
Feminist imagery and its artistic interpretation in Neal Asher's "Brass Man" and "The Line of Polity"

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Annotation *This article examines the artistic interpretation of female characters in Neal Asher's science fiction novels from a literary-critical perspective. The research draws on feminist and posthumanist theoretical approaches developed by Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti, Teresa de Lauretis, Lucy Suchman, T.V. Kruvko, and D.D. Kadirova. The study argues that Asher's protagonists Eldene and Mika embody a synthesis of gender critique and posthuman transformation. Eldene's transition from oppression to agency reflects a process of feminist emancipation shaped by social and technological forces. In contrast, Mika's cyborg transformation illustrates both the empowering and ambivalent dimensions of technological evolution. Through close literary analysis of key narrative episodes, the article demonstrates that Asher's space opera engages deeply with issues of embodiment, identity, and subjectivity, showing how science fiction functions as a platform for exploring changing models of power, agency, and human transformation in technologically mediated futures.*

Keywords *Feminist literary criticism, posthumanism, gender representation, cyborg identity, embodiment, agency, science fiction, Neal Asher, space opera, female subjectivity*

Nil Eshrning "Brass Man" va "The line of polity" romanlarida feministik obrazlar va ularning badiiy talqini

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Annotatsiya *Mazkur maqolada Nil Eshrning ilmiy-fantastik romanlarida ayol obrazlarining badiiy talqini adabiy-tanqidiy yondashuv asosida tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqot feministik va postgumanistik nazariyalar (Simona de Bovuar; Judit Batler; Donna Xaruey; N. Ketrin Xeylz; Rozi Braydotti; Tereza de Lauretis; Lyusi Sachman; T.V. Kruvko; D.D. Kadirova) asosida olib borilgan. Tadqiqotda Eshr qahramonlari Elden va Mika gender tanqidi hamda postgumanistik transformatsiyaning sintezini namoyon etuvchi obrazlar sifatida talqin qilinadi. Elden obrazi zulmkor muhitdan ezgulikka xizmat qiluvchi agentga o'tish orqali feministik ozodlik jarayonini aks ettirsa, Mika obrazi kiborglashuv orqali texnologik evolyutsiyaning murakkab va ziddiyatli jihatlarini birgalikda yoritadi. Asosiy epizodlarning badiiy tahlili ushbu xulosalarni tasdiqlaydi. Tadqiqot Eshrning kosmik fantastikasi gender, hokimiyat va subyektivlik masalalarini chuqur yoritishini ko'rsatib, postgumanistik sharoitda shaxs va texnologiya o'rtasidagi o'zaro bog'liqlikni ochib beradi. Shu bilan birga, maqolada ayol obrazlarining transformatsiyasi orqali inson va texnologiya o'rtasidagi*

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chegaralarning qayta talqin qilinishi ham yoritilib, zamonaviy ilmiy-fantastik adabiyotda subyektivlik va identitet muammolarining yangi badiiy shakllarda ifodalanishi ko'rsatiladi.

Kalit so'zlar *Feministik adabiy tanqid, postgumanizm, gender reprezentatsiyasi, kiborg identiteti, tana talqini, agentlik, ilmiy fantastika, Nil Eshr, kosmik opera, ayol subyektivligi*

Феминистские образы и их художественная интерпретация в романах Нила Эшера "Brass man" и "The line of polity"

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Аннотация *В данной статье рассматривается художественная интерпретация женских образов в научно-фантастических романах Нила Эшера с литературно-критической позиции. Исследование опирается на феминистские и постгуманистические теоретические подходы, разработанные Симоной де Бовуар, Джудит Батлер, Донной Харауэй, Н. Кэтрин Хейлз, Розы Брайдотти, Терезой де Лауретис, Люси Сачман, Т.В. Крувко и Д.Д. Кадыровой. В статье утверждается, что героини Эшера Элден и Мика воплощают синтез гендерной критики и постгуманной трансформации в условиях технологически изменённой реальности. Путь Элден от угнетения к субъектности отражает процесс феминистской эмансипации и формирования личной агентности в постгуманной среде. В то же время киборгизация Мики демонстрирует как возможности, так и противоречивые последствия технологической эволюции, влияя на границы человеческой идентичности. Близкий художественный анализ ключевых эпизодов подтверждает данные выводы. Показано, что космическая фантастика Эшера поднимает сложные вопросы гендера, телесности, власти и субъектности в постгуманистическом и технологически опосредованном контексте, расширяя понимание роли женщины в научно-фантастическом дискурсе.*

Ключевые слова *Феминистская литературная критика, постгуманизм, гендерная репрезентация, киборг-идентичность, телесность, агентность, научная фантастика, Нил Эшер, космическая опера, женская субъектность*

Introduction

Science fiction has long served as a field for reimagining gender roles and social norms through speculative scenarios. Simone de Beauvoir famously noted that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 1949), emphasizing the social construction of

gender. Judith Butler further argues that gender identity is performatively constituted by repeated acts and language (Butler, 1990). These feminist theoretical insights have influenced science fiction's treatment of gender as a discursive construct (de Lauretis, 1987, Butler, 1990) rather than a fixed essence. Works

from utopian feminism to cyberfeminism use SF to challenge binary oppositions. For example, Donna Haraway's *"Cyborg Manifesto"* envisions the cyborg as "a creature in a post-gender world" (Haraway, 1985), disrupting boundaries between human vs machine and male vs female. Contemporary posthumanist thought acknowledges the impact of feminist theory on new subjectivities; as Kravko notes, posthuman discourse foregrounds gendered otherness and technological agency in new forms of subjectivity (Kravko, 2023). In literary criticism, these ideas have been used to decode female representation and power relations (Kadirova, 2025). Kadirova, for instance, emphasizes that dystopian narratives foreground women's rights and freedoms as reflections of social structures and crises (Kadirova, 2025).

Against this theoretical backdrop, we examine two of Asher's novels *"Brass Man"* and *"The Line of Polity"* with a literary-interpretive lens. The aim is to trace how the female protagonists embody posthuman features while also acting with agency under systems of power, and to assess whether their artistic portrayal aligns with or contradicts feminist theories. This analysis adopts a comprehensive approach, drawing on primary text evidence and feminist vs posthuman sources to interpret the characters Eldene and Mika in terms of gender, technology, embodiment, and agency.

Methods

This study uses qualitative literary analysis of Asher's texts, supported by feminist and posthumanist theoretical frameworks. Primary sources include *"The Line of Polity"* and *"Brass Man"*, as well as relevant theoretical works. Key concepts are identified in secondary sources. The novels were read in detail to identify scenes illustrating control of the female body by technology or patriarchy, moments of resistance or self-transformation, and narrative outcomes for Eldene and Mika. Each finding is linked to theory.

For example, Beauvoir's notion of woman as the "Other" (Beauvoir, 1949) and Butler's

idea of subverting gender norms (Butler, 1990) guided the reading of Eldene's subjugation and rebellion. Haraway's and Hayles's ideas about cyborg vs posthuman bodies (Haraway, 1985, Hayles, 1999) framed the analysis of Mika's self-experimentation. Local researcher Kadirova provided cultural-literary context regarding feminist dystopian interpretation (Kadirova, 2025).

The author's interpretive stance is explicitly maintained. The analysis approaches Eldene and Mika not merely as narrative figures but as posthuman literary constructs through which Asher negotiates power, embodiment, and gendered agency in technological futures.

Results

The analysis reveals two contrasting but complementary female images in Asher's world. Eldene is a young laborer on the harsh planet Masada in *"The Line of Polity"*. From the beginning, her life is controlled by a theocratic regime and biotechnology. Each worker on Masada is implanted with a parasitic symbiote that enriches their blood with oxygen; without this device and its required drugs, they would suffocate. This implant renders Eldene's body literally controlled by power, resembling Foucauldian biopower via technological means (Haraway, 1991). Under such oppression, Eldene is aware of her lack of autonomy: the brutal labor, constant surveillance, and even possible sexual exploitation of women define her existence. The novel explicitly suggests that young women like her face only grim choices – escape as stowaways, assistance from an underground, or sexual servitude – echoing Beauvoir's idea that patriarchal culture reduces women to objects for others (Beauvoir, 1949). In Masada's patriarchal regime, the female body becomes either a work tool or a commodity. Indeed, Eldene initially embodies the "Other" as defined by Butler: her body and destiny are largely alienated by external forces (Butler, 1990, Beauvoir, 1949).

However, Eldene's portrayal includes significant agency. She is not a mere victim. For instance, when a foreman unjustly punishes an

innocent coworker, Eldene secretly warns others and helps prevent cruelty. This small but bold act of defiance displays her inner resistance and moral compass. Later, after the Polity intervenes and Masada's regime falls, Eldene gains freedom and a new relationship. Crucially, her physical appearance changes: with proper nourishment and medical care, her lean body gradually fills out; her muscles relax, and her hips and chest gain the traditionally feminine curves. Albeit, even then, she remains more muscular than typical women from space, appearing "grotesquely" strong (Asher, 2003). Asher refuses to idealize her beauty; instead, he notes her unusual shape to highlight both her strength and vulnerability. Thus, Eldene's arc intersects gender, power, and embodiment: technology – "the skol implant" subjected her to power, patriarchy tried to nullify her subjectivity, but she ultimately reclaims autonomy, breathing without the parasite and engaging in social bonds. In feminist terms, Eldene transitions from an "Other" to a subject capable of action (Butler, 1990). Her agency is evident even in *Brass Man*: when her lover Apiss suffers from dangerous biotech effects, Eldene actively participates in saving him, demanding that Polity agents consider his needs (Asher, 2005). In sum, Eldene's image embodies a feminist emancipation line: suppressed objecthood gradually yields to embodied selfhood, even if broken by trauma.

Mika offers a different perspective: she is a scientist integrated into Polity's high-tech society. Unlike Eldene, Mika initially enjoys privileged access to knowledge and technology. As a specialist in xenobiology and nanotech (a Life-Coven biologist), she influences the mission on Jain threats and commands respect for her expertise. Her knowledge grants her a form of power: mission leaders heed her advice, and she orchestrates crucial experiments. However, her storyline reaches a climax when she experiments on herself. In *Brass Man*, during the Masada mission, Mika uses a fragment of Jain biotech (the "doctor's mycelium") to stabilize Apiss's

fragile health. Then she implants the same mycelium into herself. The motivation is never stated clearly; when asked, she tersely answers, "For research purposes" (Asher, 2005). This cold reply belies complex motives from pure scientific curiosity to a subconscious desire for new abilities. Indeed, the mycelium grants Mika superhuman advantages: she can breathe toxic atmospheres, her wounds heal almost instantly, and her strength doubles. Essentially, Mika becomes a Haraway-esque cyborg, a hybrid of human and technology, blurring natural vs artificial boundaries (Haraway, 1985).

Post-transformation, her body is posthuman: when Cormac sees Mika after the change, he barely recognizes her. She is depicted as partially translucent, with internal skeletal motion visible, an image that signals her radical otherness (Asher, 2005). Moreover, her musculature and endurance far exceed human norms. If Eldene's strength is earned by toil, Mika's is a result of biotechnological upgrade.

Notably, both Eldene and Mika appear "abnormal" to ordinary people (strong, muscular women defy standard femininity). Mika's case is even more extreme: she gains monstrous posthuman aspects. Asher shows that her superpowers come at a cost. The mycelium, intended as a medical nanotech, spirals out of control: it continues growing inside her like a malignant organism (Asher, 2005). Confronted with this crisis, Mika must acknowledge her error. She feels guilt: "I made a mistake," she admits about injecting herself (Asher, 2005). Though possessing far more knowledge and control than Eldene, Mika is vulnerable to a different power technology itself. The Jain nanovirus defies her plan, and to save Apiss, she assists in a risky surgery she devised. In the operating room scene, two female figures collide: Mika as the surgeon-researcher and Eldene as the concerned caregiver. Eldene challenges Mika directly, insisting on accountability for the experimental risk (Asher, 2005).

Mika's portrait is compelling because it combines knowledge-power with bodily vulnerability. On one hand, she is the embodiment of scientific rationalism and agency: she actively makes decisions (she is, in de Lauretis's terms, a "technology of gender" a woman constructing herself through scientific practice beyond traditional roles (De Lauretis, 1987). On the other hand, her story warns of the limits of such power. Her body experiences subjugation to a techno-scientific order that even she cannot fully control. We read that Mika through a posthuman lens: she is a posthuman subject who, as Hayles notes, signals not the end of humanity but the end of the old concept of the autonomous liberal human (Hayles, 1999). Mika crosses the boundary between human and non-human,

thus breaking not only gender binaries but species binaries. Hayles and Braidotti emphasize that posthuman subjectivity is inherently hybrid (Hayles, 1999, Braidotti, 2013; 49). Mika indeed becomes such a hybrid.

Her image embodies both a positive emancipatory ideal and a critique of techno-optimism, which is the loss of control and technological dependency. Such figures are often read as boundary-warning monsters in feminist theory (Haraway, 1985). By crossing into the posthuman, Mika raises questions about the limits of humanity and responsibility. These questions resonate with feminist technology ethics, which insist on the interconnectedness of human and technological systems (Haraway, 1991, Hayles, 1999).

The table below summarizes key features of Eldene and Mika's characterization:

Characteristic	Eldene (Laborer)	Mika (Scientist/Cyborg)
Social Role	A woman oppressed by a patriarchal regime	Woman empowered by scientific expertise
Source of Power	Patriarchal theocracy & biological control (skole implant)	Scientific knowledge & alien nanotech (Jain)
Type of Embodiment	Subjugated body – physically strong but controlled by oppression	Augmented body – enhanced by biotech (cyborg)
Agency	Small acts of resistance; caring for others; gaining freedom at end	Initiates experiments; solves crises; takes responsibility
Relation to Feminist Theory	Path from "Other" to partial subject; body objectified by patriarchy	Embodies cyborg/posthuman subject; challenges gender/species boundaries

Table 1.

Discussion

Asher's Polity universe provides rich material for examining how gender is constructed and deconstructed in a posthuman future. By posthumanism, here we mean a vision where the traditional "humanist subject" - the autonomous, rational 'Man' at center stage is problematized by the rise of AI, cyborgs, and hybrid beings (Hayles, 1999, Kravko, 2023). For gender, this implies that the old male vs female binary loses its central significance. Asher reflects this on multiple

levels. First, his world teems with sentient non-humans: AIs and cyborgs abound. Though Asher does not explicitly give them gendered roles. For example, the known AI "Dragon" lacks fixed gender, their presence undermines anthropocentrism. Haraway argues that cyborgity "rejects the stability of gender" (Haraway, 1985). In *"The Line of Polity"*, Asher introduces drakomen part-human, part-dragon warriors with their own biology and reproduction outside human norms. Mika's fascination with the drakomen underlines the

point: the future is populated by diverse life-forms for which human gender is just one parameter. This resonates with posthumanist calls to recognize multiplicity beyond binary embodiment (Braidotti, 2013).

Second, Asher's female characters defy traditional gender stereotypes in their roles. Eldene, though oppressed, performs physically demanding labor, displaying endurance and bravery, while also retaining empathy and care traits culturally coded as feminine. Thus, she combines qualities that destabilize rigid gender dichotomies. Mika goes further: she occupies a position of authority as an expert scientist, a role historically associated with masculine rationality. Her interests in science and experimentation have traditionally been male-coded. Moreover, her transformation into a hybrid body aligns with Haraway's notion of a post-gender entity (Haraway, 1985). After her metamorphosis, Mika's translucent, almost uncanny body inspires awe rather than erotic recognition. She becomes effectively post-gender, though narratively still addressed as "she." The absence of a developed romantic subplot reinforces her separation from normative human roles.

Language and voice offer another interpretive dimension. On Masada, patriarchal rule suppresses women's public voice. After the Polity's intervention, Eldene gains the right to speak openly and challenge authority. This reflects a central feminist theme of acquiring voice. As de Lauretis notes, discourse itself functions as a "technology of gender" (De Lauretis, 1987). In Asher's narrative, women do speak: Mika asserts scientific authority in strategic discussions, while Eldene advocates for Apiss's survival in confrontations with male officials. Granting female characters discursive authority contributes to dismantling narrative gender hierarchy.

The breakdown of male-female binaries in these novels occurs through three primary mechanisms: (1) extreme bodily transformations (women become cyborg-like beings), (2) role reversals (women act as

protectors and scientists while men become vulnerable), and (3) the presence of multiple intelligences rendering gender secondary. This aligns with Butler's theory of gender fluidity (Butler, 1990) and cyberfeminist visions of a future where biological sex no longer dictates social destiny (Haraway, 1985).

Importantly, Asher does not depict a utopian post-gender world. Instead, the novels portray a transitional space where patriarchal Masada contrasts with the technologically progressive Polity. While formal equality exists in the latter, subtle gender norms persist. The emergence of figures like Mika suggests a gradual shift toward a flexible identity model. Kruvko similarly observes that contemporary science fiction increasingly positions women as posthuman subjects in technological environments (Kruvko, 2023).

Crucially, Asher portrays his heroines as agents rather than narrative accessories. Feminist criticism emphasizes the importance of representing women as historical actors rather than passive objects (Kadirova, 2025, Beauvoir, 1949). Eldene and Mika both shape outcomes: Eldene defends her community and insists on ethical care, while Mika initiates transformative scientific actions and accepts responsibility for their consequences. Their agency is narratively justified rather than artificially imposed.

From a literary standpoint, Asher's fusion of action-driven narrative with philosophical depth is notable. His female characters are not ideological constructs but psychologically grounded figures whose experiences embody theoretical tensions. Thus, even mainstream 2000s science fiction engages meaningfully with feminist and posthuman concerns.

In conclusion, Eldene and Mika's portrayals demonstrate that the "woman as Other" may evolve into a posthuman subject once she transcends patriarchal limitations (Beauvoir, 1949, Butler, 1990). Asher's fiction shows how literature can function as an experimental space for feminist and

posthuman ideas, simultaneously affirming and complicating them.

Conclusion

Author's standpoint: Eldene and Mika exemplify feminist emancipatory trajectories within a posthuman context. Eldene's path represents liberation from both social and biological control, echoing the feminist dictum that "the personal is political" in an embodied sense. Her transformation from a biologically dependent laborer to a self-determining subject illustrates how technological control over the body can be resisted and renegotiated.

Mika's arc is simultaneously empowering and cautionary, depicting the ambiguous gift of cyborgization. Her self-experimentation expands her capabilities while also exposing her to new vulnerabilities, confirming Hayles's assertion that posthuman embodiment destabilizes the notion of an autonomous liberal subject. In combining these dimensions, Asher contributes to a feminist-posthuman

imaginary in which emancipation is not purely social but ontological.

We argue that this literary interpretation demonstrates how science-fiction narratives can carry progressive gender discourse through aesthetic means. As Kadirova notes, dystopian narratives foreground women's subjectivity as a reflection of broader socio-cultural tensions. In Asher's case, this reflection extends into posthuman territory, where gendered embodiment becomes inseparable from technological transformation.

By analyzing Asher's texts through Beauvoirian and Butlerian lenses, this study shows that female characters function as cultural probes, foregrounding questions of agency, corporeality, and identity in technologically saturated environments. Such an academic reading may inform broader debates on gender representation in science fiction and suggest future-oriented imaginaries that recognize difference without abandoning ethical responsibility.

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