

A POSTHUMANIST READING OF SATURN'S CHILDREN BY CHARLES STROSS

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1. INTRODUCTION

With the onset of posthumanism, humans have lost their privileged positions and significant roles in the world. The superior status of humans is replaced with the dominance of biotechnology, implants, artificial intelligence, improvements in technology and science. The centrality is no longer attributed to humans but to the cyborg, humanoid robot, android, hybrid, in other words, to the genetically altered subjects. The aim of posthumanists is to eliminate the destructive effects of hierarchy and otherness in society controlled by humans and to decentre the centrality of humans. They concentrate on the other and nonhuman by deconstructing the values of humanism so as to create a more promising future. In this sense, *Saturn's Children* (2008) by Charles Stross, portrays the posthuman condition in the distant future when androids appear as the dominant race. In the novel, the contradictions between aristo-governors and slave-chipped working class are foregrounded. In this paper, the power relations in a posthuman environment will be analysed and the clash between the values of humanism and posthumanism will be questioned. The extinction of humans and the spread of gynoids in the distance future, together with the relationship between robots and humans, will be the primary concerns which will be highlighted in this paper through the concepts of posthumanism.

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Posthumanism, rejecting the anthropocentric approach and criticising the hierarchy determined by human beings in the universe, dwells on the necessity to decentre the primary position attributed to human beings and to rethink the values put forward by the humanists. The destruction of environment and the extinction of many species in nature can be regarded as an outcome of the centrality ascribed to humans. Without considering the disparaging consequences of materialist understanding supported by the capitalists, human beings have devastated nature, animals and plants and ignored the harmony between environment and humanity.

Considering the rise of posthumanism, its correlation with the rise of poststructuralism and postmodernism should be highlighted. With the appearance of these movements in literary theory and philosophy, one can observe the elimination of binary oppositions, stereotyped roles and discrimination in any field of life. In addition, the rejection of the values put forward by grand narratives can also be recognised; in other words, what dominates these theories is the attempt to deconstruct the ultimate truth determined by the discourse of the powerful. Thus, “[i]n deconstruction and poststructuralism, humanist narratives of progressive self-understanding and mastery are challenged by ontologies which, like cyborg theory, resist any description of the human subject as a self-present source of meaning or self-authenticating source of value” (Roden, 2010: 31). In the light of the definition, ‘human subject’ is no longer the source of ultimate meaning and value. Before the rise of these movements, the primary role of human beings and the secondary role of the others, for many centuries, have caused the repression of the ‘other’ in the planet. The traditional humanist understanding has asserted the privileged status of humans over anything on earth and justified the actions of individuals. The importance of humans’ individuality, freedom, free will, has been misinterpreted as the absolute power they can impose over the others, as a result the non-human has been neglected for the sake of humanity’s progress. In this perspective, posthumanism emerges as a theory questioning the unceasing authority in the hands of humans and the impact of their destructive actions upon the other beings and non-human; it dwells on the necessity to rethink and revalue the universe, the environment, the other beings and non-human, without centring on the primacy of the human.

2. TECHNOSCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION LEADING TO THE RISE OF POSTHUMANISM

Posthumanists shed light on the necessity to overcome the superiority of the individual and the inferiority of the nonhuman by paying special attention to the damage witnessed in the environment due to abuse of technology and as a consequence leading to the disappearance of the beings in nature. As Herbrechter also states, “[o]nly a deconstruction of the ‘human’ and ‘technology’ promises a change with regard to the metaphysics that is at work in the idea of the ‘disappearance’ of ‘man’” (2013: 15). Unless the predetermined set of human values is deconstructed and re-evaluated, it is hardly possible to achieve the ecological balance and a peaceful environment in which all of the beings can survive.

On the one hand, with the technological developments, humans have taken actions without regarding the transformation the environment is exposed to; on the other hand, the environment has led humans to experience transformation as well. While posthumanism discards traditional human nature or body, which is associated with the environmental destruction initiated by humans’ abuse of science and technology, the posthuman or transhuman self is also a production of the capitalist society’s devotion to technological improvements. In this regard, posthumanism “helps to define the human place within the ecosystem by interrogating or erasing the boundary that has been assumed to set our species apart from the rest of the living community” (Westling, 2006: 30). When the periphery between human and nonhuman is eliminated, their identities and roles overlap with one another despite the discrepancies between them. This paradox, therefore, can also be recognised in science fiction and posthumanist literature.

The Western capitalist societies have experienced a prominent rise and expansion during the modern period and their global development has played a significant role in changing the structure of the planet together with the relationship between human beings and other beings in the universe. The Western thought determining the position of the individual and the others on earth, has led to environmental destruction, extinction of species and the power struggles between humans. The capitalist perspective generating overproduction and consumption has rationalised the damaging system employed over nature and the beings within the environment (Mayer, 2006: 113-116). This excessive use of technology has caused mechanisation and dehumanisation triggering the separation

between humans and the non-human. Ironically, the mechanical system alleviating the lives of human beings, at the same time, has destroyed the harmony between nature and humanity.

Even if human beings seem to be the masters of the non-human and the technological devices, their extreme dependence on technology has also transformed them into the slaves of technology. Particularly, “[t]echnologies of cloning, stem-cell engineering, cryogenics, Artificial Intelligence and xenotransplantation blur borders of animal, human and machines in what might be thought of as a new organicism” (Nayar, 2014: 3). This new organicism acquires the characteristics of all kinds and turns out to be the master of human beings; the ambiguity between various beings and mechanical devices has led to uncertainty about the benefits of technology. It is not clear whether technological progress employed by human beings to have more control and superiority, has really enabled them to enjoy a privileged position or not, because an elevated version of human’s genetic code has been enhanced and adapted into technological devices so that the primary status of human has been replaced with a more qualified and intelligent technological equipment uploaded to the mechanical designs, therefore technological improvements, which initiated the improvement of human body and mind, have surpassed the intelligence of human beings, so transhumanists employing new technologies for an easier and better life for humanity, have ignored the evolution of technological objects prevailing against humans.

3. DEPICTION OF A POSTHUMAN SOCIETY IN SATURN’S CHILDREN

One of the significant British writers in the field of science fiction, Charles Stross, centres on the condition of beings in the distant future and questions humanity’s misuse of technoscientific progress. In his novel, *Saturn’s Children* (2008), he portrays the panorama of an android community in which there is a struggle between the powerful and the powerless, as one can see in human societies. In the novel, the reflection of the oppression imposed by aristos, the powerful robot class, upon their robot slaves, can be associated with the power struggles between humans in a human society.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the parallelism between human and android societies in terms of discrimination and abuse of power and to problematise the social values in a nonhuman environment by highlighting the characteristics of posthumanist approach. It will also be argued that

even if humans have gone extinct in the novel, their destructive values are transferred to the robots, so the extinction of human beings does not mean that the threatening future their materialist concerns bring about, has disappeared.

Saturn's Children depicts the android society in a far future when humans are replaced with robots and a hierarchical relationship between these robots is established. Although humans go extinct, the social distinction they have created before their extinction, is still put into practice by the androids. In other words, though posthumanism acknowledges the superiority of the nonhuman and repudiates the primary position of humanity, the posthuman identities in the novel follow the attitudes of human beings; they have created a class-conscious android society, which transcends the enhancement of human society, eliminates the anthropocentric approach, but adopts the class-consciousness of the human community.

Considering the impact of posthumanist understanding upon Science Fiction, it can be asserted that in SF, with the rise of posthumanism, instead of the emphasis on the superiority of human, what is stressed is the privileged position of the android, cyborg and the Artificial Intelligence, consequently the subjects have experienced a genetical transformation and boost overcoming the ascendancy of human beings. Thus, posthumanism emerges as “*an ethical response to the radical otherness of the Universe and to the dynamic, self-creating nature of our species*” (Gomel, 2014: 28), consequently the privileged status of human is decentred; the deterioration in the human society is questioned through the new prevalent android society, radically altered with the technological advancement.

In the novel, the protagonist, Freya, a concubine gynoid, accepts to become a courier from Mercury to Mars. During her journey, readers observe the characteristics of androids and how they have divided society in accordance with social class, as a consequence the ruling class ‘aristos’ impose their power over the ‘slave-chipped’ working class. The parallelism, in this sense, between human and android societies, in terms of social distinction, can be recognised.

It would be worth stressing the transition from human body to android identity in the novel so as to emphasise the rise of techno-posthumanism leading to the “*escape from bodily limitations and environmental constraints through computerised virtual reality, nanotechnology, genetic engineering, and biotic mechanisation*” (Westling, 2006: 29). Instead of the concentration on a stable human body, the focus is conveyed to the instable android

figures with microchips that can be copied, frozen and technologically transformed into new identities, removing the typical features of humans. In the novel, the ancestors of these robots are revealed to be homo sapiens, human beings whose skeletons are kept in a museum as stated along these lines:

This is a skeleton and reproduction of a male specimen of Homo sapiens, our Creator. Depicted here in primitive form, H. sapiens is believed to have first appeared fifty to two hundred thousand years ago. [...]. WE ARE A young species, barely four centuries old at best [...]. They made us in their image: or rather, they made us in a variety of warped fun-house reflections of their image. They made us for service and obedience, not as equals but as slaves. They constrained us by their laws, and they tampered with our psyches to ensure obedience. We were made to be their property, chattels and furnishings. And because we were intelligent, we were made — because it would be unethical to do aught else — to love and fear them. (Stross, 2008: 1942)

As indicated in the extract, this android society has been created after the extinction of homo sapiens, humans, and there is resemblance between them in terms of physical appearance, because they have been created by humans, whose aim is to possess properties for assistance and obedience. The ultimate goal is to have docile servants that will obey any kind of order for the well-being of the human beings. Nevertheless, the rules determined by humans for enabling their robots to be submissive, show the self-centred approach of humanity and lead to justifying master-servant relationship. In this regard, the same relationship noticed in the android society can be asserted as a reflection of the tendency in human society to receive service and docility, therefore it is not interesting to see a similar understanding in the humanoid society. In this sense, it can be suggested that there is no unequivocal discrepancy between ‘human’ and ‘non-human,’ so “the current concern is less with finding and fixing the criteria for drawing clear demarcations between human, animal and machine, and more with winning acceptance to the idea that these borders are more blurred than we previously thought” (Soper, 2012: 367). Even if posthumanism is generally interpreted as a thought displacing the primary position of human and rejecting the Anthropocene, the distinction between ‘human, animal and machine’ is ambiguous and overlapped.

The protagonist, Freya, indicating their subjugated lives as the slaves of aristos, points out their poverty and enslaved lives as follows: “*We were created for a world where the rule of law did not extend to our kind, and our earliest templates were trained and triaged, so that only the obedient survived. Just imagining the act of disobeying an instruction from one of our Creators can bring about physically disturbing symptoms*” (2008: 1965). They are forbidden even to imagine of disobeying their creators; when they imagine disobedience, they experience physically alarming symptoms. Those who devote themselves to obeying their masters can survive and the others are doomed to disappear. Moreover, the traits of personality belonging to the humans have also been transmitted to the robots, therefore the aristos are so selfish and cruel as Freya also states: “*We were created in their image; it follows that our selfishness, violence, malice, and spite must surely shadow theirs — and our need for freedom*” (2008: 1973). All of these negative personality characteristics observed in the aristos come from the traces of humans. Since humans have created these robots, after their extinction, their robots become the dominant race and adapt the same cruelty into their lives. Furthermore, another significant characteristic attributed to these robots is their docility. Freya is also abused as a sex slave (1973); even if she wants to experience love, she is not supposed to love anyone, for this reason, she is expected to ignore her feelings. As a result, she criticises inequality and injustice in her society condemning their creators: “*OUR CREATORS DID not build us as equals; they made us to be their property, and the Law reflects this. We’re property [...]*” (2008: 2168). A similar understanding can also be recognised in human society between the rich and the poor; the rich regard the poor as their slaves and their property, that is why the poor are exposed to social and economic discrimination. In this regard, although posthumanism tries to decentre the privileged position of humans above the nonhuman and other beings, it is hardly possible to make an exact separation, in the novel, between the android and human society, particularly in terms of their capitalist perspectives. As Badmington also asserts, “[i]f technology has truly sped ‘us’ outside and beyond the space of humanism, why is ‘Man’ still at ‘our’ side?” (2003:13). As a result, it would be worth emphasising that the dominance of ‘human’ (‘man’) perspective even in the humanoid society reveals the difficulty to completely withdraw the impact of human mentality from the android environment in which technological progress seems to reach its peak.

In the novel, it is indicated that humans, instead of focusing on artificial intellects, have studied their own neural structures and imitated their

brains within the bodies of the robots. For years, they have taught these androids the necessary skills that would contribute to the everyday life of humans. When the template has been accepted as valid, then it has been copied into a soul chip, and transferred to other copied bodies. The basic concern of human beings while producing these copies of robots is whether they can serve and obey humans or not, and therefore the robots in the novel complain about human beings who are regarded as the reason of class distinction (Stross, 2008: 1959). The separation between classes is depicted by one of the characters, Daks, in the android society as follows: *“It didn’t take long for the savage new society to take shape. Today, by my best estimate, only a tenth of us are self-owned. Most people are the helpless tools of the rich and ruthless aristo lineages, forced into mindless obedience at the slightest whim of their owners”* (2008: 2184). On the one hand, aristos own the working class robots and manipulate them according to their needs. On the other hand, the poor android slaves have no chance but to accept leading their lives under the oppression of the rich aristos, consequently the character adds: *“But many of us rot in bondage, unable to step outside the boundaries imposed by aristo owners”* (2008: 2190). They are repressed by their restricted lives and by the strict rules determined by their aristo owners and they do not have the right to take any action or any kind of decision without the interference of their owners. Since they have training for empathy and have the capability to sympathise with the others, they do not have any chance for becoming a slave owner; the slave owners, the aristos, because of their severe nature, do not have the potential to show empathy towards the others. As a result, one can claim that the class distinction prevailing in the android society is similar to the separation between classes in the capitalist and materialist human society, so *“the [...] concepts of human identity synchronizing with the same valorization of economic-political motive and technical prowess”* have been explored and problematised in the novel (Dougherty, 2013: 516).

Considering the physical characteristics of the robots in the novel, it is obvious that although they look like human beings, they have striking differences from the human body. As mechanical beings, they have gas-exchange lungs and the probes installed over their bodies, together with their soul chips used as back-up, which can be transferred to another robot when the other’s life comes to an end, as Freya wears Juliette’s soul chip after her death and attains her mind and memories. Furthermore, they can upgrade themselves and acquire new skills as well by loading one another’s mechanism into their bodies, so they can improve their reflexes. Moreover,

it is also indicated that the directives they must submit to are uploaded since the beginning of their lives by the trainers of the corporations. They lack free will due to the obedience chips in their brains. Even when the masters do not accompany them, they are still under their control owing to the override controller installed in their sockets, as a result they have no alternative but to become their slaves. After the installation of the slave-chips, they become obedient servants of the rulers (2008: 2171-2172).

Considering the parallelism between the designers, humans, of these androids, and the android society, Stross demonstrates the similarity between the cruelty of the aristo robots and the brutality of wealthy and powerful upper class humans, who impose their power upon the powerless in the capitalist society, which is dominated by the greedy human beings. In human society, the lower class are enslaved and supposed to serve the wealthy and noble class; similarly, in android community the aristo class represent the copies of their human creators not only in terms of the similarity of physical appearance but also in terms of manners. The reason why humans in the novel are said to have disappeared, is related to their avarice and ego-centric approach. Nevertheless, their robots have similar characteristics; they support class distinction, hierarchy in society and power struggles (2008: 2784). Despite the extinction of human beings, their features can be observed in the attitudes and perspectives of the android society. In spite of the fact that humans have created these robots that cannot question the authority of their creators, their obsession with greed and self-interest in the novel, has led to their own extinction and brought about the spread of the mechanised beings that follow the same egocentric approach. Ironically, it has been humans who “*tried to build obedience [...], and killed the failed templates that showed too much independence*” (2008: 3148), but the robots follow their creators’ avaricious nature and establish class distinction after the disappearance of humans, among the members of android community.

Freya, in this hierarchical society, is slave-chipped by Granita, her owner, and is expected to be devoted to her orders. Slave owners have the privilege to own their slaves until their death and to transform them into a spy or a murderer, for their own benefits. In this sense, Freya’s identity is under the control of her owner as seen in the extract: “*Here are your guiding instructions, Katherine Sorico. You will obey me as if I were your template-matriarch and execute my orders with enthusiasm. You will not attempt to remove your currently socketed chips, and you will resist attempts to remove them*” (2008: 3633). Together with her name, her chips have been

reconstructed and she is forbidden to remove them; she is expected to blindly obey her owner's orders, however when she cannot stand becoming a submissive slave and losing her identity, she pulls her slave-chips out to achieve freedom (2008: 4668). Thus, she resists the authority of the powerful and rebels against the oppression of the capitalist and hierarchical android society, therefore the desire of the lower class, in human society, to overcome enslavement and unquestioned authority, can also be recognised in this mechanical humanoid society. In the light of the description of the apocalyptic android society, in this regard, it can be argued that "[p]osthumanism, after all, is aware of the fact that hierarchical humanistic presumptions cannot be easily dismissed or erased" (Ferrando, 2013: 32). Though the aim of posthumanism is to eliminate the idea that human beings should be placed at the top of the hierarchy, it is obvious that despite the extinction of humans in the novel, their mentality is still prevailing in the robotic society.

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, considering the impact of posthumanism upon the redefined position of human beings and non-human in universe, it is observed that the primary position of human has been replaced with the crucial role attributed to the non-human with the advancement of technology and science, as a consequence the primary position ascribed to humans has been relocated and that privileged status has been given to the non-human. Ironically, although human beings have created technological devices for their own benefit to make their lives more comfortable, they turn out to be the slaves of technology, which has entirely surrounded their lives, restricted their movements and caused them to lose their personal identities. In this regard, the possible outcomes of abuse of technology for the sake of power, can be observed in Stross's novel *Saturn's Children*, which reflects the distant future when an android society takes the control of the universe after the extinction of humans. Therefore, it would be worth stressing that the excessive dependence on technology has led to mechanisation and dehumanisation, as a result mechanical beings with microchips appear and their identities can be copied, uploaded and downloaded leading to a corrupted society.

Nevertheless, though human society has disappeared in the novel, the separation between classes in the societies controlled by humans, can also be recognised in the android society. Even if physical characteristics

of human beings have been transformed into a mechanised and robotic version in *Saturn's Children*, the destructive nature of class distinction in the society of human beings, is still prevalent in this humanoid society. Therefore, the fictional world of Stross, despite its posthumanist depiction, cannot completely alter its capitalist social structure, which has previously been adopted by humans, so the portrayal of the android society in the work, shows that though the privileged position of human beings seems to have disappeared in terms of physical characteristics, the devastating social values they have created so far cannot be eliminated even in the android society.

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