

Online Othering: A Cyberfeministic Visual Reading of the Movie Unlocked Directed by Kim Tae-joon

¹Remya K. Palamattom,²Kochurani Joseph

¹Assistant Professor of English T. M. Jacob Memorial Government College, Manimalakunnu, Koothattukulam, Ernakulam, Kerala, India Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam remyaciyo@gmail.com

²Corresponding Author Assistant Professor of English T. M. Jacob Memorial Government College, Manimalakunnu, Koothattukulam, Ernakulam, Kerala, India Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam kochuranijoseph2@gmail.com

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Abstract: Films are entertainment and powerful tools to educate people about certain critical issues and advocate for change by activating the audiences toward social commitment. In the postmodern world, films address the omnipresence of digital technology and the incredible change it has brought to our lives. Films have embraced the cyberworld to address and challenge the existing perspectives and ideologies regarding gender. Interconnectivity and access, one of the primary benefits of digital technology, have provided man with a vast space to reconstruct their identity by breaking social barriers and gender stereotypes. This utopian version of digital technology can be questioned through visual media by exposing the hegemonic practices in the cyber world. On study, it can be revealed that women are made vulnerable and victimised when the patriarchal structures in society get disseminated through cyberspace. This paper attempts to analyse how films address this issue of online othering and gender divide through the Korean movie *Unlocked* directed by Kim-Tae joon. The concepts associated with cyberfeminism like "Gendered Online Identities and Performances," "Gender-Based Digital Divide," and "Online Othering Discourse" are used to analyse the film.

Key Words: Cyber Feminism, Hacking, Gendered Identity, Othering, Gender Digital Divide

Introduction

Films and informatics have a reciprocal relationship, and this inseparable relationship between the two is not only concerned with technology and aesthetics but also with the subject matter. As we live in a techno-savvy society, technology creeps into the film in one form or another. When films started discussing digital technology, they mainly dealt with the frightening impact of technology on the human world and how the movies portray the impact of digital technology on society and the perception of humans. In the new visual narratives, unlike the narratives of the 1980s, humans, machines, and technology are treated in a similar line, portraying their complex relationship. The new approach deals with both the opportunities and dangers of the virtual world, and this shift from a purely dystopian approach, as in cyberpunk movies, shows man's affinity with the growing digital virtual experiences (Magerstädt 3).

We belong to a culture that is evolving at a faster pace, and to build an identity in a culture of virtual imitations, an experience of the internet is inevitable. Computers that were initially used for calculation are now commonly used for simulation, navigation, and interaction. Each one of us is drawn to the computer, and the reasons for our attraction to the infinite possibilities of multiple windows of the computer are varied. As we become too involved with technology and when technology becomes an inexorable medium for our relationship with our fellow beings, the distinction between the real and the virtual becomes problematic. From a gendered perspective, this ambiguous situation creates the possibilities of identity threats, online harassment, and online abuse. At a point where the real and the virtual become ambiguous, it is an ethical obligation and social responsibility on the part of visual art to address such dangers in disguise. Films approach technology from different perspectives in their narration and treatment of the subject. Most of the time, the filmic approach coincides with the cyberfeminist attitude when it deals

with the experiences of women in the cyberworld.

Cyber Feminism and Gender Divide: Power, Identity, and Othering in the Digital Era

Feminism as a sociopolitical movement that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries critiqued the gendered hierarchies in society and worked towards dismantling the power structures that perpetuated gender inequality. The three waves through which feminism travelled addressed different aspects of gender discrimination that existed in socio-political scenarios which were reflected in identity, sexuality, and performance of women in literature and other media. The fourth wave took up gender-related discussions to investigate how digital spaces reproduce existing power dynamics and intensify patriarchal ideologies. Cyberfeminism is an area where feminist theory and digital and communication technologies meet. Feminist theory in connection with technology explores numerous regions, of which a few are considered in this paper.

Cyberfeminism, though optimistic about technology's potential to empower women, is skeptical of technology's neutrality and hence dwells on the issues of othering and gender performances that are replicated in digital media. According to Mehtap and Sedat Polat, cyberfeminism emerged when feminists embraced digital technology to continue their activism in the ever-evolving digital world, and this resulted in the interaction between technology, gender, and social change (9). Initially, feminists saw it as a novel potential medium with numerous possibilities to spread their ideologies and voice their concerns. 'The Cyberfeminist International' and 'The Riot Girl Movement' were early cyberfeminist initiatives using technology that brought women from different parts of the world to fight for a common cause (Yenilmez 4). Feminist theorist Donna Haraway (1985) saw the concept of 'Cyborg' in the 1960s as a positive outlook toward gender identity that challenged the conventional relation between genders and bodies and questioned the identities imposed by society. As technology became an integral part of man's day-to-day life, inequalities in society entered the 'cyberculture,' and this made cyberfeminism scrutinise gender performance and its treatment in cyberspace. Along with using digital technology as a tool for empowerment and resistance, cyberfeminists also focused on the injustice within the cyber world. Emily Harmer and Karen Lumsden observe that the 'virtual world is not neutral space' as it demonstrates the inequalities prevalent in the offline world (3).

The concept of 'Gendered identity and performance' deals with how gender is expressed and performed in cyberspace. Cyberspace offers the choice to an individual to express gender identities using usernames, profiles, etc., and to adopt gender-specific performances. This choice of identity and performance leads to identity theft as a means of online harassment. The anonymity granted by the internet enables one to perform their desired identity. According to

the sociologist and social psychologist Erving Goffman (1956), one of the many reasons for identity performance is self-presentation. In the act of self-presentation, the expectation of society makes the individual present the idealised version of himself. By using the metaphor of dramaturgy, Goffman explains the identity performance as the action of an individual before a particular group of audience to project a desirable persona of himself. This argument states that identity performance is a conscious act of self-presentation. Cunningham defines self-presentation as the "complex process of selecting which aspect of one's self to disclose, hide, or fake to create a positive impression on the audience" (4). This concept can be applied to computer-mediated communication, as identity is constructed and communicated online. Scholars like Gonzales and Hancock (2008) suggest that the Internet not only makes social interaction possible but also acts as a medium for self-construction. According to Miller (1995), electronic interaction gives ample opportunities to construct identity. In his work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman defines the 'front' as "that part of the individual's performance that regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance" (Goffman 13). To Goffman, the 'front stage' is where the performer is experienced by the audience, so he has to keep up with the expectations of society. Unlike the front stage, the backstage is where the individual becomes relaxed and real. In the case of online communication, the individual is both at the front and the back at the same time, which gives him the confidence to perform his 'identity'. 'Gender-based digital divide' is another concept that points to cyberspace inequality in terms of access to and use of information technology. Even though there are socio-economic factors that contribute to the digital divide between men and women, a major contributing factor is gender-related (Bimber 868). Misogynists take advantage of this digital gender disparity for online abuse. Gender-based digital divide focuses on gender as the cause for the difference in the access, opportunity, and experience of the digital platform. The use of technology is very much influenced by our social values and gender orientation. (Buskens & Webb 2009). So, the gender roles in a patriarchal society are reflected in the digital world. Mehtap Polat and Sedat Polat in the essay *Revisiting Cyberfeminism* state that the gender-based digital divide is mainly in the form of an 'access gap' and a 'usage gap'. The access gap is the inequality in access to digital technology due to socio-economic factors. It is observed that women experience such

barriers due to financial constraints, unavailability, and also cultural norms. The usage gap refers to the difference in the usage pattern between men and women, where men are considered more skilled in using digital technology. This difference in the usage pattern is again influenced by social and cultural norms and unequal opportunities for digital literacy (23). Women are less exposed to the unlimited possibilities of the digital space, which prevents them from resisting their victimisation.

Othering is a postcolonial concept proposed by Edward Said in his *Orientalism* that refers to the process by which certain individuals or groups are viewed as primarily different, inferior, or outside the norm. It has become a social and psychological mechanism to create distinctions between the dominant group and the marginalised "other." The group that is "othered" is often stripped of their humanity or individuality, reducing them to stereotypes or objects. Othering often leads to social, political, or economic exclusion, which subsequently denies rights, opportunities, or even recognition to the 'other'. The concept of othering is important in understanding how prejudice, discrimination, and inequality are perpetuated in societies. It highlights how differences—whether real or imagined—are used to justify exclusion and mistreatment of others.

The concept of the 'gendered other' plays a central role in the analysis of women's oppression. In Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949), she explores how women have historically been constructed as the "Other" concerning men, who have been

positioned as the self or the norm. In this schema, men are the standard of human existence, while women are defined as the other, often in terms of their differences from men. This construction of women as the other extends to every aspect of social, economic, and political life. Women are often denied access to power, education, and economic independence, all of which are seen as male privileges. They often internalise this sense of inferiority, leading to feelings of inadequacy, alienation, and frustration. In this scheme of things, women are often objectified and dehumanised rather than being seen as full, autonomous individuals.

Online othering and gendered otherness intersect in significant ways, particularly in how people, who are already marginalised, experience additional layers of exclusion or discrimination in digital spaces. Online spaces often reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. Gendered otherness can become more pronounced with women often seen as "other" through objectification. Women face sexualisation, harassment, or dismissal based on their gender identity or gender presentation.

Literature Review

"Unveiling cyberfeminism: addressing gender bias and online harassment in the tech era of artificial intelligence" (2024) by Prakarsh Kalahari and Dr. Sanju Choudhary conceptualises cyber-feminism and delves into the intersection of cyber-feminism and the gender dynamics of the digital world, emphasising how cyberspace can both challenge traditional gender norms and create a platform for feminist discourse. Lina Gurung, in her study "The Digital Divide: An Inquiry from Feminist Perspectives" (2019), examines the unequal access to skills in technology that has aggravated the digital divide, particularly for women. This theoretical paper explores various feminist viewpoints, ranging from optimistic to pessimistic perspectives. The paper redefines the intersection of gender and technology and delves into the broader dimensions of the digital divide and the tension between utopian and dystopian views on the potential benefits of technology. By examining diverse feminist viewpoints from both Western and Eastern scholars, the paper aims to advocate for the empowerment of women within the technological domain.

Elina Vaahensalo, in her article "Creating the Other in Online Interaction: Othering Online Discourse Theory," introduces and defines the concept of 'Othering Online Discourse'. The work outlines its key characteristics and distinguishes it from other theories that address disruptive or discriminatory behaviour in online spaces. It highlights the need to examine the underlying mechanisms that contribute to making digital spaces monotonous, homogeneous, and, at times, hostile toward 'the other'.

Discussion

The 2023 Korean film *Unlocked*, directed by Kim Tae-joon, revolves around a woman's smartphone being stolen, which sets off a chain of events where her personal life is exposed and manipulated by a criminal. The film centres on the life of an ordinary woman, Li-Na Mee, who works as a marketer at a start-up company. She also does part-time work at her father's cafe. One day Lee-Na-Mee drops her smartphone on a bus and is picked up by someone. She calls her number from her friend's phone, and the man Oh-Jun-Yeong uses a fake voice app to talk to her. He tells Li-Na Mi to collect her phone from a phone repair shop where Jun-Yeong appears in disguise as a phone technician, wearing a mask; there he gets access to Na-Mi's password and as he fixes her phone screen, he installs spyware on her phone. From there on, he starts monitoring her actions, conversations, and texts. Oh-Jun-Yeong

slowly invades her personal life, causing her father to be suspicious of him. Without her knowledge, her phone is

being used by Oh-Jun-Yeong, and he leaks some confidential information. Na-Mi gets fired from her job, where she was the most liked employee because of her hard work. Oh-Jun-Yeong claims to be working in a software company and offers to help her with the spyware. He also succeeds in making Na-Mi believe that it is her friend who has installed spyware. Ultimately, he succeeds in isolating her from everyone in her life. As a subplot, a police officer is after a serial killer who has been killing women. Towards the end, Na-mi and her father are being tortured, and the officer uncovers the truth about Jun-Yeong. The film explores themes of privacy, security, and the consequences of digital vulnerabilities, reflecting how personal information, when accessed by the wrong hands, can lead to devastating outcomes.

This paper, "Online Othering: A Cyberfeministic Visual Reading of the Movie *Unlocked* Directed by Kim Tae-joon" analyses the film using cyberfeminism as a critical framework to examine the interplay of gender and sexuality in digital spaces. The concepts of othering, gender identity, performance, and the gender digital divide are employed to inspect gender-biased performances in the digital space. It tries to explore how technology can be both helpful and raise concerns about its possible dangers.

The film begins by taking us through the contemporary world, where smartphones have become an integral part of our day-to-day lives. We are taken through the streets, the public transport systems, and the restaurants, with people with their heads buried in their phones. Everyone is in the cyber world, detached from their real surroundings. Li-Na-Mi is introduced through her phone, and we come to know about her everyday chores, her friends, and her job through the texts, photos, and videos that appear on her phone. She earns a good reputation among employees and promotes her father's business with the aid of mobile technology. Li-Na-Mi uses her phone not only for personal communication but also for professional networking. At the onset, the film shows how women can use technology to gain independence and professional success. Along with the characters, we too are made a part of the cyber world to show the infinite possibilities of the pocket-sized supercomputer. The film suddenly turns its focus from the infinite possibilities of smartphones to its terrifying impacts. This happens when Li-Na-Mi's phone gets into the wrong hands of a young man called Oh-Jun-Yeong. When he installs spyware on her phone, it becomes a tool for surveillance to track her activities. Here the victim is a woman who is being watched without her knowledge through the device, which she considers indispensable. At this point, the film initiates our gender-related concerns in the cyber world. Hacking that has taken the form of activism among cyberfeminists becomes a matter of concern when it is used against an individual. When 'hacktivism' shows the positive side of hacking to "expose injustice, promote free speech, and subvert corporate and government power (Yenilmez, 2), the film portrays the fatal side of it. Here the woman becomes a subject of gaze who is personified through her gadget. As looking is a total of one's social, cultural, and sexual orientation, it always puts women in an inferior position. The concept of gaze that travelled through different theorists like Jean-Paul Sartre (1958), Jacques Lacan (2003), Michel Foucault (1975), and Laura Mulvey (1975) discusses the power relation that operates in the act of 'looking at'. The concepts of voyeurism, scopophilia, and narcissism used in association with the 'male gaze' by Laura Mulvey (1975) are relevant here. Li-Na-Mi is the object of gaze, and Jun-Yeong is the conventionally orientated patriarchal male who finds a new way of patriarchal dominance. The Internet recreates offline prejudices and changes them, twists them, and makes them voyeuristic, and anonymity and physical distance make it easier for some individuals to treat other people as less than human.

The performative aspect of digital identity is focused on a scene where Jun-Yeong posts a picture of the dish he prepares. He is trying to present a flawless image online. But the actual

act of him preparing the food and handling the utensils portrays him as a disturbed character. Slowly we realise that his entire act of online performance is an identity theft, and his online persona is drastically opposite to who he is. He hides behind a fake profile to evade the detection of the authorities. Once he gets access to Li-Na-Mi's phone using spyware, he performs a version of her identity, sending harmful messages and leaking confidential information. This altered version of her results in losing her job and her social isolation. The duality of the character of Jun-Yeong, who hides behind a fabricated identity, is highlighted through the visual narrative. His fragmented identity and manipulative nature are reflected in shots in which he is in his room with multiple phones and tools of surveillance. Jun-Yeong, often presented in dimly lit scenes, suggests his hidden nature yet to be revealed. To communicate with Li-Na-Mi about her lost phone, he fakes the identity of a woman using a voice app. He chooses to present himself as a woman because of the gender-specific traits that society attributes to women in general.

Through the voice app, he adopts a gender-specific performance to present himself as less deceiving. Goffman's concept of performance as a conscious act of self-presentation is relevant here as he conceals his real intention to create a false narrative of himself. The misogynistic attitude of Jung-Yeong motivates him to victimise women through a novel medium in which he thinks women are less efficient.

The film also articulates the gender digital divide, which manifests in different ways in the digital space. The film portrays the usage gap to address the gender-based digital divide. Li-Na-Mi uses her smartphone to maintain her personal and professional circle and promote the company where she is working. Whenever she is on her phone, we find her conversing with her best friend about her activities, posting photos, or gaming. Throughout the film, the delicate side of Li-Na-Mi is presented, whose life is an open book through the gadget she uses. When she loses her phone, she does not take steps to secure the valuable information in it. She doesn't even consider the possibility that her phone can be misused. When she realises that her account is being used by someone else, she struggles to figure out how it happened. Close-up shots are used to show her fear and helplessness. She seeks the help of Jun-Yeong, who tells her about spyware. Even when he is the culprit who installed the spyware, the confidence with which he tells her about it shows his belief that she is not smart enough to reach him. This belief comes from the collective attitude of society towards women and technology. It comes as a surprise when Na-Mi reacts as if she is hearing spyware for the first time, and we see Jun Yeong explaining to Na-Mi and her friend about spyware in the simplest way. He even wins by making Na-Mi suspect her best friend. These several instances in the film point towards the gender gap in the usage and knowledge of technology and show women as less digitally empowered, which leads to their vulnerability. Online harassment is considered a serious issue by cyberfeminists, but it is often not treated with due concern by society. Na-Mi is not only an individual facing direct violence; she represents how the online world can treat vulnerable individuals, especially women, as 'others'. In the film, when Na-Mi registers a complaint in the cyber security wing the attitude of the officer clearly states that he takes it as a common issue and asks her to come up with proof that her phone has been hacked. The film highlights a major issue of inadequate response to cybercrime by the responsible authorities. Even when the film transforms Li-Na-Mi from a passive victim to an emotionally empowered woman who wins over the situation, the primary focus of the film is on the vulnerabilities of women in cyberspace. The act of hacking and objectification consequently reduces her to an object, 'an online other', that can be controlled. Her identity is stripped away and is presented through the hacker's plan. Here 'othering' is closely aligned to the digital or technological terrain, where marginalised groups are often targeted by those with greater technological power. This unequal power distribution in the digital world further reinforces online gendered othering. The film highlights how technology can be weaponised to isolate, manipulate, and objectify individuals, especially women, illustrating the

concept of "othering" in the digital age.

Beyond the physical and immediate dangers of hacking, Na-mi's experience also highlights the psychological toll of online othering. As she is harassed and controlled by Jun-yeong, her relationships, trust in others, and sense of safety are undermined, which is a direct consequence of the digital breach. This alienation is a form of othering, as Na-mi is pushed into a state of constant fear and detachment, no longer able to feel safe or understood in both the real and online worlds.

Conclusion

The film positions that the digital world, seen as a realm for women to reconstruct their identity that can pave the way for their liberation and emancipation, is not free from gendered digital othering. In digital spaces, where people can hide behind screens, the lines between humanity and objectification blur, and individuals—particularly those who are already marginalised—can be easily dehumanized. *Unlocked* serves as a powerful commentary on online othering, showing how technology can amplify existing power dynamics, particularly in terms of gender. It highlights how digital spaces can perpetuate exclusion, dehumanisation, and exploitation, especially when it comes to privacy violations and online harassment of gendered others. The digital manipulation of a woman's identity exposes the dangers of an increasingly interconnected world, where anonymity and data breaches can strip individuals of their subjectivity and turn them into mere objects for others' gain. The film intensely illustrates the intersection between technology, gender, and social alienation in the digital era. The combination of online othering and gendered otherness demonstrates the intersectionality of social identities and experiences in the digital space. Gendered otherness is made worse by the digital divide, where women experience exclusion, harassment, and invisibility online. The film discusses the cyber victimisation of women after two decades of the technological revolution raises the counterargument towards the utopianization of the digital world.

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