



SCIENCE FICTION AND TECHNOPHOBIA: A STUDY THROUGH REAL NARRATIVES

GURPREET KAUR

Asst. Prof. Comm. Skills, IET Bhaddal Technical Campus, Ropar, Punjab, India



Ms. GURPREET KAUR

ABSTRACT

Science fiction has been an attraction due to its depiction of a world of themes of travel through space, robot watch, aliens, nuclear power and its effects, etc. Authors found this genre a platform to turn dreams into reality. This paper deals with the literature of real events and advancement of technology in the fiction of John Hersey and Norman Mailer, in *Hiroshima* and *Of a Fire on the Moon*, respectively. Although there are many more books dealing with themes, yet these particularly have tried to express a feeling of techno-phobia of losing our human identity, our ethics, and becoming mechanical in every sense. The attempt in this paper is to show how these real narratives give a darker side of technological growth of society.

Article Info:

Article Received:

17/06/2013

Revised from : 18/06/13

Accepted on: 04/06/2013

INTRODUCTION

Since ages, Science fiction has held the interest of the readers and viewers. Science fiction has several themes which recur throughout the bulk of its literature. Although the most influential science fiction authors are Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, but many other "science fiction" authors also led people to try to think of ways of turning dreams into reality. As travel through space and a landing on another world occurred in the second century there ushered a number of fictions depicting varied themes by different authors.

But my aim here is to throw light on the works of two authors from the American literature, in particular, who have inspired generations of people who read their works. These two authors are John Hersey and Norman Mailer who in their own ways depicted the other face of technology. The attempt is to show what

the future holds for mankind through the representation of real events and advancement of technology. Technology though has many boons but at the same time these authors have through their texts tried to depict the gloomy face of technology. Science fiction is also expressing a techno-phobia of losing our human identity, our freedom, our emotions and values, and also our lives to machines. This fiction frequently paints a dark picture of technology. From the destructive robot-witch of *Metropolis* (1926), through horrible aftermath of nuclear attacks in *Hiroshima* (1946), to the parasite Squid machines of *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003), the technologized creatures of science fiction often seek to destroy or enslave humanity. As Langdon Winner says in *Autonomous Technology* (1977), "Technology is a source of domination that effectively rules all forms of

modern thought and activity. Whether by an inherent property or by an incidental set of circumstances, technology looms as an oppressive force that poses a direct threat to human freedom” (quoted in *Technophobia!: science fiction visions of post human technology* by Daniel Dinello, 10).

DISCUSSION

Science fiction as a genre or division of literature distinguishes its fictional worlds to one genre or another from the world in which we actually live: a fiction of the imagination rather than observed reality, a fantastic literature. Most of these novels are narratives that elaborate some imaginative or fantastic premise, perhaps involving a postulated future society, encounters with creatures from another world; travel between planets or in time, traumatic impacts of technology and mechanism on the sense of community.

If we go to the history of science fiction Jules Verne is held responsible for the creation of the field of science fiction literature. In 1865, he published *De la terre a la lune*, or *From the Earth to the Moon*. In which, scientists and engineers construct a 900-foot-long cannon to shoot a space capsule to the Moon. The book was quite accurate for its day, although anybody unfortunate enough to be inside such a space capsule would have been squashed into jelly by the acceleration of launch. In his next book, Verne described the actual journey to the moon, but his characters did not land on the surface. Verne's novels were immensely successful and were translated into many languages.

Afterwards H.G. Wells came, who wrote numerous stories about subjects and journeys far beyond the scientific abilities of his time. Wells' most famous works is *The War of the Worlds*, which was initially serialized in a magazine in 1897 and published as a book the following year. The story was about an invasion of earth by Martians, who roamed the earth in giant spherical spacecraft on thin legs and destroyed everything they encountered using advanced weaponry. Humanity is apparently doomed, but eventually the Martians succumb to the microbes in Earth's atmosphere. After a few years another work of importance by Wells was published namely, *The First Men in the Moon*, which was about a journey to

the Moon where the protagonists encounter insect like creatures living underground.

Moving further, John Hersey was the celebrated writer of fact and fiction best known as the author of *Hiroshima* (1946), a graphic and compelling account of the world's first atomic bomb attack. *Hiroshima* awakened Americans to the horrors of atomic warfare. It was a literary classic in which Hersey wrote a straightforward account of what happened that day and in the year afterwards to the city's inhabitant and especially to six survivors chosen by Hersey for in depth study. *The New York Times* ran an editorial calling attention to the piece, and Lewis Gannett, writing in the *The New York Times Herald Tribune*, called *Hiroshima* “the best reporting”, of the war. Earlier, most of the material written about bombing tended to focus on the science and engineering like the force of the blast, the physical principles governing the explosion etc. but by contrast, *Hiroshima* depicted the impact of bomb on every day human being leading everyday lives. *Hiroshima* was actually a relatively objective, non-judgmental account of the bombing recreating the entire experience from the victims' point of view. Hersey moves from one personal narrative to another so that the time sequence of all the six stories is carried forward simultaneously.

Hiroshima is a non-fictional compilation of six separate interviews, written in narrative form. The structure is a chronological narrative that follows the characters' lives, from the morning the bomb fell to forty years later. Hersey jumps from one character to the next and then back again, in each chapter, to nurture the reader's interest in each sub-plot. Hersey notes that while the dropping of the bomb was over, *Hiroshima* signifies a technological breakthrough into the “atomic age”. Miss Suzuki is actually crushed and wounded by books, fairly primitive objects compared to this brand new weapon. He also notes that a number of the characters remember feeling relief at the all-clear signal that sounds at eight o'clock that morning. Just fifteen minutes later, a completely unfamiliar type of bomb is dropped on them. Hersey is showing the reader just how unexpected and undetectable the nuclear attack is for the citizens of Hiroshima.

In the second chapter, the reader sees the initial horrors of the atomic experience from the eyes of the

survivors. The significance of the book's writing style becomes clear in this context: Remarkable and shocking events are told in such a straightforward manner, without commentary, that they are almost more shocking. For example, Father Kleinsorge assumes that the Hoshijima women were dead under their collapsed house, and begins pulling out one body by the hair. When the body protests in pain, he realizes she is alive. The reader is further told that both women are largely unhurt. This small event is quite impactful for the reader after hearing of so many in Hiroshima left under their houses to burn to death, with no one even trying to ascertain if they are still alive. We realize that Father Kleinsorge could have easily left the women in their buried state since he assumes them dead. The fact that they were not only alive but also in good condition shocks us into thinking about the hundreds who no doubt live through the initial blast but perish unnecessarily for lack of rescue. It is very much clear from *Hiroshima* that the uncertainty and fear from the bomb's devastation is not simply a one-time occurrence. The survivors continue to be terrified throughout the day as they wonder what had happened. When people become nauseated, they think the Americans have dropped gas to poison them. When they hear weather planes overhead that afternoon, they fear the Americans are returning to attack them again. In addition, most surviving citizens are badly wounded and nauseated, without adequate food, shelter, or water. This novel also explores the phenomenon of people's reaction to the massive suffering around them and their own survival needs. Besides Rev. Tanimoto, Father Kleinsorge, and Dr. Sasaki, the other main characters quickly become self-absorbed. The chapters describe how this is the case for the whole city. Although everywhere people are trapped under burning buildings, no one heeds their desperate cries for help. Hersey attributes this self-focused behavior on the overwhelming human need juxtaposed to people's limited powers and their state of shock. Another important author to be mentioned here is Norman Mailer, an American author and journalist, who wrote *Of a Fire on the Moon*. This book concentrates on the events of the mission as well as on Mailer's own thoughts and questions brought up by

Apollo 11. This book was written in a deal with *Life* magazine to allow him to cover Apollo 11. The fact that he comes from a completely different perspective than the personnel at NASA makes the book all the more interesting and adds an element that is non-existent in the vast majority of books on Apollo. He focuses much more on his own thoughts and views, and so the book is more a source for the opinions of one man on the Apollo missions, with lots of fear and skepticism about the technology, than a central source for technical information on the mission itself.

Basically FM has represented science in the form of NASA and Apollo 11. Here Mailer's aim was to give lively as well as factual details of the moon landing, which he does very perfectly but couldn't help criticizing the mission for its meaning and banality. For him, "something was lacking, some joy, some outrageous sense of adventure" (FM 103).

The interesting aspect of this book is that Mailer made an attempt to give the form of literature to otherwise non-romantic, flat, facts of science. Actually it is coming together of a poet and the technicality of the mechanical world lacking in mystery and any kind of subjectivity, all these features being strange to prose writing. These real events had developed "a style and structure which made them almost impossible to write about" (quoted in Harold Bloom, 153).

No doubt Mailer has dealt with many real events in the past in his nonfiction works like, *AN, The Naked and the Dead, Why are We in Vietnam*, etc, but dealing with this kind of reality handicapped him since the beginning of writing this assignment. Because he couldn't avoid the facts of NASA preventing use of his own fictional world as well as his literary techniques that is why he calls this book and this mission of its writing 'the Armageddon of Poetry' (FM...).

His narrative is also eschewed by the hard facts in forwarding the verbatim transcripts of his research in the NASA-land. Mailer puts in an artist in the scene, a persona of the poet Aquarius who has "learned to live with questions" (FM 4).

Fire is about the Poet Aquarius, Norman Mailer's persona, commissioned by a magazine to write a factual description of the moon-shot. Mailer is respectful to the power of the event and the 'NASA-land' "the very center of technological reality" (47)

which is almost overwhelming in its power, its complexity, its effectiveness. But at the same time he is more repelled by than attracted to the marvels of science and its technological creations. Mailer calls NASA land to be "An empty country filled with wonders" (103). Mailer's *Fire* is another example in which, thrusts his egotism, self display, and his shortcomings upon the readers both to show his essential honesty as well as his unexpected strengths. Mailer has used this form for creating authorial credibility to provide a center to his entire investigative enterprise.

It was the subject he had not thought about since graduating in aeronautical engineering from Harvard. Half of the book is the detailed explanation of the technology of Apollo. Many critics also had a notion that Mailer's personal philosophy was not ready to easily accommodate the role of technology. Hilton Kramer also wrote in *Book World*, "This fundamental ambivalence about the role of technology in the future of human culture is the crux of Mailer's book" (*Mailer: A Biography by Hillary Mills* 354).

Mailer was reluctant to write on this subject as it was "beyond the boundaries of his own first-hand observation, and the closest he ever came to the moon was, as we all know, his television screen" (*Mailer: A Biography by Hillary Mills* 354).

From time to time, Mailer's fears and distrust for technological advancements are visible in the book. On the first visit to NASA, Mailer called the people over there to be "wasps" who were "the most Faustian, barbaric, draconian, progress-oriented and root-destroying people on earth" (*Mailer: A Biography by Hillary Mills* 349-350). His skepticism is visible from his first question he puts to the first person to be interviewed at NASA, Dr Robert R. Gilruth, "Are you worried, Dr. Gilruth that landing on the moon may result in all sorts of psychic disturbances for us here on earth?" (*Fire* 350) Mailer calls NASA land to be "An empty country filled with wonders" (Alvin B. Kernani: *The Moon* 147). Its buildings are bleak and windowless, usually placed in some barren setting, its atmosphere air-conditioned, its procedures developed from abstract rules rather than from human needs.

To make it more practical and realistic, Mailer had to modify his romantic vision of heroism turning towards

accommodating it to the astronauts, and the purposes of the space program. But by the end of the writing Mailer was about to transform "After the moonshot, this was the first time I thought that maybe they were gonna win because they *deserved* to win, because they have been working harder at their end of the war, than we have" (*Mailer: A Biography by Hillary Mills* 352). It was also true that after *Fire* Mailer left the style of third person writing in his next books as he was worn out by it and as he says " I didn't like my own person in it-I felt I was highly unnecessary" (*Mailer: A Biography by Hillary Mills* 355).

This book is abundant with technological details of the complexity, power and realities of the NASA-land. Mailer shows the NASA-Land to be full of machines, rather computers, which have millions of parts, with perfect designs for smooth conduction, buildings are gigantic like cathedrals, and other minute descriptions making the chapters all the more interesting. Mailer tries to put in every detail of the flight he has monitored. Poet Aquarius, in *FM*, believes that no one can remain unimpressed when the great rocket leaves the launching pad to journey into space. Mailer makes use of both technical details as well as his imagination so as to link it to human world.

Describing astronauts, Mailer says that these astronauts are kept behind the glass screens so as to protect them from germs and they could be seen always from a distance. They interchange their roles with the others and function effectively and can change their parts like machines they design and operate. The decisions taken are, of the group and not the individuals. There is a vast bureaucracy, a host of contractors, an army of scientists and engineers, who work day and night like machines devoid of emotions, not giving space to any kind of friction between them. Mailer even calls them 'WASPs'. One of the astronauts, Neil Armstrong, is the type-character, coming from a small town of Ohio, being poor also in the beginning, hard working, full of determination, having courage to face all difficulties and who now has become the biggest of all pay-offs and the first man to walk on the moon. These astronauts wear plastic helmets and protective space suits being the ultimate impressions of the scientific man.

Further Mailer talks about the language used by the astronauts which is the language of the 'impersonal world of technology. Kernan calls this language to be 'so neat, so flatly delivered, so patently manufactured on Madison Avenue for the event that it reverberated with not even the slightest heartfelt spontaneous delight of a man doing something truly extraordinary' (Alvin B. Kernan 149).

Then Mailer focuses the use of jargons in NASA-land i.e. "computerese". The use of "we" was discouraged. "A joint exercise has demonstrated" became the substitution. "Other choices" became "peripheral secondary objectives". "Doing our best" was "obtaining maximum advantage possible". "Confidence" became "very high confidence level". "Ability to move" was "mobility study". "Turn off" was "disable", "turn on" became "enable" (Alvin B. Kernan 149). Some other technical terms used were EVA for "extra-vehicular activity". PTC meant "passive thermal control". VAB stood for Vehicle Assembly Building, etc. Computers were at the heart of Apollo 11. Finally Mailer has to agree that NASA being so consistent and coherent intensely is in a condition of Homeostasis and needs no purpose outside itself.

Not only Mailer but Collins, one of the astronauts, also has a doubt why they are landing on the moon, "Its been one of the failings of the Space Program... that we have been unable to delineate clearly all the reasons why we should go to the moon"(FM...). Aquarius has a feeling that it is "a meaningless journey to a dead arena in order that men could engage in the irrational activity of designing machines which would give birth to other machines which would travel to meaningless places..."

The plot of FM is the plot of NASA-land i.e. to go to the moon and return. But the inability of the NASA and astronauts to explain the reasons of their landing to the moon itself suggests the failure of this plot. This failure was felt by the Aquarius as well as the people who looked at its climax on television. The actual plot emerges as a conflict between science and poetry, NASA and Aquarius. FM is the stunning achievement due to its most impressive and detailed description of the sections dealing with vehicle assembly Building at Cape Kennedy, the blast-off of Saturn -Apollo, and the craters of the moon.

The plot of the FM is divided into three parts i.e. "Aquarius", "Apollo" and "The Age of Aquarius" being 1st, 2nd and 3rd part respectively. "Aquarius" is the Mailer's eyewitness account of the final preparation for Apollo 11 and the awesome blast-off. "Apollo", further describes the most voluminous and technical details from the inception to the recovery of the astronauts. "The Age of Aquarius" is the last part in which Mailer depicts the coverage of the mission written sitting in front of the television and which concludes thinking about the meaning of it all. Mailer begins and events his own relation to an event he describes in the middle. At the end we don't find much change in Mailer who has essentially unchanged and is still with the same unanswered questions he began with. Mailer gives about 300 pages to the description on the mechanics of Apollo 11 in the IInd part, which is supposedly the longest ever description on an event.

CONCLUSION

These narratives basically are quite suspicious of reason and science, and their authors seem to have a great distrust of machinery. Hersey has shown the most horrible effects of embracing technology in the face of nuclear bomb. Aquarius is very old-fashioned, very standard romantic poet who has, like the earth landing on the moon, landed in a world although real but for him, full of mystery and uncertainty. But still, Mailer describes the people in and outside NASA-land, gives a careful description of the objects with variety and accuracy, making use of his excellent craftsmanship. Along with that he also analyses his own thoughts and feelings so as to give meaning to the landing on the moon and bind the abstract world of science to the world of men. Some writers of this genre also have a feeling that technology may make an eventual slave of mankind. Science fiction also serves as a warning for the future, countering cyber-hype and reflecting the real world of weaponized, religiously rationalized, and profit-fueled technology.

WORKS CITED

- Roberts, Adam Charles. *Science Fiction*. Taylor & Francis, 2006.
- Luckhurst, Roger. *Science Fiction*, Polity, 16-May 2005.
- Bloom, Harold. *Norman Mailer*. Infobase Publishing, 2003

- - -. *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Norman Mailer*.
New York: Chelsea House, 1986. Print.
- DeLillo, Don. *Falling Man*. London: Penguin Books,
2007.
- Hersey, John. *Hiroshima*. Vintage Books, USA, 1946.
- Mills, Harry. *Mailer: A Biography*. New York: Empire
Books, 1982. Print.
- Dinello, Daniel. *Technophobia!: science fiction visions
of posthuman technology*. University of Texas
Press, 2005.
-