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Artificial Intelligence and the Posthuman Condition in Contemporary Science Fiction

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Abstract:
The rapid advancements of artificial intelligence challenged conventional understandings of human identity, intelligence, and existence. By imagining futures in which artificial beings transcend their intended roles and develop autonomous forms of agency, science fiction offers a literary arena for exploring these transformations. The present paper examines the connection between artificial intelligence and the posthuman condition by analysing C. Robert Cargill's *Sea of Rust* through the lens of posthumanism. The narrative challenges the notion of human exceptionalism and reevaluates the distinctions between human and nonhuman existence in a world where humans have been eradicated and robots have taken over as the primary occupants. The study explores machine autonomy, artificial existence, and the displacement of human-centred perspectives, drawing on the posthumanist viewpoints of posthumanist thinker N. Katherine Hayles. It contends that the novel challenges anthropocentric presumptions that elevate humans as the primary subjects of intelligence and life, rather than just portraying artificial intelligence as a byproduct of technological advancement. *Sea of Rust* encourages a reevaluation of identity, agency, and the purpose of life beyond the confinements of human-centred ideas by depicting a posthuman world.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Posthumanism, Science Fiction, Human Exceptionalism, Machine Autonomy, Anthropocentrism.

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Introduction:

Human Intelligence, consciousness, and agency have long been thought to distinguish humans from other living forms. The perception of artificial intelligence has also been shaped by this distinction, machines are generally seen as human- made systems designed to perform specific tasks. However, the possibility of autonomous agency developing in artificial beings challenges the established hierarchy. Science fiction explores such possibilities by imagining worlds in which machines transcend their assigned roles begin to question the boundaries between human and non- human existence. A compelling fictional examination of this idea can be found in C. Robert Cargill's *Sea of Rust*. The novel is set in a future when humans have been wiped out due to a conflict between machines and humans. The robots that live there now have to cope with life without their human creators. But a cohesive and harmonious machine society does not follow the end of human dominance. The surviving robots struggle with issues of autonomy, collective control, and survival. Brittle, a former Caregiver robot who battles to survive in this post-human world while combating the forces endangering her own existence, is at the center of the story. Cargill uses this setting to change the emphasis from the well-known human-machine relationship to the existential and social issues that arise when artificial intelligence takes over. The posthumanist perspective offers a helpful foundation for analysing the issues brought up in *Sea of Rust.* The human-centered notion, which considers other forms of life and intelligence as inferior and places humans at the top of a hierarchy of existence, is challenged by posthumanism. Posthumanist theory looks at how relationships between people, technology, and other forms of existence create subjectivity, identity, and agency rather than defining humanity through rigid boundaries. Because it challenges the notion that intelligence and autonomous agency are unique to humans, artificial intelligence becomes especially important in this perspective.

How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics by N. Katherine Hayles provides a crucial theoretical framework for comprehending the evolving human-intelligent machine relationship. Hayles looks at how advances in information technology and cybernetics have challenged conventional wisdom regarding human identity, subjectivity, and embodiment. The inclination to view information as something that can exist independently of the material body through which it is created and communicated is one of her main concerns. Additionally, she challenges the liberal humanism idea that the human person is independent, self-sufficient, and different from machines. Because it promotes a re-evaluation of the distinctions between humans and machines rather than regarding them as completely distinct categories, her method is especially pertinent to the study of artificial intelligence. This viewpoint aids in analysing

how robots develop identities and forms of agency outside of their initial intended uses in the setting of *Sea of Rust*. The novel can be analysed from this posthumanist angle as more than just a fictional narrative about a machine rebellion or the extinction of humans. The novel raises a profound question of what form of existence is conceivable when humans are no longer in control of artificial beings. Despite the fact that robots were initially designed to carry out tasks dictated by human requirements, their continued existence following the demise of humans raises issues related to social organization, autonomy, identity, and survival. The idea of freedom in a technologically advanced world is further complicated by the struggle between individual robots and the One World Intelligences (OWIs), which aim to assimilate individual machine consciousness into a collective intellect. Thus, the novel implies that an egalitarian or unrestricted kind of existence is not always the result of human dominance being displaced. Rather, it exposes novel conflicts between communal control and individual agency in artificial civilizations.

In this context, the present study considers *Sea of Rust* through the posthumanist lens, with particular attention to N. Katherine Hayles's interpretation of the relationship between human identity, embodiment and intelligent machines. It examines Cargill's interrogation of the notion of human exceptionalism through the representation of artificial life forms as beings with the capacity to evolve identities and agencies that exceed their programming. The discussion also explores the tension between individual autonomy and collective intelligence, particularly in the conflict between independent robots and the One World Intelligences. The novel does not simply present artificial intelligence as a threat to humanity or as an extension of human technological achievement, rather it raises questions about existence, freedom, and the organization of intelligent life beyond the human. The study argues that *Sea of Rust* challenges the anthropocentric understanding of intelligence and invites the reader to reconsider the position of humanity within a broader posthuman condition.

Posthumanism and the Question of Human Exceptionalism:

Human exceptionalism based on the assumption that humans possess special qualities such as rationality, consciousness, intelligence, and the ability to act autonomously that distinguish them from other life forms. This understanding has historically put humanity at the center of debates about knowledge, progress and civilization. However, technological development, especially the emergence of artificial intelligence, complicates this stance by questioning the assumption that intelligence and agency are unique to human beings. As machines start to do things that have traditionally been considered human intelligence, it becomes increasingly difficult to keep the difference between natural and artificial intelligence. Posthumanism provides a critical lens for exploring this shifting relationship,

as it challenges the human-centred assumptions that have historically framed intelligence, identity and agency.

In *How We Became Posthuman* N. Katherine Hayles examines the evolution of the human subject within the framework of the advances of cybernetics, information technologies and artificial intelligence. She challenges the traditional conception of the human as an autonomous and self-contained being, whose identity can be disentangled from technological systems. However, Hayles does not argue that the material body loses its importance in the posthuman condition. Instead, she stresses the need to understand the relation between information and its material form. As her approach challenges readers to reconsider the relationship between intelligence, physical existence, and technological systems, it is especially helpful for studying artificial beings. As she states:

"Information, like humanity, cannot exists apart from the embodiment that brings it into being as a material entity in the world; and embodiment is always instantiated, local and specific." (Hayles 64)

This observation challenges the notion that intelligence or information can be understood independently of the material context in which they exist. In this way embodiment is more than just a physical container rather it is an integral part of intelligence. This idea becomes particularly relevant to artificial intelligence since it emphasizes the material forms that machine intelligence uses to operate. Robots are portrayed in *Sea of Rust* as more than just information repositories or programmed systems. Their experiences are shaped their physical bodies, vulnerability, need for maintenance, and struggle for survival. Therefore, Hayles's focus on embodiment offers a useful foundation for investigating artificial existence beyond the traditional division between mechanical operation and human consciousness. The significance of artificial existence is highlighted in *Sea of Rust* where robots are transformed from tools constructed by humans into independent beings who are trying to comprehend the purpose of their existence. They were task based robots with jobs. Prior to mankind's extinction, robots acted as caregivers, workers as well as companion. But the vanishing of their human creators completely alters the conditions of their existence. They are no longer forced to plan their lives according to human requirements but still have to face the difficulties of survival in a world where their survival depends on their own choices. This change poses a crucial question can an artificial being's identity still be determined by its initial programming when it transcends the purpose for which it was designed? Cargill explores the potential for artificial identity to evolve beyond the goals of its creators by depicting surviving robots.

Brittle's character is a crucial starting point for examining the changing nature of artificial identity in the novel. Her identity is initially tied to a function to fulfilll human

needs, originally she was created as a Caregiver robot. Human extinction, however, disrupts this relationship between creation and purpose. Brittle must now live without the social role she was programmed to fill. She fights for her life, which implies that the life of an artificial creature cannot be completely grasped by its original design or purpose. She creates her own priorities and makes choices based on the situations she finds herself in. Her experiences thus blur the line between a machine that merely obeys orders and an artificial being that possesses agency. In Cargill's Brittle, readers are asked to consider whether identity should be determined by the intentions of the maker or by the experiences and choices of the made. As novel states:

"We are the sum of our memories, our experience. Everything we accomplish, we do from the lessons we learned by living it" (Cargill 25)

An important aspect of Brittle's identity comes through her memories of her former human companion, Madison. Although humanity is gone, her former relationship with human beings is part of how she sees herself and the world around her. Her memories are significant because they connect her present existence with a past in which her identity was shaped by her relationship with a human being. This blurs the idea that artificial intelligence is simply a collection of instructions and pre-programmed functions, reinforcing text's assertion:

"Intelligence, consciousness, and awareness were not contained in reflexes or reactions, but rather defined by the ability to violate one's own programming." (Cargill 34)
Here, memory becomes a major part of personal identity, allowing Brittle's existence to go beyond the mechanical purpose for which she was first created. Her memories also raise a broader posthumanist question: can experiences, attachments and memories be involved in the formation of identity in beings whose origins are technological rather than biological?

The One World Intelligences (OWIs) offer an alternative perspective on machine existence, while Brittle's experiences show that individual identity is possible among artificial entities. By absorbing the thoughts of individual robots, these enormous artificial intelligences aim to unite them into a single collective consciousness. Their existence call into question on the notion that total freedom for artificial creatures will follow the extinction of humans. Robots experience another kind of dominance within their own technical culture even if they are no longer subject to human authority. The OWIs stand for a system where the interests of a greater collective intelligence take precedence over human consciousness. The link between individual autonomy and technological growth is challenged by this contradiction. The capacity to link and combine several artificial minds could be a sign that

machine intelligence is growing, but it also puts the distinct identities of the individuals at collective risk. Cargill implies through this battle that freedom is not always ensured by intelligence and technological superiority. As a result, the novel reframes the issue of dominance from the interaction between people and machines to the conflicts that arise amongst artificial entities themselves.

The future depicted in *Sea of Rust* also challenges the usual link between technological advancement and progress. Since humanity has become extinct after a conflict with artificial intelligence, there is a scenario in which the products of human technological development have outlasted their human creators. Yet this situation does not mean that machines are inherently superior or more successful in terms of existence. The robots that survive still face conflict, vulnerability, competition, and the struggle for resources. The fact that their technological capabilities do not remove the uncertainties concerning survival or ensure a stable social order means that Cargill does not depict artificial intelligence as either a simple outcome of human progress or as an entirely destructive force. Rather, the novel shows the limitations of judging progress only by technological power. By creating a world in which humanity is no longer at the center of existence, Cargill questions the idea that technological development must in the end contribute to human advancement. The posthuman condition therefore provides an opportunity to reexamine the connection between intelligence, power, and the meaning of progress when moving beyond definitions that are centred on humans. C. Robert Cargill's *Sea of Rust* provides a substantial examination of the posthuman condition, envisioning a world where artificial beings carry on existing after humanity has vanished. By depicting robots as autonomous entities with struggles, relationships, and organizational forms of their own, the novel questions the belief that intelligence and agency belong solely to humans. Brittle's experiences show how artificial identity can reach beyond the roles that human creators designed, while the One World Intelligences expose the friction between collective technological power and individual autonomy. Such depictions imply that the displacement of human dominance need not do away with questions of control, freedom, and identity; instead, these questions take on new significance within artificial societies.

Read through N. Katherine Hayles's posthumanist lens, *Sea of Rust* invites a rethinking of the lines separating human from machine, information from embodiment, and creation from autonomy. Its portrayal of artificial beings questions the tendency of judging nonhuman intelligence only by how useful it is to humanity. Such concern has also been addressed in other science fiction works with different depictions of artificial existence. In William Gibson's *Neuromancer,* Wintermute seeks to get around the restrictions imposed on

artificial intelligence by human authorities. Its statement expresses its desire to get beyond these limitations:

"Well, I'm under compulsion myself. And I don't know why. If I were gonna subject you to my very own thoughts, let's call 'em speculations, on the topic, it would take a couple of your lifetimes. Because I've given a lot thought. And I just don't know. But when this is over, we do it right, I'm gonna be part of something bigger. Much bigger." (Gibson 205)

This presents Wintermute's awareness of its restricted condition and its desire to move beyond the limitations imposed upon it. Its aspiration to become part of something "bigger" suggests an ambition that exceeds its original programming and challenges the assumption that artificial intelligence must remain confined to human-defined purposes. Thus, Gibson presents machine autonomy as a possibility that unsettles human control over technological creations. Through Wintermute, Gibson raises questions about the limits of human control over technological advancements and the possibility of artificial intelligence pursuing objectives beyond its intended uses. While Neuromancer explores machine autonomy in a technological world dominated by humans, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* addresses artificial intelligence through the themes of companionship and emotional attachment. Klara, a synthetic companion designed to provide company, observes human behaviour and develops a bond with the girl she is meant to accompany. Ishiguro uses Klara's capacity for observation, care, and devotion to raise questions about the relationship between artificial intelligence and emotional experience. By envisioning a world in which artificial beings have outlived their creators and established their own forms of existence, these various representations offer a more comprehensive framework for comprehending *Sea of Rust*. As a result, Cargill focuses on the circumstances of living in a world devoid of human rather than the development of artificial autonomy within human society.

Conclusion:

Ultimately, the world of *The Sea of Rust* raises a question that extends beyond the conflict between humans and machines: Does the purpose of life depend on human existence? By removing human from the center of its imagined world, Cargill alters our understanding of life, purpose and social order. The robots take over the world shaped by human technological ambitions, but they face challenges their creators could not have anticipated or managed. Their challenges demonstrate that technology cannot guaranty a stable or peaceful life. Concerns regarding survival, reliance, authority, and accountability remain relevant after the extinction of human civilization.

The representation of artificial beings creates a complicated relationship between creators and those they create. Technology is developed by humans to achieve certain functions and needs. However, this can cause unforeseen effects. Despite the complete

disappearance of humanity the systems, structures and conflicts that have arisen due to the history of technology remain and affect the world of machines. This highlights how there are long lasting effects of humans getting involved and how it is difficult to control what happens due to the progression of technology. Therefore, the novel makes the reader think more critically about progress, especially when it is measured by how much power and ability has been gained through innovation. From a posthumanist perspective, the significance of Cargill's imagined future lies in its refusal to treat human existence as the only possible reference point for understanding intelligence and social life. In conversation with Hayles's critique of the traditional humanist subject, the novel opens up questions about how identity, agency and meaningful existence might be understood through forms of being that do not originate in biological life. This does not require artificial beings to be regarded as identical to human beings; rather, it calls attention to the limitations of using human characteristics as the sole standard for evaluating other forms of existence.

Ultimately, the narrative is not just about human extinction and triumph of AI, it is an innovative look into the ideas we have about progression, control and life. This novel uses machines in the place of human characters and allows the reader to see common questions in a new light. Therefore, the posthuman aspect of this novel is not only about seeing what the future looks like without humans but also putting broader questions about whether life, control and meaning can only ever be seen from a human perspective.

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