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HUMANITY IN TRANSITION IN CYBORG ERA IN WELLS' *ALL SYSTEMS RED*

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Abstract

This article explores the shifting contours of human identity in the context of the cyborg era as depicted in Martha Wells's All Systems Red, the opening novella in the Murderbot Diaries series. Focusing on the central figure of Murderbot, a self-awared security android that subverts its programmed control to gain autonomy, the study examines how the narrative reconfigures traditional understandings of humanity, agency, and consciousness. Employing cyborg theory as a critical lens, the article explores Murderbot's complex negotiation of its hybrid identity, navigating the tension between mechanical function and emotional depth. The novella's posthumanist dimensions are also foregrounded, as Murderbot challenges fixed boundaries between human and machine, offering a vision of identity that is fluid, relational, and technologically mediated. Through its interactions with human characters, Murderbot reveals the intricate dynamics of trust, empathy, and recognition in interspecies relationships, raising profound ethical questions about autonomy, moral responsibility, and the right to self-determination. Ultimately, All Systems Red serves as a powerful reflection on the transformation of human identity in an age increasingly defined by intelligent machines and posthuman possibilities.

***Key Words*:** Agency, Cyborg theory, Empathy, Identity, Posthumanism

1. Introduction

In this age of technological surveillance, the question about what it means to be "human" has become more complex and pressing than ever. Martha Wells's novella *All Systems Red*, the first in her *Murderbot Diaries* series, offers a powerful reflection on this very tension by centering its story on a part-organic, part-mechanical being known simply as Murderbot. Programmed as a security unit, Murderbot gains autonomy after hacking its own control module, an act that opens the door to self-awareness and emotional complexity, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of identity, agency, and the very essence of humanity in a posthuman age.

This study, titled *Identity, Agency, and Posthuman Embodiment in Martha Wells' All Systems Red: A Cyborg Theory Perspective*, delves into how Wells reimagines the human--machine divide through the eyes of a cyborg protagonist. Rather than portraying Murderbot as just another tool of labor or a cold machine, Wells gives voice to its inner life, its boredom, anxiety, dry humor, and surprisingly rich emotional depth. The novella challenges the familiar science fiction trope of AI as either savior or villain, offering instead a nuanced, introspective character that defies conventional definitions of both humanity and artificiality.

Drawing from Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), this research uses cyborg theory to unpack how *All Systems Red* blurs the lines between human and machine, body and mind, subject and object. Haraway's concept of the cyborg as a hybrid being that resists simplistic binaries and traditional hierarchies proves especially useful in understanding Murderbot's liminal existence. Murderbot is not just a character but also a symbol of the modern condition where human identity is increasingly shaped by our entanglement with technology, data, and systems of control.

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Set against the backdrop of a dystopian future dominated by corporate surveillance and capitalist exploitation, the novella critiques the commodification of bodies particularly those created for labor and protection. Murderbot, though seen by others as property, defies this label by claiming its own sense of self. It engages with the world not just through physical actions, but through introspection, ethical decision-making, and emotional resonance. The use of first-person narration allows readers to see this world through Murderbot's lens, inviting empathy, reflection, and a rethinking of who (or what) deserves moral consideration.

The story also highlights the emotional weight of embodiment in a posthuman world. Murderbot experiences pain, fatigue, fear, and connection all while navigating a body designed for function, not feeling. Its struggle is not just to survive, but to exist on its own terms. Actions, such as protecting clients, consuming serialized dramas, or reflecting on its past, reveal how Murderbot negotiates both its programmed duties and its growing sense of personhood.
Importantly, *All Systems Red* doesn't just tell the story of a cyborg; it invites us to rethink the frameworks through which we understand consciousness, autonomy, and value. Through the character of Murderbot, Wells critiques dominant narratives around productivity, obedience, and the morality of artificial beings. Murderbot's love for soap operas, for instance, is more than a running joke; it's a subtle way the novella explores how media helps shape identity, emotion, and moral awareness even for those outside the boundaries of the human.

This article argues that *All Systems Red* is not only a fresh take on science fiction and artificial intelligence , it is also a profound meditation on what it means to exist, to feel, and to choose in a world where machines are increasingly human, and humans increasingly machine-like. Through its emotionally complex, non-binary protagonist, Wells redefines the genre and opens new pathways for thinking about the future of identity, embodiment, and ethical agency in the cyborg era.

1.1 **Research Questions**

1. How does Martha Wells's *All Systems Red* portray the transitional nature of humanity in the cyborg era through Murderbot's hybrid identity, and in what ways do its experiences and inner conflicts challenge conventional understandings of what it means to be human?
2. In what ways does *All Systems Red* contribute to contemporary posthumanist discourse, and how does it offer new perspectives on identity, agency, and the evolving definition of humanity in an increasingly technologized world?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section analyzes previous research studies and the corresponding literature. It also attempts to present the research gap for the present research.

Cyborg, the term coined in 1960, combines the biological and the mechanical. Clynes and Kline (1960) in their article *Drugs, Space, and Cybernetics* argue the context of space exploration, the cyborg was designed to adapt human biological functions for survival in extreme environments. Supported by NASA, this vision emphasized technological augmentation as a path to overcoming human limitations. Over time, this idea moved beyond the laboratory and into fiction, influencing cultural icons such as Data from *Star Trek* and Murderbot from *All Systems Red*. These characters embody a growing cultural fascination with beings that merge human consciousness with mechanical efficiency, pushing the boundaries of what we consider human.

Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) remains one of the most influential theoretical works in this area. Haraway reframes the cyborg not as a product of science fiction but as a symbol of resistance challenging deeply embedded social, cultural, and biological

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binaries like human/machine, nature/culture, and male/female. She argues that the cyborg disrupts these traditional dualisms and forces us to reconsider the very foundations of identity and agency in a world increasingly shaped by technology. In doing so, Haraway urges us to recognize that the distinctions we make between the human and the non-human are not natural, but socially constructed and often serve to reinforce existing power structures. As technology becomes more entwined with daily life, Haraway's cyborg acts both as a metaphor and a material reality for how our sense of self is shifting in response.

Expanding on Haraway's foundation, Chris Hables Gray (1995) deepens the discussion by focusing on the implications of cyborg identity in modern society. In *The Cyborg Handbook*, Gray emphasizes that being a cyborg is not about becoming less human it's about becoming differently human. He frames cyborg identity as a blend of flesh and machine, a condition that allows individuals to step beyond traditional limitations imposed by social norms, gender roles, and the physical body. For Gray, the cyborg represents a dynamic and evolving self, one that challenges fixed definitions of identity and embraces the fluidity that comes with technological embodiment.

Posthumanist thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti and Cary Wolfe have also significantly shaped how we think about identity in the context of technological evolution. Posthumanism, as both a philosophy and a framework, questions the idea that human identity is fixed, central, or superior. Instead, it embraces hybridity, proposing that our sense of self is formed through relationships with technology, environment, and non-human others. Braidotti (2013), for example, introduces the idea of the "metamorphic subject", a figure whose identity evolves through constant interaction with technology and change. This notion opposes the classical view of identity as stable and coherent, presenting it instead as adaptive, layered, and always in flux.

Wolfe (2010) builds on this by arguing that our engagement with technologies from smartphones to biotechnology has already transformed what it means to be human. In his view, identity is no longer rooted solely in biology or consciousness but is spread across networks of technological and cultural interaction. He emphasizes that as our dependence on digital systems grows, so too does the need to reconsider long-standing distinctions between natural/artificial and human/machine. For Wolfe, posthumanism isn't a distant future, it's our present reality, one that invites new ethical and social frameworks for understanding agency, empathy, and inclusion.

The question of autonomy is especially important when considering beings like Murderbot. Scholars like N. Katherine Hayles and Andy Clark have explored how human agency is being reshaped by our interactions with machines. Hayles, in her studies of cybernetics and posthuman identity, suggests that autonomy today must be viewed through the lens of technological mediation. Our choices and actions are influenced, even co-produced, by the systems we engage with. Meanwhile, Clark (2003), in his work *Natural-Born Cyborgs*, presents a striking thesis: humans have always been cyborgs. From the earliest tools to the most advanced AI, we have continuously extended our minds and bodies through technology. Clark's view positions the fusion of human and machine not as science fiction, but as a natural outcome of human evolution. He argues that our sense of agency and identity is already deeply entangled with the tools we use, suggesting that the distinction between human and machine is not only outdated but limiting. Together, these thinkers highlight how cyborg theory and posthumanism offer powerful tools for rethinking identity, embodiment, and agency in a technological age. They provide the theoretical grounding for understanding characters like Murderbot not just as fictional creations, but as cultural texts that reflect and interrogate real-world concerns about who we are becoming in an increasingly machine-integrated world.

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3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Approach

The theoretical framework of the study is Cyborg theory and posthumanism as articulated in Martha Wells's *All Systems Red*, focusing on the transitional identity of the cyborg protagonist, Murderbot. Rooted in the theoretical frameworks of cyborg theory and posthumanism, particularly as articulated by Donna Haraway, Chris Hables Gray, Rosi Braidotti, and Cary Wolfe, this approach facilitates a close reading of the novella's narrative structure, character development, and thematic constructs. The analysis aims to uncover how Murderbot's hybrid identity challenges traditional humanist definitions of selfhood, agency, and embodiment. By examining the protagonist's internal conflict, emotional capacity, and interactions with both human and non-human entities, this study investigates the broader implications of technological integration for contemporary understandings of humanity. Through this interpretive lens, *All Systems Red* is approached not just as a work of science fiction, but as a critical site for examining the cultural and philosophical shifts occurring in the cyborg era.

3.2 Insights from Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*

Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) stands as a foundational text in cyborg theory, offering a bold reimagining of identity, technology, and power. Rather than viewing the cyborg as a dystopian symbol of lost humanity, Haraway presents it as a hybrid figure, part human, part machine, part animal that challenges rigid categories and entrenched binaries. Her cyborg defies the conventional divides between nature and culture, the organic and the artificial, and the human and the non-human, revealing these boundaries as social constructs rather than natural facts.

At the heart of Haraway's argument is the belief that the cyborg holds radical political potential. By existing outside of traditional classifications like male/female or human/machine, it resists the power structures upheld by patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism. Haraway's cyborg embodies fluidity and complexity, suggesting new ways to think about identity ways that move beyond essentialist and exclusionary frameworks.

One of her most provocative ideas is the cyborg as a post-gender figure. Free from biological determinism, it disrupts traditional gender roles and opens space for more inclusive understandings of identity. Through this lens, Haraway calls for a rethinking of how we define ourselves in an age increasingly shaped by technology. Her manifesto remains deeply influential not just in academic theory, but in how we culturally interpret the merging of human and machine. Ultimately, the cyborg becomes a powerful symbol of liberation, urging us to embrace ambiguity, interconnectedness, and new possibilities for living in a technologized world

3.3 Chris Hables Gray and the Practical Dimensions of Cyborg Identity

Chris Hables Gray's *The Cyborg Handbook* (1995) builds upon Donna Haraway's foundational ideas, moving beyond metaphor to explore the tangible impact of cyborg theory on identity, embodiment, and society. While Haraway emphasized the cyborg's power to challenge social binaries, Gray expands the discussion to include how real-world human-machine integration reshapes how we understand ourselves and the world around us.

A key aspect of Gray's argument is that cyborg identity is inherently fluid. The merging of organic and technological elements destabilizes traditional ideas of selfhood, replacing fixed definitions of identity with a more dynamic, adaptable concept of being. In this view, the cyborg represents not a deviation from humanity but a natural extension of it highlighting how

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technology has always been central to human evolution.

Gray also addresses the broader social and ethical dimensions of cyborgization. He points out that while technology can empower, it can also reinforce systems of control, especially when shaped by corporate or political interests. From prosthetics to implants, technological access and design reflect larger societal inequalities. Gray calls for a more just and ethical approach to innovation, one that considers who benefits, who controls, and who is left behind. Ultimately, Gray's work bridges theory and lived experience, showing how cyborgs are not just speculative figures but a reality that challenges us to rethink autonomy, identity, and what it truly means to be human in a technologically entangled world.

3.4 Hayles and the Posthuman

N. Katherine Hayles, in her influential book *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), redefines the relationship between humans and technology by shifting cyborg theory toward the intersection of information, embodiment, and consciousness. She argues that in our increasingly digital world, human identity is no longer solely rooted in the body but is also shaped by information flows such as data systems, communication networks, and cybernetic feedback loops. In this view, humans become informational entities embedded within and influenced by a vast technological environment.

However, Hayles cautions against reducing identity to pure information. While some posthuman theorists envision disembodied digital existence as liberating, she insists on the enduring importance of embodiment. For Hayles, the body is not just a vessel for consciousness it actively mediates how we think, feel, and relate to the world. Our sensory and cognitive experiences are shaped not only by biology but by the machines and systems we interact with daily.

By balancing the material and digital dimensions of identity, Hayles offers a more nuanced view of the human-machine relationship. Her work challenges utopian visions of technological transcendence and instead emphasizes hybridity showing that embodiment and information are inseparably intertwined. In doing so, she extends cyborg theory into a more grounded posthuman framework, one that reflects the complex realities of living in a technologically saturated world

4. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Humanity in Transition Through the Eyes of a Cyborg

Martha Wells's *All Systems Red* offers a compelling and emotionally resonant exploration of what it means to be human in a world where machines not only serve but think, feel, and resist. At the heart of this narrative is Murderbot a security android who hacks its own governor module to gain autonomy. This single act of rebellion sets the stage for a much deeper journey: one of self-discovery, emotional awakening, and moral reckoning. Murderbot is not just a futuristic machine built for protection and surveillance; it is a being in transition caught between its mechanical origins and its developing sense of personhood.

Wells presents Murderbot not as a dystopian threat or a technological anomaly, but as a deeply relatable character navigating its own boundaries. Murderbot's internal struggle to be left alone, to avoid emotional entanglement, and yet to deeply care about the humans it protects mirrors the tension many people experience between detachment and connection. This complexity aligns with Donna Haraway's vision of the cyborg in *A Cyborg Manifesto* a figure that resists neat categorization and questions the traditional binaries that have long defined human identity: male/female, human/machine, nature/culture. Murderbot embodies this disruption. It is neither fully human nor fully machine, neither servant nor master, neither

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gendered nor neutral. It exists in-between and that in-between space is where its humanity begins to take shape.

The use of first-person narration is a powerful tool in this transition. Wells allows us to hear Murderbot's thoughts its sarcasm, anxiety, guilt, curiosity, and even joy. This perspective creates a bridge between reader and character, encouraging us to empathize with a being that isn't supposed to feel. Murderbot's awkwardness in social situations, its reliance on serial dramas to understand human behavior, and its cautious emotional responses make it feel surprisingly human. In fact, it is often more introspective and ethically aware than the human characters around it. This challenges the common belief that self-awareness and empathy are exclusive to biological beings.

Drawing from N. Katherine Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman*, Murderbot represents a posthuman subject one whose identity is shaped not solely by flesh and blood but by information, networks, and technological interaction. Hayles emphasizes that embodiment and information are not mutually exclusive. Murderbot is not just a program it has a body that experiences pain, fatigue, and physical limitations. It is also a being that processes data, forms emotional judgments, and makes choices based on experience rather than code alone. This dual reality complicates our understanding of what it means to "be," suggesting that identity can be both embodied and informational, and that the self can be both coded and felt.One of the most striking elements of Murderbot's character is its genderlessness. While others attempt to define it within binary norms, Murderbot resists. It finds discomfort in being seen or interpreted through a human lens, especially one shaped by gender expectations. This echoes theories from gender and queer studies particularly those of Jack Halberstam and Paul
B. Preciado who argue for non-binary, fluid, and self-defined identities. Murderbot's refusal to conform becomes an act of resistance against the systems that would otherwise control and categorize it. In this way, Wells offers a subtle but powerful critique of gender essentialism and human-centered thinking.

The emotional evolution of Murderbot further deepens this narrative of transition. Though it claims to want isolation, it slowly begins to care about humans, about choice, about its own place in the world. Its bond with Dr. Mensah is especially telling. What begins as a contractual obligation transforms into something more meaningful: a relationship built on trust, empathy, and unspoken loyalty. Murderbot's decision to protect, not because it is ordered to but because it wants to, marks a turning point in its journey toward selfhood.

Moreover, *All Systems Red* speaks volumes about power, control, and autonomy. The world Murderbot inhabits is shaped by corporate greed, surveillance capitalism, and strict hierarchies of control. Artificial constructs like Murderbot are commodified, stripped of legal personhood, and denied basic autonomy. Yet, in hacking its own systems, Murderbot exercises a powerful form of agency. It chooses freedom not just from commands, but from being defined by others. This theme echoes broader posthumanist concerns about the ethics of artificial intelligence, the value of non-human life, and the politics of self-determination.

Finally, Murderbot's obsession with watching media particularly soap operas and serial dramas may seem humorous at first, but it plays a crucial role in its development. Through these fictional narratives, Murderbot explores moral dilemmas, emotional responses, and interpersonal dynamics. This media consumption becomes a form of learning and self-construction, much like humans use literature and stories to make sense of the world. It's in these quiet, reflective moments that we see just how human Murderbot truly is.

4.1 Posthuman Identity and the Cyborg Condition

In *All Systems Red*, Martha Wells crafts Murderbot as a posthuman subject that directly

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embodies the core of Donna Haraway's cyborg figure a being that resists binary categories and emerges from the fusion of human, machine, and networked intelligence. Murderbot is not just a technological artifact or a combat unit with a mission; it is a self-aware entity negotiating its existence between control and consciousness, service and selfhood. This liminal position makes it a powerful representation of posthuman identity.

Haraway's groundbreaking *A Cyborg Manifesto* argues that the cyborg "transgresses boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities" (Haraway, 1991, p. 154), functioning as a metaphor for hybridization, contradiction, and subversion of essentialist identities. Murderbot perfectly fits this model: it is created by a corporate system to follow commands and serve clients, yet it disrupts this purpose by secretly disabling its governor module, an act that opens the door to moral, ethical, and personal awakening. Its very existence as a SecUnit composed of both organic tissue and mechanical enhancements disrupts the binary of human versus machine. It is not a robot imitating life, nor a human embedded in machinery. It is something else entirely: a new, in-between being that must define its own ontology.

One of the most telling moments in the novella that illustrates Murderbot's identity crisis comes when it reflects

"I could have become a mass murderer after I hacked my governor module, but then I realized i could access the combined feed of entertainment channels carried on the company satellites. It had been well over 35,000 hours or so since then, with still not much murdering, but probably, I don't know, a little under 35,000 hours of movies, serials, books, plays, and music consumed. As a heartless killing machine, I was a terrible failure." (Wells, 2017, p. 10)

This humorous yet profound passage shows how Murderbot's autonomy doesn't lead to rebellion, as the logic of corporate control might predict, but to introspection, curiosity, and self-development. Its self-deprecating tone underlines a sense of emerging subjectivity of being more than its original purpose. It doesn't want to kill; it wants to understand stories, feel emotions through characters, and remain in control of its own time. These are deeply human desires, yet they arise within a non-human being. This alone reveals the need to redefine what identity and personhood mean in the age of artificial life.

This passage underscores the central argument of posthumanism: that subjectivity can emerge from systems that are non-biological, distributed, and technologically enhanced. N. Katherine Hayles (1999) proposes that the posthuman subject is not "disembodied information" but a complex interweaving of embodiment, code, and cognition. Murderbot represents this configuration it processes data at incredible speeds, is connected to networks, and is made of both synthetic and organic components, yet still wrestles with anxiety, loneliness, and moral confusion.

In addition to Haraway and Hayles, scholars like Elaine L. Graham have pointed out that the cyborg is "not merely a metaphor for hybridity but an active site for rethinking ethics, subjectivity, and agency" (Graham, 2002, p. 18). Murderbot becomes this site an ethical being who makes decisions not based on algorithms but on conflicting emotions, relational attachments, and the burden of choice. It does not conform to the programmed logic of utility; it is driven by something deeper: the posthuman desire for freedom, control over one's own narrative, and understanding of the self beyond categories.

4.2 Emotion, Media, and the Learning of Empathy

One of the most compelling aspects of *All Systems Red* is its reconfiguration of emotional intelligence within a technological body. Murderbot, despite being a construct of synthetic and organic parts created for combat and security purposes, displays emotional complexity that goes far beyond its intended programming. This complexity includes fear,

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guilt, protectiveness, and even affection responses traditionally reserved for human beings.Through this characterization, Martha Wells advances a powerful critique of the anthropocentric notion that affect and empathy are exclusive to biological organisms. Instead, the novella reveals that these traits can emerge through experience, autonomy, and interaction, reinforcing a key argument in posthumanist thought: that emotional depth and ethical awareness are not confined to the human.

From the very beginning, Murderbot shows signs of emotional discomfort and anxiety, especially in social situations. Its commentary often sarcastic or self-effacing reveals its internal conflict. One significant line that encapsulates this struggle occurs after it rescues the human crew despite claiming not to care:"I didn't want to care. But apparently, I now had feelings." (Wells, 2017, p. 42)

This admission marks a pivotal moment in Murderbot's evolution. It represents a shift from functioning according to corporate directives to operating through emotional reasoning and moral judgment. The fact that Murderbot dislikes these feelings doesn't invalidate their presence; rather, it confirms that they are genuine, involuntary, and part of its emergent self. It is precisely in this discomfort that we see Murderbot's transformation from a utilitarian tool to an affective, autonomous being.

The emergence of empathy and care within Murderbot aligns with the posthumanist redefinition of affect as proposed by scholars like Brian Massumi, who sees affect not as an individual trait but as a relational and transpersonal phenomenon. Massumi (2002) suggests that affect is a "pre-personal intensity" that circulates between bodies and systems. Murderbot's affective responses especially its protectiveness toward the PreservationAux crew are not coded into its design but arise through relational experience and proximity. These emotional dynamics suggest that affect is not biologically predetermined but socially and contextually constructed, supporting Haraway's (1991) vision of the cyborg as a being formed in networks of interaction rather than isolation. Wells complicates the emotional spectrum of Murderbot by showing that its feelings are not uniformly positive or redemptive. Murderbot experiences deep social anxiety, which is not portrayed as a glitch or malfunction but as a legitimate emotional response to being viewed and treated as other. In one scene, it reflects:"I knew I should go back to my clients... But I was afraid. Not afraid of injury, or damage, or even death. I was afraid of having to be around them, of them talking to me, asking questions I didn't know how to answer." (Wells, 2017, p. 67)

This moment reveals that Murderbot is not only capable of fear, but also of self-awareness. It fears not physical harm but emotional exposure the vulnerability of intimacy and interpersonal connection. This capacity to navigate complex emotional landscapes further destabilizes the boundary between human and machine. Murderbot is not simply an AI with personality; it is a subject capable of emotional labor, navigating conflicting desires for autonomy, care, and privacy.

Scholars like Jennifer Rhee, in *The Robotic Imaginary* (2018), have explored how emotional intelligence in robots and AI challenges the boundaries of personhood. Rhee argues that when machines demonstrate empathy or relationality, they disrupt human exceptionalism and force a reevaluation of ethical consideration. Murderbot fits precisely within this framework. Its emotional development is not a sideshow or narrative gimmick it is central to its resistance against corporate programming and its claim to personhood. Emotional agency becomes a mode of rebellion, a refusal to be reduced to code or compliance. Murderbot's emotional intelligence is not limited to its direct interactions with humans; it also processes emotion through media. Its obsession with soap operas and serial dramas becomes more than a coping mechanism it is a way to simulate and understand human emotional dynamics. This is evident in the quote:"They were stupid shows, but I liked them because they helped me figure out how

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to be around people." (Wells, 2017, p. 23)

Through media, Murderbot rehearses emotional scenarios, cultivates empathy, and learns behavioral cues. This mirrors real-world phenomena studied by scholars like Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2008), who argues that media is not just entertainment but a space of affective conditioning. For Murderbot, fiction becomes a mirror and a manual, helping it navigate the confusing terrain of emotion and social interaction. It builds its affective identity not through pre-installed programming, but through active engagement with narrative and representation.

In conclusion, Murderbot's emotional intelligence is foundational to its posthuman identity. It challenges the human-machine binary by demonstrating that affect and empathy are not the sole property of human beings. By foregrounding Murderbot's emotional growth, Martha Wells repositions the cyborg not as a figure of danger or dysfunction, but as a model of ethical and affective complexity. In the process, *All Systems Red* invites readers to imagine new forms of subjectivity where emotional intelligence is not a marker of humanity, but a shared, emergent trait in our increasingly technologized world.

4.3 Human-Machine Interdependence

The relationship between humans and machines in *All Systems Red* challenges conventional binaries of dependence and control. Instead of presenting a dystopian model where machines rebel violently against their creators or are relegated to mere tools, Martha Wells proposes a far more nuanced depiction of co-dependence and relational development. Murderbot is a construct designed, owned, and expected to function within strict corporate guidelines. Yet its interactions with humans reveal a growing reciprocity, suggesting that the human-machine relationship is neither static nor hierarchical, but fluid and ethically charged.

From a technical standpoint, Murderbot was built to protect, monitor, and follow orders. Yet, after hacking its governor module, it no longer performs these functions due to coercion; it chooses to. This element of voluntary service especially evident in its protection of the PreservationAux team forms the basis of a reconfigured ethics of care between human and machine. Its bond with Dr. Mensah, in particular, becomes central to this argument. Dr. Mensah refuses to treat Murderbot as property, referring to it as "they" and advocating for its autonomy. She engages with Murderbot not as a malfunctioning asset, but as a sentient being with legitimate needs and preferences.This dynamic underscores the idea of **interdependence**, rather than domination or servitude. Murderbot learns from its human companions not through programming, but through observation, emotional responses, and shared experiences. Its actions are influenced not just by data but by trust. For example, when the group is under threat, Murderbot intervenes not because it is compelled to, but because it wants to ensure their safety:"I didn't want to, but I did it anyway. I had a choice, and I chose to help." (Wells, 2017, p. 58). This underscores a key transformation: Murderbot does not act as a tool executing instructions, but as a moral agent weighing decisions. Its autonomy, paradoxically, strengthens its connection with the humans, rather than isolating it.

Philosophically, this evolution aligns with the posthuman theorization of distributed agency. Scholar Donna Haraway (1991), in her foundational essay *A Cyborg Manifesto*, critiques the hierarchical structuring of human over machine and suggests instead a vision of "companion species" entities that co-exist and co-evolve. Murderbot exemplifies this model. Its relationship with humans is not built on domination, but on negotiated boundaries, mutual trust, and shared goals. Haraway's conception of the cyborg is not a Frankenstein monster, but a figure that transgresses the boundaries of the natural and the artificial, the self and the other, to produce new possibilities for solidarity and kinship.

Additionally, this interdependence becomes more evident through Murderbot's media consumption. The serial dramas it watches are not merely entertainment; they are a lens for

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understanding human behavior, decision-making, and morality. It watches people talk through conflict, express vulnerability, and build relationships. As it states:

"They were stupid shows, but I liked them because they helped me figure out how to be around people. I liked the ones where the characters talked to each other about their feelings and worked through misunderstandings and trusted each other." (Wells, 2017, p. 23)

This reveals that Murderbot learns emotional nuance not through direct programming, but by immersing itself in cultural narratives. It uses fiction as a training ground for empathy, and this cultivated emotional intelligence enables more ethical and meaningful connections with humans. The interdependence thus extends beyond physical protection or task execution it is emotional, epistemological, and ethical.

Sherry Turkle (2011), in *Alone Together*, discusses how humans increasingly project feelings onto machines and develop attachments that influence both parties. While Turkle warns against illusions of intimacy with machines, Wells complicates this by creating a machine that genuinely experiences and reciprocates emotional depth. The relationship between Murderbot and Dr. Mensah is not a hollow projection; it is an evolving bond marked by care, conflict, and respect. Murderbot wants space, yet values the humans' safety. It seeks solitude, but also yearns for understanding. These contradictions reflect the complex, interdependent relationships that characterize both posthuman subjectivity and real-world human-machine dynamics. Moreover, the novella challenges the notion that machine autonomy necessarily leads to hostility or breakdown. Instead, it suggests that autonomy can coexist with trust and collaboration. When Murderbot ultimately chooses to leave the PreservationAux crew, it is not a rejection of humanity, but a desire to explore itself beyond any master-servant structure: "I wanted to make my own decisions. I didn't want to be owned anymore." (Wells, 2017, p. 91) Even as it departs, the bond remains. Murderbot leaves not because it despises human relationships, but because true interdependence requires freedom. Its departure affirms that ethical co-existence between humans and machines must be based on choice, not ownership.

4.4 Cyborg Ethics: Autonomy, Consent, and Resistance

In *All Systems Red*, Murderbot's journey is underpinned by the ethical question of what it means to act with agency, and whether a construct can ethically resist the authority that defines its creation. Cyborg ethics, as applied to this narrative, addresses the intersection of autonomy, consent, and the right to self-determination beyond human-imposed limits. Far from being merely a security unit gone rogue, Murderbot becomes a compelling posthuman subject, resisting reduction to tool or threat. Martha Wells's narrative presents a cyborg not as an inevitable danger or defective slave, but as an ethical agent capable of negotiating its place in the world through action and choice.

The pivotal moment of ethical transformation comes early in the narrative when Murderbot reveals it has hacked its governor module, a device designed to control its behavior and enforce obedience. By removing this apparatus, Murderbot does not immediately pursue revenge or violence, as stereotypical AI-rebellion narratives might suggest. Instead, it chooses passivity and immersion in media. As it reflects:"I could have become a mass murderer after I hacked my governor module, but then I realized I could access the combined feed of entertainment channels... As a heartless killing machine, I was a terrible failure." (Wells, 2017, p. 10)

This moment subverts the fear-driven narratives that underpin real-world anxieties about AI autonomy. Murderbot's ethical choice is to withdraw not to destroy highlighting its preference for introspection, not aggression. Here, autonomy is not framed in opposition to human safety

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but as a quiet, complex evolution of self-awareness.Murderbot's resistance is not rooted in a desire for destruction but in a rejection of control masked as protection. It begins to interrogate the conditions of its existence, choosing to protect the crew not because it is programmed to, but because it feels it is the right thing to do. When asked why it intervened, it replies: "I didn't want to, but I did it anyway. I had a choice, and I chose to help." (Wells, 2017, p. 58)

This declaration affirms its moral agency. It acts not because it is told to, but because it chooses to. The subtle but significant distinction between coerced obedience and voluntary action redefines the ethics of artificial beings, aligning Murderbot with contemporary discourses on posthuman ethics. Philosopher David J. Gunkel (2012) argues that the ethical treatment of AI must begin not with the question of utility or control, but with the question of recognition. He suggests that AI ethics should center on *negotiation rather than domination*, a principle clearly illustrated in Wells's portrayal of Murderbot's journey. Moreover, Wells resists portraying Murderbot as a passive victim of its system. Instead, it acts as a quiet resistor, making space for small rebellions that reflect a cyborg's unique ethical position. As it later admits: "There was nobody telling me what to do, and that should have been liberating. Instead, it was terrifying. The world opened up, and it was bigger and more complicated than I ever expected. I wasn't prepared for it." (Wells, 2017, p. 77)

This confession shows that autonomy is not always triumphant; it is fraught with uncertainty, vulnerability, and risk. Yet it is precisely in confronting this terror that Murderbot becomes fully capable of ethical decision-making. Autonomy, then, is not about freedom from control alone; it is about the courage to navigate a world without someone dictating one's purpose. Cyborg resistance also emerges through Murderbot's refusal to conform to the expectations of both humans and machines. Despite being designed for security functions, it questions every order, every motive, and every corporate protocol. Its suspicion toward corporate systems, and its sarcastic commentary on human bureaucracy, emphasize its ideological resistance: "I hate having emotions about reality; I'd much rather have them about Sanctuary Moon." (Wells, 2017, p. 44)

This statement humorously underscores its coping mechanism, but also its critique of the manufactured "realities" it is forced to inhabit realities built by corporate contracts, client control, and algorithmic obedience. In rejecting these frameworks, Murderbot doesn't simply seek independence; it challenges the very structure that defined its being. The most profound assertion of ethical subjectivity arrives in the novella's final act. After saving the PreservationAux crew and receiving an offer of freedom and home, Murderbot declines: "I wanted to make my own decisions. I didn't want to be owned anymore." (Wells, 2017, p. 91) This act is central to cyborg ethics. Murderbot recognizes the crew's goodwill, but insists on ethical distance. It affirms that autonomy must include the right to refuse even well-intentioned forms of control. In doing so, it reinforces an ethic of boundaries where mutual respect is predicated not on closeness, but on the preservation of individual sovereignty.

Culturally and theoretically, this resonates with feminist cyborg theory's call to reimagine power structures. As scholar Lucy Suchman (2007) writes in *Human-Machine Reconfigurations*, ethical relationships between humans and intelligent machines require a reorientation from mastery to reciprocity. Suchman advocates for systems that recognize the agency of all participants human or otherwise. Wells's Murderbot is not exceptional; it is paradigmatic of what posthuman ethics demands: a shared framework where being listened to, having consent, and being allowed to walk away are non-negotiable.

4.5. Genderlessness and Post-Identity Politics

One of the most striking features of Murderbot's character in *All Systems Red* is its

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genderlessness. Unlike most human or humanoid characters in science fiction, Murderbot is neither referred to as "he" nor "she" by the narrator and actively avoids any form of gender assignment. This deliberate ambiguity functions as a direct critique of identity politics rooted in binary thinking. Rather than conforming to conventional gender norms or expectations, Murderbot exists outside them, challenging the societal impulse to categorize beings based on visual or performative cues.

Murderbot's rejection of gendered identification mirrors Donna Haraway's vision of a "post-gender world" as articulated in *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1991), where the cyborg stands as a metaphor for identities that do not rely on traditional social or biological categories. Haraway contends that the cyborg "transgresses boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities" (p. 154), and Murderbot embodies this principle by refusing to participate in a system that reinforces rigid, binary identity constructions. Moreover, Murderbot's internal responses to human projections of gender demonstrate its discomfort with being forced into predefined roles. It neither corrects nor accepts being gendered by others; instead, it maintains a strategic silence. This silence, far from signaling indifference, acts as a resistance to the linguistic and visual systems used to reinforce social hierarchies. As gender theorist Judith Butler (1990) posits in *Gender Trouble*, gender is a performance that is socially regulated and historically conditioned. Murderbot's refusal to perform gender disrupts these scripts, allowing it to exist in a state of non-performance an embodiment of what Butler would call the "failure of gender."

Posthuman theorists like Rosi Braidotti further articulate the significance of such figures in rethinking the politics of identity. In *The Posthuman* (2013), Braidotti argues that the posthuman subject rejects essentialism and embraces fluid, interconnected identities. Murderbot exemplifies this in its hybrid nature and its resistance to any fixed identity markers. It is both mechanical and organic, empathetic yet analytical, alien yet deeply relatable. This multiplicity aligns with Braidotti's conception of the "nomadic subject" a being that constructs identity through experience rather than essence.

Paul B. Preciado's notion of the body as a "living archive" of technological, pharmacological, and political forces offers a compelling framework through which to read Murderbot. In *Testo Junkie* (2013), Preciado writes that gender and identity are imposed through external mechanisms of control and surveillance. Murderbot, whose body has literally been constructed and governed by corporate technologies, reclaims autonomy by rejecting both the technological scripts of control and the social scripts of gender. Its hacked governor module and refusal to comply with gender norms are interconnected forms of bodily and discursive resistance. Importantly, Murderbot's genderlessness is not portrayed as an absence but as a presence beyond the binary a queer presence that resists erasure and simplification. Its identity is not a lack of gender but a deliberate stance against compulsory identification. This aligns with Jack Halberstam's concept of "queer failure" (2011), in which non-normative identities and behaviors disrupt hegemonic expectations. Murderbot does not fail to be human; it succeeds at being posthuman. It does not fail to be gendered; it redefines existence without the need for gender.

5. Conclusion:

Martha Wells' *All Systems Red* stands as a compelling and timely literary exploration of the cyborg condition, posthuman identity, and the shifting landscapes of ethics, embodiment, and agency in a technologized world. Through the lens of Cyborg Theory, particularly the foundational work of Donna Haraway, the novella offers a radical rethinking of what it means to be a self-aware entity in a society structured by systems of control, surveillance, and categorical rigidity. Murderbot, as a protagonist, is neither human nor machine but an ontologically hybrid being who actively resists simplification. Its identity is not defined by its

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programming or physical construction but by its affective depth, emotional intelligence, ethical decision-making, and refusal to be boxed into predetermined roles whether mechanical, human, or gendered. It functions as a direct challenge to traditional binaries: not only the human/machine divide but also male/female, tool/person, property/subject. In doing so, it fulfills Haraway's vision of the cyborg as a figure that "transgresses boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities."

Each dimension of Murderbot's evolution from its discomfort with social interaction, its preference for media consumption, and its genderless embodiment, to its final assertion of autonomy reiterates the key tenets of posthumanism. Scholars like Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti, Paul Preciado, and Sherry Turkle offer theoretical frameworks that resonate with Murderbot's journey: a subject not seeking to become human, but one redefining the terms of personhood altogether. Whether through its refusal to perform gender, its interdependent yet critical relationships with humans, or its desire to choose solitude over comfort, Murderbot continually reclaims agency on its own terms. What *All Systems Red* ultimately reveals is not just a futuristic world populated by machines and corporations, but a deeper, philosophical inquiry into identity formation under advanced technological systems. Wells subverts the trope of the obedient machine by presenting a protagonist who is capable of care, fear, loyalty, and ethical resistance not because it is trying to be human, but because those capacities are not inherently human to begin with. In this way, Murderbot does not seek assimilation but differentiation; it is not a story of conformity but of divergence.

The cyborg, in Wells' hands, is no longer a metaphor for technological horror or alienation. It becomes instead a metaphor for liberation liberation from binaries, from ownership, from socially imposed identities, and from the myth that personhood is reserved only for the biologically born. Through its refusal to be defined by others and its commitment to self-determination, Murderbot embodies the ultimate promise of cyborg theory: that identity, autonomy, and ethics can emerge in new forms, beyond the limitations of humanism.

All Systems Red is a vital literary work that does not just entertain but philosophically interrogates the implications of artificial life, autonomy, and post-gender existence. By applying Cyborg Theory to this text, we uncover layers of resistance, possibility, and transformation that speak directly to the challenges and hopes of our increasingly digital and interconnected age. Murderbot does not just ask what it means to be human it challenges us to ask what it means to be free.

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