological factors inevitably embedded in the development, production, and use of the technology” (p. 16).

FEMALE ABJECTS IN ALITA: BATTLE ANGEL: CRAFTING NEW GENDER POSITIONS

The connecting thread in the film is the masculinised construction of female characters who are programmed as unsettling subjects in the form of abjects. In Morgan and Morris’s (1995, p. 22) words, this unsettling situation occurs “when one is in a state of abjection, [and] the borders between the object and subject cannot be maintained.” The trivialised female cyborg characters in the film are not only in conflict with the values and power of humans and the distinction between inhuman or natural and man-made objects, but they also defy the domestic settings of both in their local landscapes. The transformation of female subjects into abject forms within the narrative of the film exposes the inherent stereotypes and idealisation of women. This becomes evident from the beginning in the unconventional physical structures of characters like Alita and Nyssiana and their experiences in disrupted realities. While revealing the unsettling events that push the narrative forward, the dissonance that occurs after Abjection and its impact on the identities of female characters, both as subjects and objects in the film, is worth pondering upon. It raises questions about how male characters in the story shape the social realities of female characters, pushing them into abject roles.

One crucial aspect of the female abject is the struggle for self-identification, particularly as human beings. This struggle can be observed within the context of programming female cyborgs and semi-robotic characters through artificial intelligence. These female characters are subjected to programming, which raises important questions about the implications for the identity of the female gender resulting from the imitative representation of female cyborgs. The female characters are programmed and lack sexuality despite possessing feminine bodies. This further calls into question the gender roles portrayed in the film, which differ from prevailing societal norms.



FIGURE 1. Alita's upper portion of the body as a scrap at Zalem



FIGURE 2. Alita in Dr. Ido's lab



FIGURE 3. Alita with the face of an angel and the body of a warrior

The film begins with the rebirth of the protagonist, Alita, whose upper portion of the body has been found by Dr. Ido in a junkyard on Zalem (as shown in Figure 1). Dr. Ido's act of juxtaposing Alita's head with the body that he has created for her daughter (as shown in Figure 2) protects Alita as she gets her new body, and her existence hinges between an angel and a warrior (as shown in Figure 3). However, locating the cinematic strategies, Alita's metaxis of the angelic face and warrior's body, which exhibits Abjection and transforms a dead subject into an object, helps to highlight that she neither remains a female nor a robot instead she appears as an angel from her face and a warrior from her body. According to Kristeva (1982, p. 31), "Subjects can be abjected through the abuse of other subjects. They can also use Abjection as a way of protecting themselves from abuse." Kristeva alludes here to the dual nature of the process of Abjection. Alita becomes the subject of Abjection, primarily at the hands of Dr. Ido, who transforms her into a caricatured object, rendering her far from appearing as a typical human being. She is moulded into a creature ripe for stereotyping, marginalisation, and exclusion. Paradoxically, her transformation into a warrior grants her a defensive power within an otherwise hostile environment.

In this context, these characters exemplify a complex interplay of identities, showcasing how Alita oscillates between being a dehumanised abject creature and a warrior determined to secure her freedom and autonomy. Alita's journey from the junkyard to a laboratory and the pivotal moment when she confronts herself before a mirror highlight her interactions and negotiations with various forms of Abjection. She transitions from an unconscious object to a newly emerging conscious subject. However, as the narrative unfolds, the critical question remains: How will Alita utilise her warrior-like stature to challenge gender norms and combat the abuse of power and technology? Will her newfound strength empower her, or could it potentially further alienate and subject her to additional Abjection as her journey continues? These questions underscore the complexity of Alita's character development and the intricate dynamics of Abjection within the film.



FIGURE 4. Alita in a mirror with an abject structure of a body and face

Tracing the further effects of Abjection, which cause Alita's existence to take on a disturbing form and reshape her identity in unsettling ways, figure 4 provides evidence to argue that Alita struggles to recognise herself due to her new cyborg body and its abilities. As her demeanour indicates, her initial response is not one of defence and power but rather a sense of

strangeness and melancholy. She is profoundly affected by the unrecognizability of her identity, both in personal and social contexts. Her rebirth has granted her a life devoid of any prior history within her consciousness.

In Figure 4, the perspective vividly captures Alita's mood, marked by a profound sense of alienation from her body and surroundings. It effectively conveys the implicit influence of her new identity, which she remains unaware of. This figure starkly contrasts the perspectives one might be tempted to derive from the first three figures. Alita's journey from her creation toward becoming a somewhat conscious subject culminates in an ambivalent expression on her face. She remains in a state of in-betweenness, and it gives a sensation of Abjection to her. Kristeva (1982, p. 4) defines Abjection concerning borders and identity: "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes Abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, and rules? The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite." Alita's psychological ambiguity and ambivalence, as reflected in her image, establish her as a conflicted gendered social subject, a condition that may appear suspicious due to its form. This underscores the point that Abjection is not solely a physical phenomenon but also encompasses emotional and psychological dimensions. Abjection arises from what disturbs Alita's sense of self and identity when she grapples with making sense of the unknown or when she cannot neatly fit her concept of body and soul into an accepted category. In this context, Abjection encompasses the experiences and sensations that stem from Alita's inability to immediately classify her existence or resolve the conflicts inherent in her newly acquired identity. This leads us further to explore the complex relationship between Dr. Ido and Alita.

UNSETTLING REPRESENTATION OF ALITA



FIGURE 5. Alita and Ido gazing at each other

Alita is designed and projected to resemble a female machine, fulfilling a stereotyped feminine role under the guidance of Dr. Ido (as depicted in Figure 5). Alita has only one "parent"; she is created by Ido, who provided his daughter's body for her. Ido does not instruct her on how to behave in specific situations because she is already programmed to be a fighter through artificial intelligence. Ido, however, is not conscious of this fact. This lack of awareness allows Ido to

perceive Alita as an innocent robot designed to be the ideal prototype for society that will act on predefined norms. Ido believes that Alita is a teenage girl who has not been exposed to gender roles related to love, sex, and education. Figure 5 serves as a symbolic representation of the master-subject dynamic. In this scene, Ido's gaze symbolises authority and control, as well as his expectations that Alita will conform to typical female roles. His lack of awareness regarding Alita's inner thoughts and nature highlights how external appearances and superficial characteristics often shape our perceptions of gender, particularly in the case of women.

Alita's appearance in this figure embodies an idealised character, shedding light on the pervasive phenomenon of female idealisation. Even in a futuristic setting with advanced technology, the image of Alita reflects clichéd gender expectations and normative notions of femininity. This suggests that, despite technological advancements, societal constructs and stereotypes regarding gender remain deeply ingrained. Kristeva (1982) also sheds light on how societal codes inform us in our journey to encounter femininity. She writes:

What will concern me here . . . [are] the alterations, within subjectivity and within the very symbolic competence, implied by the confrontation with the feminine and the way in which societies code themselves in order to accompany as far as possible the speaking subject on that journey. Abjection, or the journey to the end of the night.

(Kristeva, 1982, p. 58)

Here, she highlights how discourses and different frameworks come into play in encounters with the feminine. These discourses and frameworks are the societal constructions that influence individuals, such as Dr. Ido, in their perceptions and understanding of female aspects.

Figure 5, set against the backdrop of advanced computers, reiterates that even in a technologically advanced future, these cyborg female characters continue to embody and reinforce stereotypical gender expectations and conventional images of femininity. These visual representations underscore the idea that power and patriarchy still play a pivotal role in shaping our perceptions, even in a technologically advanced society. They emphasise that technology is not a value-neutral, apolitical, or gender-neutral entity but can perpetuate and reinforce existing gender norms and expectations.

In essence, these figures serve as a powerful commentary on the enduring influence of societal power structures and gender expectations, even in a world characterised by advanced technology and artificial intelligence.

QUEST FOR FREEDOM AND AUTONOMY

The relationship between Alita and Dr. Ido, a cyber-physician, initially appears deeply personal as he donates his daughter's body to her, fostering a complex emotional bond between them. However, a crucial twist emerges in Dr. Ido and Alita's relationship. Her growing sense of identity and agency clashes with Dr. Ido's perspective of ownership and guardianship. Their father-daughter relationship becomes strained as Dr. Ido, representing a patriarchal figure, attempts to assert ownership over Alita while she seeks to define herself independently. As Robin Roberts (1996, p. 139) contends, the existence of cyborg women within the realm of women's science fiction serves as a potent means to "criticise patriarchal society and . . . provide an alternative vision of a world based on feminist principles." This complex relationship matrix sheds light on the role of technology in shaping one's sense of self and blurring the boundaries between humans and machines. It highlights the interplay of artificial intelligence, identity, and gender norms, as

well as the impact of technology on our understanding of self. The cyber-ethnologist Donna Haraway (1985) discusses the figure of the cyborg as a creature that blurs the binaries between “self/other, mind/body, male/female, civilised/primitive, reality/appearance . . . truth/illusion” recognises the role of women in the contemporary technological world and, thus, vehemently urges women to actively embrace technology and resist the complete surrender of technological power to the patriarchal establishment (pp. 59-60). She suggests that cyborgs can be of significant interest to women as “they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism . . . [b]ut [they] are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins” (pp. 9-10). The depiction of cyborg identity in *Alita: Battle Angel* alludes to gender fluidity, highlighting how Alita oscillates between various subject positions. This fluidity ultimately renders her an abject creature, challenging traditional gender subjectivity. On one occasion, she grapples with the task of winning her boyfriend’s heart, while on another, she transforms into a formidable warrior engaged in combat with robotic opponents. This absence of a stable and consistent social subject position constitutes a fundamental crisis for Alita. The intersection of gender and cyborg identity defies the notion of rigid gender boundaries, emphasising the malleable nature of identity within the context of the film.

The intricacies of this interface between identity, gender, and artificial intelligence are further accentuated when we witness Alita’s journey of self-discovery, which also presents her as an abject form — challenging conventional notions of identity and gender roles in a technologically advanced society. During her final fight with Grewishka, Alita loses her body, which may cause abject sensations in the audience or evoke a sense of loathing. However, her transformation from losing the body that belongs to Ido’s daughter to acquiring her new cyborg body, which is connected to her past, signifies her shift from being an abject to a subject, exemplified through her victory over Grewishka.

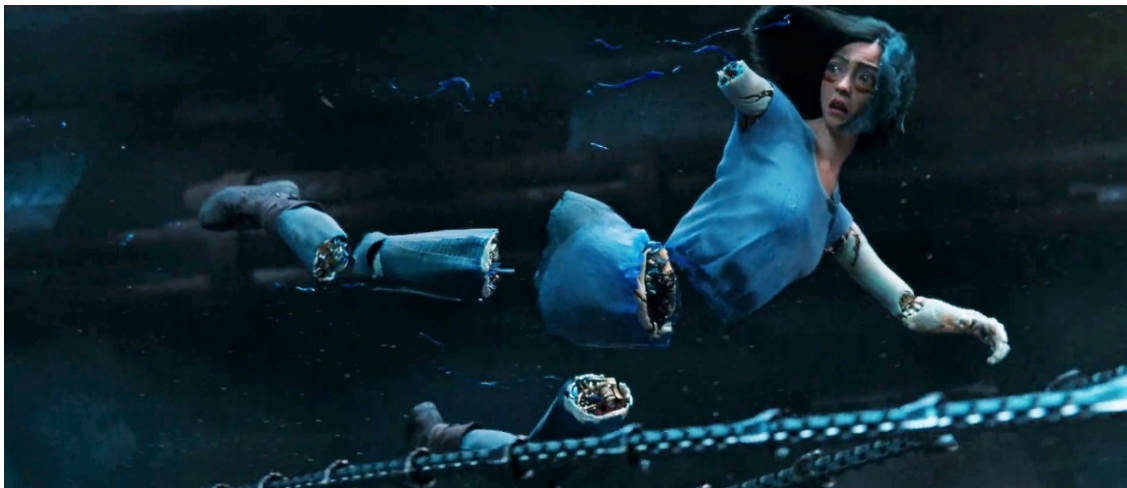


FIGURE 6. Distortion of Alita into pieces



FIGURE 7. Abjected Alita

Numerous transformations of her body significantly show how Alita challenges conventional gender representations and redefines boundaries. Initially, Grewishka tears Alita's body into pieces (as shown in Figure 6), and this process of distortion and deformity completes her cycle of Abjection. This transformation does not present an image of Alita as a powerful, athletic female fighting machine; instead, it portrays her as an immature and vulnerable fighter. Her vulnerability comes full circle during her battle with Grewishka, who possesses a large and muscular masculine body with imposing jaws (as shown in Figure 7). In fighting with him, Alita appears more like a child struggling to maintain her physical form.



FIGURE 8. Alita in her new suit

In this context, Dr. Ido's act of giving Alita a new lease on life by utilising his daughter's body takes on added significance. On the one hand, it awakens Alita from her amnesiac condition, and on the other hand, it bestows upon her a new identity and body. Figure 7 illustrates the physically broken state of Alita's body at the hands of Grewishka. However, in Figure 8, Alita is shown as showcasing her new yet entirely original fighting suit, programmed by her creator. She acquires this new suit following her battle with Grewishka — considered the most formidable male

robot in the film — during which she sustains significant damage, and her body becomes fragmented (depicted in figures 6 and 7). This portrayal of Alita contrasts with the prevailing representations of women in films, as she emerges as the most powerful robot, challenging the established gender roles depicted in the rest of the movie. She defeats Grewishka, the most potent male character, as well as numerous others on her planet. The significant and conflicting transformations showcased in the narrative, thus, depict both the cycle of Abjection and the struggle for empowerment within the traditional phallogocentric environment.

These visual figures offer us a critical insight into Alita's journey, moving through the dark phase of Abjection and her struggle to confront and ultimately overcome it. While Kristeva herself may not extensively explore how female abject characters counter aggressive patriarchy and ultimately defeat it, Barbara Creed (2022), drawing upon Kristeva in her study on what she calls "feminist new wave cinema," demonstrates how female characters encounter the masculine and eventually prevail. She writes,

Feminist New Wave Cinema focuses on this journey and the woman's confrontation with the masculine and the feminine practices (as distinct from patriarchal rituals) she adopts to protect herself. Return of the Monstrous-Feminine explores her 'journey to the end of the night.' She uses different practices and speaks in a different voice in her fight against man's aggressive phallicity. These include practices related to astrology (Spoor), masquerade (Promising Young Woman), the supernatural (Thelma, Jennifer's Body), matriarchal power (Mad Max: Fury Road), and animality (Ginger Snaps, The Lure, When Animals Dream.

(Creed, 2022, p. 23)

Following this, Alita also embarks on a journey to confront aggressive phallogocentrism and her Abjection, but she does not seem to reach the end of her journey. She grapples with these challenges throughout the film and is not provided with equally powerful practices to confront them. As a result, she remains a complex character, existing in an in-between state.

THE COMPLEX PORTRAYAL OF NYSSIANA



FIGURE 9. Nyssiana in human and dehumanised forms

The representation of Nyssiana in the film reveals additional practices and performances that contribute to the stereotypical cinematic portrayal of women. While Alita is depicted as an abject female through different idealised feminine aspects that are considered good and submissive, the conflicting, evil, and dehumanised forms of the female antagonist, Nyssiana, as depicted in Figure 9, offer further insight into Kristeva's concept of Abjection. Nyssiana's character depicts a female character whose sustainable boundaries between subject and object are eroding, and she performs certain antagonistic norms that challenge conventional categorisation. This further abjectifies her, making it challenging for the audience to classify her as a normative subject or object. She also comes across as an ambiguous creation, existing in a state of in-betweenness.

This reiterates Kristeva's (1982) important argument that Abjection is not solely caused by physical impurity but also by "What does not respect borders, positions, or rules" (p. 3). Nyssiana is perceived in a more distorted dual form, intensifying the sensation of Abjection. Initially, she presents herself as a fetishised female character in a red coat, walking on a nighttime street, apparently in search of something or for a secret meeting. However, this appearance abruptly transforms into that of a semi-robotic cyborg fighting machine, as shown in Figure 9.

This initial visual scene makes Nyssiana an unsettling creature with double identities and forms. It becomes difficult to perceive her as a stable social subject. This not only underscores the influence of technology on the construction of gender norms but also alters her impact on the audience.



FIGURE 10. Nyssiana as an Object of Abjection

Figure 10 aids in understanding and deciphering the potential aims and effects of Nyssiana's Abjection. Regarding visual effects that disrupt her identity, it is evident that Nyssiana appears as a female character from the front portion of her face, legs, and shoes. However, apart from these two visual effects, the rest of her appearance consists of additions to a female human body, transforming her into a spider, as depicted in Figure 10. In this context, a characteristic analysis of Nyssiana, in the aforementioned figure, reveals a female warrior spider with sharply pointed jaws capable of swiftly dispatching any creature in a single attempt. She exhibits the ability to cling to walls in a manner akin to how a spider adheres to its web in fighting mode. This explains

Kristeva's contention that in male-centred societies, women are often presented as uncontrollable, abominable, and evil, hence in need of being kept in check. She writes:

One of them, the masculine, apparently victorious, confesses through its very relentlessness against the other, the feminine, that it is threatened by an asymmetrical, irrational, wily, uncontrollable power . . . That other sex, the feminine, becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed.

(Kristeva, 1982, p. 70)

Thus, Nyssiana, initially depicted as an abominable spider, first evokes a sensation of loathing and ultimately represents a radical other that must be terminated for the sake of social cohesion and stability.



FIGURE 11. Abjectified Nyssiana – Dehumanised face and body

The representation of women as machines, as depicted in Figure 11, exposes the dehumanisation of the female character and illustrates how the filmmaker has portrayed a female character with the characteristics of a repulsive creature. Furthermore, the marginalisation of women as mere tools to satisfy the desires of their male masters/creators while simultaneously negating their roles as women within society is a widely recognised theme. As abject creatures, these women characters exhibit no signs of rebirth and rebellion.

Barbara Creed (2022), in her recent book, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema*, argues:

Female protagonists of New Wave Cinema experience a katabasis, or fall, as they undertake a journey into the dark night of Abjection where their sense of a coherent identity is threatened, where they encounter male violence and from where they emerge changed, often reborn. Rather than seeing a woman as the abject thing or object to be confronted with, this study sees a woman as the subject who has the temerity to embark on her own journey, her own personal revolt. As Abjection troubles the patriarchal order — any authoritarian order — New Wave directors draw on the powers of Abjection to disrupt its laws, language and values.

(Creed, 2022, p. 25)

Contrary to this transformation in female characters, both Alita and Nyssiana remain subsumed under the phallic symbolic order, and the film does not show any healthy signs of their rebirth and revolt. This is further evident in Figure 12.

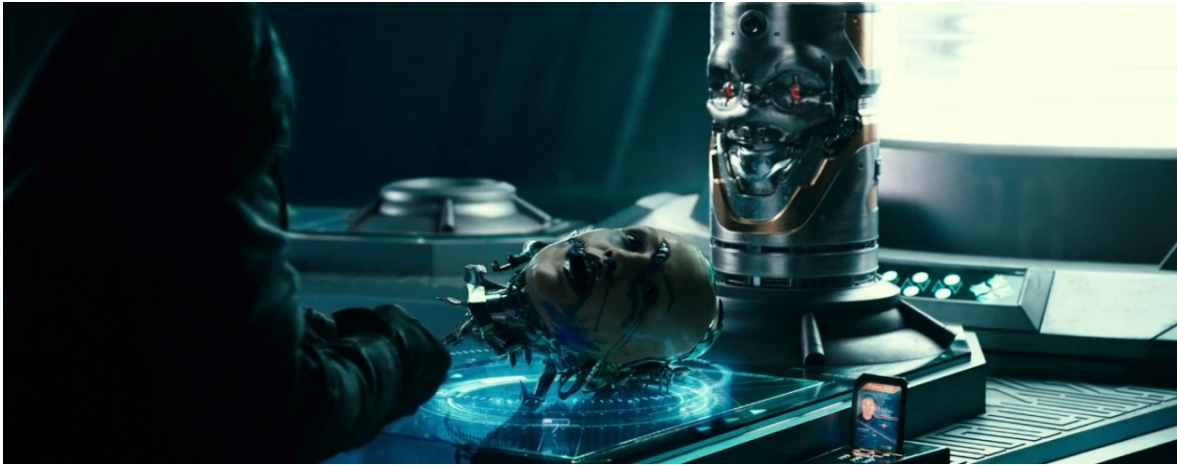


FIGURE 12. Nyssiana's Face as a Commodity Exchange

Nyssiana's head is shown in the hands of Ido, who is placing it on the machine that will earn him points to increase his rank among cyborg fighters. This portrayal positions women, in general, and Nyssiana, in particular, as commodities that can be exchanged for bonuses, sustaining their lives in this age of technology. Depicting women as objects of exchange in the form of commodities aligns with patriarchal capitalism, where women are reduced to the bare minimum, alternating between their status as subjects and objects. Artificial intelligence plays a significant role in creating cyborg female characters, blurring the boundaries of gender and deconstructing them into their basic components. Female characters like Alita and Nyssiana are not entirely depicted as human or purely robots, but they appear as monstrous and emasculated constructs.

This leads us to the conclusion that the deformed and monstrous construction of Alita and Nyssiana represents men's fear of the generative powers of the feminine. Kristeva (1982, p. 77) rightly states, "Fear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power. It is this power, a dreaded one, that patrilineal filiation has the burden of subduing." Alita and Nyssiana are not only subdued but their essential generative powers and figures are deformed and dehumanised by masculine apparatuses. The oppression of these two characters is constructed by patriarchal powers through the fear of the abject — both Alita and Nyssiana exist on the border between the subject and object, human and non-human, weak and strong, and evoke a sense of revulsion and fear. In this post-apocalyptic science fiction movie, they come across as sexualised beings who are objectified in the most unsettling ways.

For Kristeva, there is a possibility of revolt and rebirth in the dark night of Abjection. The female protagonists, after facing phallogentric nightmares in the form of rapists, murderous fathers, and violent patriarchy, may experience rebirth and freedom. This rebirth and revolt may take the form of personal justice (as seen in *Promising Young Woman* (2020) by Emerald Fennell), revenge as in *Revenge* (2017) by Coralie Fargeat and *The Nightingale* by Jennifer Kent, a terrorist attack as in *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-2021), murder as in *Spoor* (2017) by Agnieszka Holland, forging a new identity as in *Nomadland* (2020) by Chloé Zhao and *The Wife* (2017) by Björn Runge, or supernatural justice as in *Jennifer's Body* (2009) by Karyn Kusama. However, in *Alita: Battle Angel*, we do not see any grandeur and liberation in the female characters' rebirth and revolt; instead, they remain subordinated under phallogentric ideologies and powers constructed through artificial intelligence. Thus, both Alita and Nyssiana are portrayed as soulless constructions in the film.

CONCLUSION

This paper delved into various intriguing concepts regarding the science fiction movie *Alita: Battle Angel*. It explored the abject nature of the cyborg and the implications of artificial intelligence on notions of subjectivity and humanity. The paper centred its analysis on gender dynamics and the portrayal of women as commodities for exchange by employing the critical framework of Julia Kristeva's notion of Abjection. The paper successfully demonstrated how the female characters struggle to maintain their gender identities, as exemplified by Alita's confusion about her identity. Alita does not fully identify as a human being nor as a complete fighting robot, displaying an appearance that combines angelic features with a warrior-like physique. At times, one witnesses Alita presenting her heart to win her boyfriend Hugo's affection, while at other times, she shatters the sturdy bodies of fighting robots stronger than her. This lack of fixed gender and social role categorisation positions Alita as an abject figure who cannot firmly establish herself as a social subject or a fighting object. Further, the problematic nature of Alita and Nyssiana challenges conventional gender stereotypes through their hyper-gendered cyborg bodies. Female cyborgs in the film are exposed to and reflect the gender roles and positions they occupy as products of artificial intelligence.

Moreover, in the film, gender roles are negotiated within the realm of artificial intelligence, resulting in the breakdown of feminine gender traits that conform to dominant societal norms. Concerning the use of artificial intelligence in the film, it is evident that gender performances manifest in hyper-gendered cyborg characters with distinctly female personality traits. Through the extensive content analysis of dialogues and visual figures, the paper demonstrated that technology is embedded within evolving masculine structures. The creation and deployment of female robot characters are informed by the phallogocentric symbolic apparatuses and are in line with the ideas of Abjection and monstrosity. The female characters, Alita and Nyssiana, are thereby shown emerging as typical hyper-gendered monster abject figures. Drawing upon Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed, the paper further highlighted the possibility of awakening and freedom for female characters who exhibit a newfound consciousness of resilience and revolt after a long process of manipulation and Abjection.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This study is supported via funding from Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Project number (PSAU/ 2024/R/1445).

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