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**JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE
AND LINGUISTIC STUDIES**

ISSN: 1305-578X

Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies, 17(4), 2494-2502; 2021

A Posthuman Gestation of Cyborg War Machines in Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan*

Dr Suresh Frederick ^{a1}, Herbert J X ^b

^a Associate Professor and UG Head, Department of English, Bishop Heber College, Trichy-17, Tamil Nadu, India. sfheber@gmail.com

^b PhD Research Scholar, Bharathidasan University, Bishop Heber College, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, India. herbert.xavier7@gmail.com

APA Citation:

Dr Suresh Frederick, Herbert J X (2021). A Posthuman Gestation of Cyborg War Machines in Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan*, *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(4), 2494-2502

Submission Date: 30/07/2021

Acceptance Date: 24/11/2021

Abstract

Human beings and their lifestyle have always been transforming every age. This transformation of their trends and culture changing their lifestyle and outfits started to shift to focus on changing their biological outfit after the revolutionary inventions in medical, cosmetic and technological science. Posthumanism theory discusses about the modification of the biological outfits of humans through medical, cosmetic surgeries, genetic modification, etc., as a gateway to the creation of posthumans like cyborgs. Cyborg, the posthuman creature is posited more of an ideological human than a transformed hybrid human. Many Posthuman theorists suggest that the modification of man using emerging technologies will deconstruct the hindrances by man and his ideologies. Thus, the cyborg will amalgamate man with the excluded human, nonhuman entities, animals and his environment by machines, technologies. The flawless hybridity of a human recreation through the man machine interface has brought dubious enquiries on the ethics and laws in the creation and existence of cyborgs. This paper explores the negative consequences of misusing technologies and humans in the creation of unethical cyborgs in Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan*.

Keywords: posthumanism, ethics, war, cyborgs, war machines

¹ Corresponding author.

E-mail address: sfheber@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The cyborg or cybernetic organism is a prodigy of posthumanism theory. In the discourse of posthumanism, cyborg is the liberator of the modern-day human who is still controlled by the anthropocentric notions of humanism. Posthumanism brings down the binaries and human centred authority of man by the dissemination of humanness in the human body and mind. One of the ways Posthumanism practically finds to break down the binaries in the human body and mind is by removing certain features that controls or holds the humans as a dominant entity. The body of the modern-day man is becoming more elastic modifying itself towards the idea of posthumanism. For instance, the present-day technology in the field of medical science has invented transplantations of vital organs of humans, implantations of machines in the human body, and augmentation of body parts, and so on. These modification of the body removes the fixation of the body in the realm of humanness. Thus, the humans enhancing or fixing their deteriorating body will transcend to become a new entity that is free from the hegemonic control of anthropocentrism of humans. The cyborg is an extension of this idea as it collaborates the organic body with a non-organic or machine. Katherine Hayles a posthumanism theorist says that the “cyborg violates the human/machine distinction; replacing cognition with neural feedback, it challenges the human-animal difference; explaining the behaviour of thermostats and people through theories of feedback, hierarchical structure, and control, it erases the animate/inanimate distinction”(Hayles 84). Some posthuman thinkers like Chris Hables Gray say that “cyborgs do not have to be part human, for any organism/system that mixes the evolved and the made, the living and the inanimate, is technically a cyborg. This would include biocomputers based on organic processes, along with roaches with implants and bioengineered microbes”(Gray 2). Yet, the concept of cyborg mostly involves fusing the human body with an inanimate system or technology. And also, while discussing the idea of a man machine integration through cyborg, the cyborg is been seen to be threatful to humans in its creation existence. This is because of the debatable nature of the ethical use of science and technology by humans and on humans. The dubiousness of ethics in science and technology evokes to question the ethical use of science on man in the creation of cyborgs. This paper explores the negative consequences of misusing technologies and humans in the creation of unethical cyborgs in Kurt Vonnegut’s *The Sirens of Titan*.

1.1. Literature review

- Andrew Hicks in his *Posthumanism in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut: Matter That Complains So* (Routledge, 2020) has applied the concept of posthumanism to analyse Vonnegut’s six major novels: *Cat’s Cradle*, *Breakfast of Champions*, *Mother’s Night*, *Galapagos*, *The Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The book re-examines the popular assertion that Vonnegut was a human or a

postmodern writer. Andrew Hicks rejects these assertions. He uses posthumanist and ecocritical concepts to establish that Vonnegut is primarily a posthumanist.

- Darryl Hattenhauer's *The Politics of Vonnegut's Harrison Bergeron and God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* (Studies in Science Fiction, (35, 1998. 387 – 392) uses Vonnegut's Harrison Bergeron and *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*, and to some extent *Jailbird* to read socialist and liberal elements in the author. But the article explains how these works deal with the mistaken notions of equality in the American society and also how America's concepts of individuality and freedom have caused the greatest inequalities in the world.
- Matthew Gannon and Wilson Taylor in *Kurt Vonnegut's Socialism From Outer Space* (Tribune, 11.04.2021. 4-5) examine Vonnegut's idea of moral and human obligation in his works, particularly in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *God Bless you Mr. Rosewater*. The writers examine how these two works use the conventions of science fiction to critique the injustices and inequalities of modern society. The writers also point out that though Vonnegut was an atheist he was inspired by Christ's Sermon on the Mount and that his works reopen the biblical question "Am I my brother's keeper?", and so his works can be termed 'Gospel from Outer Space'.
- Ankit Raj and Nagendra Kumar in *Trick or Treat!: The Trickster Figure in Kurt Vonnegut's God Bless You, Mr Rosewater and Slapstick* (The Explicator, Volume 79, 2021 - Issue 4. 155-159) juxtapose the figures of Eliot Rosewater and Norman Mushari to explain how Kurt Vonnegut was committed to the ideas of kindness and charity as antidotes to the greed and self-centredness that plague the human society today.
- Tony Tanner in *The Uncertain Messenger: A Study of the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.* (Critical Quarterly, 11 - Winter 1969. 297-315.) has explored the major themes of Kurt Vonnegut in his novels. The article uses the novelist's non-fiction to explain his concerns in his fiction. The author of the article concludes that Vonnegut chose the science fiction mode as he found it to be the most appropriate mode for his art.

1.2. Research questions

- 1) Are the cyborgs created by the scientist in Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan* an ethical creation?
- 2) Can cyborgs be used as war machines to colonise a human geography?

2. Article structure

2.1. Kurt Vonnegut:

Kurt Vonnegut is a popular American novelist; he is universally acclaimed by the publication of his autobiographical novel *Slaughterhouse-5*. Kurt Vonnegut is reputed as a war novelist for writing about

his real-life experiences as a soldier in the Vietnam war and surviving the Dresden bombing. Vonnegut's confrontation of violence as a soldier at a very young age of his life affected his mental health. The psychological affectation caused by the deaths and violence inflicted by war and war technology became a part of most of his fiction. A major part of Kurt Vonnegut's novels speak out on the absurdity of life by portraying scientific inventions misdirected by humans for evil and destructive purposes.

2.2. : Mission of an unethical scientist

In *The Sirens of Titan*, Kurt Vonnegut narrates the fall of a technological Utopia by an ambitious scientist Winston Niles Rumford, who uses alien science to create an army of cyborgs on Mars and lead them to war on the human planet. Kurt Vonnegut begins the space odyssey with an introduction of how the human journey in outer space will find unimaginable science that will change the posthuman world to meet a dystopian situation. The prelude of the novel announces a dark age of space when humans use space science and alien technology in a destructive intention:

The bounties of space, of infinite outwardness, were three: empty heroics, low comedy, and pointless death. Outwardness lost, at last, its imagined attractions. Only inwardness remained to be explored. Only the human soul remained terra incognita. This was the beginning of goodness and wisdom. What were people like in olden times, with their souls as yet unexplored? The following is a true story from the Nightmare Ages, falling roughly, give or take a few years, between the Second World War and the Third Great Depression. (Vonnegut 1-2)

In *The Sirens of Titan* Kurt Vonnegut shows the misuse of alien technology building a war between humans living in different planets. Salo, the tralfamadorian alien robot befriended by Winston Niles Rumford in the planet Titan empowers him with an alien technology called UWTB. "Most important of all Salo had in his possession a quantity of the most powerful conceivable source of energy, UWTB, or the Universal Will to Become. Salo generously donated half of his supply of UWTB to the suicide of Mars" (Vonnegut 175). Being a scientist Winston could have used the UWTB to invent technologies for advancing humans and the Earth. Rather Winston uses the alien power in a destructive way to become the powerful human to control the universe. Winston Niles Rumford vested with the power from the alien technology prepares a war base in Mars to attack Earth. The machine authorises man with UWTB power plans to instigate a war between humans in different planets. Winston Niles Rumford uses the alien technology from Salo's ship to create an artificial habitat for humans in Mars. Initiated by Salo's advice Winston Niles Rumford uses the alien power to build an army of cyborg soldiers in Mars. "From Player Piano through God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, Vonnegut had dealt with an unending series of catastrophes, from social revolutions and a world war through a Martian invasion to the ultimate destruction of the world itself" (Klinkowitz 59).

2.3. *Exploitation of humans, technology and cyborgs*

Winston Niles Rumford, the scientist begins to organise an army in Mars to attack Earth. But his secretive plan to attack Earth required unethical power to fight with the human power. Martian space ships and war artilleries needed a user who would follow any immoral orders from their master. Human beings who are emotive to sympathise for humans will be a risky option to employ in an army attacking their home planet and their fellow species. Yet, the scientist believed that human beings are more trustworthy than machines because military technology like army robots have the chance of malfunctioning or disobeying the human's order. Immoral human beings/criminals will be inconsiderate to do harmful deeds to their fellow humans and their environment. So, Winston Niles Rumford employs thoughtless humans like Malachi Constant, a reckless billionaire unmindful of him and his world. These reckless and deceivable humans from earth are put under the spell of science so that they would not go against Rumford. Rumford's preparation of electronically fabricated humans in the army corresponds with the posthuman notion of employing machines like robots and cyborgs in the army. "The rapid movement towards greater autonomy in military affairs itself entails another process, which is the reconfiguration of new machine-humans for a transformed ethos for the administration of war. It is therefore crucial, at least from a critical perspective, to get a handle on the kind of machine-human subjectivities our new ways of war and security are producing"(Schwarz 31).

As per the plan of Winston the Martian humans are shipped to Mars and converted into human war machines to attack and conquer their home planet, Earth. With the help of Salo's UTWB Mars is built into an army base to train the electronically converted humans for the war. All the humans are converted into cyborgs by merging them with radio antennas implanted in their brain. The surgically transformed humans/cyborgs are segregated into troops and are assigned to attack a country on Earth. "It was the flag of Ceylon. And past that was a red ball on a white field, the flag of Japan. The banners signified the countries that the various Martian units would attack and paralyze when the war between Mars and Earth began"(Vonnegut 106). The cyborgs are practiced to kill the people in their consigned nation and replace the human rule with their leader, Winston Niles Rumford.

Meanwhile, arguments for human extermination by robots include propositions that robots can pose existential threats to human beings even when robots are programmed to pursue seemingly harmless goals. One such scenario being that an advanced robot programmed to manufacture paperclips would optimize this goal by turning all matter, including human beings, into either paperclips or machines that manufacture paperclips. (Fox 6)

As Stephen Fox assumed the humans in *The Sirens of Titan* are programmed like robots carrying out the task of fighting humans on earth. After the military training in Mars, the humans are fully transformed into trained machines following the orders from their master, the scientist, Winston Niles Rumford. The electronic convergence took over their consciousness and turned them into obeying humans that resembling robotic traits. The pocket History of Mars written by Winston Niles Rumford

affirms that the humans have sacrificed their body to become war machines of Mars. “In terms of their souls, the martyrs of Mars died not when they attacked Earth but when they were recruited for the Martian war machine. - The Winston Niles Rumfoord Pocket History of Mars”(Vonnegut 199).

2.4. Spoiled Creatures on a Misdirected War

Winston acknowledges that the humans used for the space expedition in Mars will not have the status of a human. The human body will be experimented and tortured like a lab animal to transform the humans into radio-controlled machines/ cyborgs. The human body and mind are subjugated to the electronic implants and a remote in the hands of the evil scientist Winston Niles Rumford. Chris Hables Gray, the post human thinker says that “there is no doubt that the concept of the cyborg has gone beyond specifically engineered organisms for extreme conditions such as living in space. This isn’t about the subservience of machines to humans or a partnership between machines and organisms; it is a symbiosis”(Gray 12).The alien technology provided by Salo has created a symbiotic relationship between man and machine. The assemblage of man has an equal relation with the machine, but still the relationship between the cyborg does not equate with the natural human. “I tell them and I tell you and I tell everybody, we don’t have to put people in the rocket ships. We will use the lower animals only”(SOT 56-57). While discussing the use of human for space travel, Winston declares his selection of humans who have no use or purpose in Earth. Winston’s choice of such people conveys his secret intention to transform those humans into despoiled cybernetic organisms for the Martian army.

The Martian cyborg army spoiled by technological alteration and commands fail in the battle with humans. Enabling the Martian humans into cyborgs helped them to proceed in attacking the earthlings. But their brain ability to think or emote were modified by the radio antennas that converted them into obeying machines. For instance, when the cyborgs began to attack earth, their human abilities opened up, at that moment the electronic technology/antennas implanted in the human skull incapacitated their humane feelings. The antennas controlling their brain failed to lead its soldiers as it lost signal from Mars and its commanders. The cyborg soldiers were agitated while performing their drill before battling earth: “It was thought unnecessary now to keep the soldiers moving and in ranks by means of twinges from their antennas. War fever had them now. They chanted as they marched, and set their iron. Heeled boots down hard on the iron street. Their chant was bloody: Terror, grief, and desolation”(Vonnegut 134-135). The cyborgs soldiers lost their cyborg commanders while landing on the earth. “It was frequently the case, however, that the troops lost their real commanders, either in the air or on the ground. When that happened, the troops became sluggish at once”(Vonnegut 168). The absence of the commanders to lead and instruction from the antenna became a setback for the cyborg soldiers. “And, as long as the Martian troops had their real commanders to radio-control them, they fought with a steadfastness, selflessness, and a will to close with the enemy that won the grudging admiration of everyone who fought them”(Vonnegut 168). The unguided cyborg army fought miserably and lost their

war on Earth. They died after compete with the technology and human power in Earth. The loss of superior generals and the command from the antennas of the cyborg failed them to defeat humans. The cyborg army succeeded to conquer a “meat market in Basel, Switzerland, by seventeen Parachute Ski Marines. Everywhere else the Martians were butchered promptly, before they could even dig in”(Vonnegut 171).

The cyborgs in *The Sirens of Titan* shows the misguided path of armed machines and cyborgs to show the misfiring of the posthuman idea. Donna Haraway’s *A Cyborg Manifesto* stresses on the same threatening speculation imagined by Kurt Vonnegut. “Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert”(Haraway 11).

3. Conclusions

Cyborgs claimed as the ideological creatures freeing humans from their limitations and constructs become a nightmare to the humans in *The Sirens of Titan*. Kurt Vonnegut’s presents a new perspective of cyborgs fighting humans. The posthuman creature created with the promise of togetherness attempts to gain power by conquering themselves their human other. The cyborgs threat to humans resembles to the cyborg monster ‘Frankenstein monster’, a miscarried by-product of science. The accidental creature in *Frankenstein* is an uncontrollable monster hunting human beings, on the other hand The cyborgs created by Winston Niles Rumford are modern day *Frankenstein* monsters an intentional creation purposely let loose on Earth to kill humans. The cyborgs in *The Sirens of Titan* have a slight difference from Marry Shelly’s *Frankenstein*’s monster as they reflect the misuse of science that backfires humans and their planet. They also reiterate the negligence of man’s unethical practice of science on himself to create posthuman cyborg monsters alike Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein*.

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Citation in text

Direct quote:

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Appendix A

A new separate entity

The posthumanism idea of modifying a human body into a creature like cyborg is to erase the differences between within humans on the basis of gender, race, etc. But breaking the barriers of human autonomy by collaborating with organic and mechanical objects to create a new hybrid human like the cyborg is unlikely to be given the status of an advanced human. The human autonomy of positioning the human body and mind superior to other living beings might also create a distinction to separate their biological and social status. The humans who have always placed their status on the top of all living creatures would not prefer the entry of any other life forms dominate or equalise their power structure. Therefore, the modified human bodies referred as cyborgs for instance will not be allowed to merge their social status with the organic humans. This in turn might create a new racial domination or discrimination by the natural humans who might signify the hybrid humans as half humans or nonhumans having lesser status of the human.

AUTHORS BIODATA

Dr. Suresh Frederick, is an Associate Professor and UG Head of English, Bishop Heber College, Trichy, India. He is the Dean of Research and Development. He holds a PhD in English from Bharadhidasan University. He has been conferred with an Hon. DLitt by IICM, Florida, USA. He has 30 years of teaching experience at the tertiary level. He has published 114 articles and edited 12 books. He has presented papers in many foreign countries like Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Portugal and Ireland. To his credit, he has successfully guided 86 MPhil and 32 PhD candidates. He has been

awarded *Editor's Choice Award* for his Critical Writing by *The Home of Letters* (India) in 2010, *Best Research Paper* award for Literature in 2015, *Life-time Achievement Award* in 2018 (for producing 25 PhDs), *Best Researcher Award* by Bishop Heber College in 2020&21, and *Indo-Asian John Milton Distinguished Literary Award*, by REd Talks Daily International in recognition of consistent performance in English Literature in 2021.

J X Herbert is a PhD Research Scholar in English Literature from Bishop Heber College, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu. His research interests are on Kurt Vonnegut's fiction from different standpoints of literary philosophies and techniques. His research is partially surrounded by posthumanism theory that is relatable to the many humanist concepts of morals and ideas to rebuild the anthropocentric notion of man postulated hitherto. He has also been exploring the affiliation of transhumanism, a key concept of posthumanism with science fiction, especially with the speculative fiction of Kurt Vonnegut.