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Posthuman Experiences of Men and Masculinities in Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me*

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Abstract: Post-war science fiction frequently urged to reconsider many norms considered natural in society and introduced a diversity of taken-for-granted norms, particularly gender norms. In this regard, cyberpunk, for instance, offers a valuable resource in defining and analyzing diverse sexualities in the tradition of speculative fiction. In this context, this article aims to exemplify the posthuman experiences of men and masculinities by focusing on Ian McEwan's novel *Machines Like Me* to examine cyborgs the queer and fluid sexualities and explore posthuman sexualities from critical studies of masculinities perspective. The heteronormative society in which diverse and non-conforming sexualities are perceived as queer necessarily regards cyborgs (and embodied artificial intelligence) as queer and problematizes the fluidity of cyborg sexuality, and Ian McEwan's cyborg in *Machines Like Me* provokes the fear of losing masculinity in such a society. In this context, this article aims to exemplify the posthuman experiences of men and masculinities by focusing on Ian McEwan's novel Machines Like Me to examine cyborgs the queer and fluid sexualities and explore posthuman sexualities from critical studies of masculinities perspective.

Keywords: Posthumanism, masculinities, queer, cyborg

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Post-war science fiction offers its readers a plethora of speculative worlds and new discoveries, thus enabling them to reconsider societies' normative experiences. Unveiling limitless possibilities and new perspectives make it possible to deconstruct, criticize and even change what is regarded as normal/usual in a society. In this sense, it may be asserted that post-war science fiction presents a perfect ground to redefine and criticize human sexuality and gender roles since "knowing science fiction's potential for using the future to explore contemporary reality and its alternatives, one might think the genre ideal for the examination of alternative sexualities" (Pearson, 2003, p.149). Despite the fact that science fiction canon often reiterates heteronormative sexualities and, therefore, reproduced patriarchal ideology in the Western world, new forms of science fiction focused on creating new worlds and offering diverse sexualities after World War II.

It can be claimed that scientific knowledge and practice have often been characterized with building stones of masculine ideology such as progress, producing and preserving knowledge, and technological development. It is also reasonable to argue that Western civilization substantially feminized all diverse ideologies, cultures, and practices. As Peterson (2010) puts it, "diverse hierarchies are linked and ideologically "naturalized" by feminizing those who are subordinated" (p.19). Thus, feminine qualities are mostly attributed to those who are subordinated. Along with the colonial period, Eastern cultures are subordinated by Western culture, and all the values that represent them are feminized by Western hegemony. In this regard, it may be asserted that science fiction as a literary genre was heavily reflected in a masculine dictum, emphasizing scientific knowledge and phallogocentric social structures. However, post-war science fiction writers enjoyed the genre's limitless possibilities and created diverse gender roles that will challenge the heteronormative definitions of the West (Merrick, 2003, p.241). In this context, queer identities suggested by science fiction are frequently encountered in literature. Judith Butler (1999) refers to the limitless

possibilities that non-heteronormative gender roles offer while discussing Deleuzian perspective of diverse sex roles by asserting that

> if the number of sexes corresponds to the number of existing individuals, sex would no longer have any general application as a term: one's sex would be a radically singular property and would no longer be able to operate as a useful or descriptive generalization. (p.151)

Queer politics and identities, therefore, became an indispensable component of post-war science fiction because both queer theory and post-war science fiction cannot regard "sexual orientation as a fixed identity, but describes bodies, genders, and sexualities as fluid" (Pearson, 2003, p.157). That is why science fiction, especially post-war science fiction, broke loose from the strict boundaries of heteronormativity and patriarchy, enabling the writers and the readers to examine and explore diverse gender roles and queer identities.

Murat Göç-Bilgin (2019) describes the fluidity of queer by stating that "queer basically denies any categories or definitions and rather focuses on fluidity and performativity of gender roles by constantly reinventing and reformulating itself and defamiliarizing, denaturalizing and reifying all cultural and political codes and institutions" (p.164). Accordingly, post-war science fiction and queer theory intersect to produce, reveal and investigate diverse gender roles. Post-war science fiction, especially cyberpunk, subverted and deconstructed patriarchal norms and ideologies that relied on redefining, confining, and disciplining the human body. On the other hand, cyborg bodies highlighted fluidity, abnormality, and queer denial of all prescribed definitions. Donna Haraway (2006) defines the term cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (p.117) in her *Cyborg Manifesto*.

As indicated by Haraway, the cyborg can be defined as a 'social reality' creature, as it turns these norms upside down and, in most cases, has difficulty keeping up with these norms with regard to their essential

characteristics. The cyborg challenges all traditional notions regarding the human body. “The posthuman perspective rejects uniformity and universal definitions. It is based on an almost queer ambiguity with a constant movement, a constant fluidity and renewal” (Göç-Bilgin, 2020, p.46). In science fiction, the cyborg is designed or attributed to heteronormative gender roles. Sara Cohen Shabot (2006) states that “the figure of the cyborg, thus, turned out to be a challenging, transgressive figure aiming at a subversion of the traditional divisions between human and machine, between the self and the other, between inside and outside and between nature and culture” (p.224). Therefore, cyborg challenges all pre-defined categories of traditional Western masculinity, allowing us to redefine and evaluate these categories.

Despite Western patriarchy's efforts to categorize the human body, particularly its functions and public visibility, cyberpunk confronts the notion of human beings as an embodied entity and challenges these categorizations with its emphasis on indefinability. As Haraway (2006) puts it, “The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust” (p.119). The traditional concepts of gender, race, and class that are often considered the products of patriarchy do not fit the cyborg universe that defies heteronormative patriarchal order.

In this sense, the cyborg’s queer and fluid nature provides a significant ground for research regarding the incompatibility of individuals and cyborg bodies in a world where traditional social norms and heteronormative ideologies are contested. It is expected that the queer nature of the cyborg will inevitably come into conflict with traditional patriarchal norms. In addition, it can be assumed that the phenomenon of cyber 'fluidity', which poses a threat to masculine hegemony and heteronormative understanding, also affects traditional men and masculinities. The masculinity crises triggered by the cyborg are also very exemplary in science fiction. Therefore, considering the crises and conflicts of masculinities unveiled by the queer cyborg, it is worth analyzing men and masculinities from a posthumanist perspective. As Balmar and Mellstöm (2019) point out

> the metaphor of the cyborg works as an encompassing term for a self-regulating system that transcends the organic and the artificial, the ›machinic‹, and the ›non-machinic‹, which has been so characteristic for the conceptual as well as biological evolution of man and masculinity. (p.322)

Machines Like Me and Posthuman Crisis of Masculinity

Ian McEwan's 2020 novel *Machines Like Me* offers such discussions and reconsiderations of the confrontation between humans and cyborgs. McEwan presents an alternative 1980s in an alternative universe in which Alan Turing is still alive and pioneering the advancements in artificial intelligence. In such an alternate reality, McEwan portrays a love triangle among Charlie -also the narrator of the novel- in his 30s, a young woman named Miranda and a robot with artificial intelligence named Adam. Through this love triangle, McEwan questions the function of cyborgs with queer bodies in human relations. As a tech addict, Charlie decides to buy the cyborg as soon as it is on sale and considers Adam as his prodigal son. On the other hand, Miranda is not as enthusiastic as Charlie and treats Adam as a sex doll. Meanwhile, Adam swings between being a docile boy and a sexualized machine that characterizes his in-betweenness and causes a traumatic and painful state of mind for all three of them. Charlie's attitude towards Adam, especially towards the end of the novel, and his tendency to violence also prove the problematic relationship between men and the cyborg. Therefore, by creating such a contradictory environment, McEwan scrutinizes the clash between masculinities and the posthuman.

At the beginning of the novel, McEwan portrays a highly technologized alternative 80s, fully competitive with 21st-century technology with high-speed trains, speech recognition software, advances in artificial intelligence, renewable energy, and many more. Charlie describes these advancements of the diverse universe as

> By the early seventies, digital communication had discarded its air of convenience and become a daily chore. Likewise, the 250 mph trains – crowded and dirty. Speech recognition software, a fifties' miracle, had long turned to drudge, with entire populations sacrificing hours each day to lonely soliloquising. Brain-machine interfacing, wild fruit of sixties optimism, could barely arouse the interest of a child. (McEwan, 2020, p.5)

The alternative universe that McEwan has created certainly serves a purpose. As Andy Duncan (2003) points out, "An alternate history is not a history at all, but a work of fiction in which history as we know it is changed for dramatic and often ironic effect" (p.209). It is possible to say that McEwan managed to achieve such an ironic effect. An alternative 80s fictional world, where technology is much more advanced, highlights a diverse cyborg image that threatens hegemonic masculinity. At the beginning of the novel, this diverse universe created by McEwan offers the reader a narrative in which the heteronormative understanding of our time is relatively not dominant.

In the novel, the lack of communication despite advanced digital technology urges people to build diverse companions, and McEwan offers 'buying' an AI friend as a solution. The narrator of the novel, Charlie Friend, is a lonely, middle-aged British man interested in computers and artificial intelligence. He decides to buy a replicant with the money he inherited from his mother. With an insurmountable desire of playing God, he states that "Our ambitions ran high and low -for a creation myth made real, for a monstrous act of self-love" (p.1). Such an obsession is closely related to the superiority complex of men since masculinity consistently has to prove itself over time. The need for proof indicates that masculinity is not natural but just a production of patriarchy built to serve it. So, it is impossible for an unnatural social phenomenon to survive without reinforcement or repetition. Therefore, the power of being a creator may be regarded as a suitable way to repeat and prove masculinity. McEwan adds that "more practically, we intended to devise an improved, more modern version of ourselves and exult in the joy of invention, the thrill of mastery" (p.1). Production may be seen

as a significant indicator of traditional masculinities and their requirement of superiority and perfection. It can be thought that cyborgs and cybernetic machines, like all other production models, should serve masculinity to prove itself through production. However, Haraway (2006) states that pre-cybernetic machines failed to serve this purpose since they were "only a caricature of that masculinist reproductive dream" (p.120) which should be seen as an extremely important dream for masculinity since;

> In the cyborg, the old human imperfections are prosthetically corrected; psychotropic technologies reconcile the spirit that is willing with the flesh that is weak. The loneliness and rigidity of the humanist body are eased. (Jacobs, 2003, p.94)

However, the obsession with being perfect is also a collective fear of humankind dominated by machines or artificial intelligence. When Charlie unpacks Adam for the first time at home, he also refers to the fear by saying, "before us sat the ultimate plaything, the dream of ages, the triumph of humanism – or its angel of death" (p.4). As Gray (2000) puts it, "an enhanced cyborg is one where the cyborgian technologies are used to make the cyborg greater than the human in a specific domain: a better soldier, a better lover, a superhero" (p.278). The fear of losing superiority over other creatures is an ancient feeling. However, cyborgism also generates some new fears and challenges. "We can see and we can well imagine that cyborgism could be a bridge to different types of posthumans, some with male bodies of some sort, some quite genderless, some with new genders based on new sexes" (p.294). Normalizing diverse gender roles is a significant challenge for hegemonic masculinity, constructed on heterosexual relationships.

Charlie refers to the role of Adam by stating that "in a sense he would be like our child" (p.22), so he wants to design Adam's characteristics not alone but with Miranda. Adam is Charlie's fatherhood ticket that Charlie is not brave enough to have a real child. Being unemployed -in other words, not being enough to be the head of the family according to patriarchal norms- stops Charlie from thinking that

he is eligible and ready to become a father because, as Seidler (1989) puts it, "the visions of authority which we inherit within Western culture are tied up with conceptions of the father" (p.272). That is why he thinks that it is more suitable to have a replicant as a child with Miranda.

> Now I had a method and a partner, I relaxed into the process, which began to take on a vaguely erotic quality; we were making a child! Because Miranda was involved, I was protected from self-replication. The genetic metaphor was helpful. (p.33)

It can be asserted that such a paternity method creates a much bigger crisis for the men and masculinities in the novel. Real or artificial, Adam tries to prove himself both as an individual and a man. Adam is perceived as a machine and emphasizes his existence, intelligence, and consequently his masculinity at every chance since "a man needs to keep repeating gendered acts to show that masculinity does in fact exist" (Reeser, 2010, p.82). Adam has sex with Miranda and falls in love with her, but Miranda treats him as only a "sex doll" and even calls him a vibrator. Charlie is jealous of Adam at first and furious, but then he also calls Adam a fucking machine. He says, "perhaps she was right, Adam didn't qualify, he wasn't a man" (p.94). As the ultimate creation of science, he performs the masculine qualities of producing and preserving knowledge to prove himself by reaching out and analyzing the history of philosophy and literature via the internet, and writing "2000 haikus and reciting about a dozen, of the same quality, each one devoted to Miranda" (p.145). He goes a step further and underestimates the world's literature by defining it as 'the varieties of human failures' such as "failures of cognition, honesty, kindness, self-awareness; superb depictions of murder, cruelty, greed, stupidity, self-delusion, above all, profound misunderstanding of others" (p.149). With an embodied artificial intelligence, the collective fear of creating artificial intelligence that may pose a risk to humanity becomes even more complex and even terrifying for men. As Carlen Lavigne (2013) puts it, "the embodied cyborg provokes more questions about body, gender, reproduction, kinship and cultural identity than does the artificial intelligence" (p.85).

As a queer body, it is not surprising to define Adam's masculinity as toxic. Adam's tendency to violence arises from the necessity of proving the masculine role attributed to him. The fact that those around him do not regard him as a man and that he wants to prove it are significant reasons for Adam's toxic masculinity. As Pearson (2109) argues, "within the extremism discourse, 'toxic' men are often the most marginalized, or subordinate, in terms of class or race, or both" (p.1257). The violence as an outcome of toxic masculinity may also be observed in Adam's behaviors. He threatens Charlie to remove his arm if he tries to reach his kill switch again. Adam says, "the next time you reach for my kill switch, I'm more happy to remove your arm entirely, at the ball and socket joint" (p.94). Adam does not hesitate to use violence on the pretext of protecting Charlie and Miranda.

Although Charlie calls Adam a machine, he is deep inside jealous of him. He sees him as an obstacle to their relationship with Miranda. When he hears her and Adam having sex upstairs, he tries to stay calm, but he says, "I badly wanted to shout. Atavistic masculinity urged it. My faithless lover, brazen, with another man, within my hearing" (p.94). Adam could not find a place in people's minds neither as a man nor as a machine. In the case of falling outside the traditional patterns, Adam tries to impose himself as an individual in the environment he lives in. Adam is well aware that he is expected to conform to social norms. Although he does not belong to any gender category as artificial intelligence, he insists on proving his masculinity because the patriarchy imposes traditional categories and nullifies other possibilities. As Lavigne (2013) recommends, "patriarchal production systems cannot allow for cyborg figures that do not embody biological gender differences, because positing a future without gender difference means positing a future without male privilege" (p.83). Even without biological gender, patriarchal dominance must be maintained and regularly reinvented.

In the novel, Adam is assigned not only gender but also exhibits heterosexual proclivities and stereotypes associated with that gender. He has the qualities of masculine physicality and a hyper-masculinized

body. However, Adam never escapes the fact that he has a queer body. Still, he is not accepted as a man since he does not have a biologically male body despite his hyper-masculine qualities.

Conclusion

The cyborgs that appear in literature, such as Daniel Suarez's *Daemon* (2006), Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), or Martin Caidin's *Cyborg* (1972), do not revert the normative sexual identities. They even exacerbate the heteronormative sexual understanding. McEwan's *Machines Like Me* is not an exception in this sense. Adam does not offer a diverse sexuality and gender role.

Through an engaging story and narrative, McEwan has made it clear that in a male-dominated society, being a woman, a man, or even a non-human will not prevent being a victim of hegemonic masculinity. It is clear in the case of Adam that without obeying its rules and shaping your identity accordingly, it is almost impossible to be accepted in society and even to survive. As Connell (2005) asserts

> It [hegemonic masculinity] was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men (p. 832).

As it is discussed above, science fiction, like the male-dominated science it inspires, has a masculine nature and, as expected, will serve to constantly prove masculinity. The cyborg phenomenon in science fiction is no exception. In their earliest instances in popular culture and science fiction, cyborgs are portrayed as destructive and dangerous beings with hypermasculine traits. However, when the recent representations of cyborgs in the post-war science fiction literature are examined, it is seen that the cyborg has been stripped of its masculine identity and has emphasized diverse gender roles more. These queer cyborgs, unlike

their ancestors, have ceased to serve masculinity and its constant effort to prove itself, and have begun to pose a threat to the patriarchal order.

All in all, McEwan has tackled one of the greatest fears of humanity and, more importantly, of masculinity; losing power. Ian McEwan's new generation cyborg Adam, too, is a part of the threat in his queer body and in an effort to find himself a place in society as such. Braidotti (2016) states that "class, race, gender, and sexual orientations, age and able-bodiedness are more than ever significant markers of human 'normality' (p.24). Since Adam is not listed in any of these 'normality' conditions mentioned above, he provokes gender, body, and identity questions. At last, Adam is killed by Charlie with an urge of his atavistic masculinity. McEwan's artificial intelligence in his diverse universe well portrays the fear of masculinity. The fragile nature of masculinity cannot adapt to new and diverse gender roles and ultimately seeks solutions by trying to destroy them. Men's instinct to destroy is exemplified very realistically in McEwan's novel *Machines Like Me*.

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Ian McEwan'ın *Benim Gibi Makineler* Romanında Erkeklerin ve Erkekliklerin İnsan Sonrası Deneyimleri

Öz: Savaş sonrası bilimkurgu sık sık toplumda doğal olarak kabul edilen birçok normu yeniden gözden geçirmeye olanak yaratmış ve kabul edilen normların çeşitliliğini, özellikle de cinsiyet normlarını ortaya çıkarmıştır. Bu bağlamda, örnek olarak siberpunk, spekülatif kurgu geleneğindeki çeşitli cinsellikleri tanımlama ve analiz etme konusunda değerli bir kaynak sunmaktadır. Farklı ve uyumsuz cinselliklerin kuir olarak

algılandığı heteronormatif toplum algısı, siborgları (ve cisimleşmiş yapay zekayı) zorunlu olarak kuir olarak görür ve siborg cinselliğinin akışkanlığını sorunsallaştırır ve *Benim Gibi Makineler* romanında Ian McEwan'nın siborgu bu tür bir toplum içerisinde erkekliği kaybetme korkusunu kışkırtır. Bu bağlamda, bu makalenin amacı, siborgların kuir ve akışkan cinselliklerini incelemek için Ian McEwan'ın *Benim Gibi Makineler* adlı romanına odaklanarak erkeklerin ve erkekliklerin insan sonrası deneyimlerini örneklendirmek ve insan sonrası cinsellikleri erkekliklerin eleştirel bir incelemesi perspektifinden araştırmaktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Posthümanizm, erkeklikler, kuir, siborg