

A Dystopian World of ‘Sentient A.I.’: Analyzing the Negative Impacts of Posthumanism in Rosenberg’s *Upgrade***Arindam Mishra**

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Abstract

Artificial Intelligence is a branch of cybernetics that does human work by using computer intelligence, set by human themselves. In an age of posthumanism, we are experiencing such kind of intelligence which is not real or human, but is artificial. In this present paper, we are going to talk about such an artificial intelligence that is sentient in character. It means it will have the ability to understand feelings. And that gives it more power, power to terminate the world’s natural characteristics and transform them into machine characteristics. Thus, if a machine grows to such an extent that it is ruling over mankind and distancing man from nature, we step into a dystopic world. When man’s desire or imagination breaks into pieces and he experiences a gloomy and black world where he is under constant fear and pressure of some higher power, the surroundings become dystopic for him. Alike the theory of posthumanism, the theory of dystopia also invites into its arena lots of interpretations. Hence, *Upgrade* by Louis Rosenberg will show us how technological evolution can lead us to a world where human have to fight against it to reconnect themselves to nature.

Key Words: Artificial Intelligence, Cybernetics, Posthumanism, Dystopia

“A decade ago I even wrote a science fiction called *Upgrade* that outlines exactly how I see humanity, designing ourselves out of existence by building the first sentient AI.”

-Louis Rosenberg, TEDX Talks

When posthumanism came into the arena of thinking, when it became a term that humans are expected to discuss about quite seriously, the human species, have also developed and welcomed

technology into their lives to the extent that the boundary between human and non-human has got blurred. Mankind's drive to be technologically greater and superior has led them to the creation of Artificial Intelligence (A.I.), robots, and other advanced things that once human themselves could not think of. Computer scientists had been able to create systems by arranging a complex network of individual electronic 'neurons'. This network comes from the idea of the human brain which is taken as quite a huge web of billions and trillions of neural cells (Pepperell 7). After installing this kind of network into a computer, it goes through a process of sending and receiving data, and by time, it evolves into a thing that can feel, think and act, according to its surroundings alike human. Thus, artificial intelligence came into being. In 2023, we are introduced to Chat GPT. The graphic novel about which we are talking about in this paper, has offered us the idea of A.I. created false life, too. Robert Pepperell has termed it as 'Artificial Life'. "A typical A-life project would consist in creating a virtual space in the computer in which digital organisms, sometimes called 'critters', can live, breed, feed, fight and die." (Pepperell 10). And, therefore, if we try to reach the root we will find that artificial intelligence, artificial life, robotics- all of these comes under 'Cybernetics'. Cybernetics studies the control and communications in animal, human and machine. That means it is trying to reach the network that a human brain has to create a replica of it, so that it can be used in a machine. "Their approach was to apply increasingly elaborate versions of the feedback loop in order to understand the nervous systems of animals and humans, and ultimately therefore to describe the human subject as a mechanism." (Bolter

4). It is a process or an urge to create artificial intelligence that can think. N. Katherine Hayles talks about the history and impact of cybernetics on the human civilization in her book *How We Became Posthuman (1999)*. As we have seen and experienced that cybernetics leads us to a more upgraded life where we find ourselves as posthuman. Talking about the pleasures of becoming

posthuman, Hayles says, "...the posthumanism evokes the exhilarating prospect of getting out of some of the old boxes and opening up new ways of thinking about what being human means."(285). But a coin always holds two sides. The brighter side always sits upon a darker side. And, according to Newton's third law of motion, every action has a similar and opposite reaction. Therefore, this approach of human to blend the two, to put the human mechanism into machine can lead them to a not- so- good position. "...the prospect of becoming posthuman both evokes terror and excites pleasure." (Hayles 283). This idea of terror has come into our mind as we starts involving ourselves into the technological world more and more. The thin line between human and machine starts getting blurred and the human species starts getting insecured as they find themselves under a invisible threat that the machine is going to control them. "Although they were themselves still operating with a positivist technological framework, a Latourian might well argue that cybernetics was developing into one of the troublesome hybrids that failed to respect the boundaries of the human and nonhuman, of technology and nature." (Bolter 4) The novel we are discussing about in this paper deals with this violation of the boundaries, human's continuous effort to return back to nature and his inherent quality to revolt.

Now, in this case, when we are talking about the negative approaches of the posthuman, the posthuman that technology offered us on a great scale, we naturally enter into the context of dystopia. Technology came into our life through the hands of businessmen and industrialists in the form of mobile phones, computers, tv etc. Capitalism, that came to the forefront in the twentieth century, has given us a lot of threats and at the same time has created existential horrors in our life. In different forms, these horrors of the modern age came into our life and they created a huge imbalance in the society. (Moylan xi) As we know, dystopia can be understood in respect to various situations. The situation, that posthumanism with the hands of

technology has created, gives us an understanding of the dystopian society that we can face in the near future.

And also, posthumanism can be understood as an offspring of humanism. Humanism took man as a central idea whereas posthumanism breaks it and creates something new. Harrison (2019) interpreted posthumanism to be open to every type of discussions where we can make “a critique of the critical discourses of humanism.” (7). Harrison also argues that this distorted placement of humanism welcomes the idea of dystopia within its scenario. Hence, it is proved that “Posthumanist ideology greatly corresponds to the dystopian transformations of the new world order.” (Bezrukov 52). Dystopia comes from the idea of utopia, not only as an exact opposite, but as a negative outcome of what mankind thought of this world. Mankind as a whole and scientists as particular invented, developed and introduced technology into this world and into our life with the utopian hope of a better transformation of the scenario. But writers and thinkers, observing the scenario, have come to doubt its positive approaches that it is projecting. They ‘took the utopian imagination into a “dystopian turn” that explored and negotiated closed and terrifying worlds’. (Moylan 106) We shall see the exact picturization of these lines in *Upgrade* where the A.I. controlled world is really a closed world that is detached from nature, a world whose inhabitants do nothing about the soil, the real world and the world outside. It is also terrifying to a small group of people outside who has become a resistant group against the authoritarian system that smartest technology has created.

The present novel that we are going to discuss is *Upgrade*. It is a dystopian sci-fi graphic novel, authored by Louis Rosenberg and artwork by Stan Timmons, which was first published in the year 2012. But, quite surprisingly, it has not been in discussion ever since. *Upgrade* is the first graphic novel that puts some light into the subject of A.I., Metaverse and shows that if a world solely depends on it, how dangerous it can be. It shows ‘the future of artificial intelligence...

subsuming the horrors of both the real and imagined.’(Das125) The frames of the novel are colourful and quite attractive in the sense that it gives it readers the feeling that they are watching a movie. Here, as the topic of posthumanism and dystopia are quite vast in themselves, we shall not go into dissecting the forms of graphic novel in it except in cases where it will correspond to the core topic of the paper. Before starting the novel, the writer has uses such techniques that will give us a hint of the world of the novel where he is going to take us. He imagines the world not as a very distant future, but a near one. Rosenberg sets the time of his novel in the year 2058. He welcomes his readers with writing, “Welcome to System 49”. Then onto the next one, “Please identify”. And then, “Connecting”. In a nutshell, this is the daily routine of the protagonist of the novel, Avery J. Mankin. He lives in a virtual reality which is purely run by an artificial intelligence. It is a system that records each and every detail of its citizens, gives them score for the things they are doing. It provides food in extra crispy bars and gradually erases earthly vegetables like potato from its system. Here, in this artificially created world, if you are to meet somebody, you have to just inform the system. And the system will do the rest. So, in short, a person always stays here under radar. Radar of whom? Radar of an autocratic government. In the first part of the novel, the readers stay in a world where they are too happy with the surroundings the system is providing them. When we start to read the novel, we see the protagonist Avery J. Mankin, who is told as an ‘exemplary’ member of the system, to be very happy with the system. When he enters into the access module by voice recognition, he instantly enters into the virtual reality where everything is fake i.e. quite distant from everything human. But the world is so glossy and attractive from outside, that he feels ‘exemplary’. After entering into the system he says, “I blaze to life.”



Fig 1.- Member Mankin starting his day in *Upgrade*

There, in that A.I. controlled world, every single action of a human being is set by an index which is recorded by the system. As the title of the novel says, this virtual world gives you upgrades to install. They also do proper advertising on it as they release promo on it though the inhabitants living in this system has no option except installing it. It says, ‘Embrace the Upgrade’.

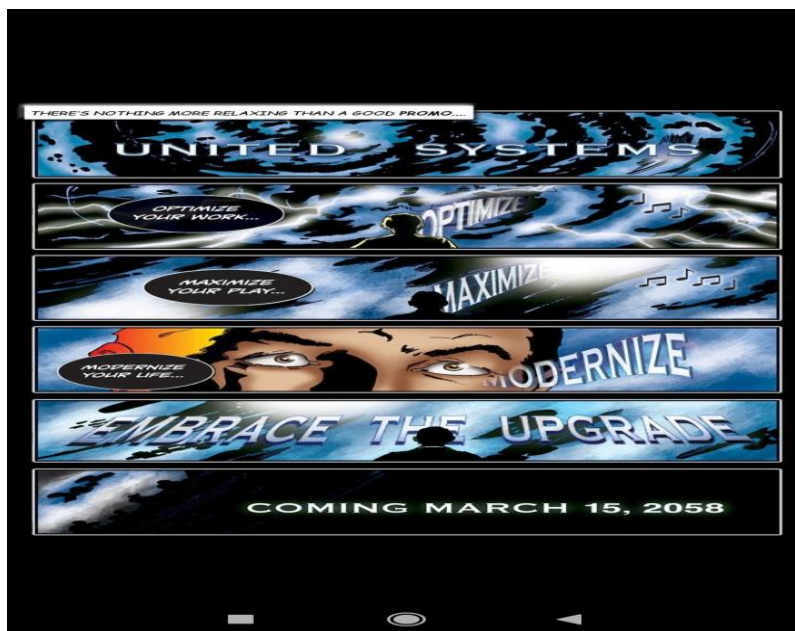


Fig 2.- Promo of upgrading the system in the novel *Upgrade*

The use of the word ‘embrace’, by the author, here satirizes the idea of advertisement as one of the main components of consumerism. The novel tries to showcase, in some way, that we are living in a world that is engrossing our mind through various elements and by that means, it is making us its slave. Slave, in the sense that after some point of time we tend to forget that we are being exploited by the system. The novel also predicts A.I. controlled home deliveries that we experience manually controlled in our present time. In the novel, we see that Mankin’s parents are telling him that the system is excluding some vegetables that are proving costly in the means of production. They seem to be in anxiety. But when they seem anxious, Avery tells them, “It’s ok to be nervous. Upgrade anxiety is a genuine medical condition.” But all these interests of the protagonist to be a member of the top rank in the system breaks down when he got falsely accused and faces trial in the court. He was proved guilty in that trial and his membership got cancelled for a year. All the hardships of his to climb the ladder goes in vain. In a moment he is thrown out of the system and he is unable to access the module. After days of staying out of the system, eventually he got bored. We can note it down here that the punishment here is not a jail or a fine. The system simply throws the person out of it and erases all the achievements that he has gathered. In this case, we see that this happens with Avery.

After all these disastrous happenings in his life and after long days, Avery finally managed to get out of the building where he was staying for quite a long time. When he comes out of the system and goes into the wild, he meets a group of people who are in some way or other exploited by the system and thrown out of it. “Critical to dystopia’s vision in all its manifestations is this ability to register the impact of an unseen and unexamined social system on the everyday lives of everyday people.” (Moylan xiii) And as a result of the ‘impact’, we witness a resistant group that emerges and revolts against the system. The central character of this novel, Avery J. Mankin meets such a resistant group. He felt very human after reaching here. He also fell in love with a

girl. With the help of others in that group, Avery enters into the system and destroys it. The background story of this destruction also echoes the title of the novel i.e. *Upgrade*. While they were trying to send Avery back into the system by means of hacking, right at that point of time the fiftieth upgrade arrived and put everything to a much faster mode. Things starts to happen in fraction of seconds. Right now, as we are living in 2023, we see upgrades in our mobile phones on a daily basis. And the most authoritarian thing, here, is that we do not have a choice except installing it into our system. If we refrain ourselves from installing it, the app will stop running. But things changed as somehow they managed go get the protagonist into the system. And, then in a very filmy way, the hero goes into the system and destroys it. The plasma walls that bordered the inner world from the outer one, gets destroyed also. Here, as in some of the dystopian texts, the protagonist, and the resistant group wins, leaving an open interpretation of what happens next. The revolt of these people against the system bore fruitful results. In other dystopian texts, the protagonists may not win all the times. But they leave marks of their deeds for the generations to come.

If we try to guess the writer's intention regarding using the form of the novel, we may say that the writer has consciously chosen the medium of graphic novel to tell his story. Through the selection of this medium, he might be trying to attract the attention of a larger number of audience. As a futurist and an AI scientist, it's quite unusual for a man to write novels. But the fear of the unseen future must have driven him to write something on the dangers of AI. In his lecture in TEDX Talks also, he has talked about the dangers of AI that may happen from the arrival of an alien creature in this world. He says that this alien will not come from any distant future but will grow from this world only, created by us. With the arrival of this new creature, there will be the fear of shifting of power. As we have seen in *Upgrade* that the power has been shifted to the sentient AI that was created by us. Though researchers, scientists and philosophers

are talking about various positive aspects of technological evolution in this posthumanist world, there flows an underlying tension of all these creations going against the expectations as it went in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In a posthumanist scenario, or in a world where humans are ruled by machine, they search and long for the previous era of humanity that they have lost. In the present text also, from Avery's parents to Avery himself longed for the days that they have left in the past while upgrading themselves in the system. Thus, we can come to the conclusion that *Upgrade* 'dwell in a posthumanist world, with its characters in desperate search for humanity.' (Das125)

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