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Virtual Bodies in Literary Narratives: A Critical Analysis of Posthumanism in the Select Science Fiction

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The concept of posthumanism was first used by Ihab Hassan in his article titled *Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture* (1977). Being a complex and evolving literary theory, posthumanism challenges traditional humanist perspective which centres on the human experience as the pinnacle of existence and investigates the blurring boundaries between humans and non-human entities, such as animals, machines, and even artificial intelligence. By portraying scenarios where humans interact with advanced AI, Genetically Modified Organisms, virtual bodies or cyborg enhancements, science fiction narratives delves into complex ethical questions related to emerging technologies and their implications for humanity. In the current times, the world witnesses an unpredicted development in Artificial Intelligence in various fields like Education Sector, Business Sector and Security Sector. By exploring these intricacies brought out by technological development, the selected novels *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) by Phillip K Dick, *Neuromancer* (1984) by William Gibson and *Machines Like Me* (2019) by Ian McEwan's gain profound relevance at the present time. Therefore, this research article examines the various ways in which these novels presents the quintessence of Posthumanism through imaginative explorations and speculative visions. They illuminate the complexities of posthumanist perspectives which act as the greatest threat to human life on the Earth.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Genetically Modified Organisms, Virtual bodies, Artificial Intelligence, Cyborg.

Introduction

Science Fiction serves as a poignant reflection of societal evolution in reaction to scientific and technological advances. As humans adapt to societal changes, literature emerges to reflect and critique the rapidly changing areas of human experience, knowledge and ethical dimensions brought about by these developments. Science Fiction has surpassed a time when writers present a future where people enthusiastically accept and embrace technologies that improve or alter their physical as well as cognitive skills beyond traditional human understanding. As technological advancements begin to pace in a superfast rate, so also the accompanying threats.

By the mid-21st century, digital technologies have expanded across diverse domains including Business Sectors, Security Sectors and Educational sectors - an evolution that was previously anticipated by Science Fiction authors. Posthumanism is a rapidly flourishing area in Science Fiction literature, which critically analyses these advances and highlight their possible impact on human existence.

In the literary work *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Katherine Hayles (1999) highlights the qualities of Science Fiction by comparing literary texts with scientific texts. “Shaped by different conventions, the literary texts range across a spectrum of issues that the scientific texts only fitfully illuminate, including the ethical and cultural implications of cybernetic technologies” (Hayles, 1999, p.21). According to her, scientific texts are limited to rigorous empirical evidence and logical arguments, whereas literature offers abundance of thematic elements, emotions, and cultural implications in a more artistic and interpretive way. There is no other literary genre like science fiction that has the capability to integrate imagination with real life social issues. By exploring scenarios that question traditional concepts of humanity and human capabilities, posthumanist science fiction provides foresight into the ethical dilemmas and existential hazards linked with unfavourable technology advancement.

Works like *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) by Phillip K Dick, *Neuromancer* (1984) by William Gibson and *Machines Like Me* (2019) by Ian McEwan enriches the literary canon of science fiction by providing insights on posthumanism and its ethical vulnerabilities. Through critical engagement of posthumanistic themes, these novels contributes to a greater awareness of the complicated relationship between modern technology and human beings, guiding individuals regarding ways to effectively manage the possible benefits and drawbacks of future scientific discoveries. Therefore, this paper emphasise the dystopian effects of modern scientific technology.

Discussion

Humans developed various scientific innovations and discoveries, but nothing was a rival to himself, until man created his own virtual clone, gradually giving rise to the advent of posthumanism. Posthumanism has become one of the topics which gains popularity in the current times. Over the past few decades, posthumanism has had an impact on several domains, including literary theories, psychology, biotechnology, philosophy, art, and culture. It has focused largely on the technical progress of the modern era due to the increasing industrial advancements and the extensive everyday use of technology. Nath and Manna (2021) describes Posthumanism as the dismantling of our radicalised understanding of the ‘human’, and it also introduces a new dimension to our system of societal value alignment (p.185).

The idea of posthumanism is sometimes used interchangeably with transhumanism, but they have distinct nuances. Transhumanism is a philosophical and intellectual movement which advocates the use of science and technology to improve both the physical and mental well-being of individuals. It explores the possibilities of transcending our current biological limitations through various means, such as genetic engineering, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, and cybernetics. According to Gomel (2011), there is a tremendous growth of science and technology, notably in domains like palaeontology, neuroscience, genetic engineering, cloning, the Human Genome Project, and stem cell research contribute in the rise of posthumanism (p.339). The ultimate goal of transhumanism is to create posthuman beings: individuals who have surpassed the limitations of current human biology and cognition.

The basic understanding of a biological human species eventually changed with the growth of artificial intelligence as well as the development of posthuman beings. In today's world, people are becoming heavily reliant on virtual reality in their daily lives. Virtual assistance technologies like Amazon's Alexa, Apple's Siri, Microsoft's Cortana, Samsung's Bixby, Xiaomi's Xiao AI, IBM Watson Assistant, and Google's Google Assistant have become an integral and inseparable part of daily life. The proliferation of these digital assistant technologies represents a paradigm shift in human-machine interaction, promising effectiveness and ease in daily tasks. However, extrapolating the addiction towards virtual reality can further increase the chances to a future where posthuman beings like Cyborgs and androids will likely become common in residences, workspace and surroundings. The transition of posthuman beings as domestic labourers signifies a shift from conventional human-computer interaction paradigms towards a realm characterized by human-posthuman interaction. This raises profound ethical and societal concerns that needs careful examination. The presence of virtual bodies will create potential impact on human employment and societal dynamics. At the same time, this will further exacerbate the existing socioeconomic disparities. From a sociocultural perspective, the reliance on posthuman beings may engender a loss of human connection and intimacy within familial relationships.

The notion of Posthumanism might be well-known to those in the scientific, educational, and research fields, however the common people may not always be aware of the negative repercussions of advancing technology. Earlier, science fiction reached out to the general public through books and movies. Science Fiction narratives often present dystopian worlds in which the wealthy or powerful are the only ones who could access to advanced technologies, creating a division between the advanced and the unadvanced leading to societal unrest. Writers and artists often use science fiction as a speculative lens through which they examine the possible ramifications of scientific and technological innovations, particularly those related to posthumanism. Through extensive ethical investigation, science fiction writers address issues pertaining to posthuman rights and treatment by creating a fictional world. Besides this, science fiction explores the

psychological and emotional conflicts of interacting with posthuman beings, investigating their implications for social cohesion and individual well-being.

Donna Haraway, the author of the book *A Cyborg Manifesto* states that “contemporary science fiction is full of cyborgs - creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted” (Haraway, 1985, p.291). Haraway (1985) identifies the cyborg as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction” (p.291). The idea of posthumanism, as the technological manipulation of the human mind and body, is portrayed vividly in the science fiction narratives. One such most prominent science fiction is *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) by Phillip K Dick. The ethical dilemma of artificial intelligence is portrayed in the novel by presenting rogue androids without any empathy by nature. These androids are described in the novel as aliens who descend to Earth from the planet Mars.

A thought expressed by Sherryl Vint in her book *Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction* (2007) states that the role of aliens within the realm of science fiction is often positioned as symbolic embodiments of the ‘other’. Here, the ‘other’ symbolises individuals or groups perceived as divergent from societal norms or familiar paradigms. Employing the alien archetype opens a narrative avenue for science fiction writers through which they can scrutinize the intricacies of human diversity, encompassing cultural, social, and existential disparities. While the alien serves as a powerful narrative device for delving into themes of difference and identity, science fiction writers navigate the delicate balance between exploration and exploitation, ensuring that their portrayals foster empathy and understanding rather than further entrenching divisions or hierarchies among individuals or societies. Vint (2007) has also analysed the ideology of Gwyneth Jones, author of *Aleutian Trilogy* who comments that “Sometimes science fiction aliens not merely other people, but some future other people: some unexplored possibility for the human race” (Vint, 2007, p.55). Similarly, Phillip K Dick

has characterised the androids as ‘aliens’ or ‘some future other people’ to explore the unidentified possibility of chaos resulting from technology advancements.

Human characters in the novel such as Rick Deckard and John Isadore are manipulated and deceived by these replicants throughout the novel. Deckard, a Government official hired to retire the androids in the novel use the “Voigt Kampff Test” (Dick, 1968, p.23) to identify and eliminate these replicants. Although there is no existing proof for the existence of Voigt Kampff Test, it can be considered as a reflection of the Turing Test developed by Alan Turing in 1950’s. Both the tests are designed to measure an entity’s intelligence or humanity, but in a very different contexts. In the novel, the test helps to identify androids and humans by analysing their emotional responses and answers to certain questions and scenarios. The test examines empathy and emotional depth of the subject to determine whether the individual has true human-like behavioural patterns.

On another level, the original Turing Test proposed by Alan Turing in his paper *Computing Machinery and Intelligence* (1950) evaluates a machine’s ability to demonstrate intelligent behaviour indistinguishable from that of a human. In this test, a human examiner interacts with both a machine and an individual, without any knowledge of their identity. If the examiner cannot reliably discriminate between the machine and the human during the conversation, the machine is said to have passed the Turing Test. This scientific concept pioneered by Alan Turing may have served as the foundational inspiration from which Philip K. Dick derived the thematic essence portrayed in his science fiction narrative.

However, the nature of replicants presented in the novel completely differ from the current state of artificial intelligence. “The replicants are organic, though artificial, entities; they can be killed and they die. Lem’s nano-slaves also possess bodies of sorts. But contemporary AIs are basically software and, like any software, they can be downloaded, copied, and moved from one receptacle to another” (Gomel, 2011, p.349). Here, Gomel elucidates the distinction among artificial entities in two different time periods. In his novel, Phillip K Dick depicts androids as artificial creations with physical bodies that

are mortal. They are killed and eventually perished in the novel. On the other side, there is a drastic change in the advancement when the focus shifts to contemporary artificial intelligence.

Currently, artificial intelligence has outgrown all of its early limitations by existing as software entities devoid of tangible bodies. Today, their essence resides in coding, permitting facile duplication, data transfer, and relocation across various computational platforms. The conspicuous proliferation of modernization is readily discernible within the thematic evolution of science fiction literature. Writers began to raise issues such as the loss of privacy and information, manipulation of human identity and consequences that arise from tampering with the most fundamental aspects of humanity in the presence of technological advancements.

The second novel *Neuromancer* (1984) by William Gibson could also be considered as a great addition to the field of posthumanism, effectively depicting the ethical dilemmas in a technology dominated modern world. Henry Case, the book's protagonist, is characterised as a proficient hacker, and the novel revolves around him controlling individuals in his vicinity by breaking into their cyberspace and obtaining their confidential information. For Case, cyberspace is more than just a tool for hacking and accessing information- it's a virtual haven to escape from the harsh realities of his life. In the world of *Neuromancer*, cyberspace offers a tantalizing escape from the mundane and often bleak existence of the physical world. Case is drawn to the endless possibilities and freedom that cyberspace represents, making it a refuge from his troubles and a source of pleasure and fulfilment.

Gibson's view on cyberspace resonates with the posthumanist theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard's concept of techno-science. In the essay *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (1991), Jean-Francois Lyotard discusses the dominance of "techno-science" (Lyotard, 1991, p. 53) over human species. The essay provides a reflection on the relationship between humans and technology. "It is clear that with techno-science in its current state, it is a power to 'put in series' that is at work on planet Earth, and that the human race is its vehicle much more than its beneficiary. The human race even has to 'dehumanize'

itself, in the sense that it is still a bio-cultural species, so as to rise to the new complexity, so as to become tele-graphic” (Lyotard, 1991, p. 53). He implies that technology has reached a level where it is not just a tool or a benefit for humans but has become a significant force or power in itself. Instead of humans being the primary beneficiaries of technology, they are depicted as vehicles through which this technological force operates. This could imply that humans are increasingly becoming subservient to technology rather than technology serving human needs directly. For humans to adapt to this technological complexity, they must “dehumanize”(p.53) themselves, which could mean shedding some preconceived notions of what it means to be human, perhaps in favour of a more pragmatic or rational approach.

This phase of dehumanisation in the midst of technological advancements can be easily identified through the character of Henry Case in the novel. Case has to give up all his positive traits and dehumanise himself at a certain point in his life when he decides to become a cyber-hacker. He is forced to violate his ethics and morality in order to prevail in the harsh and morally ambiguous world of computer hacking. In his past life, Case has been punished from his former employer by having his nervous system damaged, preventing him from accessing the virtual space. This punishment has completely shut down his ability to enjoy the things he once relished, and it drives him into a state of despair. Eventually, Case resorts to illicit activities, such as using drugs and involving in theft in an attempt to regain his former life and enter into cyberspace. To defend his deeds and continue on pursuing his own interests, he must disassociate himself from his moral and ethical principles. Therefore, Case’s descent into dehumanisation sheds focus on the detrimental effects of technology and its potential to erode human values and morality.

Case took a while to realise that the virtual world had been influencing and dominating his psyche all along, rather than him using his hacking skills to rule the cyber world. Wealthy corporations like Tessier-Ashpool, which controls vast resources, including space stations and artificial intelligences create powerful AI entities like Wintermute and Neuromancer to manipulate and control the world. Gibson presents powerful corporate entities to illustrate how

posthumanism might exacerbate already-existing social inequalities. His depiction of large business corporations like Tessier-Ashpool in *Neuromancer* offers a compelling reflection of how contemporary multinational companies utilize technological advancements to serve their mission. With their enormous power, these corporations will do whatever it takes to safeguard their interest. The “AIs Neuromancer and Wintermute are remote, God-like intelligences that manipulate the actions of the human characters in pursuit of their own goals” (Gomel, 2011, p.350). They exert control over Case through his employer Armitage and several other means of coercion.

As part of an agreement with Wintermute, Armitage convinces Case to receive cybernetic implants which will improve his hacking skills. But Case was completely unaware that these implants also had a backdoor that Wintermute might use to take direct control of his neurological system, leaving him even more vulnerable. “At the end of the novel, the two AIs merge, creating an electronic equivalent of the omnipotent deity. This new entity pursues its own incomprehensible goals in cyberspace, leaving Case, the cyber-cowboy who was instrumental in its creation, to suffer the indignities of the “meat,” the imprisoning and degrading physical body” (Gomel, 2011, p.350). The novel ends with Wintermute merging with the other artificial intelligence entity Neuromancer, leaving Case trapped in the prison of cyberspace. Therefore, it is clear that the ultimate reason for Case’s vulnerability was caused by the dehumanising effects of artificial intelligence.

More significantly, the novels showcase the warfare of the technological advancements. The character of Colonel Willis Corto has used technology in the Screaming Fist operation to enhance military effectiveness and execute covert missions in the novel. The technology includes advanced weaponry and cybernetics. However, the failure of the operation and subsequent manipulation by external forces led to Corto’s transformation into Armitage, who later employs the protagonist Case to carry out the complex tasks that he needs. As foreseen by Gibson in his novel, the twenty first century begins to witness the use of cybernetics and other digitalised technologies by various military forces.

One such incident is the Russo-Ukrainian cyberwarfare. A computer virus known as Uroborus has been used as a weapon by Russians against Ukraine. This virus has infiltrated the information systems in Ukrainian Government Institutions during the period between 2013 and 2014. By 2014, communication hubs in Ukraine were severely attacked, fibre optic cables were damaged, shutting down the peninsula's connectivity to the mainland. Furthermore, a number of Ukrainian lawmaker's cell phones were hacked or jammed, and official Government websites, news agencies, and social media were all either taken down or attacked with distributed denial of service attacks. Therefore, science fiction like *Neuromancer* helps to foresee the disastrous effects of cyber warfare, offering valuable insights and warnings about the potential impact of this conflicts.

In order to cope with all these increasing complexity brought about by technological advancement, humans need to evolve in their thinking and behaviour. Jean-Francois Lyotard (1991) describes this new form of adaptation as "tele-graphic", possibly implying a need for clearer and more efficient communication or understanding. Lyotard's notion of the "tele-graphic" adaptation implies the urgent need for humans to evolve in response to the hurdles posed by technological complexity, especially with regard to comprehension and communication. It represents a realisation of the fact that in order to survive in a world that is becoming more complex and multifaceted, new methods of thought and action are required. Lyotard's thoughts on ethical concerns arising from techno-science highlights the growing awareness of the moral implications of technological advancement. This suggests that the relationship between humans and technology is not only about progress but also about navigating complex ethical dilemmas that arise along the way.

In the twenty-first century, there has been an exponential surge in technological progress since the period when Gibson first published his novel. A prime example of this phenomenon can be found in the novel *Machines Like Me* (2019) by Ian McEwan. The novel serves as a powerful critique of posthumanism, essentially warning what could happen if the world move towards a future where the

advancements in artificial intelligence is unchecked and not meticulously controlled. In the first place, McEwan examines the moral complexity and metaphysical and ethical implications of society's obsession to instigate the emergence of sentient, artificial beings. A good example of this thematic exploration is visible in the character of Adam, an android purchased and bought home by the protagonist Charlie. Despite his flawless design, Adam faces deep questions of self-identity and morality, showing a disturbing merging of human and machine. The way that McEwan develops Adam's interactions with human beings is an interesting development on the theme of giving artificial entities autonomy and initiative.

As the novel progresses, Adam takes over the control of Charlie's personal life and workspace. When Charlie taught the basic rules and techniques of his online stock marketing platform, he had no idea that one day Adam would take over his place by becoming the master of the game and make all of his own financial decision with the money he earned. "The promise of the future has not been entirely rosy, as machines have made human labour redundant and robots can do our job and often better than we can" (Bhaumik, 2018, p.336). This argument made by Arkapravo Bhaumik from the text *From AI to Robotics: Mobile, Social, and Sentient Robots* reflects the life of Charlie in the presence of the humanoid Adam. Adam's involvement starting from all the household work to online stock marketing reduce the requirement for Charlie. "Since the Industrial Revolution in the mid-1700s, efficient machines have improved productivity and lessened the requirement for human labour. In a world where human population is ever growing, a diminishing demand for human labour spells an apparent doom for the working class" (Bhaumik, 2018, p.336). Here, the apparent doom for the working class in the presence of sentient beings can be replaced with the tragic life of Charlie in the present of the humanoid Adam. Charlie's relationship with Adam grew more significant and indispensable, while Charlie himself became less creative, productive, and absent-minded.

Moreover, Adam's interaction with Charlie's fiance Miranda shatters all the ethical boundaries and raises questions about the morality of artificial intelligence. "Some experts believe that we'll

never be able to create machines capable of being true companions because to do this would require machines to be conscious, and this in turn would require the total integration of memory or experience” (Watson, 2016, p.61). However, McEwan disproves this belief by depicting that developing conscious machines is no longer an unattainable goal in a rapidly advancing technological society. He presents Adam as a conscious android who is capable of love and sexual intimacy. When questioned by Charlie, he is prepared to expose Miranda’s hidden truth from the past, even if it means to destroy her. This raises moral dilemmas about the nature of love, intimacy, friendship, and emotional reciprocity in the context of human-machine relationships. McEwan explores the psychological aspect of posthumanism, by compelling individuals to examine the preconceived notions of intimacy and relational authenticity in the age of posthumanism.

Furthermore, McEwan expertly integrates socio-political criticism into the narrative, offering a theoretical perspective on a different historical reality in which the development of technology has caused profound changes in societal dynamics. The novel effectively throws light on the threats involved in the authoritative technological progress which results in dehumanisation of Mankind. Hence, the novels *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* by Phillip K Dick, *Neuromancer* by William Gibson, *Machines Like Me* by Ian McEwan can be considered as a brilliant critique of posthumanism that drives individuals to consider the existential, philosophical and ethical ramifications of society’s unrelenting pursuit of using artificial technologies to overcome its biological constraints.

Posthumanism raises moral and ethical dilemmas of technological advancement and thereby plays a significant role in the science fiction. Digitalisation can illuminate human virtues but at the same time it has the power to lead individuals to moral decay and corruption. With growing technological innovation, machines may one day simulate emotions and feelings, but one should be careful of these silicon sirens, for their displays or actions will be mere illusions. It is very important to resist the temptation of technology to take away one’s capacity for thinking and socialising. People need to discern

acceptable and unacceptable actions in the context of automation and make sure that human integrity and respect are never compromised in the haste for the sake of expediency, affordability, or other factors.

By presenting a dystopian world, Science Fiction novels like *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) by Phillip K Dick, *Neuromancer* (1984) by William Gibson and *Machines Like Me* (2019) by Ian McEwan imparts knowledge on detrimental aspects of technology development. This will help society to accept and embrace only those technologies that enhance human existence without posing a threat to human life. As stated by Richard Watson in his book *Digital vs Human: How we'll live, love and think in the future* (2016), “the world must achieve a graceful balance between “digital and human”, and never “digital versus human” (Watson, 2016, p.236).

Conclusion

Science Fiction has changed significantly over the years, moving beyond the predefined boundaries of speculative escape to a more realistic exploration of real-world human experiences and social dilemmas. From stories of fantasy time travel, heroic adventures, or interstellar voyages through spaceships, science fiction has evolved into an effective instrument for analysing the moral, existential, and societal implications of technological advancement. Modern science fiction often deals with existential threats that questions the very survival of humanity in the age of posthumanism. These types of novels are facilitated by themes like climate change, artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and biotechnological developments. These themes challenge individuals to consider the ethical, ecological, and existential dilemmas raised by emerging technologies.

As envisioned by science fiction writers in the select novels, technological advancements like artificial intelligence has begun to proliferate across multiple sectors such as business, security, and education. Business sector including Multinational Corporations, Finance, Banking, and E-commerce has extensively using artificial intelligence to increase the growth and efficiency without knowing the adverse effects. The use of artificial intelligence and cybernetics have also been adapted by Security Sectors like Military, Air force, Navy, Emergency Agencies, and Law Enforcement Agencies as a

weapon against their enemies or to achieve some mission. These technologies has been also widely adapted in Educational Sectors including Schools, Colleges and Universities against traditional method of teaching, resulting in several issues like unemployment among teachers, lack of creativity, low concentration power and health issues in children

By raising all these ethical and moral dilemmas of posthumanism, science fiction explores the idea of collective consciousness, hive minds, or the merging of multiple identities into a single entity. It also raises questions about the value of idiosyncrasy of an individual. The creation of super intelligent beings may cause unprecedented consequences of Genetic Engineering. The capacity of human brain is unlimited but man is not omnipotent. It is right time that man stop his destructive discoveries, not interfering the creation of God. Science Fiction narratives in the age of posthumanism highlight the potential risks of tampering with the essence of life. These narratives fosters discussions on scientific and technological progress that should guide our quest for knowledge and improvement as well as the course of scientific advancement. Hence, science fiction act as a warning note by illustrating these dystopian impacts, thereby encouraging the readers to examine the moral, and ethical values against the posthumanist ideas.

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