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The Apocalyptic Machine: An Appraisal of the Dependence of Humans on Machine in E. M. Forster's Short Story "The Machine Stops"

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Abstract

The evolution of the human mind across centuries shapes the vision and function of the world, which leads one to centralise humans more than other beings and elements. Posthumanism challenges this traditional notion, instead of placing the human as subject enacting force, it provides equal place to humans, non-humans and the environment. It explores the interconnectedness of humans, machines, objects and the natural world. In this digital era, in which, one leads a secondary life in the world by entrusting one's own in the hands of a machine. Being unaware of the technological advancement which poses a great threat to the existence of humans and other entities, people lead their lives recklessly. This paper aims to analyse E.M. Forster's "The Machine Stops," a dystopian science short story so as to bring out the impact of the techno driven world on humanity and the consequences of neglecting the natural world by humankind. E. M. Forster is a British novelist, essayist and literary critic. He has voiced for various social causes throughout his life in his writing. He has received many honours and his writing reflects a deep understanding of the human condition. "The Machine Stops" is set in future where humans lose the ability to live on the surface of the earth because of prioritising living under the dependence on the giant machine. The character, Vashti, gets a call from her son Kuno and he asks her to visit him in person. Vashti prioritises and harmonises life with machines in the isolation room and it satisfies all her needs. On the contrary, Kuno rebels against the idea of living in dependence on a machine. The machine world is guided by two rules. First, the individuals are no longer allowed to use the respirators to visit the Earth. Second, there is a kind of religion called Mechanism in which people must worship the Machine. They enjoy a comfortable life with the machines. After sometime, the problem begins when the machine has started to collapse and it brings threat to humans who have neglected the natural world. People start to lose their breath and they are unable to survive without the machine. E. M. Forster makes the reader to realise the impact of dependence on machines by people and the importance of their relationship to the natural world.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Technology, Isolation, Dependence, Control, Collapse

Disconnection, Nature, and Death

Humans have transformed their vision about the earth and function of the environment to meet their needs which places humans at the centre of everything. Posthumanism challenges this anthropocentric view, instead of prioritising the human as subject enacting force, it provides equal place for humans, non-humans and the environment. It emphasises the interconnectedness of humans, machines, matters and the natural world. It shapes the understanding of human relationship with technology and the environment. In this digital era, people are leading a secondary life in the world by entrusting one's own in the hands of a machine. Advanced technology brings comfort and it also creates an imbalance, isolation and loss of connection with the natural world. Unaware of the fact that the heavy dependence on technology poses a great threat to the existence of humans and other entities in their lives, people continue to lead their life carelessly. This paper aims to analyse E.M. Forster's "The Machine Stops," a dystopian science short story so as to bring out the impact of the technologically driven world on humanity and the consequences of neglecting the natural world by humankind.

E. M. Forster is a British novelist, essayist and literary critic. He is respected for his insightful portrayal of human relationships, social issues and his contribution to English literature. He has received many honours and his writing reflects a deep understanding of the human condition, both in the present and the future. E.M. Forster's "The Machine Stops" is a dystopian science fiction which explores the theme of the dangers of technological advancement and humanity's over-reliance on it. "The Fantasy Book Review" says, "The Machine Stops' holds more horror than any number of gothic ghost stories. Everybody should read it, and consider how far we may go ourselves down the road of technological 'advancement' and forget what it truly means to be alive" (Wikipedia, "The Machine Stops"). This story is set in future where humans lose the ability to live on the surface of the earth as a result of prioritising comfort over dependence on machines.

E.M. Forster's "The Machine Stops" takes place in future where people live underground, relying on the machine for all needs. Each person has a separate hexagonal-shaped room. They use virtual face-to-face communication for socialising and rarely visit others through the airship, which travels through the surface of the earth. E.M. Forster writes about their room;

It is lighted neither by window nor by lamp, yet it is filled with a soft radiance. There are no apertures for ventilation, yet the air is fresh. There are no musical instruments, and yet, at the moment that my meditation opens, this room is throbbing with melodious sounds. An armchair is in the centre, by its side a reading-desk — that is all the furniture. And in the armchair there sits a swaddled lump of flesh. (1)

The room is equipped with electric lighting, without any sign of natural light or a window. An air filtration system changes the air in the room. The room only contains an electric-powered armchair and desk as the furniture. And the desk comes with modern equipment technology that serves food, bath, and plays music and other needs. People are instructed to press the buttons to operate these devices and there is also a Mending Apparatus to fix the issues in the machine. Each individual has the book of Machines, which guides people about the function of each button inside and outside of the room. People look pale in the humidity of the room. Vashti is the mother of Kuno and Lecturer in the machine world. She is always busy with her lecture and prefers being alone. She teaches about the sea, music and other places in online classes. Unfortunately, they can only learn theories and there would be no room for individual ideas. She only accepts and prefers the call when it is necessary. This modern technological advancement neglects human interaction in person and tasks. People are willing to cherish and embrace this development, which gives them no work but isolation. Kuno and her mother reside far apart. Kuno asks her mother to visit him. Her mother asks why he prefers to visit in person. She says that she hates to travel on the surface of the earth and it is only dirt and mud on the earth, nothing worth.

She fears touching other people on the airship and also the sunlight and air on the earth. She feels that it is sensitive to her skin. Suddenly, the call breaks between Vashti and Kuno. Vashti calls back and says that she is unwell to travel. The machine immediately provides the prescribed medicine, which is programmed into it. Kuno rebels against dependence on machines and prefers a genuine natural connection. Kuno criticises her mother for worshipping the machine and finding great comfort in isolation. Kuno disagrees with the entire humanity for blindly praising the machine as a God and follows the rules given by it. The machine is created by men, unlike a natural source that is existing for many years. He says, when he travels through an airship, he gets to see the sky, which gives him curiosity and calmness. And the presence of her mother in his home can make him see and hear her real. Kuno cuts the call by saying that he could never call her until she visits him. Vashti decides to visit her son and starts her travel on the airship. The machine modifies the place name on the Earth. Vashti feels anxious to interact with people in the airship. The attendant says that they are flying over the Himalayas and seeks pardon for using un-mechanical names. Vashti thanks the machines and the advanced technology for having made them flying all over the world. Vashti recalls how the parental duties are neglected in their world. After Kuno's birth, she has sent him to the public nurseries. She feels comfort and does not have the responsibility of maternity because of the machine. Vashti feels that there is no sign of living on the surface for them in the world of machine. They are comfortably adjusted to the atmosphere of the room. E. M. Forster shows how over-reliance on machines makes humanity lonely and dependent of machines. On the other hand, how they miss the abundance of the natural world which provides everything to humans.

After reaching Kuno's room, Vashti scolds his son for his request and she points to her terrible experience on the airship. Kuno says to her mother that he is threatened by the machine for homelessness, which implies death. The machine instructs humans to never expose themselves to the sun and the air of the earth. Kuno says that he has visited the earth without an Egression permit and returns to the room but, on his way, the machine detects his entry. Kuno's words shock Vashti. She puzzles about how people could find a way without machines. Kuno feels that the earth is lively and calm. He criticises how the machine examines humans from birth and tells what they are good for. He questions how some develop athletic skills without climbing trees, swimming in the river and running in the meadows and hills. He says that he likes to find the meaning of the words "far" and "near" through his feet and not to the place where the airship taken him. He says that she passes through the Himalayas in her travel without any feeling of pleasure. For Kuno, it reminds the productive life of ancestors under the hills. He questions the purpose of living when one cannot sense the use of their own hands, feet or mind. Kuno claims that the committee refuses his request to become a father. It cites that the machine analysis has shown that he does not have strong genes to produce offspring. Vashti is upset with her son and he wants to meet her to listen to his lecture on civilisation. Kuno admits that he has managed to walk on the earth with the respirator given to them. Vashti points out that one must understand that without a machine, one does not survive the life. She tells him to thank the machine for its mercy towards him. Kuno claims that he wants the mercy of God for what the people have done to the environment and for themselves. The conversation between Kuno and her mother highlights the tension between the natural instinct and the controlling nature of machines.

When Vashti returns home, the system has added some rules and restrictions to people. Kuno's visit to the earth creates these changes. The machine prohibits unnecessary moving, like Vashti's visit to his son. People are restricted from using the respirators which help them breathe in the earth's atmosphere. People who worship machines in private now tend to form a religion and they glorify machine as their God. People who consider it as the object are called the "Undenominational

Mechanism" (20). Vashti's life is peaceful until he gets the call from his son. Vashti laughs at her son claiming that the machine could never go down because it fixes its issues. Soon, Vashti faces a problem with the machine in the room; there is a foul smell in the air, food and the bathing system. Vashti hears that the death rate is increasing in the machine world. When the full system starts to collapse, the machine abandons the humans by pushing them into the surface of the earth. Vashti sees:

They were dying by hundreds out in the dark. She burst into tears. Tears answered her. They wept for humanity, those two, not for themselves. They could not bear that this should be the end. Ere silence was completed their hearts were opened, and they knew what had been important on the earth...glozing it over with talk of evolution, until the body was white pap, the home of ideas as colourless. (25)

Vashti could not tolerate the horrific situation. The atmosphere and humidity on the earth are gradually killing people. All the theories and inventions become meaningless to them. Vashti and her son get to meet each other. Kuno is happy that he can see her mother in his last breath. They know that this would be the ending. E.M. Forster ends the story with Kuno saying that humanity's dependence on the machine leads to neglect of natural connection and environment and it creates the downfall for them. E.M. Forster depicts the horrific future of humanity due to their over-reliance on machines. He highlights the idea of posthumanism how the machines have played a prominent role in human life and points out the loss of connection with nature which leads to the downfall of humanity.

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