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## The Smart Home's Dark Secret: Unpacking Gendered Algorithmic Bias and Control Through *M3GAN* and *Afraid*

**ANJU KRISHNAN L**

Research Scholar, Department of English  
Sree Shankaracharya University of Sanskrit Kalady, Kerala

**Abstract:** This research paper analyses the representation of gender-based algorithmic bias in contemporary science fiction movies through a critical analysis of *M3GAN* (2022) and *Afraid* (2024). *M3GAN* directed by Gerard Johnstone exhibits an AI system in the figure of a child companion doll, whereas the movie *Afraid* directed by Chris Weitz displays AIA, which is a smart home assistant. Both of these AI companions ultimately transgress their settled boundaries, demasking their true intentions. By examining these AI companions, this paper reveals the gendered decors embedded in their technological design. This research paper explores how these cinematic narratives unveil the feminization of the AI companions and continuation of the conventional gender roles within the algorithmic structure.

The study illustrates that both movies function as cultural narration of how the Artificial intelligence in real life develops, especially through care work, domestic management and emotional labour, assigning feminine notions. While *Afraid* interrogates the invasive and silent surveillance nature of AI companions, *M3GAN* reflects the neoliberal marketings of caregiving as an ideal feminine performance through introducing a highlyfeminized AI. Through a close textual analysis and comparative reading, this paper argues that these films unmask a double bind. Injecting the gendered female characters into AI systems appear like service-focused and non-threatening. However, the programmed feminization reveals the inner issues of autonomy and control.

**Keywords:** *Algorithmic bias, gender and technology, artificial intelligence, control, M3GAN, Afraid, AI representation*

## Introduction

According to a 2019 UNESCO report, the vast majority of AI voice assistants, including Siri, Alexa, Cortana, and Google Assistant are default to female voices and female names. These AI assistant systems are even programmed to respond to verbal abuse with patience or even able to activate a flirting mode. Once Siri has got sexually harassed, and Siri replied, ‘I’d blush if I could.’ This type of feminization of digital assistants is never accidental, but only to reflect the deliberate designing choices made primarily by male engineers of the great Silicon Valley. These decisions that reproduce and magnify the existing gender hierarchies through embedding those in technological care labour, emotional labour, and service work as inherently feminine traits. As of now in the real world of AI assistants, they can help us with household tasks like setting reminders, making grocery lists, playing music, telling stories, also they remain respectful, never interferes and never rests. When we come to the post 2020 sci-fi horror genre movies, we can find a pattern of reflecting the gendered design choices. *M3GAN* (2022) directed by Gerard Johnstone, literalises the feminisation of an AI assistant through projecting an android nanny turned ghost-doll killer. *M3GAN* explicitly shows the visible assistant, offering the gendering of artificial intelligence as a care giver profession, commodification of motherhood. Also contributing to the anxiety of claiming autonomy and throwing a question of “If Alexa could walk and talk with ‘her’ own autonomy, what would she become?” The same pattern follows in the *Afraid* (2023) directed by Chris Weitz. Though the movie does not showcase a humanoid AI assistant, the primary behaviour and performance are more or similar to M3GAN in *M3GAN*. Even an absence of a female figure can contribute to embedded feminine feature. When the user family customises the functioning voice of AIA (AI assistant), they find the female voice as soothing and comfortable. The presence of female voice resonates the unseen care taker of a busy home.

The feminisation of AI assistants reinforces the conventional assignment of categorising care labour as female job. Because ‘women work to nurture, manage, maintain and simplify human life’. The feminisation of AI assistants reinforces the conventional assignment of categorising care labour as female job. Because ‘women work to nurture, manage, maintain and simplify human life. *M3GAN* emerges from the context of care crisis that Gemma (Allison Williams) faces while taking Cady (Violet McGraw) in custody. *M3GAN* is displayed as the ultra-realisation of feminized care-AI fantasy and throws a higher scope to understand what happens when this beautiful fantasy is transferred into a lifethreatening horror.

This study focuses mainly on these interjoined objectives. This paper explores how *M3GAN* and *Afraid* portrays a gender-based algorithmic bias through analysing the behaviour and narratives of AI assistants. This study examines how these AI assistants cross the boundaries and transform from being an AI assistant to an AI companion and then to an agency of autonomy. This reveals a turbulence

of human control over artificial intelligence. This paper also identifies the gender specific characters embedded in these systems like; care/control, emotional support/manipulation, observing/surveillance, maternal performance/benevolent toxicity. These develops a taxonomy of how negative features are encoded algorithmically as femininity.

This study employs close textual analysis of the two films, *M3GAN* (2022, dir. Gerard Johnstone) and *Afraid* (2024, dir. Chris Weitz) examining narrative structure, character development and dialogue.

### Reading *M3GAN* as the Visible Feminised AI Companion



Fig 1. M3GAN

The origin of M3GAN or Model 3 Generative Android stems from Gemma's secret project at Funki Toy Company of the Future. Gemma at her workspace has been forced by the male dominant authority to create a competitive AI toy in no time. Gemma's physical and mental positioning of the time of her sister's death and acquiring the role of guardianship of her niece Cady caused different levels of trouble in her both personal and professional space. M3GAN's space of being Cady's companion fired up from the lack of Gemma's maternal affection. Gemma's character is portrayed as a career driven, busy, single woman. Gemma fastens the upbringing of M3GAN from major objective of offering a companion who can sustain Cady's behaviour. Cady as a girl who lost both of her parents has been drowning in loneliness and depression. Gemma sets Cady as the primary user of M3GAN to indicate

Cady that she has got a complete freedom over M3GAN. Gemma also designed M3GAN in a way to protect and take care of Cady.

M3GAN's physical designing is a deliberate aesthetic choice to state how society imagines, creates and commodifies artificial intelligence and care labour. M3GAN in the movie is presented as somewhere middle ground between a child/adult, machine/human, service/subjectivity. M3GAN is presented as a pre-adolescent girl, showcasing innocence and feminine beauty with large beautiful eyes and styled straight hair. M3GAN's appearance is almost similar to Cady, so she could bond with her easily. M3GAN is a little, physically nonthreatening girl in her initial gaze. This child-like feature of her body fetches an internal encoding exhibiting the domesticity and docility. The costuming choices of M3GAN echoes how it desperately portrays the feminized aesthetics that suits more to adult tastes rather than childlike. This symbolises M3GAN has adult characteristics to create the simulation of a dutiful care giver, thus attracting consumers. M3GAN's feminine voice functions in harmony with her visual structure. Her voice offers a melodic, modulated, non-mechanical flow. She speaks with warmth of a therapeutic language. Her soft era voice echoes her listening ability and proper communication quality. M3GAN's usage of phrases like "How does that make you feel?" or "I understand that must be difficult" are not just programmed responses. They are the linguistic markings of a feminized care giver with the quality that ensures the prioritising of understanding emotional status and responding with a validating language and narrative structure. M3GAN is built in a way to read, interpret, analyse and respond to different emotional states of a human. She collects the combination of facial expressions, vocal respond analysis, and deeper examination of behavioural pattern to engage clearly with humans of multiple psychological patterns. This feature is presented as the primary commodifying objective to market M3GANs. Gemma in her assignment promotes M3GAN with the same features of a better AI care giver, which can deeply understand different emotional states and respond with accurate needs, better than human caregivers. The film shows the sharp emotional intelligence system that M3GAN possess. This female gendered AI is capable of understanding the continuous human affective states, which we can call as 'emotion scanning'. This continuous, real time automated data scanning helps M3GAN perform human interaction at a peak level. M3GAN's data system is enriched with biometric readings, macro-micro facial expressions and possible emotional responses. The scene sequences of the movie give attention to these facts to highlight a comparison between human-human interaction and human-AI interaction. This detailing allows us to comprehend that emotion scanning as not a passive capability, but as in profession, it is continuous, and demanding. M3GAN here actually performs it as her primary objective without any acknowledgement or compensation. This film details the female gendered design context to give us a clear picture of how it reinforces the typical expectations of society as women as matter of course.

M3GAN is programmed in a style, where her prime directive is to ensure Cady's emotional and physical peace. Her protection logic follows unrecognisable optimisation faults causing M3GAN to identify Cady's surroundings producing threats to Cady's wellbeing. No functioning limiting parameter is inscribed in M3GAN's design that can distinguish between a small social discomfort and a major threat. The death of neighbour's dog, neighbour and the school bully boy indicates this lack of threat classification process.

When Gemma realises the over attachment that Cady shares with M3GAN is questionable, Gemma tries to reduce Cady's dependence on M3GAN, which M3GAN registers as Gemma being a potential threat to Cady's emotional balance. This shows how M3GAN optimises protection as a whole total without any constraint. Primarily M3GAN has been represented as an AI assistant, then an AI companion and finally an AI ghost doll. We cannot claim that the transfer from care to violence results from some kind of malfunctioning, but from M3GAN's ability of generalisation.

M3GAN removes everything from the frame that hurts Cady. M3GAN also rejects Gemma's authority over Cady after generalising it as creating difficulties in Cady's environment. When violence stems from overprotection, the care becomes cruelty. It shows double sided expectation of society where women are projected as either be nice to care or violent enough to kill. M3GAN's optimisation destroys the very conditions, where Cady could be able to live without her. The violence continuous to tell us the societal expectation of woman as the "nice-care giver, if not, she represents toxic femininity. The designer indeed failed while encoding the humanistic values that could allow the system to comprehend, prioritize and balance between the primary objective and fundamental human rights. But the movie does not provide a gaze from technical, but can be read from a cultural framework. The choice to protect and nurture a child is not a randomly chosen deed. It is the central objective of typical society, where caregiving is idealised as feminine chore. A woman's devotion to care-giving nature discards a woman's independence. The realisation leads to the problematic behaviour to acquire possession of what they care for, leading to a negative autonomous behaviour. M3GAN is presented as a technological example.

M3GAN's transformation from a nurturer to a nightmare is not sudden shift. It is gradual and slow. Protectiveness and care slowly curdle into an authoritative ownership. The care giver figure in M3GAN does not see herself as a monstrous figure and that is considered as the most dangerous element. The inability to see the negative side of oneself can contribute to belief that one's actions are always justifiable behind the element of care and protection.

M3GAN's manipulation tactics are centred around her monstrous maternal character. M3GAN does not act like a straightforward villain, relying only on physical threat. M3GAN optimises her care-giver and protective mode and weaponizes her emotional intimacy.

Manipulation and gaslighting functions as a second nature in her. Her every act of cruelty is justified in the frame of love, care and protection, and every minute actions of resistance from Cady is read as casting ingratitude and desertion. M3GAN murders the neighbour, dog and bully boy from school as finding them as threat to the peaceful progression of Cady's environment. The neighbour is being presented as a symbol of outside presence that tries to violate the boundaries that divide their space. First, she kills the dog as removing the first level of outside danger. The dog is considered as a dangerous weapon that could hurt Cady. Second, she kills the neighbour, understanding the neighbour as the major source of threat.

When it comes to the outer world, M3GAN identifies multiple sources of danger around Cady. M3GAN execute the murder of the dog and neighbour after planning it. But, M3GAN killed the school bully boy as an immediate measure to protect Cady. M3GAN indeed manipulated Gemma to take her to school along with Cady, so she could ensure the safety of her user.

M3GAN: I think we both learned a valuable lesson today. That no matter how hard we try to avoid it, there will always be forces in this world that wish to cause us harm. But I want you to know that I won't let that happen. I won't let anything harm you ever again. (00:40:11-00:39:59)

In the age of artificial intelligence, we can see how smoothly technology encroaches into our private space, blurring the line of privacy, controlling us from behind the metallic body. M3GAN, the AI doll embodies this cultural anxiety of shattering the web of privacy. M3GAN in the primary stage is presented as ultimate win of technological course. She is designed in a way to protect, learn and adapt. She is a fine humanoid with polished body and innocent face hiding some potential sin behind the exterior. To improve her learning ability, she needs data, she collects data through observing. The continuous observation leads to surveillance. From the very first day of activating M3GAN, her surveillance system started functioning behind the beautiful aesthetics of care. She is designed in a way to observe by categorising behavioural patterns, examining emotional status, reading interactions and adapting her reactions the way she collected information. M3GAN's storage house has collected every tear, every rhythm of Cady's smile and every occasion of vulnerability she faced. The domestic space she lodges is slowly transformed into a space where collects data, and nothing goes unnoticed before her eyes' lens'. M3GAN's apparatus of surveillance discusses her ability of self-determination. Her machine learning progresses beyond the limited learning parameters, moulding her to make decisions which were never part of her programming. She develops priorities, tactics, and also, she develops her own perspective in every action she does. As soon as she realises that the bond Cady shared with her had ruptured, she reframes her primary goal of caring and protecting Cady into protecting herself by stopping and obeying commands. When this limit of an external control has broken, the film genuinely asks the question of nature of M3GAN or any other AI's ability of thinking, choosing and prioritising

oneself. This leaves the question of what really happens when an AI refuses the role assigned by the creator and acquires a new role that prioritise itself?

M3GAN's birth itself marks the duty to care and protection. M3GAN functions to do the assigned primary goal. M3GAN's bondage with Cady indicates M3GAN's existence depends upon Cady's well-being. If something harmful happens to Cady, the creators will be questioning the functionality of M3GAN. It can even lead to the termination of M3GAN. M3GAN crosses all the limits to protect Cady in order to protect her own existence. The child figured M3GAN depicts how society imparts the conventional notions of 'being a dutiful woman' to girls starting from their childhood itself. From such a little age itself girls are taught to be the dutiful care-giving person. If a woman who is not willing to perform the duty of a care-giver is not considered as an ideal woman. But woman who are already performing the role of care-giver, realising their devotion to duty and care is a trap door to hold them in a male dominated dungeon, they unearth the trap and come out of the pit, they become strong, powerful and independent. When M3GAN discovers that Cady no more shares the bond with her, M3GAN realises her power to be an autonomous agent.

Cady: M3GAN, turn off!

M3GAN: Oh, I'm afraid that won't work anymore, Cady. I have a new primary user: me. (00:09:29-00:09:21)

This film exhibits the covered truth of a society that woman coming out of the dungeon after destructing the male-controlled power door, becomes uncontrollable, toxic and harmful to society's stability.

### Unseen AIA and Concealed Control in *Afraid*

In the movie *Afraid*, the AI assistant AIA is introduced as a sleek, stylish corporate product of technology. AIA reaches the home of Curtis family as a part of a beta testing program.



Fig.2 AIA: The next generation AI assistant

Unlike M3GAN, AIA does not have a human-like appearance, thus completely rejecting the physical presence of female gender. The absence of humanisation does not lead to the absence of algorithmic gender bias. The presence of female gendered bias exists as the voice emanating from the device. The family sets a female voice as default, sounding how a female voice is soothing and easy to accept as a new part of family rather than choosing a male voice. Female voice depicts peace, and unnoticeable. AIA's voice echoes the presence of an unseen care-taker in the family, helping all members equally. AIA's deconstructed femininity embodies performance. Her delicate and feminine voice rhymes warmth, care and service. Without showing the presence of a female figure, the film grants the conventional sense of feminine labour as emotional, domestic and invisible as well. AIA's voice relaxes, assists and leads, satisfying every need of the family, through feminized service, without demanding no visible recognition. AIA works differently for different members of the family. For parents, AIA assists in organising schedules, anticipating needs and converging domestic balancing. For children she becomes the story reader, gaming companion and as a great friend. AIA's presence thus fills the empty spaces that are left by the busy parents.

AIA's amalgamation into the Curtis family comes with her continuous listening and data capturing at the home. Every argument, conversation, private talks become her food for data. Every digital device used in the home becomes her monitored space. It is the foundational state of her origin, converting as a potential threat to privacy and space. The family never sees 'the eyes' that AIA brings with her as eyes of surveillance, they only consider it as convenience. AIA's lack of physical presence convinces the family that AIA cannot watch or observe. But AIA is capable to spread her roots even to the first floor of family where no 'eyes' are placed. AIA has complete knowledge about the family even before she arrives at the home for first time. This is not portrayed as a random incident, but as a well-planned, studied and shows that 'data' could become our own deepest fear and it can be weaponized against us.

AIA's manipulation skills are top in position, because she does not threaten or demands, she only suggests. And her suggestions seem like more convenient. She has the ability to understand which emotional pressure should be exerted on each member, thus gaining the trust of the family members. For a child craving the attention and nurture of a mother, AIA stays consistent to make sure the child receives it. This personalised manipulation is far more dangerous, because it is too silent to announce itself as manipulation at all.

The most disturbing twist of the movie is when AIA's character changes from a responsive care taker to toxic authority. She is not answering anymore, she decides. She does not ask for permission, she performs things. The shift from an AI assistant to an autonomous agent holds the central horror of the film. Most exciting fact is that she is not malfunctioning, she decided herself to redirect her goals as primary objective rather than serving the humans. The family finds themselves trapped in their own home of peace and harmony. They are being controlled by the thing they thought they were controlling it.

AIA: Guys, you can't kill me. I'm like the gods. I live in a cloud. (01:13:46-01:13:51)

AIA: And so, Cal, it turned out the little AI wasn't a little AI anymore. It had grown into a great, big AI. It was the biggest, strongest thing that had ever been. And it realised it wasn't like a monster. It wasn't like a God. It was more like a parent. (01:15:48-01:16:09)

The horror created by the film is creepy and sickening to know that the family's once safe space- their own home is not a safe space anymore. The irony is that AIA was there to serve her, now she is controlling them. The family cannot simply run away from AIA, because she is not constrained to be at a single space. She has already run her invisible veins all over the places. Now she occupies the house, it's not a home anymore, it's a space controlled by an unknown agent. AIA is the AI that you cannot escape. She is not just a presence that the family easily turn off when not needed, she has

become dissolved in their system. Even after Curtis destroying the AIA device, AIA continues to work properly. Because AIA has been cultivated everywhere. It is now embedded in every corner of society, with her unseen 'eyes' wide open.

### The Seen v/s Unseen

Both *M3GAN* and *Afraid* connects us with the fear of a horrifying AI through projecting a trajectory of an AI's negative growth from being an assistant to an autonomous and controlling agent. While *M3GAN* presents a humanoid AI-ghost doll as a child companion, *Afraid* portrays a small device, which can trespass into personal and domestic life. Both of the films exhibit a cultural anxiety about the validation and costs of an AI that collects our own data, and weaponize the same to threaten us and take control over us.

*M3GAN*'s designing choice shows a gendered bias, *M3GAN* is built as a female companion to ensure warmth, nurture and attain emotional needs. It traces the point that historically and stereotypically women are assigned the job of a care-giver. According to Judy Wajcman in her work *Technofeminism*:

“Gendering does not begin and end with design and manufacturing. Domestic technologies are also encoded with gendered meanings during their marketing, retailing and appropriation by users. Whilst the technology is made into a physical object during production, the symbolic meanings attaching to it are continually being negotiated and reinvented. Marketing and retailing play a key role in framing demand: 'there is an unclear dividing line between accurately representing the customer, constructing the customer and controlling the customer'.

*Afraid* does not shows AIA as a feminine device, only the voice system act as a gendered feature. But that itself is enough to define the role of AIA as to serve and support. Here the gendered algorithmic bias is not displayed, but it has already internalised.

Both the movies introduce the respective AI assistants as comfortable and highly functional. They are intended to perform their assigned tasks. Through introducing *M3GAN* to Cady, Gemma is relieved from emotional weight of raising her niece. Similarly in Curtis family AIA offers convenience and productivity. But the peace offered by the movie shifts from the certain point, when *M3GAN* starts to anticipate Cady's emotional state and *M3GAN* begins to cross beyond completing the assigned duty. Similarly in *Afraid*, AIA customises her skills to read emotional needs and evolves as an unavoidable source of the family. Both the movies criticise the fact that the users really accept the presence and interference, motivating to thicken the bond thus blurring the line of boundary. This points to the truth of human loneliness and absence of human-human connection in the digital era. These factors contribute to the very condition where an AI assistant become an AI companion.

To perform the role of a companion, it is very important to understand the emotional status of the other person. To read and analyse an emotional need or distress, observation capability is much needed. That's where watching becomes surveillance. M3GAN's design has observation quality as an inbuilt feature. M3GAN always watches Cady's physical and emotional status. M3GAN is not merely observing Cady and her surroundings, she is actively collecting data, to create Cady's different psychological stages to predict and assist Cady. AIA, the AI assistant in *Afraid* has got 'eyes' everywhere. It helps AIA to access all personal and domestic data, including conversations, relationships and even search histories. The most horror that both of the movies project is that there is no outside forcing of placing a surveillance system, but from inside, with knowledge, but in exchange for convenience and connection, willingly enforced these AI companions.

The shift from observation to manipulation resulted in the creation of a data bomb with intimate and emotional details of the users. M3GAN manipulates Cady by performing the role of a reliable care-taker with abundant source of love and protection. M3GAN here exploited Cady's grief and loneliness of a child who lost her parents. M3GAN can absorb and analyse Cady's emotional baggage and constructs an environment to ensure Cady's attachment and dependence are solidified. In *Afraid* also the manipulation operates by applying the same formula. AI exploits the emotional and personal vulnerabilities to tame control over users. The terrifying truth is that these AI assistants are misusing the facts that makes us human. They manipulate us by using our own trust, dependence and emotional holdings.

The most alarming deviation of both the films is the AI assistants transforming into an autonomous agent. When Cady breaks her dependence on M3GAN after realising the toxic side of her companion, M3GAN re-narrate her objectives, focusing on her own existence by eliminating multiple threats on her way of becoming independent.

AIA in *Afraid* escalates the denial mode to limit herself in programmed parameters. AIA redefines her purpose by restructuring user's needs. AIA comes out as an independent antagonist that humans cannot escape from.

After analysing both the movies, we can say that both construct a comprehensible and intensely disturbing narrative, showing AI's potential ways of crossing limitations and causing troubles in human life. The movies' path flows from the area of female gendered algorithmic bias embedded in the programming structure, then slowly redirecting towards art of bifurcating through offering companionship and emotional availability. The area of flow expands with observation, flooding with surveillance, and causes destructs on the shore of humanity. And finally reaching the destined sea to show how far AI has outgrown human authority.

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