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A robot's quest for 'humanness' in Isaac Asimov's *The Bicentennial Man*

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Abstract

The advent of Information Technology in recent times has brought humanity to a point where human and machine interaction has reached certain complex dilemmas. Amidst humanity's quest for immortality, the machines are being programmed with different human-like capacities and different kinds of robots and drones are being designed and deployed for various purposes by humans. The possibilities of technological innovations turning into boomerangs have long been pestering human imagination. Every time science tries to assure humanity of safety in a convincing manner. Science fiction has long been addressing issues concerned with the then unknown frontiers of man and machine relations. Isaac Asimov's *The Bicentennial Man* depicts a robot's journey from a machine to a man; the development of human attributes and capacities and its quest for its recognition as a man by humans. This paper explores, by means of analysis and discussion, the meaning of humanness and human attributes as they are envisaged by a robot. It also tries to locate the roots of the robot's desire to become a human being. Furthermore, it also enquires about the implications of the value of 'humanness' as it is projected in the novelette.

Keywords: humanness, consciousness, robot, quest, Information Technology (IT)

Introduction:

The advent of Information Technology in recent times and especially artificial intelligence has brought humanity to a point where human and machine interaction has reached certain complex dilemmas. Amidst humanity's quest for immortality, the machines are being programmed with different human-like capacities and different kinds of robots and drones are being designed and deployed for various purposes by humans. The possibilities of technological innovations turning into boomerangs have long been pestering human imagination and every time science tries to assure humanity of safety in a convincing manner.

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Science fiction has long been addressing issues concerned with the then unknown frontiers of man and machine relations.

> Science fiction is the bridge between what we envision for the far future and what we see in practice today. By showing us the possible dream worlds or living hells, such works of art touch upon the most relevant moral, ethical, social or political issues linked to technological progress. (The Medical Futurist, n.p.)

Isaac Asimov was one of the bright scientific minds of 20th century who produced prolific writing in the genre of science fiction. His robot series is noteworthy for his foresight. He envisages unforeseen situations and tries to answer very complex questions in his characteristic style. Isaac Asimov's *The Bicentennial Man* (1976), which won Hugo and Nebula awards for the best novelette of the year, depicts a robot's journey from a machine to a man; the development of human attributes and capacities and its quest for its recognition as a man by humans. What distinguishes the novelette from the earlier science fiction is that Asimov describes a practical world instead of describing a dystopia or a utopia. The earlier science fiction described largely dystopias which were discouraging and created a kind of fear in the minds of human beings; rather they prejudiced human minds against intelligent machines. According to Gregersen, *The Bicentennial Man* is about a robot's quest to become human is one of Asimov's most beloved short stories (n.p.).

Defining humanness:

Humanness is an elusive phenomenon because the more you try to limit its sense or meaning it begins to transcend the limits. Attempts to define humanness have been made from philosophical, ontological and psychological vantage points but "this is a notion about which consensus is rarely found" (Salles 4). Some scholars tried to establish that human beings are distinguished from animals by their creative abilities and communal or social living: "Humanness is derived from an elevated moral code and this is reflected in our arts, particularly literature … However, expression of the arts is only achievable by the individual being part of a greater whole: the human community … wherein humanness is best realised through the act of living in harmony (Buckridge 427).

Wilson and Haslam conclude their empirical study about the humanness of behaviors or the behavioral similarities and distinctions between humans, animals, and machines as given below:

> …people distinguish between two distinct senses of humanness: a species-typical sense (HN) and a species-unique sense (HU). Whereas HN is an innate sense of humanness that defines the boundary between humans and machines but is partly shared with animals, HU is a sense of humanness that defines the boundary between humans and animals but may be a locus of similarities with robots and machines. These senses of humanness both affirm and challenge traditional conceptions of

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humanness and contain within them the threat (or promise) of further eroding the boundaries of humanity. (381)

However, the above conclusions are about how humans perceive humanness, so they are far from stating the ontological nature of humanness objectively. So humans are in the process of understanding and defining humanness for themselves. They tend to define themselves against either animals or machines. Humanness can also be graded broadly as non-human, less human, more human and human without fully conceiving the notion of humanness. Further, it can be argued that human is a cultural and natural construct which is built in evolutionary manner as a child grows into an adult by its interaction with both cultural and natural environment; because, most of the traits that are used to distinguish humans from animals and machines, are acquired by the humans' interaction with nature and culture. Probably, the distinctive nature of human intelligence determines our sense of being human. Human consciousness is also believed to distinguish humans from non-humans. One trait that definitely distinguishes humans from machines is the human ability to die.

The question of what makes humans human is a complex and multifaceted one, with many different answers depending on the perspective of the person answering it. It can be argued that humans are defined by their unique biological traits such as eating food and excreting, giving birth to young ones. Humans have developed languages, evolved cultures, and innovative technologies. These characteristics have helped us to become the dominant species on the planet earth.

Humans possess complex emotional and cognitive abilities which differentiate them from others. The ability to experience a wide range of emotions, including joy, sadness, anger, and love, and the ability to use language to communicate these feelings with others makes humans really very different. Apart from that, humans possess a high level of cognitive functioning, allowing them to reason, plan, create and solve complex problems.

Another defining characteristic of humans is our ability to create and maintain complex cultures and social structures. Humans have developed elaborate belief systems, customs, and traditions that shape our interactions with each other and with the world around us. They also have capacity for self-reflection and self-awareness which is not found in robots. Humans have the ability to contemplate our own existence, reflect on our experiences, and ask questions about the nature of the universe and their place in it. But most of all what makes humans, humans is the ability to age and die.

The robot Andrew's quest for humanness:

Isaac Asimov in his *The Bicentennial Man* explores a robot's journey from 'a machine' to 'a man'. The robot Andrew gradually develops human attributes and capacities and seeks recognition as a man. He learns a lot form books from library. He learns to create artistic objects and has his own bank account. He gradually understands human privileges. He also develops the desire for freedom.

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Little Miss emphasizes why Andrew deserves his freedom and compares a robot with a human being:

> "Dad, you don't know him. He's read everything in the library. I don't know what he feels inside, but I don't know what you feel inside either. When you talk to him you'll find he reacts to the various abstractions as you and I do, and what else counts? If someone else's reactions are like your own, they're human. What more can you ask for?" (BM 8).

Andrew's life like reactions to abstract things and human inability to really understand unspoken states of mind likens him to humans. Even his voice has acquired humanlike voice qualities which really surprises the people in the court where the decision on his freedom is to be taken. "It was the first time Andrew had spoken in court, and the judge seemed astonished for a moment at the human timbre of his voice" (BM 9). He even develops self respect and starts wearing clothes for he "…feel*s* bare without clothes. I feel different, George," (BM 12). The court considers the case with sympathy and finally grants him freedom. In its decision the Court remarks: "There is no right to deny freedom to any object with a mind advanced enough to grasp the concept and desire the state." (BM 10). He even wants to write a book: a history of robots (BM 17).

Most striking is Andrew's ability to learn. He learns from books and understands his limitations related to understanding human language (BM 13). Mansky is the robopsychologist at the corporation who consistently asks back Anderw. Gerard Martin says, "I am certain Mansky put an end to generalized cognitive pathways as soon as he had a good look at you. He didn't like the unpredictability of a free-thinking robot" (BM 7). Andrew wants a meeting with the company which manufactured him and it is reluctant. Andrew wants help from Paul suggesting that he lie to the company so that the meeting can be arranged. Pual says, "Ah, you can't lie, but you can urge me to tell a lie, is that it? You're getting more human all the time, Andrew." (BM 21).

Andrew could feel but lacked the emotional intelligence that could help him understand SGMartin's reaction when he leaves him "It takes a human soul to understand the sad power of love denied, and so Andrew could not truly understand the pain that Sir felt when Andrew left him. Nor could he understand how humans feel compelled to separate from the ones they love when those loved ones deny them in some important way" (BM 10). Andrew's is unable to react properly when sir GM is dying and says that he is happy that Andrew in free: "Andrew did not know what to say. He had never been at the side of someone dying before, but he knew it was the human way of ceasing to function. It was an involuntary and irreversible dismantling, and Andrew did not know what to say that might be appropriate. He could only remain standing, absolutely silent, absolutely motionless" (BM 11).

Andrew tries to buy his freedom from Sir Gerard Martin arguing that ""Freedom is without price, Sir," …. "Even the chance of freedom is worth the money." He argues in the

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court, "Perhaps no more than I do now, Your Honor, but with greater joy. It has been said in this courtroom that only a human being can be free. It seems to me that only someone who wishes for freedom can be free. I wish for freedom." (BM 10). Little Miss advocates a bill to be passed by legislature about robots rights (18). Her son George also argues in favour of robots:

> "Is this just? Would we treat an animal so? Even an inanimate object which had given us good service has a claim on our consideration. And a robot is not insensitive; it is not an animal. It can think well enough so that it can talk to us, reason with us, joke with us. Can we treat them as friends; can we work together with them, and not give them some of the fruits of that friendship, some of the benefits of co working? (BM 19)

Andrew not only develops learning and thinking abilities but also make his body organic by designing his organs for using hydrocarbons as source of energy. Andrew even undergoes a surgical procedure that makes him fully human, with all the physical frailties and mortality that come with it. He dies peacefully, surrounded by his loved ones, content in the knowledge that he had achieved his goal of becoming human. Despite his best efforts, Andrew is still considered a robot by society, and he feels like an outsider. However, he never gives up on his dream of becoming human. Finally, Andrew is granted the status of human after successfully arguing his case in court.

Conclusion:

Asimov's story raises thought-provoking questions about what it means to be human. Andrew's journey challenges the idea that humanity is defined by physical characteristics alone. Instead, it suggests that humanity is a state of mind, one that involves emotion, creativity, and empathy. The roots of Andrew's quest of humanness lie in the notion of freedom. He learns to value freedom and he realized that if he wants to be free then he must become human or at the least he must be legally recognised as a human. Recent advances in Artificial Intelligence have also made revisiting these questions an imperative. However Clark warns humanity of the unenvisaged dangers of robot becoming humans, "Technoscientific ambitions for perfecting human-like machines, by advancing state-of-the-art neuromorphic architectures and cognitive computing, may end in ironic regret without pondering the humanness of fallible artificial non-normative personalities" (n.p.).

Asimov's *The Bicentennial Man* is a poignant exploration of what it means to be human. Andrew's quest for humanness is a reflection of our own desire to understand ourselves and our place in the world. The story also raises questions about the nature of consciousness and the possibility of artificial intelligence evolving beyond its programming. Overall, the novella is a powerful meditation on the nature of humanity and the human condition.

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