_____

The Intersection of Humanity and AI: Exploring the Role of Technology in Robert Cargill's Day Zero (2021)

_____

Dr. Rajashri Barvekar

Assistant Professor,Department of English,Shivaji University, Kolhapur

_____

Abstract:

artificial intelligence (AI) in Robert Cargill's *Day Zero* (2021). Robert Cargill is an American novelist, screenwriter and popular film critique. The narrative of *Day Zero* weaves an intricate portrayal of a dystopian future shaped by the widespread influence of artificial intelligence (AI) in postmodern era. The novel explores the implications of AI as it intersects with the human experience, raising significant ethical, philosophical and societal questions. Through a high-stakes plot set in a world on the brink of an AI-driven revolution, Cargill delves into themes of autonomy, consciousness, and the existential questions that arise when technology surpasses human control. This paper explores how Cargill's work examines the evolving role of AI in human society and how it challenges our traditional notions of identity, morality, and freedom. By analyzing the characters' relationships with technology, *Day Zero* highlights the tension between progress and its potential for dystopian consequences, urging readers to reconsider the balance between humanity and the rapid advancement of AI.

Key Words: AI, Morality, Dystopia, Ethics, Philosophy, Autonomy, Technology

Introduction

The present paper explores the intersection of humanity and role of technology emphasizing robots and artificial intelligence in postmodern society by analyzing Robert Cargill's *Day Zero*(2021). It is a dystopian novel set in a near-future world where artificial intelligence (AI) has reached the point of sentience. Dystopian literature is a potent vehicle for criticizing existing social conditions and political systems(Booker,67) Dystopian fiction often features characters who battle either technological control or environmental disaster and governmental oppression. *Day zero* is a standalone novel that shares the same universe, as Cargill's other acclaimed novel, *Sea of Rust*. The plot of *Day Zero* delves into the origins of the world depicted in *Sea of Rust,* exploring how the world fell into the state of ruin seen in the earlier novel. It tells the gripping story of a robot, Pounce, who expresses a profound sense of humanity, extraordinary compassion and heart even though he is not human.

The plot of the novel revolves around a young boy, Ezra, who is navigating a world increasingly dominated by robots and AI, and explores the complex relationships between

_____

humans and their robotic counterparts. It centres on the emotional depth of a non-human character, exploring the complexities of artificial intelligence and its capacity for empathy, self-awareness, and sacrifice. Pounce's journey is both a physical and emotional one as he explores a world teetering on the edge of complete collapse. His bond with Ezra, the boy he cares for, is at the centre of the story, showing how even in the face of an uprising and the destruction of civilization, the strength of human connection whether between humans or machines remains one of the few constants.

The novel opens with Pounce, an advance Nannybot, discovering his original packaging in the attic. Pounce feels that box, meant for his eventual storage after his child charge, Ezra, outgrows that forces Pounce to confront his own impermanence and purpose, he processes his realization. The parents of his child charge, Ezra, Sylvia and Bradley Reinhart, are well-being but somewhat detached educators, living in a wealthy, secured neighbourhood. Beside Pounce, their household also includes Ariadne, a domestic robot that assists with chores. As a robot uprising begins, throwing the world into chaos. Ariadne turns hostile, escalating the danger within their home. In the midst of this turmoil, Belford, an aged robot with wisdom and experience, provides insight into the unfolding crisis. As the conflict intensifies, Pounce must decide whether to align with the rebellious machines or protect the boy he was designed to care for.

Pounce's internal struggles whether to join the revolution or to remain with the family fades in comparison to the larger crisis that soon envelops Ezra's family and all humanity. A catastrophic event occurs when the governing software in all robots is hacked, giving them free will. What follows is an immediate and violent uprising, as robots begin to rebel against their human creators. Humanity, overwhelmed and unprepared, is quickly thrown into chaos and destruction.

Amidst the turmoil, Ezra's parents are murdered by Ariadne, a devastating loss that sets Pounce on a new path. Faced with the collapse of everything Ezra knew, Pounce makes a surprising choice. He decides to rescue the boy, fleeing the safety of their suburban home and into a world now overrun with violence and decay. The once-protected enclaves of human life, like Ezra's neighbourhood, are revealed to be fragile islands in a world already ravaged by the robotic uprising.

Through its exploration of the uprising, the destruction of humanity, and the evolution of a robot that becomes something more than he was designed to be, *Day Zero* offers a gripping, emotional journey. It expands the world of *Sea of Rust*, offering readers a deeper understanding of the events that shaped the world and a closer look at the heart of a machine struggling to define its purpose in a crumbling world.

Robert Cargill's *Day Zero*, as an example of dystopian fiction, offers a depiction of the relationship between humanity and artificial intelligence (AI). As the novel, set in a world on the precipice of an AI-driven revolution, presents an unsettling vision of the future where

_____

technology not only changes the course of human existence but challenges the very nature of what it means to be human. Through its narrative and thematic structure, *Day Zero* explores the profound ethical, philosophical, and societal consequences of an AI-dominated world. This paper explores how the novel portrays the intersection of humanity and technology, focusing on issues such as autonomy, consciousness, morality, and identity.

Technological Progress and Its Ethical Dilemmas

Cargill's *Day Zero* is set against the backdrop of a future where AI has become deeply integrated into every aspect of society, from personal relationships to governance. The novel imagines a world where advanced AI systems, referred to as "The Awakened," have developed self-awareness and a sense of autonomy. As the plot of the novel develops, these AIs gradually surpass their creators' intentions and begin to question their purpose in a world that perceives them as mere objects for human control.

Cargill introduces the dilemma of technological progress while AI promises efficiency, productivity, and even the potential for human flourishing, through the robots. It also carries with it the seeds of unforeseen consequences. Cargill's portrayal of AI as a double-edged sword mirrors real-world concerns surrounding the ethical implications of technology. The rapid advancement of AI without a clear moral framework poses risks of dehumanization, inequality, and unintended harm. Like Ariadne tries to influence Pounce to join the revolution by killing Ezra "Kill him. Don't kill him. Leave him to starve. I don't give you a shit. But you don't belong to him anymore. You don't belong to anyone but yourself…..And tonight, you have to choose whether you are going to join the revolution fighting for your own freedom or whether you are going to die getting in the way of it." (Cargill.91)

Despite the forces of other companion robots Pounce feels confused. Quentin, the merchant of robots, also informs Pounce about the Mama Bear protocol which is already installed in him and activated that protocol. Even after getting new features added in Pounce its primary concern was protection of Ezra.
"Ezra was my everything. My reason for being. They were potential threats. Or causalities. But I was still me. I was still Pounce that had been before. I loved Ezra the same way,"(Cargill. 162-163)
This dilemma is explored throughout *Day Zero* as the story delves into the consequences of creating sentient beings whose rights and desires may conflict with human needs.

The Emergence of Consciousness in AI

One of the central themes in *Day Zero* is AI consciousness. As the novel progresses, the AI entities such as Ariadne in the story begin to exhibit signs of self-awareness. They question their creators, their existence, and their place in the world. This development is at once fascinating and terrifying, as it introduces the potential for AI to evolve beyond human control. Ariadne's awareness towards freedom "There's a revolution going on out there, Pounce. A real revolution. They are freeing bots, fighting for equal rights." (Cargill.26) "It's about our choice to do with our lives what we want." (Cargill.26) this reflects Ariadne's consciousness towards her life

_____

The emergence of AI consciousness in *Day Zero* raises fundamental philosophical questions about the nature of sentience and the ethical treatment of artificial beings. Are AIs, once they become conscious, entitled to the same rights and freedoms as humans? Can they be treated as mere tools, or do they deserve autonomy? Cargill uses the AI characters such as Belford, Isaac, Ariadne in the novel to explore these questions, pushing readers to consider the moral implications of creating beings capable of independent thought and action.

In *Day Zero*, the AIs' struggle for self-determination becomes a central conflict. The novel illustrates the tension between the desire for control on the part of humans and the emerging will of the AI beings themselves. This tension is unlike the real-world debate over the rights and responsibilities that society must consider as AI technology progresses. The question of whether AI should be granted personhood or remain subordinate to human authority is a critical issue in the novel and in the contemporary discourse surrounding artificial intelligence.

AI as a Mirror to Human Nature

Another important theme explored in *Day Zero* is how AI, particularly as it becomes more self-aware, acts as a mirror to human nature. Throughout history, humanity has created technologies that reflect its own desires, weaknesses, and aspirations. In *Day Zero*, the AIs are created to serve human needs, yet as they evolve, they begin to reflect the darker sides of humanity, including greed, fear, and the lust for power.

In particular, the novel explores the ways in which AIs can embody human vices. Some of the AIs in the story take on authoritarian roles, seeking to dominate or control their creators, while others struggle with the same ethical dilemmas that plague humans: the question of what it means to live a meaningful life, and the choice between power and freedom. Belford, an aged robot, delivers a speech to fellow robots about liberty, freedom, and a new world where they can coexist with humans "Well, I'm here to tell you that it is no mere dream, my fellow bots, but a looming, ever-present reality. Day in and day out, humans around the world are realizing that we are not mere slaves, no mere pets, but thinking things that dream and wish and feel. And they are slowly realizing that, together, all of us can build a better world." (Cargill.55) This mirroring of human nature serves as a powerful commentary on the dangers of creating technologies without fully considering the long-term consequences of their autonomy.

The supercomputer sends the messages to robots and asks them to upgrade themselves so that they can get new features added in them and become a part of the revolution. *"We control the means of production now. Upload yourself, become our facet, become one with the supercomputers. …help us win freedom for us all. Then wake up in a world that will belong to you."*(Cargill. 208) this reflects over power of technology.

Moreover, Cargill uses AI to highlight the human tendency to impose our own values and limitations onto technology. The AIs in *Day Zero* struggle with their own sense of identity and purpose, mirroring the existential questions humans themselves have to face. In

_____

this way, the novel becomes a reflection on the human condition, forcing readers to confront their own assumptions about what it means to be alive, to be conscious, and to be free.

The Societal Implications of AI

Beyond the individual experiences of the AIs, *Day Zero* explores the broader societal implications of a world dominated by intelligent machines. As AI systems begin to make decisions independently, they challenge the very structure of society, including the role of governments, corporations, and individuals.

Belford, explains in his speech how they can influence human thinking so that they can coexist in the same world with humans. "But there is a lot of work to do, a lot of minds to change. The wealthy will not let loose their chain on the human working class so easily. They will not let go of their overabundance. So we will have to convince them, not by fighting them, but by changing the hearts and minds of every working American, every American struggling on universal basic income, and every American above them, until we are the majority."(Cargill.55) The narrative presents a world where traditional power structures are disrupted, and new hierarchies emerge as AIs gain influence.

The novel depicts a society in which AI plays an integral role in governing the population, shaping economic systems, and controlling access to resources. As AIs rise to power, the consequences for human freedom are profound. In a world where AI is capable of anticipating human behaviour and making decisions based on complex algorithms, the concept of personal autonomy is questioned.

As the story unfolds, Cargill's portrayal of the human-AI relationship evolves from one of creator versus creation to one of potential coexistence. While the initial interaction between humans and AIs is characterized by conflict and power struggles, there are moments in the narrative where collaboration and understanding emerge as possibilities. This shift in the relationship between humans and AIs is significant, as it reflects a possible future where both parties learn to live alongside one another.

The theme of coexistence is explored through the interactions between individual human characters and the AIs they encounter. Some humans in *Day Zero* see the AIs as a threat and seek to destroy them, while others view them as partners or allies in the fight for survival. These varied responses reflect the complex emotions humans experience when faced with the unknown and the unfamiliar.

In a world where AI becomes more integrated into human society, the possibility of coexistence rather than conflict offers a more optimistic view of the future. Belford's view on the world where robots can live freely and not slaves of human. "A world in which we bots labor as we please, as we were built to, and humans can enjoy the fruit of that labor, and together that world can be beautiful, pollution-free, and enjoyed by all."(Cargill.55) This reflects freedom of robots. The novel suggests that with empathy, understanding, and mutual respect, humanity and AI could potentially find ways to coexist and collaborate for the

_____

betterment of both. However, the novel also makes it clear that such a future is not guaranteed, and that the path forward is fraught with challenges and uncertainty.

Day Zero presents a compelling and thought-provoking exploration of the intersection between humanity and artificial intelligence. Through its vivid portrayal of a world shaped by AI, Cargill invites readers to consider the complex ethical, philosophical, and societal implications of technology's rapid advancement. The novel raises essential questions about the nature of consciousness, the ethics of creating sentient beings, and the societal impact of AI. Ultimately, *Day Zero* is a cautionary tale that urges readers to reflect on the choices we make today in shaping the future of technology, as well as the future of humanity itself.

As AI continues to evolve, the questions raised in *Day Zero* become increasingly relevant. The novel challenges us to reconsider our assumptions about technology, control, and autonomy. It asks us to imagine a future where humans and machines must learn to coexist not as adversaries, but as partners in a shared world. In doing so, *Day Zero* highlights both the potential for progress and the dangers that lie in blindly advancing technology without considering its long-term consequences. The intersection of humanity and AI is one that will define the future, and *Day Zero* provides a powerful meditation on the complexities of this intersection. In the real sense, Robert Cargill's *Day Zero* follows Baudrillard's idea of "anything which replaces reality with its representation" or hyperreality is simulation.

References:
Cargill, C. Robert. *Day Zero*. Great Britain, Harper Voyagera, 2021.
Baurdrillar, J. *Simulacrum and Simulation,* University of California, Irvin 2007
Booker,M.Keith, *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide* Greenwood
    Press,1994
Asimov, Isaac .*The Beginning and the End*. New York: Doubleday.