



Life in Altered Reality: A Post-Humanistic Approach to William Gibson's *Neuromancer*

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Abstract

The creator of this human race has offered 'free will' to them. Like the image of the creator, the human race tries to create their creations in the form of art, literature, music, sculptures, and technological inventions such as the second brain and artificial intelligence. Many science fictions were written on these subject matters. Isaac Asimov's I, Robot talked about the conscience of mechanical robots and the domination of artificial intelligence. Plenty of films were made on these scripts. Some scientists believe that the extreme level of technology could start to control the users like the Skynet mentioned in the Terminator franchise. Very few science fictions are talking about the advancement of technology as close to the present reality. William Gibson's "Neuromancer" is a kind of novel that talked about actual reality and altered reality such as digital reality. The wonderful thing is this novel was published in 1984 before the era of the internet, smartphones, applications and bots. After 38 years many of the concepts that he discussed in this novel are about to become practical in this 21st century. In this case, this novel was ahead of its time. At present, Facebook is developing a virtual world called 'metaverse', it is a type of virtual reality where socialization can occur without leaving our place. If the whole world is occupied under this kind of technology, man could have double identities such as living in the physical world and altered reality with their A.I. generated avatars. This paper is about exploring the lived experience of many characters under the perspective of Post-humanism on both realities as mentioned in the novel. The end of the presence of humans, in reality, would open the gate for Post-humanism.

Keywords: Post-humanism, Alternate reality, William Gibson, *Neuromancer*.

Introduction

In this world, men and women are born free. They are free from all types of boundaries such as race, colour, religion, language, inequality and nationality. All these symbols are registered in their mind through their families, society and the nation. However, there are many numbers of magnanimous souls who always think about the sufferings of fellow humans. This is a random act of kindness found in Jesus, Marx, and Mahatma Gandhi. They lived by their principles and ethics. Common men and women of France turned their nation into the French Revolution in 1789. In the present era, humanism is moving beyond theism and irrational thoughts. It tries to make a peaceful world for the people to choose their desired life. In this humanism, there is no interference of technology and other powers. If there is a role of powerful technology which is about to take control of human destiny, that comes under the term post-humanism. When the intelligence of men is transferred into artificial intelligence, technology will be attributed with the right to distinguish good and evil. In *The Posthuman Condition: Consciousness Beyond the Brain*, author Pepperell says,



Humans have imagined for a long time that the ability to develop and control technology was one of the defining characteristics of our condition, something that assured us of our superiority over other animals and our unique status in the world. Ironically, this sense of superiority and uniqueness is being challenged by the very technologies we are now seeking to create, and it seems the balance of dominance between human and machine is slowly shifting (p.3).

William Ford Gibson was born in 1948. A living author from American – Canadian literature and known for many science fiction and scientific terms such as cyberspace. His famous work *Neuromancer* received many awards such as the Philip K. Dick Award. Like the present thieves who steal money, this novel talks about a data thief ‘Case’. Even in the advanced world, exploiting the freedom of civilians continues and their life and freedom are converted as a product to be sold. Human values are decentralized after the dominance of A.I. bodies. The author named the virtual world as ‘Matrix’ where one experiences an altered reality. After two years, in 1986, he published another novel *Count Zero* which had the plot set of *Neuromancer*. Much of his fiction such as *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988) is also about the influence of technology over humans. Since the dawn of the industrial revolution, man started to share his knowledge with machines and robots gradually. This twenty-first century is running over the Web 3.0 industry where the industry control is controlled by advanced software. In a book titled *Marketing in the Moment: The Practical Guide to Using Web 3.0 Marketing to Reach Your Customers First*, Tasner says about the role of virtual reality,

Virtual reality worlds are places users visit to interact with others from around the world in a 3-D setting. Meetings are being conducted in these spaces, and trade shows are being replaced with virtual reality shows. Examples include Second Life and Fun sites. (p. 12)

This shows that almost the role of humans in this earth would be eliminated or altered and man will be left to live only with flesh and bones without the power of thinking. If he or she wants to consume real happiness, they have to construct an alternate reality. This is the subject matter of this novel. In this novel, the main character Henry Dorsett Case the console cowboy is looking for help to remove poison from his body to connect with the altered reality ‘Matrix’. The death of Linda Lee is altered by the case by transferring her memories into the matrix. Molly the razor girl’s hands and nails are altered or modified with razor blades. Colonel Willis Corto is made as deformed in a military operation and later saved by higher officials. This character lives as two personalities in the existing reality. Riviera the character removed the left side lung and placed a technology that will project holographic images to distract the attention of others. Moreover, Julie, Ashpool and Lady 3Jane are some unusual characters who have extended their life by breaking reality such as increasing their life span and cloning themselves. These phenomenal situations can happen in other realities only with the power of advanced technology. This paper explores these unusual realms through the way how the above-mentioned characters are portrayed along with the future technology. Some are living in virtual reality, some are living with partial mechanical bodies in existing reality and some are made as cyborgs.

Life in Post-humanist Reality

In this fiction, Henry Dorsett's Case is projected as the main character. He is introduced as a ‘console cowboy’. This refers to the practice of stealing in the cyber world. His profession is mentioned as a ‘digital thief’. Apart from this, this character is experiencing trauma from its past. From his last project, his whole body's nerves were poisoned and he was counting his days. “You have fifteen toxin sacs bonded to the lining of various main arteries,



Case. They're dissolving. Very slowly, but they are dissolving. Each one contains a mycotoxin." (Gibson 50) Unlike the present century, there is no need to die in a God-made reality. This novel talks about a second chance to live in an altered reality where one can surpass diseases, injuries and even death. He considers his body as a pile of meat. He uses cyberspace as a digital toxin to overcome his pain. "For Case, who'd lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall. In the bars he'd frequented as a cowboy hotshot, the elite stance involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. The case fell into the prison of his own flesh." (Gibson 6)

According to Case, living in the matrix is like living in the form of a pure soul where he cannot feel pain and agony. This is how this character lives in his altered reality. But in the real world, Case hates his body like a soul trapped in a prison. Instead of trying euthanasia, technology offers a different solution to the sufferings of the people like healing. Gibson mentioned the concept of surveillance through technology in the first chapter. This is not about the altered reality but changing the existing reality in human life like Orwell's 'Big Eye'. "M-G employees above a certain level were implanted with advanced microprocessors that monitored mutagen levels in the bloodstream." (Gibson 11) Gibson did not hint at the revelation from the Bible. But he predicted this chip technology 38 years back. At present, amputees and patients with long time incurable diseases are advised to take wearables to monitor their health. Soon, it may control our free reality from a remote location. Thus the chances to access the other reality would be restricted.

There was a man in The Bible named Methuselah who was gifted with a long life span of 969 years. In reality, it is not possible, but the character Julius Deane in this novel is 135 years old. The appearance of him is not so old but young, only his age is so old. This is like surpassing death in reality, extending lifespan and starting to live a long life in an altered reality. This is nearly equal to resurrection without tasting the death. It is done to him with a special serum. If nature is considered as the attribution of reality, this character altered it by stopping ageing. Unlike going to Matrix, Julius modified his DNA to keep his body alive for a long period. "His primary hedge against ageing was a yearly pilgrimage to Tokyo, where genetic surgeons reset the code of his DNA, a procedure unavailable in Chiba." (Gibson 13) Like Julius, there is another character named 'Molly. This character is nearly like a half-human and a half-mechanical robot. Like the *Robocop* movie, Molly undergoes surgery to turn her biological body into a partial robot. She turned her nails into razor blades. They are modified like beasts' paws. She can retract and extend her nails when it is necessary. "Her hands, in the pockets of the pink coat, were flexing systematically through a series of tension-release exercises. It took him a few seconds to realize that the peculiar sensation at the tips of her fingers was caused by the blades as they were partially extruded, then retracted." (Gibson 66) Most of her body parts are upgraded to a personal computer to obtain super strength that a human cannot.

As per the story, Molly's body is used as an avatar to be operated in this physical world from the Matrix. Her body reflects the movements and follows the commands from Matrix streamed by Case through her simstim unit to accomplish the project. This is not possible for normal humans. Among all the characters in this fiction, Molly is the only character who could exist both in reality and altered reality which is the virtual world. Her character is like a reversed version of game world avatars. Instead of performing in the virtual world, she can reflect on the virtual world's actions in the real world. Her physical modifications are incredible to the present technologies that exist in the medical world.



Conclusion

William Gibson's *Neuromancer* was way ahead of the time in the last decades of the twentieth century. His AI 'Wintermute' is constructed as an overpowered character over the other real-world characters. Gibson has presented this story that our future society would be ruled and controlled by the force of artificial intelligence. This is nearly like our current reality is under the supervision of algorithm-based virtual reality where we cannot justify the term consciousness. D Majumdar and HK Chattopadhyay say in *Artificial intelligence and its impacts on the society*, "AI is also posing vital implications to the general citizens by providing them enormous help in a cost-effective manner as well as posing some entangled challenges even jeopardizing their basic rights including privacy infringement." (p 306) So, his human characters who have consciousness try to sell it to their technology and turn themselves into biological machines. They would like to consume pleasure from artificial reality rather than god made. Michael Cheng-Tek Tai says in *The Impact of artificial intelligence on human society and Bioethics*, "History tells us that human is always looking for something faster, easier, more effective, and convenient to finish the task they work on; therefore, the pressure for further development motivates humankind to look for a new and better way of doing things." (p 340) Since the era of homo sapiens, mankind was focusing on reducing the burdens behind hunting and protecting. Thus they invented tools and weapons so that in the era of the internet, mankind is trying to erase the obstacles of day-to-day life through the power of technology.

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