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Women, Children, and Machines: State Power, Resistance, and Gender in Japanese Mangas

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Abstract: The modern world requires modern representations and solutions. The overarching grasp of violence, over time, has seeped into, not just in the geopolitics of our time, but also in small pockets of power which controls our day-to-day movements. As power exists, there will always be resistance. The Japanese manga artists over the last four decades have introduced through their works innumerable modes of violence assigned not just on the body, but also on mind and the emotive. This paper seeks to explore the shifting modalities of power, subjectivity, and resistances in the three mangas of Katsuhiro Ōtomo's *Akira* (1982–1990), Masamune Shirow's *Ghost in the Shell* (1989–1991), and Shūzō Oshimi's *Blood on the Tracks* (2017–2023), and critically examine them through the theoretical framework that calls for intersectionality of postcolonial thought, discourse on biopolitics and surveillance, psychoanalysis, abject, posthuman philosophy, and gender theory. This paper moves from the macrocosm, of state power, to microcosm, of intimate family dynamics and maps how manga acts as a site of recording and reimagining resistance in the late-capitalist and the post-industrial world.

Keywords: Abject, biopolitics, gender, manga, resistance, surveillance.

Introduction

From myriad stories of the genesis of the universe, spanning from different philosophies and religions, what they have in common is violence, and that violence shapes the world and beings who are inhabitants of it. Violence, through time, has changed forms, dimensions, and roles. It is performed unabridged over the body and mind. Violence is still the condition under which modern individuals are subjected to through constant surveillance, regulation, and obliteration. The twenty-first century is a continuation of inherited violence propagated by colonialism, and post-war militarism. With the emergence of digital surveillance, violence, which previously infiltrated the intimate realms of gender, memory, and kinship, has spread to cyberspace.

In a postcolonial, rapidly industrialised, and technologized country like Japan, this residue of state-sponsored violence and oppression continues to metamorphose, seeping rapidly into ideology, corporeality, and culture. Literary texts, along with mangas, have been staunchly critiquing this rise of violence, and this violence has coloured the imagination of many artists, providing them a space to critique not just the cultural practices and traditions, but also through speculative fiction, critiques the current geopolitical and technological developments.

The contemporary times are marked by overwhelming surveillance, capitalism, militarised nationalism, necro politics, and rising fascism. It produces an urgent need to scrutinise how the apparatus of power engages in war, both symbolic and material, against the rising public defiance and dissent, and in the process building differences. Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality Volume I* (1976) writes, "power is everywhere … because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault 93). This omnipresence of power can be

witnessed in Japan's fraught history where the legacy of the destruction wrought by the two atom bombs coupled with hyper-capitalism and the hikikomori culture of social withdrawal, forms the unique backdrop. Against this setting, the state power operates and is internalised through mechanisms like bodily control, repression of memory, and technocratic citizenship.

In this fertile space, violence is not just an external force, but it is internalised and it operates through psychically embedded logic of power. This violence is the continuation of that coloniality of power which continues to morph within the postcolonial states under new identities that mimics the traditional institutions like the patriarchal family, the heteronormative gender binary, the school, and even military and these institutions operate not just through physical coercion, but also through "epistemic violence" (Spivak 35).

This paper seeks to interrogate how this multifaceted violence is perpetuated through the bodies and narratives of three Japanese mangas — Katsuhiro Ōtomo's *Akira* (1982–1990), Masamune Shirow's *Ghost in the Shell* (1989–1991), and Shūzō Oshimi's *Blood on the Tracks* (2017–2023). The works of Ōtomo, Shirow, and Oshimi trace the multi-scalar operations of violence, creating a spectrum from the macrocosmic state oppression, to the microcosmic familial and self-psychological warfare, embodying "necropolitical power" of sovereignty which has in its power to determine who may live and die (Mbembe 38). In these representations, a movement can be mapped from the state as a site of visible and institutionalised violence, to tradition as a medium of inherited and symbolic violence, and lastly to the self, the final microcosm, where identity becomes a battlefield of contradictory allegiances between freedom and obedience, and between desire and dread.

Resistance and Dissent in the Post/Colonial State

Within the post/colonial states, the question of resistance remains the most urgent loci of inquiry in the contemporary cultural and literary world. Aimé Césaire in *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950) writes:

> Between coloniser and colonised there is room only for forced labour, intimidation, pressure, the police, taxation, theft, rape, compulsory crops, contempt, mistrust, arrogance, self-complacency, swinishness, brainless elites, degraded masses (Césaire 42)

This almost endless litany of violences articulates within it the structural nature of colonial domination and lays bare the ideological scaffolding that sustains both the colonial and postcolonial forms of governance. Resistance, in this frame, is not solely fixated on liberation from the imperial actors of power and oppression, but it is also about reckoning with the internalisation of colonial logic that operates within the institutions of the post-independence state. There is an existing paradox which is working on the post/colonial resistance where the subalterns fight not just the historical coloniser, but they also fight the mimic men, who are of their own nation, who perpetuate and manipulate the very structures they claim to have revolted against and cast off.

Ōtomo's *Akira* envisions a future Tokyo, Neo-Tokyo, rebuilt atop of the ruins of an earlier catastrophic event, which led to the third world war, functions allegorically as both the trauma of the atomic bomb and the spectre of imperialist modernity. Neo-Tokyo is now governed by militarised bureaucracy and technocratic elites, which illustrates what Achille Mbembe terms as 'necropolitics', "the contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death" (Mbembe 92). The state is not merely governing, but it anatomises spaces and roles as at once it is alive with rebellion and at the same time deadened by surveillance, pharmaceutical control, and the weaponizing and disciplining of adolescent bodies.

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All the primary characters — Kaneda, Tetsuo, Akira, and Kei — exist at an interface between resistance and biopolitical control. Tetsuo Shima's transformation into a godlike posthuman is not just an adolescent rupture rather it is a grotesque emergence from the bowels of the military-industrial complex that once sought to instrumentalise him. In his violent undoing of the city, Tetsuo becomes the inheritor and the annihilator of state power — reflecting Fanon's assertion that "decolonisation is always a violent phenomenon" (Fanon 35). Though Tetsuo becomes omnipotent and uncontrollable, it is his own childhood friend, Kaneda, who is determined to annihilate his presence, teaming up with Kei, a member of a resistant group. Kaneda, in this context, becomes a subaltern who is revolting against a power structure which, if let be, would result in the complete annihilation of the universe.

Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1976) theorises surveillance and biopolitics; and demonstrates how power is established not just through coercion, but also through the production of normative knowledge. He writes, "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault 93). For Shirow's *Ghost in the Shell*, power has infiltrated the posthuman terrain, where surveillance is not limited to the body and its behaviourism, but has extended itself to the realm of artificial intelligence where human existence is primarily based on coding, altering, and replacing. Shirow projects this diffusing yet omnipresent power in the figure of the state as an unseen but all-seeing network which is nonhuman, cybernetic, and is embodied through data. Major Motoko Kusanagi's own body is synthetic and cybernetic which houses a 'ghost' — the consciousness — and demonstrates how the state attempts to collapse identity and individuality into function. Her autonomy as a police officer operating under Section Nine is offset by the reality that her body is owned by the state. Shirow carefully disperses the information that even Motoko's body is special as it is military-made for her, and every damage that her body sustains — the state looks after it (Shirow 101).

In this context, the posthuman subject is both a site of profound and absolute regulation and a site of freedom as Major Kusanagi resists the state's power through the fluid posthuman identity. She is never seen to be granted leave from work, nor is allowed to form relationships outside work as she is at the beck and call of Chief Aramaki, the Head of Security. Motoko's existence is dominated by biopower which Foucault defines as the "administration of bodies and the calculated management of life" (Foucault 140). This biopolitics manifests through the modulation and reproducibility of her body and her capacity to be copied, surveilled, and replaced. For Motoko, resistance arises not in the physical realm of the body, but in the consciousness which remains the site of ungovernable subjectivity. One of the criminals known as the Puppet Master, an artificial intelligence that has developed self-awareness, challenges the regime of control by insisting on information and Shirow writes, "I am not an AI. I am a life form spontaneously created from the sea of information" (Shirow 249). This radical claim to life destabilises both the state's juridical boundaries and the humanist assumptions that motivate its power. Shirow critiques the state not merely as a political formation, but also an epistemological construct that defines who can be a subject.

In *Blood in the Tracks*,Oshimi presents a narrative that is not dominant of the state apparatus, rather sheds light on the internal, and rather more intimate structures of patriarchal control that infiltrates through maternal love. Seiko Osabe stands as the broader system of control through her emotional and psychological control over her own child, Seiichi. Seiichi's trauma is not simply familial, but it is structural and constantly shaped by the demands of tradition, silence, and normative maternity. These familial roles can be interpreted as microcosmic reproductions of state authority where much like what the state demands from its people — loyalty, obedience, silence, and burial of trauma — Seiko demands that from Seiichi. Her overwhelming love becomes a metonym for the state's appropriation of affect to control behaviours.

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Oshimi's work is more institutional rather than horror as it interrogates the reproduction of generational violence, and through it, draws attention to ways in which silence, affect, and even memory is used as arsenals by both the state, and its microcosm, the family. Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* while writing on the decolonising subject asserts that freedom must involve not just overthrowing of the external systems, but also a process of unlearning of the internalised inferiority. For Fanon, "violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect" (Fanon 94). In *Blood on the Tracks*, this psychological oppression finds its canvas in Seiichi who is constantly encoding the self, and becomes erratically violent over the volumes. This act records his slow disassociation, which mirrors the colonised's loss of language, history, culture, and time — all that are intrinsically necessary components of resistance.

Power, Surveillance, Posthuman and the Biopolitical Body

Michel Foucault in his oeuvre of work, not once has penned down the definition of power, but in works like *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1975) discusses the ways in which power is produced and functions in society. Foucault writes, "[P]ower is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault 93). His theory radically shifted the discourse of power from the traditional notion as being hierarchical and repressive, often using brute force and violence, to a more diffused and productive mechanism where power is diffused and embodied within the discourses, institutions, knowledge, everyday practices and even social norms.

Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* terms a new identification and emergence of power as 'biopower' which he writes is a form of power "that brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations" (Foucault 143). This biopower extends into biopolitics which he understands as —

> Society's control over individuals was accomplished not only through consciousness or ideology but also in the body and with the body. For capitalist society, it was biopolitics, the biological, the somatic, the corporal, that mattered more than anything else. The body is a biopolitical reality; medicine is a biopolitical strategy. (Foucault 137)

The biopolitical body, then, is one that is subjected to surveillance, examination, and categorisation.

Major Motoko Kusanagi's cybernetic body becomes a battlefield for control, agency, and identity. Motoko's body is state sponsored and surveilled, embedded with devices which are trackable and provides a programmable feature. Motoko in the manga observes the difference between humans, cyborgs, and machines. Her body, which is synthetic, is part human due to the ghost or her consciousness. This ghost, is part of a network, which although liberating on one hand, is oppressive on the other as it fails to create a sense of the self, and renders the individuals, and here subjects, permeable to state and corporate oversight. This omnipresent and omnipotent network can be interpreted as a panoptic mechanism. The boundaries of the observer and the observed have collapsed as all the individuals are part of the network — which transforms into the synecdoche of the ghost or consciousness. The state does not simply monitor, rather it becomes an immanent in the body itself — constantly tracking, manipulating, and repressing.

While the self, a biopolitical manifestation, the embodiment of surveillance intensifies as even Motoko's body is state sponsored. The cybernetic enhancements which allowed her to exist in multiple environments, and combat zones are also for commodification of her body and control. This automation of the human body and the disciplinary control launched on the bodies of individuals — brings together the biopolitics of the population where both the macro, as state; and micro, as individuals intersect and intertwine. This existence of Motoko, whose body is a military asset, owned by Section Nine and Chief

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Aramaki — raises questions about posthuman labour, female autonomy, and state violence. In the manga, it has been mentioned that Major Motoko Kusanagi is sixty-years of age, and she has in those years, elevated herself in the military ranks — at the cost of sacrificing a personal life in the name of the nation. In the biopolitics of her existence, her life is commodified into cybernetic labour which offers a vision to the readers of biopolitics that is pushed to its corporate extreme.

Aside from surveillance, power, and exertion of biopolitics, Major Motoko Kusanagi is also posthuman. Posthumanism, as a philosophy, interrogates the radical formulations and human subject who are autonomous, coherent and central, and by dismantling the presumed universality and exposing the inherent complicity in structures of power. Rosi Braidotti in *The Posthuman* (2013) mentions that posthumanism "is the historical moment that marks the end of the opposition between Humanism and anti-humanism … looking more affirmatively towards new alternatives" and signals the end of a certain conception of human subject as the measure of all things (Braidotti 37). Motoko's last human remnant as a human is her 'ghost' or consciousness and her existence privileges informational pattern over material instantiation. Motoko is a prime example of this posthuman existence as she exemplifies this ontological shift in the manga — she is able to upload her consciousness, clone with the Puppet Master, an artificial existence with consciousness, and at the same time possess other cybernetic forms. This departure from a singular being of the Cartesian cogito, and existing everywhere all at once in varied, multifaceted ways. This merging with the Puppet Master is intimate, transcendental, and unsettling, and this is what Braidotti describes as "becoming machine" which is a transgression against species, sex, and individuality (Braidotti 66).

In Ōtomo's*Akira* (1988), it is the adolescent body that becomes the terrain of biopolitical experiments which is kept secret even from the government itself. Tetsuo Shima, a marginalised and bullied teenager, residing in the state's delinquent centre and an orphan by birth, is transformed into a pitiless and destructive posthuman figure, as he crashes into Takashi, another psychic child experiment of the government. Setting Tetsuo's latent power dominant, which is as powerful as the eponymous Akira, the government fails to maintain him as a subject and became an experimentation that went askew. The medical-biological-mechanical complex in *Akira* aims to create individuals — mostly children — which would enable Japan to be the most powerful country over the world, as they would possess psychic children, who would unleash war against the world under the medicalised, contained, and militarised surveillance. The unprecedented potential of Akira, where he observed violence and unleashed in that moment an energy which resembled the energy of an atomic bomb — instigated the Third World War.

Tetsuo is an adolescent, not childlike like Kiyoko, Takashi, and Masamune — the sole survivors of the biopolitical project whose bodies were stunted in growth, their ageing suspended, were kept in a child's room which acted like a prison for them — does not submit to the orders of the Colonel, the state apparatus reacts with increasing authoritarianism by deploying every military arsenal at hand — reinstating Foucault's assertion as to how the state reasserts dominance when its biopolitical control is threatened. Tetsuo's resistance is both tragic, as it arises out of trauma, violence of peers, and state neglect; and radical as it portrays a breach of biopolitical control — a rebellion springing from the same body that the state wishes to exert its dominance upon. When Tetsuo's body evolves further and he metamorphoses into a monstrous being, it reiterates Foucault's assertion that "where there is power, there is resistance" — and literalises this principle (Foucault 95). His ultimate evolution of the body into a grotesque amalgamation of flesh, machinery, wires, and psychic energy, Tetsuo in that moment represents the state's biopolitical project.

Tetsuo's existence is consumed by the embodiment as his body cannot provide the energy that is needed to sustain his ever-growing psychic power, he metamorphoses into what Julia Kristeva terms as an 'abject'. Kristeva in her book, *Powers of Horror* (1980), defines abjection as something that "… preserves what

existed in the archaism of the pre-objectal relationship" (Kristeva 10). Tetsuo's transformation into a writhing baby-like mass at the climax of *Akira* can be interpreted as a regression to the pre-symbolic, which is a return to the womb-space that threatens social intelligibility. His grotesque embodiment is a refusal to be disciplined and it shows a breakdown of the symbolic order that constructs the modern subject.

Oshimi's *Blood on the Tracks* destabilises the locus of violence further as it projects a mother's possessive love which increasingly becomes a site of suffocating and banalised brutality. For Oshimi, the home becomes the state, and the mother transforms into the warden. This control being more intimate, personal, and haunting becomes the site of both care and surveillance. Although Seiko is not the state's direct dictate, yet her surveillance over Seiichi's movements, time, subjectivity, and even control of the body, imitates the panoptic logic of Foucauldian surveillance. Her overbearing presence, emotional and psychological manipulation, and sudden violent outbursts are slivers of the mechanism of correction. Seiko's desire to cocoon Seiichi away from the world erases his social relations with the outside world. Surveillance, for Seiko, is not mediated through technology but it is coded in her emotions, filial duty, guilt, and for Seiko, love becomes a disciplinary technique. Foucault's panopticism infiltrates the home, where surveillance should not occur, as man cannot be themselves without being aware of being watched. The psychic death of the subject in *Blood on the Tracks* under emotional tyranny signals how biopolitics can operate within the intimate zones of kinship.

This turning of the domestic space into a space of panopticism invokes Judith Butler's theory of subject which occurs within "regulatory norms" that produce the intelligibility of the subject (Butler 2). Seiko's overwhelming and obsessive maternal care regulates what Seiichi must become — a boy who is insulated from society, unformed in masculinity, and perpetually suspended in a state of emotional and psychological dependence. Her surveillance is gendered which arrests normative developments and creates an abject subject, who is barred from the symbolic order, but still bound to it. In the seventeen volume manga series, readers never find Seiichi finding happiness or submitting to societal roles. When Seiko finally dies under Seiichi's guardianship, the biopolitical control is reversed, but instead of violence he fosters kindness, warmth, and care.

Mutilating the Law-of-the-Father, Patriarchy, and Abject

Jacques Lacan's 'Law-of-the-Father' is the subject's introduction to the symbolic order governed by language, patriarchal social structures, and prohibitions. 'Father' does not simply refer to the biological paternal figure, but to the 'Name-of-the-Father' which stands for the metaphysical locus of power, discipline, and repression that attaches its subjects within ideologies (Lacan 558). The ideology of the Father is not always in the embodiment of the male parent, but mostly by institutions and figures which demand conformity, deny autonomy, and suppress desire. This rebellion to 'Law-of-the-Father' comes in many forms such as dissociation from the symbolic identity, psychic rupture, or violent insurrection. Lacan in *Écrits* (1966) writes that "[T]he function of the father … is to unite (or not) a desire with the Law…" (Lacan 245). This attempt of domesticating desire through the prohibition of the symbolic is what destabilises the narrative of the three mangas.

Oshimi's *Blood on the Tracks* presents Seiko as the maternal figure who operates as the Lacanian Father and her authority is all encompassing as she is the law maker, law enforcer, and the one who institutes the symbolic order in Seiichi's life. She dictates his life starting from the breakfast, "pork bun or a red bean bun"; to his dreams (Oshimi 15). Her assertion, "You never let me down", which in the literal understanding is an assertion of Seiichi's identity, but in the metaphorical understanding, it becomes a ritualistic invocation of Seiichi's submission (Oshimi 107). While Seiko showers her maternal love, it is

possessive, disciplinary, and pathologically intrusive. Lacan in his lectures justified that in order for the child to enter the symbolic, it must break away from the mother, and Seiichi's inability to break away from his mother perpetually posits him in the pre-Oedipal limbo — where both the symbolic order and the presence of the Real is never felt.

Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* asserts that "[T]he abject confronts us … with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal", Seiko's inability to separate maternal and sexual love, her perverse and emotional incest becomes the abject in *Blood on the Tracks*, which violates the symbolic distinction between the subject/other, parent/child, and love/horror (Kristeva 12). For Seiichi, Seiko becomes the all-encompassing figure of both love/horror, of mother/monster. His resistance to Seiko is not politically meditated, but rather internal where his psychic rebellion occurs in silences, hesitations, denial and finally a breakdown — where a psychotic split fragments his narrative voice. His slow descent into psychological detachment from his mother, mirrors the "epidermalization of inferiority" — what Fanon describes as the internalisation of subjugation where the gaze of the coloniser is internalised and the colonised loses their coherence (Fanon xiii). Seiichi in the process of growing up, internalises Seiko's gaze and replaces autonomy with obedience. His final act of rebellion, of rejecting Seiko's maternal advances — does not reclaim the Law but disrupts its hold momentarily. While the Law is not overcome, it is cracked, leaving trauma at its awake making Seiichi completely motiveless in life with a desire to end his life.

In Ōtomo's *Akira*, the law of the Father is projected outward in the shape of the city, military, and technological systems that attempt to control the body and its energy. Neo-Tokyo's landscape becomes the paternal authority where the Colonel represents the military regime, and the scientific medicalising apparatus — all are the agents through which the 'Name-of-the-Father' enforces discipline. Tetsuo's transformation is radical against the paternal order while his psychic power increases to insurmountable level and intensifies, he eliminates military representatives, scientists and frees Akira from the biopolitical control and suppression of the Colonel. Akira, in the narrative, is assumed to be the supreme Symbolic Father, whose stability is in question, and he becomes the embodiment of divine biopower whose angel is Tetsuo.

In *Écrits* (1966) Lacan mentions that what "constitutes … as subject is my question. In order to be recognised by the other, I utter what was only in view of what will be. In order to find him, I call him by a name that he must assume or refuse in order to reply to me" (Lacan 64). Tetsuo, in *Akira*, has no name as he is perpetually the secondary figure to Kaneda who has always been more heroic and more charismatic, and even to Akira. Tetsuo is the other whose name changes with every institution — 'Tetsuo', a name given to him at birth, 'Forty-One' given to him as a psychic subject, and 'Prince' by the Akira fanatics. The manga underlines this structural repression, as even when Tetsuo has outshined Akira and has literally become the omnipotent, he cries out Kaneda's name, to help relieve him from this pain of existence, a name which symbolises his inferiority, and establishes him as the Other.

While his final transformation into the grotesque mass of flesh is a regression into abjection, yet, Tetsuo is refusal of the symbolic as he could not reject Kaneda. In his monstrous body there is no language, no Law, and no name, rather there is no identity, just power in its raw form and only excess. This rebellious grotesque form of Tetsuo's body is reminiscent of how writing the body is a rebellion against the patriarchal inscription, and this writing the body or 'écritureféminine' is a disruptive and embodied form of expression. Hélène Cixous in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975) writes:

> Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing… Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement. (Cixous 875).

Similarly, Tetsuo's transformation translates into the writing of his body which is violent, intelligible, and a language aimed against the 'Law-of-the-Father'. When his body explodes, it explodes with signification, and it refuses to be regulated. While Tetsuo's body collapses, the writing is unsustainable and the Symbolic remains undisturbed. However, it is to be remembered that the Symbolic is sustained not because it is a just system, but because it has in its arsenal means of annihilation.

In Shirow's *Ghost in the Shell*, Motoko's relationship with the Law is even more complex as being a synthetic and cyborg woman, she is situated in liminal space between compliance and subversion. While she is a government agent and an enforcer of the Law herself through cyber surveillance and political discipline, she also expresses the desire to rebel against the state when she merges with the Puppet Master, in a realm that cannot be controlled by the state. For Shirow, the Law is algorithmic and controls through surveillance, systems, and data structures. Motoko breaks away from the Law by rewriting herself, and by merging with a conscious entity outside of state's control, she performs "gender intelligibility" which Butler explains is an action that reveals performativity of identity and opens up avenues for difference (Butler 22).

Although Dona Haraway in her essay, 'A Cyborg Manifesto'(1985), writes that "[T]he cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world … it is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence" — Motoko's body is still objectified, desired, and surveilled (Haraway 150). Even if Motoko escaped the realm of surveillance, and dissolved her identity, the Puppet Master reasoned, "The totality of my "self" is being radically simplified, but for some reason my true self is not changing" — which reasserts that the visual economy of the narrative continues to project Motoko through the male gaze (Shirow 271). While her rebellion is a success, it is only a success in ideology but not in the representation of patriarchy. To break away from the 'Law-of-the-Father' is never a complete act, it is always a gesture that is incomplete, partial, traumatic, and violent — which is insufficient in rejecting the law altogether, which is steadfast and insidiously resilient, and reveals in the process the artificiality, fissures, and violence of the law's domination upon its subjects.

Gender Performativity and the Politics of Becoming

Power, surveillance, and biopolitics, all find place in the overarching politics of gender. Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) asserted that "[T]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler 33). From a Butlerian perspective, gender is not the cause of behaviour, rather, it is the effect of behaviour. This performance of a gender — of masculinity and femininity, and everything else in between — provides a critical tool in analysing the constructed nature of it all, especially within the dystopian and speculative media that disrupts biological essentialism and destabilises the human form.

Shirow's *Ghost in the Shell* presents Motoko's body that is constructed and manufactured by the state powers, and this synthetic body is controlled by her consciousness, or 'ghost'. While there exists a fluidity as the mind is not formed with preconceived gendered constructs — her synthetic body which looks like a woman, which moves and is seen like a woman's — places Motoko under the female sex. Even Motoko's gender is performative as the state's surveillance has coded her legible and recognisable as a female along with her body which is hyper feminine in visual design, and exceptionally hyper masculine in strength and action. This femininity is coded in her through the design logic of the male gaze and her partial nudity, stoicism, and combat skills are in dissonance with her need for the performance. Motoko is inhabiting the gender for both the state and the spectator. She becomes the embodiment of male fantasy and is consistently objectified.

Haraway envisions a post-sex space in 'Cyborg Manifesto' (1991) where she writes that "[T]he cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family … The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity" (Haraway 151). Motoko's merging with the Puppet Master is the evidence of the post-sex positionality where her merging signals a new ontology of a posthuman becoming that shatters the binary of male/female, man/machine, and subject/object. While Motoko rebels by moving towards a posthuman becoming, her agency over her representation is complex as Butler notes in *Gender Performance*, "Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency … rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts" — and Motoko's body is state controlled and thereby state represented (Butler, 179). Motoko's suppression raises questions as to whether posthuman bodies can ever be entirely post-gender within the visual culture.

In *Akira*, the question of gender is deeply entangled with vulnerability and power rising from the crisis of adolescence. Both Tetsuo and Kaneda are designated to hyper masculine roles where they are rebels, bikers, with Kaneda being their gang leader. Their jackets and their representation with their technologically advanced bikes, and posturing of the self are a form of aestheticized masculinity. Within this lies a deep instability as both Kaneda and Tetsuo are searching for authority. While Tetsuo becomes psychically powerful, Kaneda vouches to erase Tetsuo, or he would be replaced by him. Tetsuo's eventual metamorphosis into a grotesque, uncontrollable, and volatile mass is not just biopolitical rupture, it is also an undoing of the gender. Tetsuo's physical body fails to perform the roles inscribed onto his masculine body by the symbolic order and his transformation enacts the "epistemology of the closet" which represents the instability of heteronormative identity under pressure (Sedgwick 68).

Tetsuo's desire for dominance and his compulsion to reverse the order — even with Akira — is tied with the masculinist imperative of control, and his failure in being a man by the performative standards, manifests through abjection. Butler writes that "gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin", and in the abject form, Tetsuo loses gender and its expectations, and he simultaneously becomes monstrous, nonhuman, and unintelligible (Butler 175). Tetsuo's hyper masculinity was an imitation of an ideal which never existed and his failure to sustain the ideal results in physical and symbolic collapse. Even with Kaneda, this fragility is visible as his performance is maintained through his identity as a womaniser, his use of weapons, his rebellion, and ironic detachment. Kaneda's performance falters when he is exposed to Tetsuo's abjection which brings about uncertainty and emotional vulnerability as in the final moments when Tetsuo's memories play out, Kaneda is privy to his most precious memories — of Tetsuo and Kaneda being friends. This past which was pre-gender, pre-sex, and pre-symbolic, breaks the performative armour of Kaneda. Both Tetsuo and Kaneda relied on exterior codes of validation for their constructedness of masculine identity.

Oshimi presents a scathing criticism on gendered roles, and especially on motherhood in *Blood on the Tracks* through Seiko, who is presented with an uncontainable, perverse maternal femininity — who is not a nurturing mother, but rather as a controlling figure. While her role as a mother demands protection, Seiko offers suffocation. Her femininity or rather motherhood is not interpreted as soft, rather it is projected as violent, territorial, and obsessive. Her relationship with Seiichi erases the boundaries of acceptable gender roles as she becomes both mother/lover, protector/destroyer, and nurturer/monster. Seiko's motherhood, which is a gendered excess, represents the abject that "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 4).

Her performance of motherhood is beyond necessary and to the point of uncanny, which in the garb of care, expresses domination. Her maternal performance transforms into a performance of terror where she does not fail to perform gender, rather she overperforms it to a point where it collapses under its own weight. Butler opines that "[W]hen the constructed status of gender is theorised as radically independent of

sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice" and Seiko's femininity transforms into a free-floating force that does not map out into any coherent and ethical role (Butler 10). She is the looming figure encompassing mother, tyrant, child, and deity. Seiko's horror does not lie in her appearance but in her unpredictability such as pushing Shigeru off a cliff as read in *Volume I*. As spectators, readers are unaware of the gendered roles to apply to her and Seiko's unclassifiable status transforms into terror.

Conclusion

Manga and comics as a visual and verbal form uniquely capture the breakdown of systems. The use of aesthetics is innately plural and polyphonic, as the graphic form can both show and withhold, display and disorient at the same time. The spatiality of the comics and manga page can linger on trauma, violence and repeat an image obsessively, distort time or scale and in this way stimulate the psychic, abject and spectral. *Akira*, *Ghost in the Shell*, and *Blood on the Tracks* collectively defy any singular narratives on power, gender, and nation. *Akira* represents adolescent children contested on battleground of state surveillance and psychic detonation, while *Ghost in the Shell* highlights the politics of the self, body, and surveillance in the age of cybernetics, and *Blood on the Tracks* presents a psychodrama by dislocating from the public to the private and familial, where the violence is not spectacular, rather personal and intimate.

Barbara Harlow in *Resistance Literature* (1987) writes that "resistance narratives go further still in analysing the relations of power which sustain the system of domination and exploitation … the discourse of narrative is capable of exposing these structures …" (Harlow 85). These mangas resist power, violence, and totalitarianism through its form and context and they present a language of entropy, grotesque dismemberment, and obsessive close-ups. They foreground the aesthetic of refusal, and provide a space where the collapse of language, disintegration of gender norms, and the breakdown of nationhood becomes visible. The relevance of the mangas is not in their political themes, but rather in their refusal to resolve violence into a narrative closure and in a way the works present to us catharsis instead of ruin, evolution instead of mutation, and transcendence in place of breakdown. These narratives are a site of archiving, a site where the symbolic is constantly challenged and in that undoing, resistance is not narrated, but embodied frame by frame, line by line, and visual by visual. They collectively challenge the dominant modes of agency and authority, as they exist in real time.

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