

Between Man and Machine: Rethinking Identity in Martha Wells' *Artificial Condition* and *Fugitive Telemetry*

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Abstract: *This paper expatiates on the human-machine interaction in the AI era through the prism of Wells' *Artificial Condition* and *Fugitive Telemetry*. It questions the human ability to cope with bots which assume such roles as human saviors and murder investigators. It is theoretically inscribed within the precincts of posthumanism, as these bots are posthumans with super-exceptional capacities. This study highlights that humans and their intelligence are at risk as they can be surpassed. Human intelligence is under erasure¹. Also, the boundaries between the real and artificial are blurred and human identity is steeped in ambivalence in different artificial conditions that pose security-related issues among both scrupulous and rogue machines.*

Keywords: artificial intelligence, artificial conditions, identity, subversion, replacement

INTRODUCTION

In the works of Martha Wells, an American author who has written a number of fantasy novellas in the form of installments in a series known as Murderbot diaries, there are capital staples of Sci-Fi, namely space travel and artificial intelligence. In these novellas, including *Artificial Condition* and *Fugitive Telemetry*, androids and cyborgs get involved in a number of adventures as they traverse different inhabited spaces to fathom the depth of humans and understand what it means to be human. The android is given the name of Murderbot. It is a Secunit machine charged with the task of interacting with humans in different artificial conditions.

¹ Under erasure (in French, "sous rature") is a strategic device "derived from Martin Heidegger, who often crossed out the word 'being' ... and let both word and deletion stand because the word was inadequate yet necessary" (qtd. in Sarup 33).

Martha Wells raises identity-related questions, morality-based issues and power-driven dilemmas in a world marked with the intersection between humanity and technology. The events of the novellas exude mixed feelings of fear, hope, horror and frustration triggered by the artificial conditions humans have to deal with. Human-machine struggle for power and supremacy can serve as a catalyst for conflictual rivalry, especially that androids are fictionally presented as sentient beings. Hence, the author addresses such focal questions as: what does it mean to deal with androids as sentient? And are they able to understand and manipulate human emotions, develop a sense of security and experience self-control and freedom?

The two novellas serve as a canvas on which the critique of the moral implications of creating bots is sci-fictionally painted. They are the landscape where AI existence and development are questioned, and where the query of what it means to be human in an increasingly automated and digitalized world is mooted. They can be considered a milestone in a series of sci-fi contributions that have stirred debates about the ethical and philosophical dimensions of AI and about all its possible trajectories in the days looming ahead. They constitute a literary endeavor to draw attention to what Herbrechter (vii) calls in his preface to *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* “the current technological advancements levering out ‘our’ traditional humanist reflexes.”

The title of this paper is inspired from Butler’s essay titled “Darwin among the Machines” published in 1863. This essay raises serious questions about the future prospects of the human race in a world laden with mechanical appliances which Butler calls “man’s next successor” (62). He mentions that as humans, “we are ourselves creating our own successors” and “we are daily adding to the beauty and delicacy of their physical organization, we are daily giving them greater power” (62). Butler struck an alarming bell in the 19th century that “in the course of ages we shall find ourselves the inferior race” (62-63). His essay serves as an alarming bell that humans can be relegated to lower position in the presence of robotic machines.

Following this apocalyptic, ominous description provided by Butler, Murderbot, the main character and narrator in Martha Wells’ works, represents these mechanical successors and rivals. It is created to interact with humans in different ways and in many situations. It is endowed with the power that reveals these humans in some conditions as disabled. The author deals with this human-machine interaction in relation to the questions of replacement and competition for space and supremacy. The events in the stories are foreboding and grim. The author portends the coming of a bunch of artificial life-endangering situations. She forebodes impending fatal fate of the human race due to the proliferating artificial conditions that humans have to cope with in their everyday lives. Viewed from this perspective, her novellas provide a posthuman scenario of the future and possible end of man bombarded with countless AI-powered tools and situation.

Through the adventures of Murderbot, Martha Wells takes her readers to a kingdom of robotics and artificial intelligence, and to a new phase of sophisticated mechanical production. Her fantasy novellas are an opportunity to ponder upon the connecting links between the

world of humans and that of machines and to reflect on the borderline separating the two. They are also an invitation to question the ability of the human mind to undertake the challenging task of dealing with these machines and think about the possible gains and risks of the whole process. To use the words of Phillips (32), they are “an attempt to identify what, if anything, marks the boundary of the human.”

This study is theoretically inscribed within the posthuman framework. One of the underlying implications of the events of the two novellas is that artificial intelligence is presented as a questionable imperial posthuman enterprise that constitutes a threat to the noble humanist ethics that advocate the supremacy of human beings in the presence of a number of fabricated machines. These novels can be deemed an important milestone in the discourse of counter AI as they raise the unnatural human-machine interaction which goes against the course of human normalcy. They bring to the foreground the survival of the human in an AI-driven world.

One more thing, they draw attention to an era in which Anthropos or human beings, as against non-humans like androids and cyborgs, are less valorized. Martha Wells hints, albeit implicitly, at the idea that anthropocentric views of humans are challenged, shaken and trumped by posthuman ones. Thus, her two novellas can be categorized under the heading of the literature of the posthuman which “is concerned with a variety of topics that are associated with figurations of the posthuman and issues dealt with by posthumanism” such as “climate change, AI, androids and robots, the Anthropocene, postanthropocentrism” (Herbrechter 2).

Human-machine interactions reveal that a more dehumanizing and dystopian future is awaiting human beings due to the abuse of scientific knowledge and power. Human nature and its originality and typicality is under scrutiny and inquiry. Fukuyama (130) defines this nature in this way: “human nature is the sum of the behavior and characteristics that are typical of the human species, arising from genetic rather than environmental factors.” Giving some of the qualities pertinent only to this nature is a digression from the normal course of life. This is one of the interesting implications of Martha Wells’ novellas.

Authors like Kazuo Ishiguro have issued a warning against this knowledge. In *Never Let Me go*, for instance, he criticizes the entrepreneurial biotech projects which have distorted the real identity of humankind under the banner of scientific progress. He denounces a burgeoning genetic industry which produces human clones and leads to the digression of the natural course of life. In *Klara and the Sun*, robotics have invaded human life and transformed it in many ways. Artificial Friends (AFs) like Klara have been created to bring happiness to children who suffer from solitude. These machines take the place of parents, which is against human nature.

The key questions this paper seeks to answer are: are machines becoming like humans? Or are humans becoming like machines? Could machines think just like humans? Could cyborgs protect humans from danger and death? To what extent are machines able to assess threats and risks around humans? Do machines control humans? Or humans control machines? Are

machines able to escape the programmed systems that make them controlled by humans? Can the human brain create a robot that is part-human and part-machine? What is the risk of doing that? How can people deal with the profusion of artificial conditions in the world of today? What is the nature of the human-machine relationship? And is it based on replacement and competition or on collaboration and support?

To address these questions, a text-oriented, bottom-up method is adopted, moving from text to theory. It is founded on the close examination and analysis of *Artificial Condition* and *Fugitive Cemetery* through the attentive and investigative perusal of these two novellas and then the choice of the theoretical concepts that are functional and instrumental in critically approaching and interpreting both of them. The methodology employed is also dialogic, intertextual and perspectival as it recognizes the author's perspective and critically connects it to other authors' perspectives in other literary texts.

In terms of structure, this paper is composed of two main sections in addition to an introduction and conclusion. Each section focuses on one specific theme. Both themes have the same weight of importance. They are both related to the risks of being among machines. The first section draws attention to the ominous possibility of seeing real human intelligence erased and superseded by artificial one. The second highlights the intricacies of the real human identity in the presence of the fabricated one. For the sake of consistency, clarity and organization, the titles of the two sections have the same syntactic pattern.

Between subversion and replacement

This idea of replacement is echoed in the author's choice of Murderbot as a character and narrator. Artificial characters and narrators have superseded human ones in literary texts. This is an omen that human intelligence is somewhat at risk. It is under erasure, to use the concept used by Martin Heidegger and later on by Jacques Derrida (qtd. in Sarup 33). It is located in the interval between subversion and replacement. It is subverted and replaced but, in the meantime, it is kept legible. There is a risk that human intelligence can become "inadequate but necessary" (33). This can be seen as an inauspicious signal that this intelligence is losing ground; its status is getting blurry and endangered. Maybe, the question that will be possibly asked in the future is: who needs human intelligence in the presence of the artificial one?

The name Martha Wells has chosen for the main character and narrator implies the idea of creating and interacting with a living murder machine and all the possible horror it brings. Thus, Murderbot Diaries in general evoke the scary and somewhat weird nature of the world of artificial intelligence which offers opportunities and poses risks as well. The big possible threat is that human intelligence resigns itself to something inevitable, which is its relegation to a lower rank and its imminent replacement with the artificial one. It is on the verge of being erased.

Martha Wells brings to the fore, albeit implicitly, the question of whether humans' abilities are surpassable and of the extent to which AI constitutes a real threat to the so-called uniqueness of the human intelligence, especially in a world where ideas that used to be

considered a form of science fiction are quickly becoming a visible reality. AI surprises are uncontrollable. Her sci-fi novellas which champion the Murderbot make very interesting hints to the control issue in man-machine relationship and co-existence and warn against AI that can serve agendas which misalign with sincere human values and ethics.

The author draws attention to the issue of artificial intelligence and patronization. In *Fugitive Telemetry*, Murderbot states its hatred of being patronized: "I'm not a bot, I'm not a human, so I don't fit into any neat category. Also I hate being patronized. (The whole bot-guardian system is like an attraction field for humans who like to be patronizing.)" (25). This hatred can be glossed as a sort of rebellion against its creators who might be themselves subject to mechanical patronization. The point to make here is that the superiority of humans as inventors, scientists and thinkers can be grabbed from them and handed to androids. Human superiority and excellence on this planet can be tragically replaced with the artificial ones.

The words of the Murderbot show that it is neither a bot nor a human. Its identity is not clear. It's a hybrid creature made out of the artificial crossbreeding of human and mechanical features. It sees itself as singularly different and special. That's why it is so bold that it openly expresses its hatred for the patronizing tendencies of humans. It wants to be free of these tendencies. This means that this man-made android character rejects being treated as inferior to its creators. It is not amenable to any human control. This can be viewed as a sort of an artificial superiority complex that people in the age of artificial intelligence have to deal with. Machines can possibly disobey their inventors and they can even turn into their fierce competitors.

Murderbot's words can be considered a call to reflect on the worries associated with artificial intelligence and to drill down on the implications of its proliferation. They provide anticipatory signs that machines can grow powerful to the extent that they seek equal partnership which can develop into very intricate human-machine rivalry. The implication of this is that the face of the natural world is more liable to be warped if the flow of artificially-made products continues. The invented machines can dethrone their inventors and take their positions.

This is one possible way to put the blame at the door of the scientific knowledge and the human mind which flood the world with a lot of artificiality and distort the basic human nature. Scientists sacrifice natural human intelligence on the altar of the fabricated one. The contention here is to vouch that AI-enabled robotic manufacturing can be an excrescence on the face of the world, especially if it is not bounded with ethical and humane considerations. This implies that the yardstick to judge androids is their ability to serve the needs of humans and act under the surveillance of humans.

In Martha Wells' novellas, there are references to issues related to artificial intelligence and its incorporation into such fields as human security and justice work. She deals with nerve-racking questions such as: are humans able to eschew the risks of being hit or killed by artificially made machines? How can the legislative branch deal with these artificial

conditions such as robotic crimes? Can bots that murder humans be considered criminals? If yes, what sorts of punishments should be issued against them? Does it sound logical and natural that a human judge sentences a cyborg to death or imprisonment? And what kind of laws should be used to issue this legal sentence?

Martha Wells draws attention to these questions, albeit implicitly. She hints at the susceptibility of human security and justice to artificial automation and human augmentation. Her capital focus is on what is known as scientific shapeshifting², not in its mythological and folkloric sense of the word where it refers to the physical transformation of humans through supernatural processes, but in its scientific meaning in which the stress is laid on cyborgs and robots as panphorms since they are presented as an emulation of the human body and some of its distinguishing features. Murderbot is half-organic and half-mechanical. Its gender is unknown. This genderless bot can take the place of humans in matters of, for example, crime investigation.

In *Fugitive Telemetry*, Murderbot assumes the role of a murder investigator tasked with the job of investigating the murder of a stranger on the Preservation Station. It has the work of police investigation in the place of real humans. The author is trying to impart the message that machines are policing humans and garnering evidence about their lives as well as deaths. Murderbot has the forensic task of examining evidence to help real humans (i.e. the Senior Officer named Indah) solve this shocking crime mystery. It is a homicide detective. The issue raised here is the ability of artificial intelligence to supplant human detectives. The author is implying the risks of automating murder investigation.

But the question that floats to mind is: how can machines deal with detective affairs that require some manual dexterity and interpersonal skills? Can human police officer accept non-human investigator in their teams? In *Fugitive Telemetry*, Indah, for instance, does not trust Murderbot and SecUnits in general and gets annoyed when Dr. Mensah suggests the help of Murderbot to solve the mystery crime of the strange person in the Preservation society. The author introduces Murderbot's role in this crime investigation as capital when things get complicated for Indah and the whole investigation team. Does this mean that the reliance on such machines as Murderbot can make police investigation and justice work more effective? And do human investigators need Murderbots to protect them and highlight their weaknesses and shortcomings?

It sounds puzzling and ironic to provide a 'Yes' answer, given the fact that these Murderbots are human-made. There is a sort of scolding sarcasm arced towards the human mind that can create machines which could cast light on humans' mistakes and inadequacies. This mind is held responsible for the creation of these puzzling artificial situations and for the digression of the normal course of life. The visibility of this mind and of all that is real and authentic is at

² - The concept of shapelifting is used here to refer to the scientific emulation of the human body and some of its distinguishing features.

stake. Cyborgs and androids are endowed with a gigantic power that entitles them to aberrantly overstep the natural capacities of humans.

Viewed from this perspective, the human-machine relationship turns out to be antagonistic and existential. Humans are besieged with artificial conditions that are really paradoxical. In *Artificial Condition*, Martha's Murderbot mimics the qualities and behaviors of humans as it keeps bouncing and moving from adventure to another (i.e., from one problem to another), but, at the same time, it describes itself as a company's property (2). The question is: how can a company's property assume the responsibility of rescuing humans and keeping them safe? How can an artificial product provide security to its real producer? And is it plausible to see a property supplanting its owner?

The author is actually drawing attention to these perplexing, paradoxical artificial conditions into which humans are entangled due to the scientific advancements in robotic intelligence and human augmentation. Real humans, artificial and augmented ones have to interact with each other, but with suspicion and expectations as each one thinks that the other is searching for information about others. Each one is seeking superiority over others. Lack of trust among these three categories of creatures does not allow for an atmosphere of security and peace. This is to imply that with artificial intelligence, things might sound apparently simple, but, deep down, they are very fuzzy and even incomprehensible. Life becomes a vast space for boundless webs of artificial situations.

The idea that humans might look like dullards among humans is clearly mentioned in *Artificial Condition* when Maro, one of the characters in the novella, says: "Yeah, we were idiots. Tlacey was never going to let us give her the bonus for our files" (59). The implication of this is that natural human intelligence is at risk as it can be surpassed and overridden by the artificial one. The world is doomed to be full of artificial chasms among humans, humans and androids and among machines themselves. The intellectual status of Man is more likely to shrink and diminish, which sounds really frightening.

The worst thing that can happen to humans among machines is to be described as inefficient and stupid. This is clearly implied in *Artificial Condition* where humans are presented as dullards who cannot understand some complicated issues and seek the help of machines. The inability of humans to keep up abreast of the work of the androids is a source of frustration and exasperation for these machines. The writer provides a dystopian vision of the world through the lens of the android. The core point of this vision is that human intelligence can fail to do things that artificial one can successfully and efficiently accomplish.

With the gigantic advancements in the world of robotic machines, androids and bots, humans might look like a small drop in a big universe. Humans' status get diminished in the presence of machines. Murderbot describes Tapan, one of the characters in *Artificial Condition* as "a tiny human" (72). Humans might turn into small and weak entities in comparison to bots and androids. When humans are among machines, they have to deal with issues of security and feelings of fear which are depicted as artificial conditions imposed by external forces. Tapan

says: “In the crèche, our moms always said that fear was an artificial condition. It’s imposed from the outside. So it’s possible to fight it” (72).

Thus, one of the perplexing questions that humans have to address at this time of artificial intelligence is: what are the boundaries that demarcate the line separating the inside from the outside, the normal from the abnormal, the real from the simulated, the earthly from the unearthly, and the transients from the real residents? Humans, as cited earlier, have to cope with complex artificial conditions. In *Fugitive Telemetry*, Murderbot is given the ability to scan dead human lividity, the bluish-purple discoloration of skin after death (i.e., ambient body temperature) and compare the results of the data collected with archived one to determine the death time and write a report about it (1).

Humans including doctors are unable to do that. They are less visible compared to machines which debilitate them in a sensitive issue linked to death. Human feebleness is echoed in the emotional states of, for example, Dr. Mensah who looks dry and Senior Indah who gets annoyed and is not comfortable seeing a cyborg working with their investigation team. Indah raises the question of the report accuracy after reading it. Hence the question related to the extent to which the work done by machines is accurate. This example shows the degree of competition between humans and machines. This competition is a matter of being or not being for both of them.

It is no longer an exaggeration to describe this situation as the tragedy of humans among machines. It is the tragedy of seeing real people on the verge of being replaced with artificial ones. It is the unwanted disastrous situation of witnessing the fall down of the human intelligence in the abyss of failure and frailty in the presence of the artificial one. Thus, the main question that can be mooted in this context is : what should be done to avert this tragedy? The point is that concerted efforts should be made to avoid the erasure of human intelligence and place it on the pedestal.

Between Real Identity and Disguise

The author does also raise the question of identity in the era of artificial intelligence. Murderbot as a cyborg does in a sense resonate with many people who may find it hard to identify themselves with a certain group, given the invasive flow of artificial conditions where bots interact with other bots and make connections with humans. With every move, humans have to run through what Martha refers to as “an identity check” (*Fugitive Telemetry* 2). They have to continuously and carefully delve into the question of who they are and make sure there is nothing wrong with their identities which are in constant flux.

Murderbot as a member of the murder investigation team provides a report related to the identity of the dead human and describes the whole process as easy since “Preservation Station kept an identity record and body scan for permanent residents and every disembarking transient passenger” (2). It does it without the dead body’s interface whereas real humans, namely Tural and Indah express their inability to do it. Tural says: “Without the interface, we have to wait until Medical gets here to do the body scan so we can try to match it with the

visitor entry logs” (2). The striking thing here is that human identity check is beyond the can of humans.

The ironic thing is that cyborg identity is valorized and the human one is overstepped in the sense that cyborgs are endowed with abilities far above and beyond those of humans. To elucidate, they are described as quicker than the human Medical staff busy with “preventive health check day at the school” (2). Paradoxically enough, bots are introduced as more humane than humans themselves. In this scene of identity check, the scan of the dead body is quickly done by Murderbot and the report is already written and submitted to the investigation team, whereas the people in charge of this kind of checking has not come yet in spite of being informed about that. Tural, one of the human characters, explains this situation by talking about what an emergency means for humans: “it was an emergency until the onsite medic pronounced the person dead/ unrevivable, after that it went to the end of the list on non-emergency things they have to do” (3).

Checking the identity of a dead human body is not really an emergency for some humans in *Fugitive Telemetry*. Does the author imply that in the world of today, there is the possibility of having machines that are more principled and humane than humans themselves? Murderbot is very much concerned about the identity check and it rapidly prepares the report, whereas human checkers are slow and unable to act due to hierarchical, bureaucratic, administrative procedures which cause long delays. Thus, robotic identity check is presented as more effective and efficient than the human one.

There is a reproach of the human approach to this kind of emergencies in comparison to machines. It is an approach which Murderbot describes as “the ‘make it a question so it does not sound bad’ thing” (2). For the bot, since the identity is not checked; it still sounds bad, blaming people for complicating things and growing suspicious about his investigation work. None of them was doing a good job to make an ID as Dr. Mensah says (3). Humans’ humanism is replaced with cyborgs’ humanism, which is really paradoxical and puzzling. They are caught between the hammer of benefiting from AI and the anvil of being surpassed and replaced. This can be considered one of the big dilemmas that humans have to deal with at a time when artificial super-intelligence will possibly be at the nexus of everything.

The choice of the word “check” is worth considering. It reflects that there is some problem or crisis identity that requires some careful scanning to know who is who and which is which. This can be interpreted as a way to say that humans among machines have to check their identities again and again to ensure that there is nothing wrong with them, especially that there are augmented humans who interact with real ones in the fantasy space created and dominated by AI-enabled mindsets. This is to imply that this identity verification process is almost a must in the era of artificial intelligence.

Martha Wells hints at the idea that with artificial products and conditions, it becomes hard to distinguish between the real and the artificial. To use the words of Barry, “the distinction between real and imagined, reality and illusion, surface and depth” disappears, resulting “in a

culture of ‘hyperreality’, in which distinctions between these [are] erode[d]” (64). There is a blame of artificial intelligence for fostering this culture of hyperreality. Humans have to cope with this hyperreality as they are surrounded with artificial simulations and augmented humans like Murderbot. They are counterfeit humans.

Murderbot describes death as “anomalous” (*Fugitive Telemetry* 4). It deviates from what is normal. Dr. Mensah mentions the possibility that this murder was committed by GrayCris which is a corporation that makes profit by killing everybody and taking his stuff. The author is raising the issue of murder investigation and the role that artificial intelligence can play in it. The key question is: can androids be effective substitute detectors of real human ones? Or are they just counterfeit investigators whose efficacy depends on the software that governs their work? Thus, the identity of these detective investigators remains blurry and questionable.

Humans are among machines that are able to assess threats, risks, accidental deaths and security measures. Humans are associated with vulnerability and invisibility. They are open to anxiety, injury, fear, annoyance and unrest because of the artificial conditions they have to deal with. The author is possibly referring to a dystopian stage when humans as real residents of this planet may become passing transients, mere passers-by. The permanence of this residency is put in peril. The world is heading towards what Baudrillard calls the “loss of the real” in his *Simulacra and Simulation* (45). This flooding flow of invasive artificial conditions constitutes an intrusive power against the real human intelligence.

This foreshadows a cleavage in the world between the real and simulated in a way that creates more confusion and, thus, the challenge that humans have to deal with is to find the isthmus that connects the two sides- a liminal third space where AI-human interaction can smoothly take place. Here, there is a hint at the idea of belonging that humans are compelled to grapple with: to which world do they belong to? Do they belong to their world or to the other? Going to the AI world can be compared to an exile or displacement and the return to the real world (homeland) can be onerous and subject to frustration and even trauma. Individuals may find themselves speaking like Said in *Culture and Imperialism*: “I have felt that I belonged to both worlds, without being complete of either one or the other” (26). This is possibly one of the implications germane to the thematic structure of the two novellas.

Identity is linked to the issue of freedom. Murderbot is presented as a completely free and partially organic agent endowed with the power to make its own choices, set its own priorities, come up with its own logical reasoning and moves around humans. With each novella, readers discover more changes of the Murderbot into a caring entity that does its best to keep real humans safe. This artificial freedom steps into human life and brings to the fore the manipulative nature of the bond that binds humans to machines. It is the question of who is the manipulating self and who is the manipulated other.

The question that can be mooted here is: what can Murderbots and other robotic machines do with their freedom when their governing softwares are disabled? In *Artificial Condition*,

Murderbot gets perplexed as to what to do with its own freedom. It decides to pay a visit to a mining site named RaviHyal, boarding a space transport vessel to find out details about an accident, but the problem is that it malfunctions and kills a bunch of people. This lethal event can be glossed as an outcome of the unbounded, unstudied freedom given to robotic machines. This gives a clue to the machine identity which can surprise, challenge and jeopardize its human creators.

The author makes a reference to the human self-concept and self-image, albeit implicitly, by questioning the ability of scientific human mind to control the androids and the softwares that govern them. These androids can go astray and accomplish tasks, but, unfortunately, in a fatal way, and, thus, show humans as weak and inefficient. Murderbot is a representative example of these androids. It has moved from protecting scientists and keeping them alive in *All Systems Red*, one of Martha Wells' previous novellas, to killing dozens of people in *Artificial Condition* and then to investigating a murder crime in *Fugitive Telemetry* upon finding the dead body of a strange person in the passageway of the Preservation Station. After the killing incident, it simply wipes its memory and the whole tragedy with the killed people go to the trash bin.

This multidimensional aspect of the nature of the Murderbot's tasks, which are helpful and life-saving at times and fatal at others, can be regarded as a real proof that robotic machines should be kept under the human control to avoid deadly accidents that harm humans and cause long-lasting pain and suffering. This is possibly one of the implications of the adventures of Murderbot from one novella to another. It can be granted some freedom as a key trait of its identity, but it should be limited. Any malfunction of one of its governing softwares can result in disastrous repercussions.

Onboard, Murderbot is not in the company of humans. It feels astonished at the discovery that the ship it is boarding is controlled by a computer that has a strong artificial intelligence. This is worth considering as androids get upset with each other and complain about each other. In this way, Martha Wells insinuates that robotic intelligence can lead to intricate relationships not only between humans and machines but also between machines and machines. Conflictuality is presented here as an important quality of machine identity. Machines can fight over power: which controls which, which governs which and which can change which. Murderbot gives the computer that controls the ship the nickname of ART (Asshole Research Transport). It teams up with ART which helps it have some surgical changes and disguise itself as a human. This is another artificial condition in which androids become imposters.

Martha Wells dwells on the issue of humans and artificial enmity. "What the hell was going on with humans?" (*Artificial Condition* 72). This is a question raised by the narrator. It is worth considering as it questions the architects of artificial machines and the possibility of creating dangerous enemies for humans and transforming our life into a battlefield between real humans and stimulated or augmented ones and a world where everyone is skeptical and afraid of the other. Murderbot disguises himself in the appearance of a human being to avoid being detected by humans. He uses the word "panicking" (1) to refer to his feelings in case he

is detected by other humans. This means that fear is mutual. It is a feature of both human and robotic identities. This means that humanity will be possibly placed in the throes of a psycho-emotional, communicational and socio-cultural crisis.

The Murderbot Diaries can be categorized under the heading of cyberpunk sub-genre, given that the protagonist's activities take place "in a futuristic universe where interstellar travel and highly advanced technologies are commonplace" with "the Murderbot travelling to and engaged in activities at a Mining facility" (Fantasy for the Ages). They focus on a counter-human, complicated high-tech future in dystopian spaces where there is death, horror and insecurity and where the boundaries between the real and the fabricated are blurred. The protagonist is bought by clients for security and protection reasons in the first book titled *All Systems Red*, acting under the control of its purchasers. They all know that it is nothing more than a machine.

But the freedom and autonomy that the protagonist gets in *Artificial Condition*, the second book, make it take the decision to run away instead of staying with the family that has bought it. Its fear of being discovered and caught pushes it to pretend to be an augmented human and start a journey back in time to receive responses regarding the crime it witnessed in the previous book titled *All Systems Red*. It hides its real identity and begins deceiving people who look naïve and disabled. This level of AI-human interactions show the complexity of the situation of humans among machines.

The author draws attention to the issue of artificial intelligence and deception. Murderbot employs disguise as a strategy to hide its identity. It wants to avoid panic and talks about his relief at the idea that "the security drones wouldn't be scanning for SecUnits unless they were specifically instructed, and nothing had tried to ping [it] so far" (1). It talks about its "wearing gray and black work clothes, the long sleeves of the T-shirt and jacket, the pants and boots covering all my inorganic parts, and ... wearing a knapsack (2). This means that it is half-human and half-machine. It is among a crowd of people with its dataport in the back of its neck; this dataport "implanted to draw any suspicion" (2) makes it look like an augmented human and thus invisible to the crowd.

This is an artificial condition of deception and disguise. Human-made cyborgs have the power of deceiving humans in many ways. This condition sounds paradoxical as how can human innovators create machines that can invade their lives, spread fear and insecurity among them and imbue their hearts with feelings clouded by doubt and terror? This is a sort of inquisitive and critical investigation into the utility of this technologically advanced avatar innovations. Why should humans create artificial conditions of suspicion, deception, disguise, panic, terror and death? Is it a human need or just a masquerade to hide the hidden business agenda in which cash values hold sway? Thus, Martha Wells' novellas serve as an opportunity to reflect on the possible nefarious purposes secretly orchestrated for the whole AI project.

Man's identity is situated at the interval between visibility and invisibility against the backdrop of robotic revolution. The power of Murderbot can be glossed as an alarming bell

that man's presence can be overshadowed by that of the machine. AI-driven machines are coming as superior forces that can subdue man and shake his position, namely at the relational and affective levels. This concern with the destiny of man in sci-fiction is not new. For instance, in 1897, Herbert George Wells, one of the pioneers of this literary genre, wrote his novel titled *The Invisible Man* in which he made clear references to the ability of scientists to take man from visibility to invisibility.

Herbert George Wells' and Martha Wells' science fiction can be deemed important contributions to the critiques geared against scientific knowledge in general through the human mind creates things that can disrupt the natural course of human life. In this vein, it is worth mentioning that this visibility/ invisibility dyad and its relationship to scientific knowledge have been discussed by such contemporary authors as Ishiguro, albeit from a different perspective. All these authors share the view that this mind's inventions can kill all that is real and take human beings from the status of visibility to invisibility.

In his short story titled "Nocturne," Ishiguro launches a critique against this knowledge through the focus on the nefarious cash-oriented agendas behind the business of cosmetic surgeries, namely in the field of music. The bandages wrapped around human faces used as a result of these surgeries can be regarded as a metaphor for these agendas. They stand for the invisible part of this profitable industry which strives to keep their intents invisible just like the bandaged faces. What lies beneath the bandages is potentially perilous. Man's worth is reduced to having a beautiful face. The nocturnal scheming of this knowledge is founded on the devaluation of all that is human.

Martha Wells refers to the idea of pinging among humans and machines. Real and augmented humans are put into artificial conditions of fear and insecurity and they have to do their best to ping each other in case of danger. Real humans and Murderbots have to live in uncomfortable situations as it is the case with the team murder investigation in *Fugitive Telemetry*. Indrah, the Senior Officer, does not trust Murderbot and feels disturbed at its presence in the team. Murderbot finds itself in the situation of joining this team in a society that it is not comfortable with. This is to imply that this artificial intelligence creates uncomfortable artificial conditions for both humans and machines. Both of them experience moments of depression and anxiety when they have to deal with each other.

The author does possibly seek to suggest that in this era of artificial intelligence, not only humans who get upset and uncomfortable but also machines, which reflects, in a sense, the complexity of life especially when it comes to feelings and emotions at this specific time of scientific panphormism and bio-mimics. This says a lot about her perspective on the world of today which she seems to associate with anxiety, anger, depression, frustration, stress and distrust. The era of artificial intelligence is a period of a borderline anxiety, fear of emotional abandonment and social rejection.

Martha Wells makes a clear reference to the issue of human augmentation as one of the manifestations of advancements in technology and machine as well as computer learning in

the world of today. In *Artificial Condition*, Murderbot pretends “to be an ordinary augmented human, and not a terrifying murderbot” (1). It does not want to be spotted and seen by real humans. The author is calling attention to the idea that with the flood of highly sophisticated innovations that seek to create artificial humans, real humans can face a big danger. The boundaries between the real and the simulated are blurry.

As humans, we may find ourselves interacting and living with moving entities whose identities are hard to identify. We cannot figure out if we are speaking to real or simulated humans. Martha Wells is drawing attention to the encounter of human race or species with alien ones. Humans are surrounded with augmented humans that step outside normalcy. They are invasive, especially with the gigantic advancements in robotics and bio-technology. The author is inviting us to reflect on the perceived capacity of the architects of the artificial intelligence to create machines that can imitate human species with dexterity.

Murderbot is an example of these simulated entities that live among humans and seek to know everything about them. It describes both real and augmented humans as busy with their own affairs, thinking about their transport directions. “Besides the humans, there were bots of all different shapes and sizes” (*Artificial Condition* 1). There were human-driven as well as bot-driven cargos and drones working side by side. There are stations and transit rings for both humans and bots or SecUnits. The whole scene is foggy and baffling.

CONCLUSION

Martha Wells’s *Fugitive Telemetry* and *Artificial Condition* provide a sci-fictional journey into the human-machine interactions at the age of robotic intelligence. They signal to readers to ponder not only on how this intelligence has revolutionized the way people work and think, but also on the way it has impacted a plethora of vital areas such as security, justice work, identity, self-disguise, power and freedom. They present webs of artificial conditions into which real humans are caught. Androids like Murderbot are created and designed in a way that can be a source of either security or threat for the human race.

One of the key implications of the events of the adventures in both novellas is that there might come a moment when the question of whether human intelligence can efficiently withstand the pervasive influence of robotic technology is hotly raised. There is a risk that humans among machines might look like dullards unable to deal with critical issues that require imagination and craftsmanship. This is a gloom prophecy of the impending uncertainties that the human mind has to cope with and works hard to circumvent their negative repercussions. This alarms humans by underscoring their upcoming impotence in the presence of machines.

Humans among machines are sometimes baffled as they do not know if they should completely trust and rely on cyborgs. Human security looms large on the horizon and the ability of robots to save people and keep them alive is questioned. Are they really able to detect possible dangers and risks? Can half-machine and half-human bots rescue people in critically dire circumstances? The adventures of Murderbot show that the situation is doubled-

edged; the reliance on robots can result in both rewarding and disastrous repercussions. It all depends on the software that governs their work and the amount of freedom allotted to them. This means that the world of digitals and robotics needs some cautious pruning. The unwanted, useless and risky branches should be cut off and then put into a good and helpful shape.

The issue of artificial ethics is also implied in the two novellas by raising the deceptive disguise of Murderbot that seeks to show that it is like all humans around it. This is unethical as it penetrates into the world of humans stealthily with a false identity: an augmented human. The author implicitly invites us to reflect on this issue and its possible risks. What is the gain in doing that? Why does Murderbot hide its real identity and pretend to be an augmented human? What is the gain in creating webs of artificial conditions? Does the fabrication of fake identities reflect the fakeness of the whole process of artificial intelligence industry? To what extent are humans able to keep AI-powered machines under their control? And if they escape this control, how to deal with them? These some of the irking questions that humanity has to continuously address at the time of AI.

Martha Wells raises the question of trust between cyborgs and their human creators. When should humans, namely scientists, trust the machines they design and produce? If they trust them, what would happen? If they don't, what can possibly happen? The preservation scientific team led by Dr. Mensah decides to trust the Murderbot given that it has demonstrated a protective role. But in cases in which robots turn into imposters with fake identities, this trust can evaporate. The questions raised so far reveal the complex nature of the life of humans among machines. This is, in a sense, infuriating, but, worse than that, it can be dehumanizing.

The question of human identity in Martha Wells' novellas can be understood in relation to its other (i.e., the machine). In these two works, there is a catalogue of oppositions inscribed: identity and alterity, human and non-human, reality and fiction, truth and fantasy, anthropocentrism and technocentrism, intuition and artificiality, rationality and absurdity, visibility and invisibility. These oppositions make the response to the question of what it means to be human suspended and reflect the paradoxical and complex situations created by the integration of AI into human life. At the core of all of them lies the idea that the creation of AI-powered machines that can transact and interact with humans in different conditions is 'against the grain.'

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