

BEING HUMAN OR BECOMING A CYBORG? EXAMINING THE TECHNO-CULTURE AND HYPERREAL REALM IN HAMID'S FICTION

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Abstract

This research article delves into the intricate interplay between humans and their obsession with machines or technological tools within the framework of Mohsin Hamid's literary oeuvre. It is an examination of Hamid's five novels with an aim to investigate the evolving concept of cyborg in the face of a rapidly growing technoculture, leading to the emergence of a hyperreal realm and a cyborgian future. By taking theoretical insights from Haraway's notion of cyborg and Baudrillard's concept of simulacrum and hyperreality, this study provides a multidisciplinary approach to understanding the complex dynamics of being human and the emergence of cyborg identities in Hamid's fiction. A critical analysis of his fiction reveals how his characters seem to navigate the blurred boundaries between organic humanity and technological augmentation, shedding light on existential dilemmas in the present era.

Introduction

About the impact of technology on human beings in the present era, Haraway (2010) states that the time in which we are living is "a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics" (p. 2191). Therefore, the present research is situated within the current theoretical as well as analytical approaches to examine the impact of excessive use of technology and extreme consumption of mass media on human beings. For an examination of man's increasing dependence on technology, five novels have been selected written by a leading British-Pakistani Anglophone author Mohsin Hamid. So far, he has published five novels namely *Moth Smoke / MS* (2000), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist / TRF* (2007), *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia / HTGFRIRA* (2013), *Exit West / EW* (2017) and *The Last White Man / TLWM*¹ (2022). Before moving on to the analysis of the selected novels, it seems pertinent to give a brief overview of the novels aforementioned. His first novel *Moth Smoke* (2000) is the story of a protagonist named Darashikoh Shehzad who after losing his job as a banker falls in love with his best friend Ozi's wife which eventually becomes the reason for his downfall. His second novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) is set in a post 9/11 world, telling the story of a Muslim Pakistani young man Changez. It covers his migratory experiences while living in United States before and after 9/11. His third novel *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) revolves around an unnamed man's journey from being a poor boy to becoming a business tycoon in an anonymous city in Asia. It also talks about his pursuit of a beautiful but nameless girl whom he could never get. His fourth novel *Exit West* (2007) centers on the story of two lovers Saeed and Nadia living in an unnamed city torn by civil war who eventually decide to escape to another country by passing through the magical doors. Moreover, in his recently published novel *The Last White Man* (2022), a white man named Anders wakes up to find himself turned brown / dark. However, it has been mentioned that he is not the only man who finds himself transformed because soon the reports of similar transformations begin to surface.

Literature Review

In this technologically advanced world, the role of mass media in human lives is

enormous. Media/ social media is governing the human unconsciousness by determining how they view the world. The internet and television have become a kind of drug for humans. Multiple social media platforms with their ability to convey a large number of signs and messages have become a means of getting knowledge of the social reality. However, these social media websites have no longer remained a means of propagating the reality but of hyperreality. And with its ability to manipulate the reality into that of hyperreality, it is creating a consumer society. By presenting only the perfect ideas, media creates the image of a fantasy world which forces us to enter and live that perfect life (Baudrillard, 1994; Baudrillard, 2000; Osborne, 2012)

¹ MS, TRF, HTGFRIRA, EW and TLWM will be used as the acronyms for referring to Hamid's novels *Moth Smoke*,

The Reluctant Fundamentalist, *Exit West* and *The Last White Man* respectively in this article. and Perry, 2012). Therefore, in line with research carried out on Baudrillard's concepts of 'simulations' and 'hyperreality', it has been observed that hyperreality develops through a process of simulation and all this occurs in a sign system in which symbolic signs are exchanged and signs or their meanings are sought in the relation of these signs with other signs in that system (Rachmawati, 2015; Astuti 2015; Dewi, 2017; Suprpto and Huda, 2018; Mawardi and Riza, 2019).

This excessive use of technology and Artificial Intelligence and the resulting simulated world and hyperreality have given rise to multiple debates regarding the growing complexity of human nature. Not only human nature, but the human body is also becoming so vulnerable to the radical changes in technology that it has become a serious matter of concern for what might be the fate of human beings in the pervasive techno-culture and increasing virtual experiences? Hayles (2005) goes on to say that "what we make and what (we think) we are coevolve" (p. 216)." Human beings' increasing dependence on technology and the resulting transformation has also been reflected in literature, particularly in science fiction. In this regard, Bruce Sterling's science fiction novel *Schismatrix* (1985) can be regarded as the earliest of this kind. Sterling depicts a world in which technology has been spread far beyond the earth and the metamorphosis in Sterling's world takes place not only on political, social, cultural and psychological level, but on physical level as well. That's why, Vint (2007) comments that Sterling presents the image of a 'posthuman' who is not grounded in any specific "embodied form", but rather as someone who is open "to change and newness, to becoming other" (p. 174). Likewise, Greg Egan sets his novel *Schild's Ladder* (2002) in a future 20,000 years ahead from now in which humans have ceased to exist. Clarke, Doel, Merrin and Smith (2007) also express this concern in the following words: "what lies at the origin of technology is the vision of a society in which machines replace man, in which humans are unnecessary. We see this vision coming true ..., which have no outside" (p.31). Similarly, Mamona et al. (2023) have analyzed an animated movie WALL-E in which humans no longer exist and a robot is assigned to clean the garbage on earth. Hence, in their research, they caution against the potential impacts of machine-driven world on earth and human life (Mamona et al., 2023).

In literature, much of the research which reflects the huge impact of technology on humans mainly centers on the Western / American novels (Hayles, 1999, 2005; Blackford, 2000;

Luckhurst, 2005; Vint, 2007). Therefore, there seems enough room for this research to take this approach on an Anglophone / Pakistani English author Mohsin Hamid's fiction. The reason behind the selection of Hamid's fiction for this study is that the exhaustive research which has been conducted so far on Hamid's fiction mainly revolves around the issues of post-colonial / diasporic identity crisis / ambivalence, class differences, psychoanalysis, globalization, migratory experiences, nationalism and racial differences (Jay, 2005; Munos, 2012; Poon, 2017; Lagji, 2018; Awan, Andleeb, and Yasin, 2016; Sami, 2020). Moreover, the recent research on Hamid's novels has also addressed multiple current issues such as gender, refugee crisis, post- modern fragmentation, magical realism and environmental issues (Mamona, Khan and Sadiq, 2022; Munir and Sumaira, 2021; Perfect, 2019; Naydan, 2019; Brauer, 2019; Mir, 2018 and Yaqoob 2010). Hence, in the light of the research discussed above, the present research is an addition to the existing literature as it is intended at taking a new stance on Hamid's fiction, that is the examination of the prevalent techno-culture and a hyperreal realm in which the characters seem to be transformed into cyborg-like entities.

Research Questions:

In the light of the discussion above, the present research is aimed at investigation of the following questions:

1. How does Hamid create a hyper-real realm in his fiction?
2. In what ways does Hamid present his characters turning into cyborgs under the influence of pervasive techno-culture?

Methodology and Theoretical Framework:

The present research is qualitative in nature and follows the method of textual analysis. Moreover, the theoretical framework to explore the proposed research questions includes Haraway's idea of 'Cyborg' along with Baudrillard's concepts of 'Simulation' and 'Hyperreality'. The term 'cyborg' was initially coined by Nathan Kline and Manfred Clynes in 1960 while referring to an entity that combines the technological and the organic into a single self-regulatory system. However, the concept of cyborg in terms of theory has been developed by Haraway which she presented in her essay 'Manifesto for Cyborgs' (1985,1991). Cyborg according to Haraway (1985) is "a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (p. 149). Elaborating on Haraway's argument, Mansfield (2000) states that the figure of cyborg which she presents is commendable in that with it, we are able to see how different domains—the political, the conceptual, the biological and the machine—interrelate with one another "where technology as a material reality and as a cultural fiction are not separable" (p. 161). Similarly, Baudrillard's concepts of simulation and hyperreality stress on the idea that in this media laden world, the constant bombardment of images has collapsed the difference between the imaginary and real, false and truth and the signifier and signified. As a result, the reality which is presented before us as real and authentic is in fact fake or simulated. That's why, Baudrillard (1994) writes that "the simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none". Moreover, while explaining Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, Srinawati, Pratiwi and Arimbi (2020) state that the simulation is that which presents itself as reality but which is not as real as the reality itself. Hence, the reality which is 'not real' but presents itself to be reality that determines our consciousness is what is called 'hyperreality' (p. 645). To put it in the words of Baudrillard (1994): "It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real."

Analysis

An in-depth analysis of the selected texts is an attempt to reveal the characters' complete dependence on machines and technological tools and how they unconsciously begin to identify themselves with their material possessions and with what they consume on internet or media. Also, it unveils how despite being in-contact with each other physically as well as digitally, the characters in the selected novels are least in touch with each other emotionally. In this way, this study demonstrates a close yet an uneasy relationship between the novel's characters (human) and machines (non-human) and how this relationship has transformed the human's notion about ideology, psyche and identity. In Hamid's first three novels, characters have been observed to associate their identity with the vehicles they own. In fact, their vehicles' characteristics and condition are often aligned with their personality. For instance, Daru in *Moth Smoke* is obsessed with machines (in the form of vehicles). He owns a Suzuki Mehran which is often associated with the lower-middle class in Pakistan. Daru's whole life appears to be affected by the car he owns, both consciously and unconsciously. He judges others by the type of locomotives they own as he navigates the "road through the arc the steering wheel cuts above the dashboard" (*MS*, p.10). This approach to life makes him feel inferior to his friends or anyone who owns a vehicle better than his own car. Throughout the story, he keeps comparing his life with the life of his childhood rich friend Ozi. He owns a Pajero which acts as marker of landlords, elite and upper class in Pakistan. Ozi too identifies himself with his Pajero, being conscious of the fact that his big Pajero gives him an edge over smaller ones. He considers himself above the law while driving his vehicle on the road without abiding by any rule because according to him "bigger cars have the right of way" (*MS*, p. 25). This attitude of Ozi reveals his ruthless personality. When Daru experiences his first drive in his friend's Pajero, he reflects "I have never been in a Pajero before. Costs more than my house" (*MS*, p. 25). Daru compares the sound of the opening or closing of the doors of his car and Ozi's Pajero by using the words of "nervous cough of my Suzuki" and "deep thuds" of Ozi's Pajero respectively. In his study on the relation of humans to their automobiles, Pearce (2016) comments that "cars can symbolize human attributes and aspirations, and ... have contributed to the modern conception of tragedy" (*MS*, p. 52). Likewise, instead of being grateful for his job, his home and everything he has, Daru becomes envious of his friend's lifestyle and starts competing with him in almost all aspects which ultimately leads him towards his own tragedy. As his girlfriend leaves him to pursue men with bigger cars, he starts depending on drugs and builds an affair with Ozi's wife Mumtaz which turns his childhood friend into his biggest enemy. Ozi takes revenge from Daru by accusing him of the murder of a child which he himself had committed by hitting his Pajero on the road.

Hamid's second novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* also offers a rich analysis on the cyborg-like existence of the protagonist Changez. His journey from Pakistan to America and then back to Pakistan reflects the complexities in identifying his self in the present era where conventional notion of the self is threatened by the forces of cultural hybridization, globalization and technological integration. His work at Underwood Samson involving the use of financial algorithms and data reveals blending of machine precision and human decision-making. Hence, his work turns him into a part of corporate machine because of his continuous integration with technology. This is evident in his own words from the novel as he says, "I had changed; I was looking about me with the eyes of a foreigner" (*TRF*, p. 56). The vehicles and flights used by him for his corporate travel and business respectively also highlight his cyborg identity. His journey from Pakistan to the United States via an airplane marks his entrance into a simulated world of American Dream. He tries to create a simulacrum of a 'successful immigrant' by assimilating into the corporate culture in

America. He begins travelling in chauffeur-driven cars revealing his integration into high-powered American corporate culture. However, this situation changes drastically as a result of the aftermaths of 9/11 incident. His identity is continually questioned and his vehicles and his movements are constantly scrutinized and controlled with the help of technology as he observes that “one of the tires of my rental car was punctured—far too often for it to be mere coincidence.” (*TRF*, p. 57). Hence, the image of a ‘successful immigrant’ created by him only masks or replaces his original Pakistani cultural identity which ultimately makes him feel hollow from inside and detached from his authentic self as he says, “we cannot reconstitute ourselves as the autonomous beings as we previously imagined ourselves to be. Something of us is now outside, and something of the outside is now within us” (*TRF*, p. 76).

Similarly in his third novel *How to Get Filthy Rich in rising Asia* (2013), Hamid depicts how the family members of the main character have to travel on the “roof of the overloaded bus” (p. 13) while the landlords in his village “drive by in their SUV” (*HTGFRIRA*, p. 7). Johnke (2002) states that “cars are a window into the body image of a driver and the statement they wish to manifest about their status in the community” (*HTGFRIRA*, p. 152). Likewise, the social status of the main character in *How to Get Filthy Rich in rising Asia* can also be determined by the type of vehicles he uses from being a poor boy to becoming a business tycoon. At the earliest stage of his career, his employer gives him a bicycle. Later on, he starts riding a motorcycle. The next stage of his financial career evolves as he starts his own sealed water business and buys a small pickup truck. However since it is not considered a very decent mode of transport, he is asked to park it in a “secondary parking lot in the rear” of the hotel where he goes to meet his first love. When he achieves more success in his business, he drives in a car and then buys an “only lightly second hand” SUV (*HTGFRIRA*, p. 143). Later on at the peak of his career, he gets a chance to ride in the business class section of an aero plane and in a “great armor plated, signal jamming, depleted-uranium-firing helicopter” (p. 160). At the apex of his financial success, he sits in the back of his car which is “driven by the driver” (*HTGFRIRA*, p. 182). However as his downfall begins, he is left with no car or driver and mostly travels by taxi. Hamid’s fourth novel *Exit West* (2017) is the most explicit representation of a technologically incorporated world. Since the idea of cyborg refers to the merging of human and machine and transcending the human limitations, Hamid manifests this idea through magical doors which help people in their migration from one place to another. The magical doors reflect the advancement in technology and how it reshapes the human interaction and experiences by challenging the traditional notion of the spatial boundaries, as it has been stated in the novel that Saeed and Nadia feel that “they were each at the crest of the hill only briefly, and at different times” (*EW*, p. 104). This line indicates how technological mediation collapses the perception of space and time. Also, these doors alter the main characters’ identities as soon as they pass through them. Their continuous experiences with new cultural contexts and different environments highlight the possibility of new forms of existence. However, the novel also reveals how the integration of technology into human life can lead to a distorted perception of one’s “ideal self” and identity, as Hamid says it in the novel that Saeed and Nadia “found themselves changed in each other’s eyes in this new place” (*EW*, p. 186). Their experience of passing through the magical doors echoes the process of disembodiment and re-embodiment because of technological mediation. Moreover, the novel reveals excessive dependence of characters on mobile phone and internet which act as an extension of self, rather than merely a means of communication. Hamid puts it in the novel that that “mostly they communicated by phone, a message here, a link to an article there, a shared image of one or the other of them at work” (*EW*, p. 51). Saeed and Nadia’s reliance on mobile phones

and internet for social as well as personal interaction depicts the technological augmentation in everyday life and how they feel “marooned” when the internet connectivity is suspended due to the expected curfew in their city. Additionally, the existence and use of magical doors in the novel also blurs the lines between real and unreal, leading to the creation of a hyperreal world. Similarly, media or images also tend to create simulated realities, rather than representing the real complexities involved in the experience of people living in a war torn city, as Hamid puts it that local channels “were saying that the war was going well but the international ones were saying it was going badly indeed” (*EW*, p. 70-71).

In her study on the concepts of Posthumanism and Cyborg, Hollinger (2009) explains that “cyborg is the figure for whom technology itself is the “unexpected other,” a lived environment with the radical potential to turn “us” into “them” as “we” become other than what we (thought we) were” (p. 274). In the same way, in Hamid’s recently published novel, *The Last White Man* (2022), the transformation takes place not only in characters’ minds and experiences but on physical level as well. For instance, the protagonist of the novel Anders feels as if he is drifting apart from his original self and turning into an “unexpected other”, as the novel begins in these words: “One morning Anders, a white man, woke up to find he had turned a deep and undeniable brown” (*TLWM*, p. 4). This change in the skin color of Anders acts as a metaphor for shifting realities and identities in the present era. This physical alteration can also be observed as a simulacrum which marks a break from previous realities and an entry into a new hyperreal existence which Anders has to learn to navigate. Moreover, the role of mobile phones and internet is central to how Anders and others perceive the world around them. It has been mentioned in the novels that in order to confirm that he has indeed been altered physically, Anders “tested this by taking a picture and placing it in a digital album” (*TLWM*, p. 5). The digital realm becomes the mirror through which they seek validation of their transformed selves and make sense of the world around them. For instance, Oona’s mother has been presented as constantly checking her social media accounts to get information about the shifting identities, as she tells it to Oona that she has seen it online that “people are changing,...All over” (*TLWM*, p. 12-13). One of the characters in Egan’s (2003) fiction says to his partner that “next time you want an authentic embodied experience,... just simulate it” (*TLWM*, p. 123). In a similar way, Oona in *The Last Whiteman* tries to simulate herself by modifying her skin color in her mobile phone. She starts playing with her own images in her phone and realizes that “she could alter not just the color of her skin but whatever she wished” (*TLWM*, p. 46). Oona’s act of changing her color with the help of technology represents Baudrillard’s notion of simulacrum and hyperreality as her digitally altered skin color takes precedence over her authentic self. Hence, her simulated version blurs the line between her image and her original self. Furthermore, their excessive reliance on online news and consumption of often fragmented and sensational information creates a heightened sense of fear and anxiety among characters. This increasing dependence on social media leads to the erosion of trust in physical reality as the technologically mediated world becomes more authoritative and convincing to them. As a result, they are left with very little connection to the tangible environment and real life experiences. Hyperreality takes the place of physical reality directing and reflecting personal as well as social actions and reactions. Hamid aptly depicts a hyperreal realm in the novel in these words, “online you could form your own opinion of what was going on...and the boundary between what was in your mind and what was in the world beyond was blurry, so blurry there was almost no boundary at all” (*TLWM*, p. 47-48).

Findings and Conclusion

The study of Hamid’s selected novels in the light of research questions reveal characters’ excessive dependence on machines or technology in general. His fiction discloses

an uneasy relationship between human and machines as the characters find it hard to identify themselves without technological tools, rather technological tools act as extension of their selves. For instance, the way Daru in *Moth Smoke*, Changez in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and the protagonist of *How to get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* have been found obsessed with their cars indicates the prevalence of techno-culture in their lives. Similarly, magical doors in *Exit West* and characters' reliance on online connections and social media information in *The Last Whiteman* reveal their hyper-connected existence in a technologically mediated hyperreal realm. Such an obsession on technology turns the characters into cyborgs (part human and part machine). In other words, it can be said that a detailed study of Hamid's fiction represents a contemporary digitally mediated Pakistani society where human and machines have become inseparable, thus turning humans into cyborgs. Orbaugh (2005) states that cyborg represents "a new paradigm of subjectivity, a new way for humans to understand themselves" (p. 55). Hence, through his masterful construction of a hyperreal realm and cyborg-like creatures, Hamid invites the readers to reflect on what it means to be truly human and how the current nature of reality is shaping our perceptions of being human. In this sense, his fiction underscores the profound impact of technology on people and a realization of what might be their fate in future. Therefore if we don't keep check of where we are headed, then in the words of Gray (2001), "soon we will be creating creatures from ourselves that cannot even be classified as humans" (p. 11). Similarly explaining about how the ever increasing technomania is leading humans toward posthumanism, Foster (2005) says: "Posthumanism emerges when technology does in fact "become me, not by being incorporated into my organic unity and integrity, but instead by interrupting that unity and opening the boundary between self and world" (p. 10). Therefore, to prevent us from turning into posthuman, Hamid's novels seek to raise awareness and make us conscious of the excessive use of technology and how it is damaging our mental as well as physical health along with distancing us from ourselves and from our loved ones. It also encourages us to reflect on what it means to be truly human and how technology/media is transforming our perspectives in a negative way which can be a serious threat to humanity.

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