

Cyborgism and Social Enhancement: Shaping a New Rhetoric for Woman's Participation in Contemporary Society as Represented in William Gibson's Neuromancer (1984)

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Abstract

In A manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s (2015), Australian scholar Donna Haraway develops a new feminist philosophy based on the possibilities offered by the cyborg, a cybernetic hybrid organism representing the coupling of organism and the machine, which is turned into an instrument for achieving all human aspirations. Drawing from this vision, we show through the study of Neuromancer (1984) by American writer William Gibson, that the trajectory of Molly Million, Gibson's female protagonist is consistent to the cybor figure, and as such it is instrumental to the emancipation of contemporary woman's life.

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Background to the Study

It is common and easy to learn and know about great figures like Shaka Zulu and Martin Luther King at school or in whatever historical context. This is because men's exploits are generally linked to their gender and intrinsically considered as natural. Yet, when looking back to the history of women like Taytu Betul or the Queen Ginga Mbandi, who fought and resisted with their weapons against Portuguese for over forty years, we barely value their heroic actions because they were simply women. In the plot of American fictions like *Neuromancer* (1984) by William Gibson or *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston, the representation of such female figures, who challenge patriarchal power through extraordinary actions and clever use of technological materials, brings Zoologist and feminist activist Donna Haraway to refer to these women as "cyborg", notably in connection with their hybrid identity. In her *A manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s* (2015), Haraway associates the image of the woman to the notion of "cyborg" that she considers as "a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century." (Haraway 2015: 2). Through this notion of cyborg, the feminist activist considers that the identity of human being, especially the woman is no longer strictly linked to her gender or her physical anatomy.

Taking inspiration from this philosophy of cyborg that Haraway puts to the service of the woman's cause, and putting it in relation with the image of the woman represented in American fiction, particularly the female character in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), we have decided to work on the following topic: Cyborgism and Social Enhancement: Shaping a New Rhetoric for the Woman in American fiction. Through this work conducted from cyborg feminist perspective, we will answer to the following questions: (1) How can the theory of cyborg positively affect the woman's condition? (2) In what way does it stand as impetus to the actions of Gibson's and Hurston's female characters?

The Cyborg in American Literary Imagination

Women are generally held back in the society by considerations related to gender, like the physical anatomy, or the perception of their role in the socioeconomic competition, etc. Yet, some cyborg women like Siri and Vivenna demonstrate through their actions in the story of Brandon Sanderson's *Warbreaker* (2009) that women's true value in contemporary society should be evaluated according to their true capacities to stimulate change that serves the interests of human community. The cyborg characteristics in *Warbreaker* (2009) are perceptible from the early stage of the reader's contact with Sanderson's book, since the cover page with the picture of a pretty girl with a sword. This picture emphasizes the importance of action in addition to spoken words in order to free the woman from patriarchal domination. It evokes the necessity to fight on a daily basis in order to emancipate from men's injustices. In addition, this girl is dressed all in white. As a symbol of peace, the white color shows women's willing to achieve peace between both genders, and not the war created by patriarchy. It presents their intention of peace and equity between the male and the female.

As for the story, it reveals two princesses of the kingdom of Idris. The kingdom of Idris is under the threat of invasion by Hallandren, a neighboring kingdom with which Idris shares hostile relation in connection with magic rituals. In fact, every human being is born with a breath, and it can be freely given or sold. The more breaths a person has, the more powerful he or she becomes. This breath can be sent into objects to bring them to life, control and make them act like human beings. The king of Hallandren is considered as a god, and the king of Idris as a less powerful god, due to the influences of their respective kingdoms, and especially to the quantity of their breaths. In order to avoid a conflict and the destruction of Idris, Vevenna, the main character and Siri's senior sister is raised to marry the king of the rival kingdom of Hallandren. Yet, when the time comes, the king of Idris sends the junior sister Siri instead, because he finds that her strong character of opposition to patriarchal views of her society is appropriate to face this difficult situation. In addition, he thinks that she can manage to stop war if it starts. He says to Vivenna: "How could I choose one over the other? How could I send Siri to die and leave you here to live? I didn't do it based on personal preference, no matter what people think. I did what will be best for Idris when this war comes." (Sanderson 2009: 10) Here, the father of Siri stresses the fact that, despite the patriarchal thoughts which characterize women as intellectually and physically weak, he can count on her to avoid war with intelligence and wisdom. He shows that the whole society can count on a woman with a strong character, who stands to fight against the patriarchal domination. He also shows through his words that women should not be considered as inferior to men, because their intellectual and physical capacities can lead to the betterment of the society.

This story of the king of Idris and his daughters illustrates the issue of woman cyborgism. In fact, the pursuit of self-fulfillment, freedom, and emancipation of the youngest sister Siri makes her father and his people believe in her more than the oldest sister, although Vivenna is considered as the favorite daughter of the kingdom. It means that even men under patriarchal thoughts know that the devaluation of women's position is not good for the coherence of the society; it rather represents a danger. As we said, the situation in Sanderson's fiction shows that women's true emancipation and freedom will not be attained for granted; they rather have to fight to get it. They have to express the true strength of their body and spirit in connection with female cyborg principals.

Like Vivenna and Siri, Celaena Sardothien the character of Sarah Janet Maas's *Crown of Midnight* (2013) is also a female figure, whose thirst for equity and justice leads to the use of swords – two of them – as it is presented on the cover page of the novel. She also uses some technological tools like weapons. The story begins by stressing the hardships Celaena goes through as a Salt Mine worker in Endovier. From the outset of the story, the reader has an insight into the hard and perilous moments of the labor carrier: "She paused, probably recalling the three scars that raked down Celaena's back. A permanent reminder of the cruelty of the Salt Mines of Endovier – and a reminder that even though she was free, thousands of people still toiled and died there." (Maas 2013: 13) This statement unveils the "cruelties" Celaena went through for a long time in the salt mines.

The scars mentioned in the statement are generally marks of bitter suffering, most commonly from whipping. In the history of human communities, the whip is usually used to torture people who go against the law or slaves to keep them obedient. Like in the situation of bondage, Celaena was used in the salt mines as a slave, and she endured all the difficulties until her liberation, although many men “died there”. Her situation shows a woman can bear heavy pains and overcome them in order to survive like a man. The fact that many men died while she survived is clear evidence that women can be physically stronger than men. This is a negation of the distorted patriarchal beliefs, according to which women are fragile beings and incapable of doing hard works.

As this early stage of the story shows Celaena's bravery, strength and autonomy, it also shows her opposition to patriarchal thoughts and principles according to which women are physically and psychologically weak. More than being a simple mine worker, Celaena assumes a much challenging role, that of killer in the service of the king, a role she plays to escape his wrath. Like Molly Millions in Gibson's fiction which serves as corpus of this work, Celaena is used to assume the filthy job for the king, like for instance eliminating as it is illustrated in the last statements of chapter ten: “She took a steadying breath and looked him in the eye. It was time. “The king sent me to kill you.” (Maas 2013: 65). These statements reveal the courage of this cyborg woman who is afraid of nothing. She fearlessly challenges gangsters and looks in their eyes, turning fear to them. Sarah Janet Maas's female cyborg is fair and keeps a sense of justice, and her womanhood for she refuses to kill the enemies the king wants to eliminate unlawfully.

Celaena's example is similar to that of American historical figure Isabella Bomefree, commonly Sojourner Truth who also endured the pain of whipping and hard works for years in the time of slavery. Sojourner Truth became famous not only through her anti-slavery activism, but also through a speech she held during a feminist rally, boasting her actions as a woman, an activist, a man, and potentially a cyborg. Like Celaena in Sarah J. Maas's *Crown of Midnight* (2013), Sojourner Truth thus endorses the identity and characteristic of the female cyborg, that W. Gibson's character, Molly Millions, embodies in *Neuromancer* (1984). The character Janie in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) also starts enjoying life when she decides to act as a cyborg woman, instead of remaining passive.

This symbolic work of the Harlem Renaissance tells the story of Janie Mae Crawford. She is an African-American girl who is raised in an all-black town named Eatonville, a city which is highly affected by slave culture and slave history. For her grandmother, a former slave who is still influenced by the sad days of slavery and its patriarchal ways, a woman must get married in order to exist, and in order to be taken care of. Contrary to her grandmother, Janie grows up in a town completely ruled by black people, so she is under new visions and aspirations. Yet, she is convinced by her grandmother to get married with the old man Logan Killicks, who uses her almost like a slave to do hard works like farming. Her second husband Joe Starks confines her, beats her, and imposes her an ugly dressing when he starts fearing revolt from her. Yet, she meets true love and

emancipation when she decides to flee her patriarchal husband to start a new life with the young man Tea Cake, who treats her as an equal. Besides, Tea Cake practices so - called male activities like marksmanship and checkers with her.

The story of Alice Walker's *the Color Purple* (1982) reveals two black women, Celie and Sofia, who end up understanding that their freedom and emancipation would not be handed to them on a silver plate. In fact, they understand after years of abuses that the best way for a woman to be truly free is to live a daily life of woman cyborgism. Each of these women is special in her own way. Celie for example is ill-treated by her own father and her husband for years. Thus, she writes to god in her diary, trying to show him her painful situation. This explains why the book is written letter by letter, and not by chapters. In addition, almost all chapters begin by the term "Dear God". (Walker 1982: 7) Yet, after years of writing to god without any improvement of her situation, Celie infers that god is surely a man. It means that if god does not change her unbearable situation, then he is in favor of unjust patriarchal rulings over women. Thus, she inspires herself from her friend Sofia's cyborg personality, who starts fighting back her husband after years of submission to his violence. By adding action to writing, and by standing up to fight for her rights, Celie succeeds in bringing a betterment in her situation.

Characteristics of The Female Cyborg in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984)

Through the reading of *Neuromancer* (1984), we discover the character of Molly. She is one of the main characters of the novel, a character that influences the novel thanks to her enhanced body. Molly Millions is a bodyguard in the story of *Neuromancer* (1984) who is made of a special body and characterized by technologically-sophisticated aspects. Her outer appearance is a special one: "She wore tight black glove leather jeans and a bulky black jacket cut from some matte fabric that seemed to absorb light." (Gibson 1984: 16) Despite the fact that in the story of *Neuromancer* (1984) characters live in a futuristic world, "the cyberspace", dominated by machines, the description of Molly's dressing remains meaningful to the reader. In fact, the "tight black glove leather jeans" and the "bulky black jacket" are dressings known as belonging to the category of hard nut to crack men in society. It means that Molly does not make any difference between female and male dress style; on the contrary, she wears clothes, which make her strange and cause fear from ordinary citizens. Therefore, she is independent and ruthless; this makes her speak and act freely, and it makes her different from all false patriarchal presuppositions. Among her body enhancements, there are silver eye cover implants, heightened neural response and above all, she is endowed with retractable razor blades beneath her nails. Beyond this fact, she distinguishes herself by embodying the cyberfeminist self. Thus, her temperament shows her original nature which is beyond the two normative identities: the male and the female. Her potential gives her the title of the lethal "razor girl", a way to express the new nature she belongs to and to identify her as the girl acting as commander of all the operations conducted in *Neuromancer* (1984). (Gibson 1984: 17)

When closely analyzing Molly, it becomes evident that through her character, she to some extent breaks the shackles of patriarchy. Now, women should no longer be considered as biologically inferior. Additionally, Molly's body augmentations enable her to get rid of her emotions: "'I don't cry, much" "I spit Molly said" "The ducts are rooted back into my mouth"' (Gibson 1984: 11) It is then obvious that emotions are removed from Molly, turning her into a more masculine creature. She is more masculine and individualistic at the same time. This mixed identity acquired thanks to the cyberspace enables Molly to cross gender and body boundaries.

Lisa Nakamura in her book *Cybertypes: Race, ethnicity, and identity, and identity on the internet* (2002) tries to explain how internet shapes and reshapes our perceptions of race, ethnicity, and identity. She coins the term "identity tourism". (Nakamura 2002: 192) It simply means that members of a particular group try on the identity of another group who belong to a different race or gender. For her, internet is an easy way of doing it. Consequently, gender no longer constitutes a barrier for humankind. In short, Molly is able to escape her previous considered weak body. She can overcome every patriarchal barrier, improving her dominated condition to become an independent cyborg not afraid of anything. This is why Molly is the fulfilment of a new feminism that overcomes gender, the cyberfeminism. Similarly, in *The Ship Who Sang* (1969), Anne McCaffrey establishes a close relationship between the term "disembodiment" and the emancipation of the female genre through the use of technology. (McCaffrey 1969: 152) Technology for her actually liberates the female from her corporeal body. In fact, in the novel, the use of technology helps the character of Helva move and speak. Thus, McCaffrey says that: "woman's development is not separated from technological development, but has, in fact, displayed a similar trajectory." (McCaffrey 1969: 152) It means that the female and technology must always go together; they must remain merged with one another for the well-being and the self-fulfillment of women.

Cyborg Struggle and The Dynamic of Woman Liberation

In the story of *Neuromancer* (1984), when Molly Millions meets Case the hacker for the first time, an important aspect of her personality is revealed: it is her cyborg identity. Molly is presented as a hunter of gangsters on "the cyberspace". (Gibson 1984: 2) One significant aspect of William Gibson's literature is its specific setting shaped among divers' components by the virtual reality known as cyberspace, the ancestor of the internet of today. This book is among other books of Gibson what has inspired to the building of the World Wide Web, shaped in the term: "Cyberspace seven" coined in *Burning Chrome* (1982), the first work of Gibson's trilogy, to mean a virtual world of interconnected computers. But, the term "cyberspace" takes its most important significance through the following definition in *Neuromancer* (1984): "Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts . . . A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system." (Gibson 1984: 31) Being the ancestor of the internet of today, the Cyberspace is a virtual world, which opens up many possibilities for both genders. It is in this logic that Molly is. In real life, she is a "street

samurai” who is someone known as a strong and powerful warrior in ancient Japan. Inside the Cyberspace, she is the commander in charge of many harsh activities. Thanks to her body augmentations, Molly is a cruel character inside the Cyberspace where she leaves without any gender restriction. The genre of Cyberpunk, as a subgenre of Science Fiction, is seemingly incompatible with some aspects of modern society like the institution of patriarchy. An example among others is the equal use of technological tools and innovations by men and women today. In a way, this is why the tone in Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) is favorable to the woman's situation. As it innovates the genre of science fiction, cyberpunk productions tend to describe social reality as it occurs in the present time but also in the future with all its implication with technological innovation. This is clearly stated in the beginning of the story as Molly introduces herself to Case: “My name's Molly. I'm collecting you for the man I work for. Just wants to talk, is all. Nobody wants to hurt you.” (Gibson 1984: 16) This statement is significant because it says a lot about Molly's physical appearance. It is among many things an indication of the level of menace she represents, even for a gangster like Case. From her statement, the reader learns that Molly is one of an androgynous type, a situation that makes it difficult to know her proper gender.

In order to know in a clearer manner, the positivity of the idea of “cyborg” regarding human beings as whole, and its good impact on women, let us analyze deeply Molly's statement, when introducing herself to the main character Case. She says: “You. One live body, brains still somewhat intact. My name's Molly. I'm collecting you for the man I work for. Just wants to talk, is all. Nobody wants to hurt you.” First of all, Molly, by beginning her introduction by the statement “One live body, brains still intact.” underlines a very important aspect of the present paper. In fact, she underscores the cause of Case's weakness as being the result of his almost natural body and brain. It means that the world in which they live, and their natural body have so much been impacted by technological innovations that the natural body is regarded as something outdated and weak. Now, considering their actions and the fact that Molly is originally a woman, Case a man, it becomes clear why Haraway says that the cyborg changes “what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century.” (Haraway 2015: 2) So, one of the positive impacts of the cyborg can be the meaninglessness of genre and sex. Molly continues saying that she is collecting Case. To be able to collect a man like him, one must be strong both bodily and psychologically. In the present daily life, those who are known as the collectors of human beings are policemen, soldiers and so on. They are also known as forces. In other words, they are the dominating corps used to establish order in society. Thus, once again, this clearly shows that the male/ female binary opposition has no longer only on direction, which puts the male over the female. Yet, Molly's statement demonstrates that the female can also be the dominating figure in this binary opposition, and a clear example is the policewoman who is able to collect men as well. She also makes clear the fact that she does not want to hurt Case. This statement may appear as an irony to an anti-feminist reader, but a key fact of it to be understood is that women can move from the state of the ones who are always hurt to the ones who can hurt. They can move from the logic of the weakest members of society to the strongest, and the ones who play the

most important role. Another key point is that she puts forth discussion and exchange instead of force and violence. This aspect demonstrates that the equality or even the superiority of the cyborg woman is not the result of “might is might” as it can be witnessed in the age of patriarchy. Rather, it is the result of cleverness, wisdom and justice. This also shows that the characteristics inherent to women, like tenderness, love, and the maternal instinct are not weaknesses; rather they are some powerful characteristics that can be used to establish order, equality, and love inside humans' society.

After introducing herself, Molly wants to reassure Case and the reader as well. To Case, she says: “Nobody wants to hurt you.”; and to win his confidence, she adds: “If I put this dart gun away, will you be easy, Case? You look like you like to take stupid chances.” (Gibson 1984: 16) Molly qualifies any attempt from Case to run away as “stupid chances”. As a woman who tries to dissuade a dangerous man from fooling around, Millions' attitude shows how hazardous it is to under-estimate the psychological and intellectual capacities of a woman like her. She is indeed living evidence that a woman can be more intelligent and courageous and a mam.

The fact that Molly Millions possesses a gun gives her an advantage over Case, the man; but more importantly, it highlights her status as a woman turned into cyborg by technological material. With the gun, Molly has a sense of superiority, which is re-enforced by the transformation her body has apparently undergone. As the narrator underlines, “Molly's breasts were too large, visible through tight black mesh beneath a heavy leather jacket” (Gibson 1984: 23) The fact that Molly's breasts are qualified as “large” instead of “big” generally used for women shows that she is rather identified as a man, and this fact emphasizes her status as cyborg.

Molly Millions is a cyborg woman who mercilessly hunts down her targets. The tool she uses to achieve her pitiless aims is a “fletcher”. The description of Molly's relationship with her fletcher reveals details about cyborgs' predatory nature, and this is highlighted throughout the length of the story. In fact, it recurs more than twenty-five times. For instance, there is: “Molly stepped out of the shadows, all in black, with her fletcher in her hand.” (Gibson 1984: 55) When having a close look upon this statement, the reader notices that here again, the idea of the feline predator is expressed. The term “stepped out” is similar to the pounce of the feline when it is ready to abruptly catch its prey after minutes of spying. The term “shadows” supports more this idea. In fact, similarly, it is behind bushes that the feline hides itself to spy its prey. The term “all in black” also supports the idea of hiding and spying. As for the term “fletcher in her hand”, it shows once again the predatory nature of the cyborg. Even if the term “fletcher” appears as an ordinary one, it occurs more than three times in the story to shade light on the fact that the fletcher is like an integral part Molly. It is as if the fletcher has become her DNA. It is as if she has been made to act like a predator. As said above, an example of predator is a human being who lives on hunting and picking, and he/ she can only succeed in doing so through some arms and tools like the fletcher. In short, Molly is able to escape her previous considered

weak body and overcome all the patriarchal barriers. Consequently, she is able to impose her domination to become an independent cyborg not afraid of anything.

As a cyborg, Molly Millions is a mixture of the male and the female gender, a situation which illustrates the cyberfeminist ambition of creating a "world without gender" (Haraway 2015: 37). The characteristic of this world is "monstrous", because in it women are no longer completely natural; they are rather half-human and half-machine creatures, shaped to challenge traditional patriarchy. The female cyborg that Gibson's character represents is, thus, the product of the fusion between her human condition and the potentialities conferred by new scientific technology represented, among many things, by the gun and her augmented physical anatomy. With this fusion and the augmented capacity that it gives to Molly as a cyborg, she becomes ready to defend her interest both as a human being and as a woman. Therefore, as a strong cyborg woman, her actions contribute to safety, and the improvement of humans' society.

The experience of Gibson's fictitious protagonist is similar to the real example of Priscille Deborah, the first French bionic woman. After an accident, which brought her to a long surgery upon which robotic materials were substituted for her legs and arms, the French woman started a new life as a cyborg, an experience she relates with enthusiasm saying that "The catastrophe of my life turned out to be a chance. I seized the opportunity which was given to me, in spite of everything, to reinvent my life." (Deborah 2021: 8)

The French bionic woman's idea of reinvention echoes Haraway's "reinvention of nature", as it communicates a real renewal of life for her. Not only is she no longer crippled by physical handicap, but she is also emancipated from the restrictions of contemporary world dominated by patriarchal rules. In a long testimony, she shows how positively her new condition of cyborg has changed her life: "I have overcome my beliefs, my dreads, and my doubts, to go beyond my limits. I have not the pretention to say that I know how to become a bionic woman, but my story can perhaps give some keys to some persons who need it. My story has a bad start, but a good end even if I ignored it at first." (Deborah 2021: 1) Through this statement, Priscille Deborah implicitly urges all women for a change of mind about their condition in a world dominated by male values. Like Gibson's female protagonist, the French cyborg Priscille Deborah is engaged in "a struggle over life and death, [in a world where] the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion." (Haraway 2015: 2)

These women have understood that the differences established between science fiction productions and human being societal life constitute an "optical illusion" for the most part. It means that technological innovations are so manifestly and firmly implanted in humans' daily lives, that it sounds foolish that women cannot use them in their interest. Therefore, they have decided to use the results of these productions to express the real strength of their femininity, and to prove the world that the female is far from being "the weak sex" as patriarchal people believe. The result of this initiative is their self-fulfillment and their emancipation in the society, an emancipation which is also noticeable in the

trajectory of Janie, another female cyborg in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).

In the first marriage of Zora's feminist activist, Janie endures many injustices caused by the old man Logan Killicks' side. She is used almost as a slave to work in the farm. In addition, the old man does not satisfy her carnal desires, and he stinks and insults her all day long. Consequently, she flees from this patriarchal subjection with Joe Starks: "After that she came to where Joe Starks was waiting for her with a hired rig. He was very solemn and helped her to the seat beside him. With him on it, it sat like some high, ruling chair. From now on until death, she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything. A bee for her bloom." (Hurston 1939: 39) This statement is very significant with several metaphors, which show Janie's determination to escape from the patriarchal prison. Despite his poverty, Joe Starks has some characteristics which are contrary to the ways of patriarchal men. He is "very solemn" with her and "helps her to seat beside him". This means that here, Joe Starks gives Janie almost the same status as himself. He does not put her in a lower category of the society; on the contrary, he treats her like equal to him and help develop her personality turn her into a real cyborg.

Conclusion

The present study was intended to evaluate the way the theory of cyborg can positively affect the woman's condition. As we saw in above lines, women's performances are still hardly accepted in humans' society, because of the distorted ideas about their body. Yet, some extraordinary women like Sojourner Truth and Priscille Deborah positively influenced and inspired the world through their exploits and achievements. As leaders of their own selves, they succeeded in fighting against distorted patriarchal beliefs in order to be free and emancipated. When paying a close attention to their stories, the reader can notice that they fulfilled their dreams thanks to a cleverness, but also thanks to their body strength, and their mastery of technological instruments like weapons. Likewise, the examples of their exceptional performances have permitted to highlight the way women's body and their psychological capacities are wrongly considered in society.

An analysis of the character Molly Millions in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), and the characteristics of the first bionic woman in France Priscille Deborah has permitted to show the way all women of every social scale can adopt technological tools and the internet with its social networks, as a way of expressing their femininity. The conscious raising and the travel to real freedom and emancipation of a cyborg woman like Janie in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), also has been helpful for the shaping of our argument. It has proved that, even after years of abuses, when women succeed in overcoming the wrong suppositions about their gender and their body's real capacities, they become very powerful both physically and psychologically. The result of this enhancement is equality within the society, and the positive influence of it in the world around them.

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