

The Fatal Garment of Technology a Critical Analysis of E.M Forester's '*The Machine Stops*'

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Abstract

E. M Forster's 'The Machine Stops' gives us a prediction of a future that we have nearly reached nowadays. Forster warns that technology if not counterbalanced by a careful preservation of spiritual, physical and emotional values will not lead to the betterment or elevation of mankind, but on the contrary, will end in his/her degradation and elimination. The paper examines the metaphors in this short story focusing on the effects of computerization on the lives of human beings as portrayed in 'The Machine Stops' and how these are related to our present life.

Key Words:

Family ties- social relations- physical impacts -new ideas–Isolation

'The Machine Stops' is E. M. Forster's only dystopian short story that was published in 1909. It is different from the negative utopias that were written at that time. It could be compared to Well's *The Time Machine*, Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in the fact that they all belong to the dystopian tradition. However, as Caporaletti (1997) pointed out, it does not contain horror and violence as the above novels. Forster in this short story predicts the future life of human beings whose lives are completely dominated by technology in the form of a highly advanced machine which could represent today the computer and Internet. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the main thematic implication in Forster's 'The Machine Stops' examining the metaphors used and the effects of computerization on the lives of human beings today as predicted by Forster in this short story.

It is important to first note the narrative technique that Forster used in 'The Machine Stops', as he started with the words "imagine if you can" to clearly indicate that he is not referring to reality. In other words, he wanted to give an aura of a utopian future world that is pure imagination as he wrote this story in 1909, yet surprisingly all what he described in this short story exists nowadays except the stopping of the Machine (computer and internet) which in some countries does stop due to electricity outage. Moreover, the narrator who relates the events to the reader is authoritative and omniscient which makes the reader not willing to question the reliability of the events and they accept them as the truth of what really happened (Jackson, 1981). Forster did not use the normal utopian narrative techniques as Caporaletti (1997) stated which include the 'time travellers or waking oversleepers' or 'time machine' that usually could fill the gap of time between the present and the future. He intentionally wanted to jump to the future world skipping the past and present world. The fictional reality that Forster describes in 'The Machine Stops' as Caporaletti (1997) mentioned is neither 'incredible nor absurd' as it is 'validated by the internal coherence of the narrative' and the advancement in the computer technology

nowadays. Moreover, Forster predicted the start of this computerized networked world long before the creation of the first microprocessor in 1971 which was the home computer.

The world that Forster created in 'The Machine Stops' is a world that is mainly dominated by the Machine that orchestrates all the people's lives and solves all types of problems that they face. People in this world live underground trapped in cells that were created by the Machine that contains everything that anybody may need. They do not feel imprisoned as they are provided with artificial light, food, a bed and the ability to exchange ideas with friends using buttons and switches as Forster (2001) narrates describing the human cell:

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. There are no musical instruments, and yet . . . this room is throbbing with melodious sounds. An arm-chair is in the centre, by its side a reading-desk – that is all the furniture.

So the machine here is providing humans with what it believes is necessary for their survival to ensure that they have a simple tranquil existence free of anxiety and need. This made people eventually worship it without actually admitting this. In this future world In Forster's 'The Machine Stops' Vashti the mother mentioned "I worship nothing, I am most advanced"(Forster, 2001) refusing to believe that she worships the Machine. When she asks her son Kuno to ask for the Machine's mercy he replies that "I prefer the mercy of God!" Forster in the character of the rebel Kuno conveys all his concerns about technology and its drawbacks on man. Moreover, people in this future world not only worship the Machine, but they also worship 'the Book'-the computer manual, as when the Machine stops, Vashti started kissing 'the Book' in an effort to be saved by it. On another occasion, she is seen talking to it and raising 'the Book' to her lips three times kissing it and feeling "the delirium of acquiescence"(Forster, 2001).

Forster in 'The Machine Stops' uses the bee metaphor when he compares the cell where his characters live to the bee hive and human beings to bees. Bees in Greece were a symbol of strict order, constant work and blind obedience to their queen (Seabury, 1997). This is like for example the mother Vashti who constantly is making speeches, sending messages, listening to lectures and giving lectures, as Langer (1962) stated that modern utopias have been established on the 'beehive ideal'. Even when she is asleep, messages continue to be received on her answering machine and the group calls weigh on her. So if compared to the non-stop organic work structure of bees who follow their natural instincts, humans in Forster's world live as Seabury (1997) maintains a life style that suppresses a lot of their natural instincts leading to unacknowledged irritability. If compared to nowadays, there is always the fear of missing out which could be defined as the "pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent" (Przybylski et. al, 2013), and in internet games there is always the frustration caused by losing in these games. Wortham, (2011) and Morford (2010) both maintain that a combination of social media and fear of missing out might be related to a person's general feelings of unhappiness.

It is interesting here to relate the above bee metaphor with the consequences or results of living in such a computerized hive cell in our modern day. According to Seabury (1997), if bees exist always in a 'teeming mass', modern humans could be seen as a being 'decentralized' even if they are able to communicate electronically. This communication is only virtual, so the reality is that they are isolated. In a study conducted by Lipinski-Harten and Tafarodi (2013) in which the aim was to compare online chat with face-to-face conversation the results were that the text-based online communication had limited potential as there were no "visual, auditory, and physical confrontation that defines face-to-face conversation [which] forces each speaker into a deeper engagement with the subjective world of the other, heightening the social

impact of expressed thoughts and feelings, including those that contrast with one's own" (Maciek Lipinski-Harten, 2013). When Vashti asks her son Kuno to send what he wants to say to her by post, he answers that he prefers to see his mother and speak to her not through the Machine "I see something like you in this [blue] 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" (Forster, 2001). So here Forster displays through his rebel character Kuno the discrepancy between face-to-face speech and communication via technology. Another study conducted by Valkenburg and Peter (2001) illustrated a 'displacement hypothesis' which means that when adolescents communicate with their friends online via social media this decreases the quality time that they may spend with them in face-to-face interactions. Moreover, Davis (2013) discovered that there is a negative relationship between internet use and adolescents' 'self-concept clarity' which is developed via 'self-expression and 'self-validation'. Similarly, Kim et. al (2009) asserted that excessive social media use aggravates social isolation. The results of these studies clarify why Kuno preferred to communicate with his mother Vashti face-to-face and not through the Machine post.

The bee metaphor contains another noteworthy idea which is being physically busy all the time, as the bee here could be compared to humans who are mentally busy while their bodies are passive. Forster described the mother Vashti as a 'swaddled lump of flesh' which indicates her obesity as a result of sitting all the time on the armchair and not moving physically. Beneret. al (2011) conducted a study on school students in the State of Qatar and found a relationship between their obesity and the excessive time that they spent on the internet. This quick pace of the technologized life is what we are experiencing nowadays as we, like Forster's individuals, are always over occupied with our daily activities that we as Huxley (1932) mentioned in the *Brave New World* are shielded from thinking about are lives or values.

In addition to being busy all the time, bees all have to succumb to the queen. This is likewise with the human beings in Forster's futuristic world. The Machine prohibits natural instincts like motherhood as "parents duties cease at the moment of birth"(Forster, 2001). We find that the maternal love that Vashti should have felt towards her son kuno was destroyed and crushed by the Machine; however, when the Machine stops, this emotion is automatically rekindled when Vashti and Kuno touch and kiss in the tunnel before they die. Another natural instinct that is suppressed is the sense of touch as is depicted in 'The Machine Stops' when the mother Vashti was about to fall in the air ship and the hostess prevented her fall by touching her to stop her from falling. Vashti was dismayed "How dare you!" "You forget your-self"(Forster, 2001) she exclaimed feeling the act as barbaric and vulgar. According to March-Russell (2005), the fear of the Other is apparent in the mother refusing to be touched by the hostess. "This contest is played-out in terms of the mother-son relationship, home and homelessness, advancement and barbarism"(Russell, 2005). In other words, the fear of the Other is depicted as a disgust of any physical contact which was hailed by the Machine.

It is important to note that the Machine did leave its citizens with one humane feature which is the freedom to generate new ideas; however, the ideas that were displayed in Forster's short story were mainly factual ideas that did not involve any creativity. Vashti had "no ideas of her own but had just been told one" (Forster, 2001). The word 'idea' is a derivation from the Greek word 'idein' (to see) which represents insight, but the same word is interpreted differently according to the Machine(March-Russell, 2005). The ideas that the Machine encouraged were ones that referred to 'empirical data and their function to social utility ... [they] do not comment on the mind's capacity for imaging the world but mirror the world as an objective given"(March-Russell, 2005). In other words, subjective ideas were not allowed, as in the world of the Machine "people were almost exactly alike all over the world"(Forster, 2001). However,

this killed human subjectivity and this was what kuno had and thus he was not allowed to have children because the Machine did not accept such rebels in its world. "His guilt is all in his extravagantly independent conduct, which is regarded as illicit or as Vashti says unmechanical"(Forster, 2001). In other words, all human beings were equal and there were no classes to differentiate them by the Machine's standards. However, if any human being shows signs of being an athlete, he is not allowed to live, as he could never be happy sitting all day on an armchair and not moving at all. The danger that Forster forecasts is that conforming to a central standardized machine like today's computer which impoverishes us emotionally, spiritually, and physically, may lead to the repression of creativity, diversity and spontaneity. In other words, as asserted by Caporaletti (1997) the scientific continuous development of this Machine (computer) may eventually demolish our 'humanistic ethos'. That is, Forster is maintaining that the technology in the form of the machine will be the cause of the degradation of mankind, as it robs him/her of his emotions, physical strength, and individuality. In addition, Forster in his hive world provides us with a number of paradoxes: "many people yet isolation; centralized authority, control, power, yet a decentralized lifestyle; busyness yet physical and spiritual stasis; stability yet fragility" (Seabury, 1997). All these paradoxes are perceived in Forster's 'The Machine Stops' which envisions our society today.

Forster in 'The Machine Stops' shares Freud's view concerning the conflict of centralized stability with peace and the individual's free will, as they both believe that a stable and peace society could not exist without centralized planning which inevitably depends on the restriction of individual will (Caporaletti, 1997). This is quite apparent in Forster's short story as all people were expected to be the same and under the authority of the Machine which provides all of them with stability, peace, and all their needs. Moreover, Forster in this short story has an affinity with Samuel Butler's *Erwhon* (1871) in which the latter states that the

technological advancement of man may be beneficial, but in the long run may dominate and control man, thus leading to overrun him. Forster in 'The Machine Stops' showed his concerns about the technological developments that satisfied human needs, yet "the evolution of the Machine will inevitably coincide, sooner or later, with the involution of the human race"(Caporaletti, 1997). This reminds us with the well-known archetype of the Frankenstein myth where the creator was destroyed by the monster that he created. Technology in Forster's world in 'The Machine Stops' was meant for the betterment of human life, yet the created Machine (computer) might turn into a monster and become master. Forster's story ends with the Machine stopping and causing the destruction and death of all its followers. The question that needs to be asked now is: will this be the end of all human beings when we lose the electric power to sustain our computers that may be dressing us in a fatal garment? We indeed need to listen now to Kuno's warnings in Forster's 'The Machine Stops' (2001):

Man is the measure . . . Cannot you see, . . . that it is we that are dying, and that down here the only thing that really lives is the Machine? We created the Machine, to do our will, but we cannot make it do our will now. It has robbed us of the sense of space and of the sense of touch, it has blurred every human relation and narrowed down love to a carnal act, it has paralysed our bodies and our wills,. . . The Machine proceeds – but not to our goal.

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