
An Attempt to Colonise Extraterrestrial Land for Human Evolution - A Reading of Posthuman Condition and the Process of Disengagement from Earth in *Man Plus* by Frederick Pohl

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Abstract

The novel *Man Plus*, written by Frederik Pohl, is a highly acclaimed science-fiction novel, portraying the issues present in a futuristic dystopian society where the fate of human existence is on the verge of collapse due to burgeoning population, hunger issues, and the threat of a worldwide thermal-nuclear war between the USA and China. The solution to the issue is regarded as a highly advanced and rather ambitious project to create a cyborg that can survive the harsh environment of Mars and essentially colonise it for human relocation. The paper aims to investigate the themes of the colonisation of extraterrestrial land on Mars and disengagement from Earth using posthumanist thought. A qualitative approach to thematic analysis is adopted for the paper. Through comprehensive discussions, it is revealed that reliance on posthumanist qualities created through technology may be threatening to humankind as the sentient technology is able to gain consciousness and act according to its own motives, indicating that colonisation is the beginning of oppression for humankind as well.

Keywords: colonisation, Mars environment, science fiction, technology in literature, Cyborg, posthuman condition.

Introduction

The science fiction novel *Man Plus*, written by Frederik Pohl, portrays a complex narrative regarding the future of humankind. The protagonist, Roger Torroway, is transformed into a cyborg to survive in the harsh Martian environment and pave the way for humans to colonise Mars to save themselves from the dreadful devastations of war between the US and China. The responsibility of achieving a goal that will be able to disengage humans from Earth and change the course of their lives is entrusted in the hands of one human being who has been enhanced scientifically to embody a posthuman entity. Posthuman elements in science fiction can be considered one of the most interesting tropes that engage the readers, forcing them to envision a rather dystopian future for humankind.

Merging advanced technology and human consciousness through Roger Torroway is showcased as a positive step towards an unimaginable future until the connection between humans on Earth and Roger is separated. As the story progresses, the advancement of sentient technology makes the correlation between them and humans rather co-dependent one. In essence, the sentient robots gain the consciousness that, in order to survive, connection with the human race should remain uninterrupted. However, from a posthuman perspective, it can be seen that the creation of cyborgs through Roger and other sentient robotic technology on Earth is able to exercise power over the fate of humankind. Moreover, the tendency of humans to use technology for colonisation of the extraterrestrial land on Mars indicates their desire to escape from earthly turmoil and rebuild a society through the power and higher intelligence. Thus, the paper will analyse the elements of the colonisation of extraterrestrial land on Mars and the disengagement of humans from Earth through a posthumanist perspective in *Man Plus*.

Dystopian conditions on Earth and the desire to escape

The novel *Man Plus* illustrates the desperate need to seek shelter in outer space for the human race to escape the dystopian conditions of Earth. The sentiment of dystopia presented in the novel is influenced by the social and political conditions

of the 1940s and 1950s. "Pohl and Kornbluth were both a part of the "Futurians" group of science fiction writers of the 1940s...The United States of the 1940s and 1950s saw a movement away from the politics of the Communist-influenced left towards a centrist and 'liberal' consensus." (Baker, 439). Therefore, the political tension of the Cold War, and the apprehension of another thermo-nuclear war between the US and China that may destroy humanity are seen as the motivating factor behind the project of Mars colonisation.

The dystopian condition and probability of a great war that can annihilate the human race drives the society described in the novel to lean towards escapism. Colonisation of an extraterrestrial land seems to be the natural course of order, indicating that the use of power and intelligence for furthering sovereignty in outer space is still present in the future society as well. Thus, the narrative is able to explore the inherent faults in human conduct that drive them towards extraterrestrial colonisation instead of seeking peaceful solutions for the sustained survival of mankind.

Human tendency for colonisation

The tendency of humans to colonise uncharted land is recorded in history, indicating the violent and oppressive nature of colonisers. This tendency of the past is again probed in the *Man Plus* where the development of a cyborg is used to colonise the land in Mars. The theme of colonisation present in the novel indicates the linkage between the past and the present, questioning the true nature of human evolution. In an essay by George S. Wilson, titled "How Shall the American Savage be Civilised?", he states that "Suppose some superior race should come from another planet, and find us as inferior and barbarous, according to their standard, as we consider the Indians, when measured by our standards. And suppose they should conquer and put us on reservations." (Grewell, 25). The narrative of the selected novel does not stay far from this statement as humans proceed to create a cyborg to conquer the harsh Martian environment. Therefore, the detachment towards developing human society on Earth is ignored in favour of a greater and more appealing dream for which Roger is created. However, the fate of human beings remains precarious till the end of the novel as the author defines the nuances ever-present in such an ambitious project.

Posthumanism in science fiction

Posthumanism in science fiction can be seen as a popular theme that portrays the evolution of human beings with the help of science, enhancing the qualities of human beings beyond imagination. Posthumanism is often riddled with questions of morality as the enhancement of human qualities to such a great extent may create an organism that is able to surpass the morality of humans and conduct itself independently.

"N. Katherine Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman*, however, links the philosophical /political questioning of humanism with the sweeping advances in science, particularly in cybernetics, genetic engineering, and neuropsychology. These advances not only force us to abandon the bankrupt notion of "a universal human nature" but also to consider the possibility of the actual production of subjectivities housed in bodies that are no longer recognisably human or even organic, such as genetically engineered organisms or Artificial Intelligence (AIs)"(Gomel, 345).

Therefore, posthumanism is used to construct a futuristic society where the advancement of scientific technology is beyond limitations, paving the way for a new world. These advancements, portrayed in science-fiction literature may reveal themselves as either negative or positive elements for human existence.

Discussion

Theme 1: Portrayal of posthumanism in the novel

Posthumanism retains significance in the novel as the author incorporates the theme of sentient technology and the creation of cyborgs. The crucial significance of posthumanism also lies in the urgency to create an advanced human being who can survive the harsh Martian atmosphere. Roger, however, by embodying the enhanced senses and strengths of a cyborg, starts to feel separated from himself. "In the sense that form follows function, Martian he was. He was shaped for Mars. In a sense, too, he was there already (*Man Plus*, 26). This description is the beginning of many, delineating his otherworldliness to the readers.

He becomes a stranger to himself and to the world around him. Only as he lands on Mars, he is able to finally feel at home, indicating his heightened awareness and strength. His physical appearance is altered to a great extent as well and it becomes impossible for him to even recognise himself. "After a month as a cyborg, speaking was becoming strange to him, for he was getting out of the habit of breathing anyway" (*Man Plus*, 30). Thus, the simplest and necessary of human activities fading away from Roger indicates his alterations that are both internal and external.

Theme 2: Human evolution and disengagement from the earth in the novel

The importance of the mission entrusted to Roger is directed from the president of the USA himself as the author reveals the current human condition. Dictatorial countries threatening nuclear warfare and overpopulation threatening hunger become the prime reason for seeking evolution. Human life in such a dystopian state becomes meaningless. "One human being does not seem particularly important, when there are eight billion alive. Not more important than, for example, a single microchip in a memory store" (*Man Plus*, 9). Hence, human evolution becomes a necessary theme in the novel to ensure that the value of human lives is preserved away from Earth through human evolution.

The dream to evolve through technological advancement and discover a utopian world becomes a necessity to preserve the human race. However, as Roger himself goes through the evolution, he feels hopeless in finding a world that guarantees peaceful survival." . . . Roger himself doubling as diplomat and mission head, world traveller, familiar of a

dozen capitals, really did not think in his conscious mind that the 'Free World' existed" (*Man Plus*, 45). The sheer hopelessness of Roger further accentuates a necessary human evolution, however in a moral sense. "It was a terrible responsibility, we being custodians of humankind's last forlorn hope for freedom and decency" (*Man Plus*, 45). Such a heavy responsibility is entrusted to Roger as he proceeds to prepare himself for the mission upon which the fate of humanity resides.

Theme 3: Elements of colonisation and its impact on society

The theme of colonisation and its impact on the futuristic society is also depicted in a complex manner, taking into account the duality in the mind of Roger. As a cyborg with heightened intelligence and sense, the project to colonise the Martian lands proposed by the President of the USA as the sole means of surviving the war seemed ludicrous to him. However, his opinion is disregarded as his hybrid internal and external appearance makes him a monster to the humans around him. Despite the extensive description of the colonisation mission to Mars, the majority of the novel is devoted to the preparation of the journey. "The deputy went on: A.S.A.P. We've got to complete this job- and by that, friends, I mean to complete it, get Harrinert up to optimum performance so that he can actually live on Mars..." (*Man Plus*, 52). This urgency indicates the troublesome earthly conditions and the negative impact of it on society as the whole of Earthly society is to be relocated away from Earth as soon as possible.

Theme 4: Relation between sentient technology and human beings

In the novel, the reliance of human beings on technology to create posthuman robots indicates the impossibility of surviving in the Martian environment without enhancement of inherent human qualities and senses. The only hope of humans to survive in the colonised Martian land is sentient technology and creation of cyborgs like Roger Torroway. However, the novel also describes such reliance on sentient technology in a negative light, at the end of the novel as the autonomy of these sentient robots are relieved. "Of course, human beings did not know we were pleased, and perhaps would not have believed it. Human beings did not know that machine intelligence was capable of self-awareness in the first place. We went to a lot of trouble to keep them from that knowledge too" (*Man Plus*, 263). Thus, the change in the narrative style and presenting the shared consciousness of the sentient technology that keeps the connection between Earth and Mars alive reveals a symbiotic survival method that AIs are aiming at to keep them in existence.

Discussion

The above discussion illustrates the positive and negative aspects portrayed by Pohl in his novel, outlining a dystopian society in the future, on the verge of collapse due to human ignorance and greed for dominance. Their survival is dependent on the posthuman qualities of the cyborg, Roger Torroway, who is entrusted to find a habitation for humans in Mars, thus colonising it. The insistence on disengagement from Earth also reveals the inadequacy of human intelligence to use advanced technology to resolve Earthly issues first instead of deserting the planet. Finally, it is also seen that their heavy reliance on the AIs and sentient technology has made them a slave to the system they themselves have created. A darkness in the theme reveals itself as the disengagement from Earth reveals that humans are bound forever to keep a symbiotic relationship with each other. The capacity for higher intelligence and senses required to survive on the extraterrestrial land of Mars is achieved only through posthuman expansion of human beings, and the author illustrates the inherent weakness of humanity. In order to overcome these weaknesses, the posthuman technological beings such as Roger Torroway become their hope for survival. Therefore, it can be stated that the novel projects the hopelessness of human existence in a dystopian world and the threatening circumstances they are bound to face due to the sentient nature of advanced technology. Their act of colonisation paves the way for the human race to be colonised and oppressed by the sentient technology themselves if their dependence on technology increases.

Conclusion

The prominent themes of *Man Plus* by Frederik Pohl reveal the nuances that can be present in the technology-dependent future society. The project to colonise the extraterrestrial land of Mars reveals the dependency on sophisticated and advanced technology through which Roger Torroway is transformed into a cyborg. The changes he undergoes, both internal and external, reveal his alienation from himself. The fate of humankind is portrayed to be dependent on the possibility of colonising Martian land as hunger issues and the probability of thermo-nuclear warfare threatens the continued survival of humans. As the novel proceeds further, it is seen that Roger himself, with higher intelligence and senses finds the project hopeless. However, a darker side of reliance on sentient technology is revealed at the end of the novel, as the AI network, preserving the connection between Earth and Roger, reveals to have developed a consciousness of their own and is acting according to their best interest, in essence, to survive through a symbiotic relationship. Therefore, it can be concluded that the novel reveals the inherent negativity and darkness related to colonisation and reliance on posthuman abilities to survive. The desire to disengage from Earth and seek survival in Mars instead of seeking a solution for Earth using advanced technology is seen as a sign of disharmony between the planet Earth and its citizens. Furthermore, as the paper studies the posthuman nature of Roger, it is also revealed that the enhancements made to his internal and external facilities make him feel less of a human. Thus, his metamorphosis into a cyborg indicates the overwhelming power of connected consciousness seen in the AI network that controls everything on Earth. Thus, the entire novel becomes a testament to alienation and subjugation that the human race is forced to face due to their highly ambitious idea of colonising Mars.

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