Speculating the Posthuman Scenario of Man vs Machines in Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano*

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Abstract

Science and technology have unarguably become a part of human life. The mundane life of every man has become dependent on technology that efficiently performs or reduces his labour. Posthumanism, a contemporary literary theory dealing with human, science and the universe warns on the over dependence of machines and labour reducing technologies. A technophobic perspective of posthumanism talks about innumerable unpredictable threats humans are liable to when they allow too much science and technology in their life/world. The imagination of technological threats in the future posthuman society is preconceived in Kurt Vonnegut's science fiction novel *Player Piano*. This paper explores the threats posed by machines in a technologically advanced posthuman world by exploring the chaotic situation in the Industrial society of Ilium in Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano*.

Keywords: posthumanism, war, industry, computer, artificial intelligence.

1. Introduction

Science fiction, a genre of fiction has always been more than a fictious work of art. Many writers of the speculative fiction have used their investigation on their contemporary human research and development in science and technologies, rather than creating imaginative machine inventions. The realistic approach in fabricating a scientific imagination has dwelled on the intrinsic nature of man with science mainly

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after the twentieth century when science moved man to his modern era. The rapid growth of the modern world science encapsulated in the science fiction written in the twentieth century and its end began to speculate the emergence of a post-postmodern world when their works constantly spoke about the interference of science and its transcendence on man in the digital world. So, their works had speculations on machines acquiring human entities like feeling, soul/life, "the theme of body invasion: prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration. The even more powerful theme of mind invasion: brain-computer interfaces, artificial intelligence, neurochemistry-techniques radically redefining the nature of humanity, the nature of the self"(Sterling xiii). This style of writing on human machine transcendence probes the use of science fiction to analyse the contemporary theory posthumanism. Sheryl Vint comments that science fiction "is particularly suited to exploring the question of the posthuman because it is a discourse that allows us to concretely imagine bodies and selves otherwise, a discourse defined by its ability to estrange our commonplace perceptions of reality" (Vint 3). This research focuses on the science fiction of Kurt Vonnegut to validate the use of science fiction to explore posthumanism.

1.1. Literature review

Kurt Vonnegut began to receive critical attention after the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, though earlier he had been dismissed or ignored as an entertaining science fiction writer. *Slaughterhouse-Five* not only brought Kurt Vonnegut critical review but also initiated a rereading of Vonnegut's earlier works. As a consequence, there has been numerous perspectives and trajectories in reading Kurt Vonnegut. There have been modernist, postmodernist, humanist, existential and dystopian readings of his novels. Some have seen Vonnegut as satirist, while some read him as a black humourist.

● 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 Begeron and God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* (Studies in Science Fiction, (35, 1998. 387 – 392) uses Vonnegut's Harrison Begeron 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)   Do machines pose threat to take over human employment?
2)   Will machines turn against humans and take over their society?

2. Article structure

2.1.   Kurt Vonnegut:

Kurt Vonnegut, the twentieth century American novelist is one of the chief contributors of science fiction. Kurt Vonnegut's universally appreciated autobiographical novel Slaughterhouse-Five, recognised as a war novel for sharing the writer's experiences as a soldier in the Vietnam war also possesses outlandish fictional elements like alien invasion, time and space travel. The oeuvre of Kurt Vonnegut gives equal space to sci-fi elements in many of his novels, this is evident from his first novel *Player Piano* and his last novel *Timequake*. Kurt Vonnegut's Player Piano imagines the threats humans face in a posthuman society by maximising the use of machines in their personal and professional space.

2.2.   Digital technologies for war:

Player Piano opens up showing a post-war society that was fought by the supporters of machines and people against its automation. Machinery development was the conflict that created a tussle between

these two sects of Ilium. The machines who were the primary reason for the cold war participated to fight for the humans who were in favour of their independent functioning. The computer series born at the time of automation are the early version of the Epicac series, which acted as the brain of the humans fighting for them. The Epicac computers helped the humans by teaching them the strategies to win the war. Chris Hables Gray points out the intact relationship between human and machines increased the use of AI machines like Epicac series computers in the occasions of war.

The connection between war and technoscience has long been intimate; now it is integral. A certain basic level of technology is what makes war possible. But in the last few hundred years there has been an incredible increase in the interdependent connections between the forces of creation and of destruction. The latest, perhaps decisive, link is between computers and the military" (Gray 7).

Epicac series of AI in *Player Piano* is relevant to a few AI's used in the military to secure its nation form war. The role of Epicac computers in the cold war in Ilium is similar to Alan Turing's computer intelligence build with a code to make suppositions of the war situation. "Turing, who played a fundamental role in developing the computer while he was building code breaking machines during World War II, based his test on a party game called 'the imitation game'"(Gray 24-25). Epicac computers conceptualised many war scenarios like the 'imitation game' to show the moves of the opponent's attack. The demo conceptualised by Epicac would analyse a good defence or attack strategy for fighting in the cold war.

2.3.   Automation of industries threatening human skill and employment:

Player Piano portrays the use of machines in human war. Automatic and thinking machines are reasoned as the cause of the civil war in the state of Ilium. The cold war sparked by the advancement of machines was won by the people who sided with machines. Inanimate machines worked as the brain and weapons of the war. After the cold war in Ilium, the Industry and its society was marching to reach its third revolution by renewing intelligent machines. Machines with immortality and thinking abilities increased in the industries of Ilium. Handing over human labour and decisions has developed the machines into a joint force against humans, this is very much evident in its resemblance to the concept of Big Brother by exposing the machines in Ilium which function independently for its production and administration. The subordination of human power to machines in the post-war industry feared a few employers who were earlier in favour of machines. They were frightened by the speculation of another segregation of workers within the industry. More than that, they were scared of losing their jobs to the machines like the working class rotting in the south. The golden age of industrialisation became a nightmare for the humans who supported the advancement of the industrial machines. "These are dangerous times - more dangerous than you'd suspect from the surface. Kaplowie! But it's also the Golden Age, isn't it, Paul?" Paul nodded. Kroner turned to look at him. "I said, isn't this the Golden Age?" (Vonnegut 127). This

conversation between Paul and Kroner reveals the fear of humans in the age of machines reaching to its maximum advancement.

Like Paul, a few people in the North being to fear that thinking machines and Epicac XIV, the new AI would begin another war in Ilium. The machines of the 'Golden Age' has begun to intervene the economy of the state and its people. Earlier, these machines have took over the jobs of manual labourers and the eliminated the working class from the industry. Sooner, thinking machines like the AI, Epicac XIV will chase less talented managers and engineers out of the industry. This situation prevails in the state of Ilium, the personnel machines fed with human data analyses the profiles of every human for an employment opportunity. This exhibits the segregation of humans based on their IQ. All the humans' roles (employment and education) are given by the machines. Humans are measured by their IQ to check their qualification to work in Ilium Industry. The assessment of machines applies to the south side people of Ilium. The people from the southside of Ilium differ to agree with the analyses of human data as every human has a set of skills and talent cannot be entered in the documentation of his intelligence/IQ level. The judgement of man by a dominating machine that could work and think more efficiently than a human will increase the rate of poverty and unemployment of Ilium. So the people who fear machines form an anti-machine group named as the 'ghost shirt society'. "The thing he concentrated on now, a far more entertaining and consequential enterprise, was the saying of as many poignant, antimachine, pro-Ghost Shirt Society things as he could over a nationwide television network"(Vonnegut 313).The ghost shirt society is an underground society gathered to fight against machines and its development, especially the implementation thinking machines like the artificial intelligence Epicac XIV. This anti-machine society was initiated by the people from the south to gain back their social and economic status. The Ghost Shirt Society gained support by a few people from the north side of Ilium who saw the danger arising from the earlier advancement of machines and also the coming danger from the AI machine Epicac XIV.

2.4.   *Man vs Machine:*

The Anti-machine society became infamously known in Ilium after a few meetings gathered to discuss about the abolition of machines. This problematic situation helped the ghost shirt society to get their leader Paul, their messiah in the hopeless mechanised world of machines. Paul, the central character of Player Piano belongs to the heritage of Ilium's management. Paul, the manager of Ilium industries, was a strong believer of mechanisation. He has earlier contributed in the immortalising of manufacturing machines. His automation of production took off the jobs of many manual labourers. Paul comes to a realisation that any technology replacing human work is an evil technology. "Paul wondered at what thorough believers in mechanization most Americans were, even when their lives had been badly damaged by mechanization"(Vonnegut 253). Paul quits his position as the manager in the industry of evil technologies. Paul moves south and gets elected as the leader of the Ghost shirt Society. In his first

meeting as the head of the 'ghost shirt society', Paul announces the ghost shirt society plans to attack the computer intelligence, Epicac XIV before its launch event. The entire society goes chaos on the day conspired to destroy Epicac XIV. The citizens of Ilium came out in support of the secret society to fight against the machines. This led to the chaos is Ilium where humans lashed out against machines.

He had smashed a traffic safety education box - a tape-recording and loudspeaker arrangement - that had been fixed to a lamppost outside his bedroom window. Look out! it say. don't you go crossin' in the middle of the block! said Harold, mimicking the tape recording. Fo' two years, ol' loudmouth and me done lived together. An' evah last time some'un come on pas, they hits at 'lectric eye, and ol' loudmouth, he just naturally gotta shoot off his big ba-zoo. don' step out 'tween two parked cars, he say. No matter who 'tis, no matter what tahm 'tis. Loudmouth, he don' care. Jus' gotta be sociable. Cayful, now! Don' you do this! Don' you do that! Ol' mangy dog come bah at three in the mornin', and ol' loudmouth jus' gotta get his two cents wuth in. 'If you drahve, he tells that ol' mangy dog, if you drahve, don' drink! Then an' ol' drunk comes crawlin' along, and ol' gravelthroat tells him it's a city ohdnance ev'y bicycle jus' gotta have a re-flectah on the back"(Vonnegut 305)

This chaos between man and machines which is identical to the cold war in the beginning of Player Piano. Every machine visible to the humans were whacked and destroyed. The destruction of machines reveals the frustration of humans living in a flawed system of technology. Humans were fed up with the machines invading their space. The machines taking damages started to defend themselves from the human attack.

2.4 Machine Fighting against Man:

The Ilium technology built on an automated integration of machines resembling the big brother society began its counter attack on humans. The machines that observed and instructed the humans so far began to warn the human violating the anti-sabotage rules of Ilium. "All posts! All posts! Protect all property! Vandalism and looting will be punished by death. Attention all posts - can you hear me? Silence" (Vonnegut 326). The first cold war in ilium saw the breakage of machines in its industries. So, the government passed Anti-sabotage laws to protect the machines in another war or riots by the anti-machine citizens. The protestors of the ghost shirt society using the microphone were shocked by a voice out form a speaker that ordered to protect the machines in the industries. "Baker Dog Three, said Lasher into a microphone. Baker Dog Three. Protect all equipment in the Works until decision can be made as to proper disposition. Can you hear me, Baker DogThree? The crowd by the saloon fell silent, to hear the reply of the Moose and Elks above the shushing noise of the loudspeaker"(Vonnegut 325-326).

At first, the voice from the microphones and speakers were ignored by the anti-machine protestors, so the speakers summoned machines to sustain its authority and to save other machines attacked by humans. "People of Ilium! boomed a voice from the sky. People of Ilium! Paul, Lasher, Finnerty, and von Neumann hurried to the opening where the floor-to-ceiling window had once been. Looking up,

they saw a robot helicopter in the sky, its belly and blades reddened by the fires below. People of Ilium, lay down your arms! said its loudspeaker"(Vonnegut 330-331). The society integrated by intelligent machines have become a network of machines that has invisibly grown into a powerful technological threat. The machine integrated society casts a machine to stop the violence on them: the robot helicopter warns the protestors to drop their chaos, if not the machine will call out tanks and armed machines from the army to stop the human violence: "We could bomb and strafe you, but that is not the American way. We could send in tanks, but that is not the American way. This is an ultimatum: surrender your false leaders and lay down your arms within the next six hours, or suffer in the ruins of your own making for the next six months, cut off from the rest of the world. Click."(Vonnegut 331). Marvin Minsky mentions the problematic transformation of thinking machines in the army as war technology:

The first AI system of large capability will have many layers of poorly understood control structure and obscurely encoded "knowledge." There are serious problems about such a machine's goal structure: If it cannot edit its high-level intentions, it may not be smart enough to be useful, but if it can, how can the designers anticipate the machine it evolves into? In a word, I would expect the first self-improving AI machines to become "psychotic" in many ways, and it may take many generations ... to "stabilize" them, (Warwick 116).

As Marvin Misky mentions, the AI machines in *Player Piano* has grown to become a rebellious machine against humans.

3. Conclusions

Kurt Vonnegut has hypothesized the problem of entrusting power to machines. *Player Piano* begins with the end of a cold war, and ends with the beginning of another war by machines, this time machine fight directly with humans. In the first cold war, machines assisted humans to fight for their advancement. In the second cold war machines came out to fight with humans to protect their colonised territory. The chaos at the end of *Player Piano* is not resolved, the ghost shirt society fighting the machines have become the vigilantes of the machines. The plot does not end the war between humans and machines. The novel ends as a cliff hanger without showing the aftermath or the end of the war. *Player Piano* ends by depicting the war between man and machines to denote a supposed posthuman situation where machines are predicted intelligent and powerful threat to humans.

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Citation in text
Direct quote:
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Appendix A

Fear of losing human skill

The discussion of losing employment in Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano* by implementing machines in a industry or any work place leads to think about the fear of losing human skill. Human beings like machines develop every generation by cultivating a set of skills which are natural. For instance, painting an art is a natural skill which could be replaced by a software that digitally create an art. Likewise, the photography skill of a human will deteriorate when the camera gets more enhanced modes to capture pictures. The vision of the photographer to capture innovative style of photos will decrease. So, the over advancement of any technology to perfect its purpose will unconsciously reduce the use and improvement of the skill of the user and the non-user. The machine advanced with a particular skill is feared to erase that skill in a human when it is overpowered and overused.

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