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**Superflat and Post-Gender: A Case Study of female bodies in *Ghost in the Shell* and *Paprika***

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**Abstract:**

*This article studies the representation of female bodies in two anime films: Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) and Satoshi Kon's *Paprika* (2006) to study how the post apocalyptic cyborg and the dream realm's alter ego both subvert the gender oriented paradigms by becoming Superflat bodies in a post-gender space. Takashi Murakami's Superflat manifesto talks about the bricolage of multiple flattened layers superimposed onto one another to create a composite surface of multiple focal points where meaning exists on the surface itself rather than the interior. In both *Ghost in the Shell* and *Paprika* we see the melting of the outside into the inside. The post apocalyptic Niihama City and the unstable kaleidoscopic dream realm both are examples of what Susan J Napier terms "fantasyscapes" where the body goes through the Guattarian "a-signifying semiotic" process to create unlimited intersections of signs, identities, images and self-images. This contributes to the Superflat "delimiting" (Looser, 2006: 108) of the body where its symbiosis with both technology and the cybernetically created alter ego takes place. It also blurs the boundaries between body and commodity. Thus the bodies of Major Mokoto Kusanagi/The Puppet Master in *Ghost in the Shell* and Dr. Chiba Atsuko/Paprika in *Paprika* become examples of Superflat bodies in a post-gender future.*

**Keywords:** *Anime, manga, female body, Superflat, Post-Gender, sci-fi, cyberpunk, cyborg, alter-ego, Ghost in the Shell, Paprika, Satoshi Kon, Mamoru Oshii*

**Introduction:**

Japan as a country of diverse signs and symbols has always found itself at odds with its own subjectivity regarding the female body. From the traditional paintings of the Meiji Restoration to the explosion of anime and manga since the 1960s, the female body has found itself at the centre of many different and varied

perspectives and discourses. From being idealized and commodified as sexual and reproductive resources to inhabiting the posthuman ambivalence of human-technological symbiosis, the female body has been a playground of philosophies and art-forms to lock horns with each other. According to Dolores Martinez:

...the female body in Japan is hyper-symbolic: it can signify modernity, tradition, social and biological reproduction, and magical or demonic powers, while holding the potential for the sorts of highly sexualized, subversive, and dangerous representations often found throughout patriarchal societies. (Martinez, 2015: 74)

Takashi Murakami's "Superflat" manifesto places Japanese visual culture as a postmodern cannibal of cosmopolitanism. Murakami has talked about the flatness of Japanese art as a result of a nation's shallow, amateur consumerism and economic instability. But he has superseded the boundary between the Western high culture and 'flat' Japanese culture to create an art form that places layers of diverse art forms and cultures and then flattens them together. The result is what is called "Superflat", a multilayered composite medium that has incorporated the many forms it combined into an inseparable coalition that at the same time points towards the vanity of consumerism and also glorifies it. The female body for Murakami not only functions as an open space for cultural and sexual critique of the Japanese plasticity of consumerism but also as an area of vast philosophical anomalies.

My aim in this paper is to study how the groundbreaking anime films *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) and *Paprika* (2006) revolutionized the cyberpunk and sci-fi genre by portraying the female bodies firstly in a dystopian high tech post-gender scenario and then placing the female body in the discourse of a larger issue about the self and the self-image. The body politics of *Ghost in the Shell* explores the unreliability and anxiety of the ambivalence of the human-machine cyborg in the lieu of an AI antagonist who identifies as a new life form. It poses philosophical questions about evolutionary dynamics of reproduction and embodiment of the exterior and interior of a body. Superflat theory's argument of apocalypse as a means of resetting the clock here charges the motif of Kusanagi's biological and technological divide within her "shell". Major Kusanagi is not merely a cyborg but a much more 'hyper' cyborg with peak physical features of extremely sexualized toy like physique and an increasingly subjective self-awareness. The Superflat impact of blurring the boundaries between art and commodity reiterates in Kusanagi's body blurring the divide between the self and the product.

Satoshi Kon's *Paprika* (2006) on the other hand delves deep into the question of the body's capabilities regarding its own subjective structure. It pushes the limits of inhabiting a unique sense of fluidity within the alternating states of the conscious and the unconscious of the mind. Superflat's emphasis of melting the outside with the inside is consciously cultivated by Kon in *Paprika* especially in the shot where Dr. Chiba looks at the reflection in the glass and sees her alter ego *Paprika*. The deliberate "overexposure" of the internal eventually rules out the divide between an outer and inner self. Rather the surface becomes the focal point. *Paprika's* hyper imaginative sequences of the internal mind causes the dichotomy to break and the internal becomes the external and results in what Thomas Looser calls the "delimiting" (Looser, 2006: 108) of the body.

My analysis will be focusing on both of these works to study the various dimensions of representation of the female body and how they transcend gender oriented discourses to become Superflat examples of self-referential, post-gendered, uncategorized bodies of a dystopic and deconstructed future.

#### **A brief introduction to Anime and Manga:**

Japanese visual culture in the last 40 years has exploded worldwide to become a multifocal cultural phenomenon. The skyrocketing popularity of manga (Japanese comics) and anime (Japanese animation) since the 1980s has not only created innumerable rhizomes of subculture throughout the world but also has reinforced a socio-cultural invasion into the world's psyche (especially the West). Joseph S Nye has talked about the "soft power" (Nye, 1990: 166) of anime and manga that has venerated the postmodern field of semiotic boundaries by the extensive osmosis of signs and symbols from Japan. The result is a dominating and largely commodified field of production that dovetails the animation schema from what is distinctly Japanese to what Koichi Iwabuchi calls "culturally odourless" (Iwabuchi, 2002: 465).

The word 'manga' is used today to mean Japanese comic books. The word literally translates to Japanese as "various or whimsical pictures" (Prough, 2010: 56). What we call manga or comic books originated during the 1930s as newspaper strips for children. The modern manga's ancestry however can be traced back to various scrolls and caricatures in Japanese cultural history most notably *Hokusai Manga*, which was published between 1814 and 1878. Manga has a unique art-style as well as sense of realism that makes it distinct from

Western comics. The sequential panels along with a cinematic style of storytelling, make up for a unique mode of artistic expression. Craig Norris comments, “During the early postwar period manga provided cheap and exciting reading for poor workers and children. In the 1960s it was at the forefront of counter-culture thought. While its working class origins and radical counter-culture politics of the 1960s may have diminished from the 1980s, it remains an innovative element of Japanese visual culture today. (Norris, 2009: 258)

‘Anime’ is the short form of ‘animation’ which generally refers to animation from Japan. If manga is the platform where Japanese visual culture first took shape, then it is anime that has largely contributed to what Douglas McGray calls, “Japan’s Gross National Cool” i.e. “an idea, a reminder that commercial trends and products, and a country’s knack for spawning them, can serve political and economic ends” (McGray, 2002: 53). Jonathan Clements comments that “anime is not a ‘genre’. It is a medium” that can be impacted “by changes in technology, delivery systems and cultural context” (Clements 2013: 3). Today anime and manga has given birth to the ‘Otaku’ (Fanboy) culture all over the world which has created cultural pockets such as Fan conventions, Cosplays, Fanfictions even erotic subgenres such as BiShōnen (Boys Love). Ian Condry aptly comments, “Anime is characteristic of contemporary media in its interconnected webs of commercial and cultural activities that reach across industries and national boundaries” (Condry, 2013: 1). Mark W. MacWilliams asserts, anime and manga are “an open window onto the Japanese id, a view—not necessarily of reality itself—but of a culture’s aspirations, dreams, nightmares, fantasies, and fetishes” (MacWilliams, 2008: vii). The impact of anime has also created distinct imprints onto the Indian cultural demography as Sharmistha Singh Rawat comments,

“In engaging with this global media product, the Indian fans of anime and manga are drawing desired meanings from them and engaging in specific fan practices that are informed by their particular social and cultural position within the society. In so doing, these fans are becoming a part of a growing transnational fan community of anime and manga where other fans, also influenced by their local context, are involved in similar processes of selective reception and meaning making. (Rawat, 2022: 241)

Anime and manga has ventured into a profusion of genres and sub genres that have gone on to carve their distinct niches in various socio-cultural pockets. The most prominent ones are: ‘Shōnen’ (Young Boy), ‘Shojo’ (Young Girl), ‘Seinen’ (Adult), Yaoi (Boys’ Love), Dojinshi (Fan fiction), Supokon (Sports) etc.

Although these sub genres do posit distinct delineation from each other, more often than not they are overlapped to create and propagate more hybrid narrative modes.

### **The Female Body in Anime and Manga:**

Anime and manga as art forms have evolved since the early 1900s as a major cultural kaleidoscope where the female body has been portrayed in a profusion of different perspectives and outlooks. The early 'comic' illustration of women during the pre WWII era in Japan saw the female body represented in the "Shojo" genre ('young girls') in a very specific way to cater to female readership. In the works of early Shojo artists like Yumeji Takehisa and Kaoru Sudoi the female body is drawn as frail, soft and fragile which came to know as the jojo-ga style. In the 1920s we see that with artists like Koji Fukiya, women are represented with big round eyes and staring into nothingness. Mizuki Takahashi sees these female bodies as 'fresh virgins' resulting primarily from the bourgeoisie fantasies of the hyper-sophisticated male gaze (Takahashi, 2008: 116). The implied flatness of these bodies reinforce the shallow consumeristic attitude towards sexuality where the social paradigms of reproduction were based on idealized physical appearance. The skeuomorphic recreation of pale, wide eyed, frail women were not merely phallic dreams but also a means of a desired autocracy over the female body.

The post-war Japan however was a drastically different space with extremely contorted and traumatised psychological and political dimensions resulting from the impact of the mushroom cloud. The 'Mecha' genre that gained impetus in Japanese visual mediums from the 1960s projected a solidified anxiety of technological advancement. According to Kumiko Saito:

"Mecha is the Japanese term for 'mechanism' or 'mechanical' and generally means technological gadgets of all sizes that augment and enhance human abilities. Although American culture tends to use mecha to signify robots in anime, the term's original Japanese connotation for metal and mechanical things includes everything from small gimmicks and devices to human-sized cyborgs and even giant robots. Mecha in anime has also undertaken the symbolic role of representing the self in both the material embodiment of the human body and the metaphysical framework of identity. (Saito, 2020, 153)

These hyper-violent and at times graphic narratives of science fiction are normally set in futuristic dystopian settings where the society has collapsed causing mass disintegration of morality, empathy and propriety. In the works such as *Mobile Suit Gundam* (1979), *Bubblegum Crisis* (1987), *Akira* (1988), *Battle Angel Alita* (1993), *Armitage III* (1995) and *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) the pre-war sophistication of Japanese narratives was gone along with their “soft” subjects. The nuclear blast, war defeat and subsequent military occupation of Japan at the hands of the USA caused an oedipal relationship between the two countries. In Freudian terms the US-Japanese oedipal undercurrent has given rise to the Japanese libido for the “hyper”. According to Alan Cholodenko, in terms of Baudrillard’s “hyper real” theory, to supersede the American Disney’s cuteness, Japan has created hyper cute or “kawai” (Cholodenko, 2003: 6) and to supersede the violence of Hollywood, Japan has given birth to the ultra futuristic apocalyptic wastelands of hyper violent “mecha” culture.

According to J.C. Schaub ‘cyberpunk’ is basically the literary outcome of ‘mecha’. Japanese cyberpunk, according to Saito however stopped producing hegemonically dominant male protagonists but instead produced “the general shift of the anime protagonist from male to female—cyborg women came to dominate anime, overpowering men in battle, intelligence, and/or political maneuvering” (Saito, 2020: 153). The female body thus stopped being an open playground of male libido and became a wider and more nuanced manifestation of the post-war psychosis of the Japanese psyche where the possible symbiosis between humans and technology became a major focal point as seen in *Akira*, *Battle Angel Alita*, *Bubblegum Crisis* and *Ghost in the Shell*. According to Saito:

“The plot often revolves around a female cyborg or, more precisely, a composite of the human brain and the female-model artificial body. The imagined presence of the brain is the sole physical evidence of an original human identity, but the content of the head remains unconfirmed. Like Deckard in *Blade Runner*, cyborgs in anime often live with internal doubts of their own originality and humanity. (Saito, 2020: 153)

The ambivalence of technology, the all devouring sense of losing control and eventual loss of biological existence to a symbiotic one are some of the main concerns shown in the Cyberpunk genre. Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” revolutionized the posthuman turn in feminist studies with the focus on the permeability of a post gender world. For example, the body of the main character in Mamoru Oshii’s *Ghost in the Shell* has an artificial body but her consciousness

is in her 'ghost'. The sustainability of which depends upon post-sexualized bodies where the neutralization factor is brought forth by its own hybrid components. J.C Schaub comments:

“Along with the cyborg's status as a hybrid of cybernetic technology and organic matter, there is also a hybrid nature to the cyborg's gender. Although they may be amply endowed with sex characteristics, cyborgs do not have stable gender identifications. According to Haraway, The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world.' (1991: 150) To the extent that gender identity and the fixed roles that gender creates for people are oppressive, then the cyborg's refusal to fit into a fixed category for gender is liberatory. (Schaub, 2001: 86)

Saito however argues that the female body in cyberpunk opens itself up to the subjectivity of the male gaze. The composite nature of the post-biological femininity, if we can consider it femininity at all, lends itself the subjective view point of being a canvas of uncontrolled libido for a genetically engineered product fit only for sexualizing freely. She further adds:

“The situation of Japanese cyberpunk, however, is not as simple as calling the female cyborg's objectified femaleness conservative and dissenting for feminism. Non-western viewpoints on this discussion have found more male subjectivity than feminism in the female cyborg. Rising from the defeat in WWII and deeply inscribed sense of inferiority to the west, postwar Japanese popular culture has generated a wide array of humanoid robots and cybernetic heroes who suffer from their incomplete being as monstrous human-machine patchwork. Japan's inferiority complex and blind mimicry of the west have resulted in stories about 'Japanoids,' who are not only metal-flesh chimeras, but also dilemmatic composites of west and non-west, or democracy and the emperor system. (Saito, 2020, 154)

The post bubble economy of the 90s however also focused on another particular aspect about the female body in sci-fi anime, i.e. the interplay between individual and extended states of consciousness. In *Ghost in the Shell*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, *Akira* we see the question of a hive minded existence of the body, where the individuation of the body is completely destroyed in order to accommodate a much more integrated state of consciousness. The wide “Net” in *Ghost*, represents what Haraway envisions as a post-gender sphere where the 'merging' of the self with the other takes place. In *Neon Genesis Evangelion* we see the main antagonist plans to turn the whole human civilization into primordial

soup. A liquefied return to the Neo-Darwinistic sense of uniformity. *Akira's* famous metamorphosis scene however gives us a much more violent picture of invasion of flesh by technology and its catastrophic consequences, yet *Ghost* and *Neon Genesis* put forward the symbiosis as a necessary step in evolution which echoes the late 90s turn of transhumanism. This huge wide unending schema of consciousness that is created by the hive mind trope is called "Cyber Sublime" (Gardner, 2009: 45) by William O Gardner where the self's individuation is engulfed by a greater sea of data.

Satoshi Kon's *Paprika* however (2006) marks a new landmark in anime where it doubles down on the "Cyber sublime" motif by the means of which Gardner has called "virtual mirrors" (Gardner, 2009: 45). This is a trapdoor like trope that are strategically weaved into the narrative pockets to mark the descent of the character's body into the "data realm" (Gardner, 2009: 50). Just like the "Net" in *Ghost in the Shell*, *Paprika* uses the machine DC Mini to establish a bridge between the conscious and unconscious states of the self. The DC Mini is the machine used by psychotherapists to tap into the depths of people's minds by exploring their dreams. The visual modus operandi of the duality of ego and alter ego is the driving force of the movie where therapist Dr. Chiba Atsuko uses an alter ego called 'Paprika' to explore her patients' minds. *Paprika* embodies the desires, anxieties, phobia and fetishes of the subjects and metamorphoses according to the mentalscapes. The infinite interplay between of Nietzsche's void and the process of looking back raises the question of *Paprika's* representation about the fundamental break within the body and the self. The body that the self perceives is neither stable nor holistic. The continuous loss of the self in order to integrate with the subjectivity causes multifocal planes of existence blurring the line between real and representation. Gardner comments, "With this dual nature, *Paprika* suffers the same dilemma as many of Kon's other female protagonists, who are unable to resolve the tension between establishing their own subjectivity and serving as the object of the male gaze" (Gardner, 2009: 65).

### ***Ghost in the Shell:***

Mamoru Oshii's 1995 cyberpunk masterpiece *Ghost in the Shell* is considered a legendary piece of work in anime due to its philosophical insight and artistic mastery of creating a hyper futuristic posthuman landscape of Niihama City. The story focuses on Major Motoko Kusanagi who is a biologically engineered cyborg who works for Section 9, a government agency dedicated to fight cybercrime and political espionage. The members of this agency are all



cybernetically augmented beings with enhanced physical and mental abilities. Most of them have “cyber-brains”, with the ‘ghost’ inside them as the only biological link to subjectivity or thought. The Puppet Master is the primary antagonist of the narrative who is eventually revealed as a cybernetic program created by Section 6 who seems to have developed sentience and escaped his creators through the ‘net’. Kusanagi is tasked with capturing the Puppet Master, who can hack into human brains and create implanted memories called “stimulated experience” to manipulate them into doing its bidding. When Sector 9 finally confronts The Puppet Master, it reveals that it has stopped identifying itself merely as an AI and is asking recognition as a ‘life form’ because it has developed its own ghost which is a counterpart of the human soul. It describes itself as a life form “created out of the sea of data”. The climax of the film reveals that the only reason The Puppet Master came into contact with sector 9 was to get close to Kusanagi whom it sees as a “kindred being” and wants to merge with her as the next step of evolution. Kusanagi whose cybernetically engineered body inhabits within itself an astonishingly introspective ‘ghost’, wonders about her origins and questions the authenticity of her subjective and cognitive responses early in the movie. In the climax she and the Puppet Master merge to create a higher form of existence and even though their outer “shells” are destroyed, Kusanagi’s colleague Batou saves the new merged brain and supplies it with a new shell, that of a young girl. The film ends with Kusanagi wondering about the vastness of the ‘Net’ and her next destination.

In the tradition of Akira’s *Neo-Tokyo* along with *Bubblegum Crisis* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion*’s post apocalyptic Tokyo, Ghost’s Niihama city also represents the trademark cyberpunk’s collapse of society and the capitalistic engulfment of sovereignty. Niihama City is a perfect example of the Superflat’s apocalyptic “ground zero” (Looser, 2006: 95) where the flattening happens in an eclectic mix of fantasy and distortion which represents a return to a new beginning. Thomas Looser comments: “The “Superflat” layering and juxtaposing of different worlds, in ways that retain the unique organization and coherence of each media world or each layer - though still grounded within some kind of common order - are already a new image of history, or a new way of imaging history” (Looser, 2006: 108). In other words, Niihama city’s post apocalyptic nature makes it possible to inhabit such a future which in Superflat terms advocates a reset point in history from where new beginnings can be imagined. The surface of Niihama city thus is a Superflat surface where history and future get flattened together.

In the famous opening sequence of the film, we see Kusanagi standing atop a tall building preparing to assassinate a high profile political target. She takes off her jacket to reveal a fully bare human female body with complete breasts but no genitalia. The opening credits scene however shows the construction of Kusanagi's technological body. Kusanagi's body clearly positions itself as a critique of capitalism where nothing exists outside the 'product'. The Superflat desire to blur the lines between body and commodity clearly echoes in Kusanagi's cyborg existence. Her 'existence' however is established by her 'Ghost', which is an internalized entity. On the surface, the much emphasized 'Ghost' as the qualifier of these cyborgs' subjective experience of the world would nullify the Superflat theory which propounds that meaning exists on the surface rather than the inside. However, the 'ghost' as the signifier of subjective experience is not a fixed centre of meaning for these bodies. The Puppet Master's ability to 'Ghost hack' and create 'Simulated experience' decentralizes the monopoly of the 'ghost' as the primary centre of physical and psychological meaning for these bodies. According to Susan J Napier, *Ghost in the Shell* depicts "fundamental concern or even unease with the body and thus implicitly with identity itself" (Napier, 2005: 115).

In *Ghost in the Shell*, the bodies of these cyborgs themselves are the source of their dilemma. It is their very creation/production that compels them to wonder about their 'authenticity'. Kusanagi's initially shows a rather cold view towards her own "shell" of a body. She recklessly dives in the ocean to contemplate about various feelings without regard for her shell and does not care about Batou's warnings. Her self-harm is also an indication of her predicament inside that body, the very internality of which is the source of her problems. Later we see that even though her body is destroyed the new merged brain is intact and the new shell this time is that of a young girl thus resetting the body clock. Even though the brain is the source of her consciousness, the surface or the shell is not merely a protective layer but rather is a flattened layer where multiple focal points are created.

The body of a cyborg not only blurs the line between bio and non-bio but also male and female as J.C Schaub comments:

"By juxtaposing the fetishized body with the image of that body's construction, Oshii establishes the possibility for a critique of global capitalism. Unlike robots, which are completely mechanical, cyborgs are a hybrid of humanity and technology which, as has already been

established, also disrupt the binary separation of masculinity and femininity (Schaub, 2001: 91).

This reinforces Haraway's exegesis that due to having no fixed gender the cyborgs are free from the gender related norms and tropes. But the apparently androgyne Cyborgs are also indicative of a post-apocalyptic world where gender neutrality is not only seen as something attainable but also something inevitable. In fact, it shows that the post-gender beings like the Puppet Master are the next step in evolution. According to Martin de la Iglesia and Lars Schemeink:

“In evoking this union of technology and spirit, *Ghost in the Shell* provides a uniquely Japanese perspective on cyborg identity, one that embraces the possibility of hybrid existence, of giving up a tenuous self in order to be integrated into a larger network. (de la Iglesia and Schemeink, 2020: 167)

This desire for integration into a wider network echoes the Superflat urge to lose the individuation for brutal assimilation yet retaining a uniquely Japanese identity. Kusanagi's lack of Oedipal issues with her creator, her acceptance of technology as an essential part of its structure and concerns regarding authenticity sets her apart from the Western cyborgs like the Terminator or even earlier examples like the Frankenstein's monster. Her body thus not only represents multiple layers of focal points 'flattened together' but also presents a critique of the all-encompassing capitalistic libido of the post-apocalyptic world, making her body a Super flat entity in a post-gender world.

### ***Paprika:***

Susan J Napier has asserted while commenting on Satoshi Kon's cinematic oeuvre that “Kon possesses a strong social/socio-cultural consciousness—several of his works are not only grounded in contemporary social issues but also serve as clear critiques of Japanese society—as well as what might be called a metacritical consciousness—a fascination with illusion, materiality, and cultural memory...” (Napier, 2006: 24). In several of his previous works such as *Magnetic Rose* (1995), *Perfect Blue* (1997) and *Millennium Actress* (2001), Kon has explored deeply into issues like memories, dreams, identity, mimicry, performance, fragmented selves and the blurring boundaries between real and illusion. His 2006 anime film *Paprika* is considered a pathbreaking contribution to Japanese and subsequent world cinema where he has delved deep into

psychological depths of the self and self-image by collapsing the boundary between the waking and the unconscious self. The body of the psychological dream realm with its unstable physicality bleeds into the conscious or 'real' body causing a composite body to emerge. Napier adds "Transcending the strict boundaries of the patriarchal gaze, Kon offers his audience a world of fluidity and ambiguity in which the male and female gaze are both powerful and capable of uniting with other gazes" (Napier, 2006: 41).

*Paprika's* story revolves around Psychiatrist Dr. Chiba Atsuko who uses the machine DC Mini to explore the dreams of her patients in order to treat them. She uses the alter-ego Paprika who is the polar opposite to Chiba's reserved, composed and brooding personality. Cheerful, energetic and brave, Paprika with her signature red hair transforms into various characters while exploring the dreams of the patients. She embodies their desire, fears, anxieties and also assists them to find out more about their unconscious mind. When the machine DC Mini is stolen, havoc breaks out as many doctors including the chief Dr. Shima are invaded by a 'rogue dream'. They are put in the dream while being awake similar to the 'ghost hacking' seen in *Ghost in the Shell* and are seen losing control of their bodies. Dr. Shima jumps off a high window and almost gets killed while others are also injured. Later, the inventor of the DC Mini, Dr. Tokita is also captured within the dream. The dream is that of a long parade led by anthropomorphic household items such as TV, microwaves, fridges with another doctor Himura sitting at the top.

Later it is revealed that the chairman of the Institution, Dr. Inui wants to take over the world of dreams and be a God like omnipresent figure. His misuse of the DC Mini causes the dream world to collapse onto the real world as the whole world seems to be under a shared psychosis. Chiba and Paprika are separated from each other and confront each other about their acceptance. Dr. Tokita transforms into a large robot like creature who wants to "ingest" Chiba, reflecting his obesity, eating disorder and repressed emotions towards Chiba. Chiba is consumed by Tokita's dream self but he feels that it is incomplete, and needs a little spice, indicating Paprika. Paprika then gets inside Tokita's robot and emerges as a baby girl. She starts to eat the whole dream weakening the huge naked God like figure of Dr. Inui. She grows into a mature woman, presumably a mix of Chiba and Paprika and vanquishes Dr. Inui to end the dream.

In *Paprika*, we see an extended use of Gardner's "virtual mirror" (Gardner, 2009: 35) which is the gateway to the other realm. In *Ghost in the Shell*, we see the

cybernetic “transgression” (Schaub, 2001: 86) of the cyborg that professes itself as a new life form thus challenging the gender bias of a body. In *Paprika* however we see that the body in the unconscious realm is an extremely unstable entity. According to Alice Vernon, *Paprika* uses “the lucid dream as an opportunity for limitless personality performance” that causes the dream body to become “a medium, a kind of semi-fictitious avatar, for unlimited and unconstrained role-playing” (Vernon, 2016: 115). In the opening sequence we see that while exploring Detective Konakawa’s mind, *Paprika* first shows up as a clown in a circus, then as a trapeze artist. After that as they chase the fugitive within the dream, the scenarios change rapidly from a scene in *Tarzan* to *From Russia with Love* and *The Roman Holiday*. In each of them *Paprika* inhabits the classical male gaze where she is sexualized as female lead in those movies. Her performativity indicates that the body of *Paprika* is a volatile mishmash of subjective desire and gaze. The scope for her body is limitless and unrestricted, she can move between extremely sexualized heroines to clown figures very easily. Takashi Murakami has talked about the hyper sexualization of the “kawai” (cute) culture in his Superflat manifesto. The ‘Lolicom’ genre where uniformed school girls are portrayed with huge bodily curves and large pie eyes is a mainstay of Otaku culture. Superflat sees this as a combination of shallow consumerism and a desire for amateurism. Michael Darling comments:

“The morally ambiguous territory traced by Superflat suggests the possibility of a broader social critique of the decline in Japanese mores and values—for which otaku are common culprits—and hints at the dangers faced by a society that has lost its economic might, its job-for-life company loyalty, and even its sense of security. (Darling, 2001: 83)

*Paprika*’s ‘kawai’ body seamlessly transforms to Chiba’s reserved and mature real body when the dream ends. But the divide between these two personalities causes them to bleed into each other as the film progresses. The mirrors in the film turn into virtual mirrors where Chiba sees herself as *Paprika*. The body’s internality thus starts to melt with its externality. Thomas Looser sees this phenomenon as a part of the “new media” which “as defined by the Superflat may be little more than 1990s consumer capitalisms dream of an outside” (Looser, 2006: 107). The body which is slipping in and out of the dream constantly bears the risk of converging its conscious and unconscious self which ultimately happens in *Paprika*, where Chiba and *Paprika* face each other as the reality is invaded by the dream.

The bodies in the dream realm are entities of Napier's "fantasyscape" (Napier, 2005: 238) which according to Alice Tedorescu are, "the in-between territory where both imagination and identities are experienced, created and recreated" (Tedorescu, 2016: 65). The bodies in the dream defy standard gender related identities and performances. We see in Konakawa's dream that when a mob attacks him, all the faces of mob turn into his own face, Himura's body turns into a female doll with male voice and Himura's face reflecting his Otaku obsession of dolls. Later in the dream parade we see 'lolicom' girls with television screen as their heads. These are not only Superflat but also post-gender entities with no prominent or distinctive sexual or gender orientation.

*Paprika* also extensively uses what Guattari has termed "a-signifying semiotic registers" that according to Andrew Lapworth bypass language and meaning to act directly on bodies of intensities (Lapworth, 2019: 191). He further adds that:

Through these cinematic experiments with a-signifying intensities of colour, sound, and non-linear editing, *Paprika* thus expresses a different conception of dreams as no longer simply the private psychological state of an individuated subject, but rather as a transindividual process that connects heterogeneous signs, bodies, ideas, and affects in unforeseen ways. (Lapworth, 2019: 195)

*Paprika* blends the interior and exterior of self or self-realities by putting the distorted bodies of the "fantasyscape" (Napier, 2005: 238) in the 'real' world. The collision between the real and dream bodies causes a flattening effect of multiple superimposed layers onto each other. The visual motif of the dream melting into the world causes the internality of the bodies to be layered upon the externality resulting in creating a Superflat surface of bodies that defy heteronormative and anthropomorphic norms. The bodies of *Paprika* not only disintegrate the distinction between ego and alter-ego but also the inside and outside in a Superflat surface of multifocal origins.

## **Conclusion**

The bodies of sci-fi anime thus not only defy their gender oriented discourses but also pose a deep rooted critique of the performance against the male gaze. The Superflat interplay between disorientation and extravagant fancy allows the grotesque, the hyper cute and the hyper cyborg to posit a multifocal surface of representation that acts not only as a Guattarian "desiring machine" (Lapworth, 2019: 194) but also supersedes the Western outlook of Cartesian dualism. The

bodies of Kusanagi and Chiba/Paprika expand the horizon of new definitions, new creations and new scopes where the “delimiting” (Looser, 2006: 108) takes place. David Beynon comments that these bodies of animation give us “This idea of the machine being not only a friend (or enemy) but ‘ourselves’” and “In the unthreatening anthropomorphic guise of the robot, technology- so overwhelming and sublimely menacing in high-tech- is blended into the world of humanity” (Beynon, 2012: 132). These bodies not only relieve the distinct anxiety of the post nuclear Japan but also the ambivalence regarding the effects of technology/radiation on bodies and what it could mean for a chaotic, decentred future that these bodies might inhabit.

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