

A Story That Resonates: Reading Forster’s “The Machine Stops” Amidst the Pandemic

Sharada Allamneni

Professor, Humanities Division,
Vignan’s Foundation for Science, Technology & Research,
(Deemed to be University), Andhra Pradesh, India
E-mail: allammenisharada@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to show how E.M. Forster’s short story, “The Machine Stops,” written more than a century ago resonates with contemporary readers, particularly in the current Covid pandemic period. Written in 1909, the dystopian future world that Forster imagined at the turn of the last century, appears to be already here. Adopting a close analytical reading of the story, the paper will discuss Forster’s critique of the techno-progress of the modern age, and the potential inversions it can cause to mankind with the growing and excessive reliance on Science. The story primarily explores the aspect of alienation and dehumanization that is characteristic of most techno-societies of the modern age. Forster asks pertinent questions on how we, as humans choose to live in space and time, and how we establish our relationships with the Other as well as the rest of the world mediated through technology. Like most works of the Sci-fi genre, the story registers some of the major contradictions of its time. It suggests Forster’s dreadful premonition that machines are supplanting humans and altering relational encounters. The story highlights how everyday technological interfaces can change the way we perceive the world and the possibility that with certain types of mediation there is a loss of connection with the Other.

Keywords

Sci-Fi; Literary Criticism; inversions; human alienation.

Introduction

Commenting on the role of art, Theodor Adorno in his *Theory of Aesthetics* opines that good art is always constructed from and reflects the contradictions of its time. By calling forth, the emotions, thoughts and judgment of the readers, Art has the potential to wake them up from the stupor of their quotidian existence (Adorno, 2004). This is particularly true of science fiction (Sci-Fi). The popular American Sci-Fi writer, Robert Heinlein, avers that only speculative fiction can interpret “the changing, headlong rush of

modern life” (Heinlein, 1964 53). Often downplaying the character, in preference to the phenomena, Sci-Fi usually tends to play with the notion of the real. By estranging readers from their familiar world, it attempts to produce some striking new perspectives (Suvin 1979). Hence, reading Sci-Fi becomes a comparative exercise, allowing the readers to “cross-relate the familiar to the strangely new” (Seed 4).

Archetypal Sci-Fi writers like Jules Verne had a romantic interest in the ideas of science and technology for human

progress. In some of his most memorable works like *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) and *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1873), Verne championed the revolution in transportation that was to help mankind conquer space and time. Arriving on the literary scene immediately after Verne, H.G Wells, a disciple of the famous scientist, Thomas Huxley presents a wholly different account through his works. Pointing to the limits of progress possible through science, in his works like *The Time machine* (1895), *The Stolen Bacillus and Other Incidents* (1895), *The Invisible Man* (1897), *The War of the Worlds* (1898), Wells while envisaging time travel, bioengineering, alien invasion etc., warns that man should not dare to surpass Nature. Unlike Verne, Wells' vision of the future as understood from his works is tempered by pessimism (Tymn 43). Nevertheless, reading Sci-Fi can be a most instructive experience. Explaining the enduring appeal of Sci-Fi, Sir Arthur. C. Clarke says that "Sci-Fi can challenge conservative mind sets through narratively embodied thought experiments" (Seed 4). By exaggerating human situations, it critiques current conditions of life, to implicitly present a model for substitutive reorganization of the society. The genre of Sci-fi, thus, evokes hope and is able to speak to different people at different times.

Having great contemporary relevance and much ahead of its time, E.M Forster's "The Machine Stops" (1909) is one such speculative story that reflects on a dystopian future where technology has come to occupy a central place in the human world, and with its dehumanizing tendency is depriving individuals of all scope for social interactions. Consequently, humans have been reduced to ineffective and feeble creatures, i.e., mere consumers leading stagnant lives over-dependent on machines. Devoid of personal relationships, humans interact with one another only through the interface of a

Machine. The events in the story "The Machine Stops" are ominous. Eventually, the Machine stops working and society comes to a grinding halt. It is clear, that Forster cautions us on the dangers of over-reliance on technology, and how it would rob us of everything that is human.

Techno-Utopia or Dystopia?

Commenting on the relatedness of science fiction with Dystopia, David Seed (1994) says that Sci-Fi looks towards the future not with a sense of optimism that man's growing mastery over nature would bring about greater happiness but with the pessimism that the more man controls nature, the less he controls himself.

Forster's story starts with an omniscient narrator introducing the readers to a subterranean setting where the denizens of the future world are housed in exclusive enclaves:

Imagine, if you can, a small room, hexagonal in shape, like the cell of a bee. It is lighted neither by window nor by lamp, yet it is filled with a soft radiance. There are no apertures for ventilation, yet the air is fresh (Forster "The Machine Stops")

Living in one such honeycomb-like cell, Vashti, the protagonist of the story is introduced as a "swaddled lump of flesh – a woman, about five feet high, with a face as white as fungus". In this world of automation, Vashti fulfils all her needs with the mere touch of a button. Here, human labour has been obviated, and the human body owing to excessive reliance on machines, bereft of all physical activity, has started to lose its natural faculties and functions. It is in an advanced state of atrophy. We are informed that Vashti's legs have become wobbly and she just about manages to totter. Not only her limbs have become dysfunctional due to disuse, but her lungs need the aid of respirators.

Cocooned in this artificial, machine-regulated environment Vashti leads an

insular life. At her bidding, the machine feeds her, bathes her, and furnishes her with a bed. Shielded from real people and experiences, lulled by the constant humming of the machine in the background, Vashti leads her days and nights alike. In such a machine-ordered world, there are no places for human emotions, familial or social ties. The omniscient narrator informs the reader that,

The clumsy system of public gatherings had been long since abandoned; neither Vashti nor her audience stirred from their rooms. Seated in her armchair she spoke, while they in their armchairs heard her, fairly well, and saw her, fairly well... (Forster 4).

Humans now have only virtual interactions, through video conferences and lectures. Vashti's son, Kuno complains that he has trouble reaching out and connecting with her. Despite Kuno's plea, Vashti is reluctant to meet her own son, because she has come to dread any kind of direct interaction. She responds to Kuno's demand by saying, "But I can see you! What more do you want?" Kuno protests to Vashti,

The Machine is much, but it is not everything. I see something like you in this plate, but I do not see you. I hear something like you through this telephone, but I do not hear you. That is why I want you to come. Pay me a visit, so that we can meet face to face, and talk about the hopes that are in my mind (2).

It is evident that under the impact of technology, even the most tender human relationship, that of a mother and a son, has taken on an impersonal turn. Family as an institution no longer exists and the traditional role of the mother, as a nurturer and care provider has been lost. It is ironic that Vashti, as a lecturer is acquainted with thousands of people whom she interacts with virtually through her video-lectures,

but she lacks the sensitivity to understand her own son's human need for motherly care and attention

Forster goes on to critique modernity and reflects how techno-progress has affected the Man-Nature relationship. There are references in the story to how the machine age, through the over-exploitation of natural resources, has brought upon environmental depredation. Looking out through her window as the airship passed over the Himalayas, Vashti finds, "The forests had been destroyed... for the purpose of making newspaper-pulp ... In the plain were seen the ruins of cities, with diminished rivers creeping by their walls" (10).

It is evident that Forster was deeply disturbed by man's rapacious desire for wealth generation through indiscriminate plundering of earth's scarce resources which William Morris later condemns as "extraction capitalism" (1999 89).

Forster thus foresees the emergence of a techno-dystopian world, where humans through an over-reliance on machines have ended up subordinating themselves to technology.

Forster's Prescience

It is no surprise that humans in Vashti's world have lost their capacity for original thought. Rene Descartes, the seventeenth-century philosopher had famously posited "*Cogito ergo sum*"- I think therefore I am. He had concluded that it is only through the act of thinking that we can be fully conscious, self-aware and autonomous. Descartes had spoken on the necessity to subject everything known to rigorous inquiry before accepting it. In Vashti's world, however, people are no longer curious to investigate or know things through direct observation or experience. One of Vashti's peers cautions, "Beware of first-hand ideas! [...] Let your ideas be second-hand, and if possible tenth-hand, for then they will be far

removed from that disturbing element — direct observation” (18).

Baudrillard, in his book *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), had reflected on how the simulacra precedes the real, rather than succeeding it. He argues how in contemporary society the simulated copy has superseded the original object. The thinking of the people is shaped and conditioned by second-hand knowledge that the machines feed them with.

Kuno, Vashti’s son rues that they have lost their ancestor’s intuition and the primordial connection to the elements of nature. The incongruity between the real world above and the simulated world, which the denizens of the story inhabit, is brought home rather sharply, by Kuno’s (mis) adventure into the outside world. Kuno laments to Vashti that “You know that we have lost the sense of space. We say ‘space is annihilated,’ but we have annihilated not space, but the sense thereof” (11). Kuno’s struggle to escape from the artificial world, where humans have lost their capacity to discern between the real and the virtual, is rather poignant. When Kuno attempts to explore the natural world above, he is branded as a traitor who dares to go against the spirit of the age. He is threatened with homelessness, i.e., permanent banishment to the world above, because nobody can survive outside the world of the machine.

In this machine-dominated world, where individuals have access to instant communication with others located far away, they have however lost the ability for real-time, genuine and face-to-face interaction. As Kuno laments, technology can only present us with an “idea” of a person, not the real thing. Vashti while speaking to her son wonders whether he is sad though she is not sure what he is feeling. “Machine does not transmit nuances of expression. It only gives a general idea of people (3).” Communication even between family

members has thus taken on an impersonal turn.

Besides, communication that was once natural or integral to human society has now become selective. The residents of Vashti’s world can choose to engage with or be cut off from others at their will. All it requires is a mere click of a switch. Vashti shuts herself off from the rest of the world, by pressing on a button. But then, the fast-paced world around her doesn’t stop even for a moment. When she turns off the self-isolation button, “all the accumulations of the last three minutes burst upon her” (4). These events portrayed in the story, resonate with the current readers, as we find parallels to our own contemporary lives; an accurate observation, of how technology has transformed our lives into one perpetual motion. In our fast-paced world, it is becoming increasingly difficult for us to be in sync with everyone else.

Leading a life in self-isolation, owing to the lack of physical contact with other humans Vashti has become estranged from fellow human beings. There are evident symptoms of xenophobia and even homophobia. On her way to meet Kuno, whilst boarding the airship Vashti totters. When the flight attendant attempts to reach out and steady her, Vashti recoils from her touch yelling furiously, “How dare you! You forget yourself! (9)”

In a world, where machines have become the measure for everything, Forster warns of grave repercussions. With the machine standardizing everything, art and architecture everywhere will become uniform. It will lead to the homogenization of cultures and divest mankind of all diversity. The machine age will strive to unify cultures and people in future may grow averse to travel, as the whole world has come to look alike. Given the reluctance to end self-isolation, citizens of the machine world, dissociated from nature will grow content to have a simulated experience. Vashti remarks of her

ancestors, “those funny old days when men went for a change of air instead of changing the air in their rooms!” (5). Habituated to their comfortable and banal lives, individuals avoid surprises. Everything happens with clock-like regularity, without any variance. Humans will become accustomed to all experiences being predictable and systematic as the machine has scheduled.

Technology drowns civilization in a sea of meaningless information. In the world of the machine, idea worship has replaced the need for empirical experiences. “Advanced thinkers, like Vashti, had always held it foolish to visit the surface of the earth” (18). She has overcome the need for direct experience, as she engages in a mere discussion of ideas and knowledge, shared in her lectures, with the aid of a system of speaking tubes. In the airship, Vashti looks at Greece and says “no ideas here, and covers it behind a metal blind” (10). The irony is not lost on the readers, who are aware that Greece is credited with being the birthplace and fountainhead of all great ideas underpinning western civilization.

Mind vs. Matter

Forster’s “The Machine Stops”, hints at the ultimate triumph of matter over mind. It will render humans incapable of solving their own problems. Vashti’s world at an advanced stage of sophistication has come to be structured as a system of subsystems, where systems are designed to run autonomously. As a result, humans have lost the capability to fix even small breakdowns, and leave them to be self-fixed by machines. Forster’s message seems to be that, people like Vashti, who follow the gospel of the Machine with blind faith are doomed. In his 1977 book, *Autonomous Technology*, Langdon Winner speaks ominously on the idea that somehow technology has got out of control and follows its own course, independent of human direction (13). Forster’s omniscient

narrator relates: “time passed, and they resented the defects no longer. The defects had not been remedied, but the human tissues in that latter day had become so subservient, that they readily adapted themselves to every caprice of the Machine” (22). This unwillingness to take action, even when there are clear signs of systemic failure, proves man’s helplessness and subservience to the machine. In such a world, where people have been fed on second-hand knowledge, they gradually lose sight of the original concepts and ideas that underlie the foundation of the design of such machine systems. If something goes wrong, the whole world, like a pack of cards will come crumbling down.

Conclusion

Such arguments resonate with a contemporary moment when our world steered by techno-progress and owing to the current pandemic of Covid-19 has virtually come to a standstill. It is evident in how technology has shaped the world in which we live today.

Written at the turn of the 20th century, when Forster wrote this story, there was an irrational exuberance stemming from advancements of modern-day science, where mankind had begun to feel invincible, in that it had learned to harness the forces of nature. The modern man was revealed in the creation of huge machines that could work for men.

It is uncanny, how Forster could accurately predict the Internet age, social media, fast travel, and instant communication. People communicating and interacting with each other through a machine is a reality now. Travel embargoes, video conferencing and zoom platforms have become the new normal. Social distancing and virtual communication with others mirror the world that Foster had foreseen more than a century ago. The story’s contemporary relevance cannot be stressed enough.

WORKS CITED

- Adorno, Theodor, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor. London: Continuum, 2004.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation* University of Michigan Press 1994
- Forster, E.M. "The Machine Stops", 1909
<https://web.cs.ucdavis.edu/~rogaway/classes/188/materials/the%20machine%20stops.pdf>.
- Heinlein. Robert A. *Of worlds beyond; The science of science fiction writing; a symposium*. Chicago: Advent Publishers, 1964.
- Morris, William. "Art and the Beauty of the Earth." *William Morris on Art and Socialism*. Ed. Norman Kelvin. Mineola: Dover, 1999. 80–94.
- Robert Lee Mahon *Bibliographies, An Annotated Bibliography of Critical Studies and Reference Works on Fantasy* Marshall B. Tymn 43. Volume 40 January 1978:2
- Seed, David. "The Flight from the Good Life: "Fahrenheit 451" in the Context of Postwar American Dystopias," *Journal of American Studies*, 28(2), 225-240, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40464168>
- Seed, David. Ed. *A Companion to Science Fiction*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2005
- Suvin, Darko. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, Yale University Press, 1979

Dr. Sharada Allamneni is a Professor and Head of the Humanities Division at Vignan's Foundation for Science, Technology & Research, India. She has three decades of rich experience in teaching language and literature. Her research interests include Postcolonial Literature, Literary Theory, Gender Studies, Environmental Ethics, ELT and Education Theory