Reimagining Humanity in Ruins: A Post-humanist Analysis of Select Post-Apocalyptic Fiction

T. Nivethitha & B. Winmayil

Abstract

The emerging genre of post-apocalyptic narratives facilitates contemporary writers to speculate the possible consequences after a catastrophe, which indirectly alerts the readers to be conscious of their present planetary crisis and bleak future. The human race has been working towards enhancing its status in the ecosystem hierarchy through scientific innovations such as genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, virtual reality and cyborgs. Such hyper-real advancements in science fiction present scenarios where the entire human race can vanish through the illusion of evolution. This paper aims to apply the ideologies of transhumanism in select post-apocalyptic fiction and analyze the future consequences of human enhancement in selected science fiction texts: Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines* (2001); Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2011); and Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011). These novels transport readers into worlds shaped by technological upheavals. This study explores the ethical concerns around unchecked technological advancements and their impact on ecological and social systems. Ultimately, this paper urges society to reflect on whether transhumanist progress uplifts humanity or contributes to its decline.

Keywords: Post-apocalyptic literature, transhumanism, genetic modification, cyborgs, virtual reality.

Introduction

Post-apocalyptic narratives envision worlds radically altered by cataclysmic events—be it natural disasters, pandemics, technological

 ISSN: Print 2229-6557, Online 2394-9244

collapse, or societal breakdown. They explore not just the fragility of civilization but also the resilience of the human spirit. The Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings (1945) and the Chernobyl disaster (1986) had not only taken many human lives but inflicted long-term damage to the environment through radiation. Such real-life disasters have instigated many writers to critique the illusion of advanced science through post-apocalyptic fiction; providing critical insights into the consequences of unchecked technological advancements and environmental destruction and raising questions about the ethics of human evolution. This genre mirrors the contemporary fears and questions whether humans can rebuild or fall again by repeating the past mistakes. Hicks (2016) in *The Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Twenty-first Century: Modernity Beyond Salvage* lists out the general conventions of post-apocalyptic genre fiction:

> Post-apocalyptic genre fiction, including some or all of the widely recognized conventions of that form: ragged bands of survivors; demolished urban environments surrounded by depleted countryside; defunct technologies; desperate scavenging; poignant yearning for a lost civilization, often signified by the written word; and extreme violence, including cannibalism, enacted by roving gangs of outlaws. (p. 6)

Post-apocalyptic settings like abandoned old buildings, eerie dark places, devastated ecosystems and islands stripped of human habitation portray a picture of possible catastrophes. This visualization suitably alarms the readers about their regular environmental abuse which has brought the planet to the brink. Hicks (2016) defines post-apocalyptic fiction as a "material that depicts what might be called 'globalized ruin' … that portray catastrophe … As these texts remind us, one of the most potent and distinctive aspects of our own contemporary apocalyptic fears" (p. 7).

Understanding Post-humanism and Transhumanism

With each new scientific innovation, the human race has been working to enhance its status within the ecosystem hierarchy. Emerging developments in artificial intelligence, robotics, and genetic engineering have taken the evolution of humanity to another level. It was Ihab Hassan, an American critic, who was the first to use the term 'post-humanism' in his work *Prometheus as Performer: Towards a Post-humanist Culture* (1977). The proponents of post-humanist discourse have rejected the ideas of classical humanism and anthropocentrism, challenging

traditional ideas of being human. Donna J. Haraway in *A Manifesto for Cyborgs* (1985) introduced the concept of a dominant human as an artificially modified cyborg. The progress of humans with modified artificial organs using nanotechnology, genetics, or cybernetics has led to the rise of a post-humanist future. These hypothetical possibilities of human enhancement can make clones, robots, AI and humans coexist in post-humanist future. In the first wave of post-humanism, N. Katherine Hayle (1999) pinpointed the lack of demarcation between humans and computers in the cyber world, where cybernetics is used by humans to interact with technology. In the second wave of post-humanism, the focus shifted towards the distinction of humans and animals. Cary Wolfe's *Animal Rites* (2003) emphasized the possibility of human control over non-human beings. Posthuman theorists from a different era gave multiple perceptions on it as they continue to liberate humans into technologically enhanced intelligent beings.

The post-human concept of improving the human civilization gave birth to a philosophical theory called transhumanism, which seeks the help of science to elevate the status of the human race. Julian Huxley, the first director general of UNESCO, coined the term transhumanism in a lecture *Knowledge, Morality and Destiny* (April 1951), which was later published in his collection of essays, *New Bottles for New Wine* (1957). According to Max More (1990), transhumanism is a "class of philosophies that seek to guide us towards a posthuman condition. Transhumanism shares many elements of humanism, including a respect for reason and science, a commitment to progress, and a valuing of human (or transhuman) existence in this life rather than in some supernatural afterlife" (p. 1).

In future, genetic engineering and bio-engineered human genomes may produce brainy superhumans or transhumans; advanced AI and robotics may introduce human-machine cyborgs. Such adroitness of technology may even extend the lifespans of humans.

> Transhumanism … appears to be everything anyone could wish for: a future where our senses, intellect, emotions will be technologically enhanced right off the human scale of function and performance, and we will either have bodies so merged with computer and robotic augmentation and power that we will be able to upgrade them into an endless future. (Bostrom, 2005, p. 10)

It is a human tendency to idolize transhumans, whether it is a marvel

 ISSN: Print 2229-6557, Online 2394-9244

superhero in the west or *Mahabharata* epic heroes in the east. Fascination towards extraordinary skills and immortal future has raised the advocacy of transhumanism in literature through science fiction. In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) children are produced in laboratories through cloning as transhumans; embryos in tubes injected with designed hormones, conditioned to eliminate human emotions, and eradicate diseases and old age, yet the society remains unsuccessful in defeating death. Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003, 2009, 2013) depicts how humans live along with bio-engineered humanoids called 'Crakers', vegetarians with short life span. 'Crakers' are transhumans with human DNA, a clear paradox of human evolution.

Science fiction with transhumanism narratives stand as a platform to visualize an advanced future with enhanced techno-humans, whose intellect surpasses that of humans through the evolution of artificial intelligence, virtual reality, nanotechnology, cyborgs, and genetic engineering. Such hyperreal advancements in science fiction portray possible catastrophes in which the entire human race could vanish under the illusion of evolution. This paper analyzes the aspects of transhumanism in select science fiction texts—Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines* (2001), Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2011) and Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011)—which predict scenarios of a dystopian future for mankind. These novels highlight the evolution of humanity in a post-apocalyptic context exploring how technological advancements impact posthuman condition. By reimagining human survival, these novels provide profound insights into the existential consequences of a world in ruins as well as the potential futures awaiting humanity.

The Cyborgs of *Mortal Engines*

Philip Reeve's maiden novel *Mortal Engines* (2001) was originally planned as a single book but sequels followed and they are together named as *Hungry Cities Quartet*. Its sequels are: *Predator's Gold* (2003), *Infernal Devices* (2005), and *A Darkling Plain* (2006). *Mortal Engines* is set in a dystopian future where a cataclysmic event of a sixty-minute war involving advanced weaponry has devastated civilization and much of the earth. The remnants of humanity have created mobile cities competing for resources in a practice called 'Municipal Darwinism'. It reflects the backdrop of post-apocalyptic themes, where survivors are adapting a brutal lifestyle after a global collapse.

In *Mortal Engines*, humans live in cyborgian cities, which move like a giant vehicle. A cyborgian city in imagined future is "a hybrid of machine and organism" (McCallum, 2009, p. 214). Reeve describes the city as a living organism in a machine form, through metaphors and similes: "the pistons in the engine-room beat as eagerly as his heart, the wheels and tracks race like his thoughts, rushing toward the wall" (Reeve, p. 247). The graphic representation of the city resembles a human body with personified senses. London city's lower part is 'turd tanks', where excrements are flushed and recycled; the middle part 'gut' is where captured prey (smaller or weaker cyborgian cities) gets dismantled; the uppermost part 'guildhall, the engineerium' is where intellectuals make serious decisions. "Cities have become virtual living machines, which move around, carving up the physical landscape, the larger and stronger, pirate-like devouring smaller and weaker cities, in order to extract any usable material" (McCallum, 2009, p. 213).

In the novel, London city is the largest cyborgian city, which preys on other smaller cities like a predator and brutally dismantles them for resources such as metals, fuels and engines. The inhabitants of London gather as mobs to witness the thrill of hunting smaller cyborgian cities. The titanic tracks of the cities (rovers) on the uninhabitable wasteland (earth's surface) evidences massive environmental devastation through new technologies, where, "The United States has been erased as a world power, and is now an uninhabited wasteland, 'Dead Continent" (McCallum, 2009, p. 213). This seems to be bringing alive the British environmentalist James Lovelock's prediction that, "Cyborgs will replace humans and remake the world" (Powell, 2019). Cyborgs blur the boundary between humans and machines. Transhumanism is based on the concept human evolution is happening when its ability is replaced with powerful machines. Lovelock, remarks, "The understanders of the future will not be humans but what I choose to call cyborgs that will have designed and built themselves" (2019, p. 27).

Genetic Mutations in *Divergent*

Genetic mutations are common in bio-medical research to enhance human evolution especially to fight against diseases and aging factors. "Chinese Scientist, Jian-kui HE, claims to have produced the world's first germ line gene-edited babies, and that these babies are naturally immune to the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)" (Li et al., 2019,

p. 32). This has created a controversy over the ethics of editing human genomes, which may eradicate hereditary traits of real humans in the future. In literature, the consequences of unethical genetic mutation have been imagined with multitude dystopian scenarios. The American writer Veronica Roth's visualisation of advanced genetics in *Divergent* (2011) exposes the effects of genetic manipulation vividly. Veronica Roth is well known for her dystopian series: *Divergent* (2011), *Insurgent* (2012), *Allegiant* (2013), *Four: A Divergent Collection* (2014), and *We can be Mended* (2017). *Divergent* is set in a future Chicago which has faced purity war, a global conflict resulting from genetic modifications intended to enhance human traits and ending up in a fragmented society with five faction names designed to restore genetic purity and prevent future conflicts. It represents an attempt to maintain order and rebuild civilization in the aftermath of global devastation which highlights the post-apocalyptic survival.

In *Divergent*, human genomes are altered by the Bureau of Genetic Welfare to achieve the status of genetically pure, devoid of evil traits but ends up with damaged genes. Soon the genetically damaged individuals are placed as specimens in Chicago city in an experiment to study their new personality traits. Individuals are treated as mere humanoid specimens for experiments; categorized in faction system under controlled condition; dehumanized, and examined through constant surveillance. The programming of five factions for the bio-engineered humanoids is arranged with human personalities: Abnegation–selfless caretakers; Amity–peacemakers; Dauntless–thrill seeking soldiers; Candor–honest lawmakers; Erudite–intellectual techies. These transhumanist dreams of perfecting genomes are high risk attempts to raise the natural status of humans. But the problem is that though the individuals in Chicago are considered mere humanoid specimens, they are not programmed machines; they too possess emotions, and desires which lead to a revolution for freedom. The human in them cannot be suppressed.

> Cloning and inheritable genetic alterations can be seen as crimes against humanity of a unique sort: they are techniques that can alter the essence of humanity itself (and thus threaten to change the foundation of human rights) by taking human evolution into our own hands and directing it toward the development of a new species. (Annas et al., 2002, p. 153)

The dreams of transhumanism can be used to eradicate disabilities in people, but the reconstruction of humans by playing the role of God may

lead to negative consequences in the future. If such genetic alterations are experimented on human embryos, the future may lose real humans and their emotions. Leon Kass remarks: "The ability to select the genes of our children and to create so-called designer babies will, it is claimed, corrupt parent, who will come to view their children as mere products" (2002, p. 497).

In *Divergent*, the truth serum in Candor reflects the use of psychedelic drugs (Sodium Thiopental which inhibits the brain from lying) by police on criminals. The artificial serum in the novel incites the amygdala neuron in the brain, which is responsible for emotions, 'the serum stimulates the amygdala, which is the part of the brain involved in processing negative emotions-like fear and then induces a hallucination" (Roth, 2011, p. 231). The serum triggers nightmares and unconscious fears in the form of hallucinations. It is monitored through electrodes and the reactions are transmitted as computer data to the admin with the measurements of heart rate and breathing rate. Tris, the protagonist of the novel shares her traumatic experience with the serum: "I feel the trademark symptoms of fear, sweaty palms, racing heart, tightness in my chest, dry mouth, a lump in my throat, difficulty breathing" (Roth, 2011, p. 232). Serums with tracking chips have been injected by Erudite on Dauntless to create a humanoid army, who are controlled with computer order. "They move in unison, the same foot forward as the same arm swings back … the rhythm feels strange' (Roth, 2011, p. 417). Injecting such serum can dehumanise individuals without emotions, and creates psychological side effects. In 2015, Doug Weber, a program manager at the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), stated in an interview with *Mic* that anxiety medicines which inhibit fear can be "useful for our war fighters who have to deal with very stressful environments" (Stein, 2015). The elimination of fear in soldiers creates consequences: it may make them transhumans with fearless and powerful traits but the fearless qualities in them also prevent them from obeying the laws.

Virtual Reality as an Alternate Universe: *Ready Player One*

As the first quarter of the twenty-first century reaches its completion, AI and its hidden algorithms seem to be taking over our day-to-day existence. The idea of enhancing humans with the help of AI can make many jobs effortless, but the constant surveillance of intellectual machines is extremely dangerous for mankind. It is the social media

that now determines the hobbies and ideologies of the human mind. Computer networking, gadget addiction and virtual reality games have become hobbies for youngsters and severely reduce human interaction. "Virtual reality presents a world where human experience is not constrained by the physicality of the body; the mind can roam free, and the distinction between what is real and what is imagined becomes increasingly difficult to discern" (Heim, 1993, p. 45). These new paradigms of virtual reality have become a sad reality and it is ironic to get trapped in the illusion of one's own creation. Advanced technological creations can improve the human lifestyle according to transhumanism, but the consequences behind it are blurred. Science fiction texts visualize future scenarios with sceptical speculations where virtual reality and AI overtakes their creators. In American science fiction writer Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2011), individuals find themselves immersed in virtual reality games and possess personal virtual avatars with their choice of voice, gender and appearance as digital identities. The novel was also turned into a film (Warner Bros., 2018), the screenplay of which is set in the year 2045. Here the real world is shown to be in an undesirable state of poverty, overpopulation, social unrest and environmental depletion. It reflects the aftermath of global systemic failures where humanity taking refuge in virtual reality abandoning real-world issues. The virtual reality universe OASIS helps the characters to escape from the harsh realities of their physical world. The setting highlights the ongoing tension between the dying real world and digital utopia. Cline's portrayal of fragmented post-apocalyptic society reflects contemporary anxieties about the future of technology which has the power of progress and control over humans.

The artificial intelligence of the virtual game is called OASIS, where the advancements in virtual reality have surpassed the real world. "The OASIS lets you be whoever you want to be. That's why everyone is addicted to it" (Cline, 2011, p. 171). Wade befriends a muscular man called Aech in OASIS, who is later identified as an African American female in reality. Using VR goggles for high definition of vision, noise cancelling headsets, suits and sensors over the body teleport the players completely into the virtual world while playing the game. They feel their complete presence in virtual night clubs and battlefields through the senses of touch, and pain. "The problem with video games is not that they are inherently bad or that they encourage escapism, but that

they are often designed in ways that discourage players from thinking about how they can apply the positive skills and experiences they gain in the game world to real-world challenges" (McGonigal, 2011, p. 125).

In *Ready Player One,* James Halliday the creator of OASIS has designed the virtual universe as a kind of escape from his failed love life in reality. OASIS allows game coins as virtual currencies that allow players to purchase game related supplies. This reflects the usage of blockchains or cryptocoins in our real world where currencies are digitalized. The security threat of digital currencies in advanced future is questionable. The OASIS game gives clues for the players to find the 'Easter Egg', which awards digital currencies. This future vision of gaining wealth through virtual games is not too far in reality. Such possibilities can change humans to look for employable offers in the virtual universe; they may not like to leave home while they gain everything by sitting at home. A virtual environment may sound distant, but advanced AI, in collaboration with corporate businesses is raring to alter our future. People are already lost in the world of their technical gadgets, living their life online.

Conclusion

The powers and immortality of cyborgs in Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines* can draw fascination, but the traumatic risks and consequences behind it can destroy the entire human race. The idea of the transhuman/cyborgs may be attractive in allowing humans to overcome disabilities, but the extreme greed of evolution to reconstruct the anatomy of humans would eliminate the entire race. The humanoid specimens in Veronica Roth's *Divergent* are often injected with serums to test their emotions and intellectual levels. Transhumanist ideas of inventing serums to measure emotions may result in danger and dehumanize the human race without any feelings. The characters in Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* use virtual reality games as an escape from their harsh social and political realities. The conception of an alternate universe in the future cautions us to the reduction of human beings to mere artificial organisms. The apocalyptic narratives, thus, when analysed through a post-humanist lens, explore the themes–critique of anthropocentrism, the integration of humans and technology, and the redefinition of identity and ethics in a transformed world. They challenge and redefine traditional conceptions of humanity, identity and survival in the wake of societal collapse.

 ISSN: Print 2229-6557, Online 2394-9244

References

Annas, G. J., Andrews, L. B., & Isasi, R. M. (2002). Protecting the endangered human: Toward an international treaty prohibiting cloning and inheritable alterations. *American Journal of Law & Medicine, 28*(2–3), 151–178. https://scholarship.law.bu.edu/faculty_scholarship/55/

Atwood, M. (2013). *MaddAddam*. Nan A. Talese/Doubleday.

Bostrom, N. (2005). A history of transhumanist thought. *Journal of Evolution and Technology, 14*(1), 10. https://www.transhumanist.com

Cline, E. (2011). *Ready player one*. Crown.

Haraway, D. J. (1985). A manifesto for cyborgs: Science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s. *Socialist Review, 15*(2), 65–107. https://doi.org/10.1080/07075638508410699

Hassan, I. (1977). Prometheus as performer: Toward a posthumanist culture? *The Georgia Review, 31*(4), 830–850.

Hayles, N. K. (1999). *How we became posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics*. University of Chicago Press.

Heim, M. (1993). *The metaphysics of virtual reality*. Oxford University Press.

Hicks, H. J. (2016). *The post-apocalyptic novel in the twenty-first century: Modernity beyond salvage*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Huxley, A. (1932). *Brave new world*. Chatto & Windus.

Huxley, J. (1951). Knowledge, morality and destiny [Lecture]. UNESCO.

Huxley, J. (1957). *New bottles for new wine*. Harper & Row.

Kass, L. (2002). *Life, liberty, and defense of dignity: The challenge for bioethics*. Encounter Books.

Li, J.-r., Walker, S., Nie, J.-b., & Zhang, X.-q. (2019). Experiments that led to the first gene-edited babies: The ethical failings and the urgent need for better governance. *Journal of Zhejiang University-SCIENCE B (Biomedicine & Biotechnology), 20*(1), 32–38. https://doi.org/10.1631/jzus.B1800624

McCallum, R. (2009). Ignorant armies on a darkling plain: The new world disorder of global economics, environmentalism, and urbanization in Philip Reeve's Hungry Cities. *International Research in Children's Literature, 2*, 210–227. https://doi.org/10.3366/E1755619809000702

McGonigal, J. (2011). *Reality is broken: Why games make us better and how they can change the world*. Penguin Press.

More, M. (1990). Transhumanism: Toward a futurist philosophy. http://www.primenet.com/~maxmore

Powell, C. S. (2019, August 25). Cyborgs will replace humans and remake the world, James Lovelock says. *NBC News*. https://www.nbcnews.com/mach/science/cyborgs-will-replace-humans-remakeworld-james-lovelock-says-ncna1041616

Reeve, P. (2001). *Mortal engines*. HarperCollins.

Reeve, P. (2003). *Predator's gold*. HarperCollins.

Reeve, P. (2005). *Infernal devices*. HarperCollins.

Reeve, P. (2006). *A darkling plain*. HarperCollins.

Roth, V. (2011). *Divergent*. HarperCollins.

Roth, V. (2012). *Insurgent*. HarperCollins.

Roth, V. (2013). *Allegiant*. HarperCollins.

Roth, V. (2014). *Four: A divergent collection*. HarperCollins.

Roth, V. (2017). *We can be mended: A divergent epilogue*. HarperCollins.

Stein, J. (2015, December 16). The Department of Defense wants to use science to make soldiers literally fearless. *Mic*. https://www.mic.com/articles/121287/the-department-of-defense-wants-to-use-science-to-make-soldiers-literally-fearless

Wolfe, C. (2003). *Animal rites: American culture, the discourse of species, and posthumanist theory*. University of Chicago Press.

T. Nivethitha *is a PhD Research Scholar in English at V.V.Vanniaperumal College for Women, affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Virudhunagar, Tamil Nadu. Her area of interest is science fiction.*

nivethitha140596@gmail.com

B. Winmayil *is Assistant Professor of English at V.V.Vanniaperumal College for Women, Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Virudhunagar, Tamil Nadu. Her areas of interest are postcolonial literature and gender studies. She is interested in writing poems and film reviews.*

winmayil@vvvcollege.org

 ISSN: Print 2229-6557, Online 2394-9244