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ALAN AYCKBOURN'S EXPLORATION OF TRANSHUMANISM AND POSTHUMAN CONDITION: *HENCEFORWARD*

ABSTRACT: One of the finest and most prolific writers and directors in England, Alan Ayckbourn walks the line between humor and despair in his plays while emphasizing people from the middle class and addressing issues with the family unit and marital difficulties that may or may not arise in society. The purpose of this research is to provide an explanation of the 'post-human condition' by focusing on transhumanist theory and the post-human scenario in the play Henceforward (1987), which was dramatized by Ayckbourn with a gloomy outlook on the future. In the context of transhumanism, which represents the transition from humanism to post-humanism, in Ayckbourn's *Henceforward*, Jerome is addicted to technology but lost his productivity and falls into a void due to his wife's abandonment having an isolated life in a shelter equipped with technological tools, but hopelessly tries to produce something but he fails. In addition to the character of Jerome, who is trying to regain his family in desperation by trying to create, a woman Android (NAN 300F), which is the creation of modern man and is programmed to take care of a baby, takes part in the main action of the study. The second part of this research examines the post-human nature of the characters as well as their behavior patterns, focusing on how the man-made and human-like robots interact and communicate with actual humans. Considering the plot of the play, the study examines whether the human-machine conflict is possible in the foreseeable mechanical future, whether real humans or man-made androids with artificial intelligence will dominate each other in the near future, and whether human-designed and human-like machines are acceptable for the future of humanity.

Keywords: Transhumanism, Posthumanism, Technology, Human, Love.

ALAN AYCKBOURN'ÜN TRANSHÜMANİZMİ VE POSTHUMAN DURUMUNU KEŞFİ: *HENCEFORWARD (ŞİMDİDEN SONRA)*

ÖZ: Komedi ve umutsuzluk arasındaki çizgide ilerleyen, oyunlarında genel olarak orta sınıftan gelen karakterleri merkeze alarak, aile kurumunu ve eşler arasında yaşanan/yaşanılabilecek toplumsal sorunlara uzanan Alan Ayckbourn, İngiltere'nin en yetkin ve üretken oyun yazarları ve yönetmenleri arasında yer almaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amacı geleceğe yönelik karamsar bir bakış açısıyla Ayckbourn tarafından kurgulanan *Henceforward* -Şimdiden Sonra (1987) oyununda transhümanist düşünce ve post-insan durumu merkeze alarak, 'insan sonrası durumu' aralamaya çalışmaktır. Hümanizmden post-hümanizme geçişi temsil eden transhümanizm bağlamında, Ayckbourn'ün Şimdiden Sonra oyununda, insanın gelecekteki durumuna yönelik yaratılan teknoloji bağımlısı ve üretkenliğini kaybetmesinin yanı sıra karısının kendisini terk etmesiyle bir boşluğa düşmüş, teknolojik aletlerle donatılmış bir sığınakta izole olmuş bir biçimde yaşayan ancak yine de sanat yaratmaya çalışarak çaresizlik içerisinde ailesini yeniden kazanma çabası içerisinde olan Jerome karakterinin yanı sıra modern insanın yaratımı olan ve gerçekte bebek bakması için programlanmış bir kadın Android (NAN 300F) çalışmanın temel eyleminde yer alır. İnsan yaratımı olan teknolojinin günümüzde insanları nasıl şekillendirdiğini gözler önüne sermenin yanı sıra oyun karakterleri aracılığı ile karakterlerin insan sonrası doğası, yaratılan ve görünüm olarak insana benzeyen makinaların gerçek insanlarla nasıl ilişki ve iletişim kurdukları, davranış biçimleri bu çalışmanın ikinci bölümünde incelenmektedir. Çalışma, oyunun olay örgüsü göz önünde bulundurularak, öngörülebilir mekanik bir gelecekte insan- makine çatışmasının mümkün olup olmayacağını, gerçek insanların mı yoksa yapay zekâya sahip insan yapımı androidlerin mi yakın gelecekte birbirlerine baskın olacaklarını ve insan geleceği için insan tasarımı olan ve insana benzeyen makinelerin kabul edilebilir olup olmayacağını araştırır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Transhümanizm, Posthümanizm, Teknoloji, İnsan, Sevgi.

Introduction

"As humanism freed us from the chains of superstition,
let transhumanism free us from our biological chains"
(Young, 2006: 24)

As a recently-developed field of study, transhumanism may not have yet had a clear enough definition and discussion. It is, however, admittedly defined as an "interdisciplinary approach to studying and assessing the prospects for improving the human situation and the human body opened up by the advent of technology" (Bostrom, 2005b: 3). It is a school of thought that has been more popular over the last several decades in the world. To broaden the boundaries of what is possible for human existence is the driving force behind transhumanism. This expansion involves "radical extension of human health span, eradication of disease, elimination of unnecessary suffering, and augmentation of human intellectual, physical, and emotional capacities" (Bostrom, 2005b: 3). Transhumanists are those who think that human nature is always changing and that it has the potential to change for the better by the use of science, technology, and other methods. Transhumanists, in a sense, want to find a way to evolve into a 'posthuman' form with more capabilities than the people alive now. The term "posthuman" refers to the improved form of the human race that may be produced through technological advancements (Ranisch & Sorgner, 2014: 7). Ranisch and Sorgner (2014: 8) also contend that the 'transhuman', which is a synonym for 'transitional human,' is the connection between the human and the posthuman. Based on their reasoning and Bostrom's declaration that "transhumanism has its origins in rational humanism" (2005a: 3), transhumanism might be defined as a modern rebirth of humanism.

Transhumanism may be traced back to the enlightenment principles that were prevalent throughout the French Renaissance, according to Jean Pierre Fillard. In addition, he notes that Darwin proposed that the "human race had not yet arrived at its most advanced evolutionary stage" (Fillard, 2020: 4). The idea that the human body may be enhanced and elevated to a higher state of being has been greatly influenced by scientific progress and the development of technology. Therefore, the Enlightenment's motto, "Dare to know!" has inspired people to apply their minds more efficiently and go beyond their understanding. The potential advantages of cutting-edge technology that may enhance people's capacities and quality of life consequently have given rise to the transhumanist worldview. Ray Kurzweil, a futurist, emphasizes humanity's ambition to elevate itself and characterizes people as species that strive to expand their horizons. In addition, Kurzweil asserts that no other species has ever done so and that humans have not yet discovered any advanced civilization elsewhere in the cosmos (Kurzweil, 2005: 366).

A Transhumanist and Posthuman Perspective on the Future of Humanity

Since the dawn of the modern era, people have attempted to go beyond the constraints imposed by their current human situation because they are dissatisfied with their limits. People now imagine having better physicality and mind thanks to technological advancements, which would enable them to dominate the world. Protagoras' renowned maxim "*Man is the measure of all things*" appealed to humanist philosophers and the notion of humanism. Ideas from the Enlightenment, including science, reason, individuality, and the belief in rational progress, have inspired people to go beyond their 'human' constraints. Due to this motivation, people have realized that they have the potential to alleviate suffering and improve conditions for mankind. Bostrom asserts that humans have always sought methods to broaden their social, geographic, or mental horizons. This urge is as ancient as the human species itself, he claims. The Enlightenment's catchphrase is the motto of Enlightenment 'Dare to know! Have the courage to use your own intelligence!', which in this respect establishes the roots of transhumanist thought (Bostrom, 2005a: 4). Harari argues, as does Bostrom, that, success fosters ambition and that recent human accomplishments have motivated people to set even more ambitious

goals for the future, such as aiming to "upgrade humans into Gods and turn Homo Sapiens into Homo Deus" (2016: 29-30).

In *The Order of Things*, Foucault argues that the human is a transitory idea that might quickly vanish, stating: "*Man is a new creation, possibly approaching its end.*" (2002: 422). From an anti-humanist stance, Foucault gives us crucial means with which to evaluate the idea of human uniqueness. Furthermore, he believes that "*if the fundamental arrangements of knowledge change again just as they did at the end of the eighteenth century, man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea*" (p. 422). Therefore, unless *"the essential arrangements of knowledge"* are modified, as asserted by Foucault, the human notion established by the Enlightenment philosophy is doomed to vanish. Therefore, it is anticipated that once the 'post-human condition' brought on by transhumanism emerges, the category of 'human' will no longer exist from now on.

Nietzsche's investigation into the human sparked a re-examination of humankind's position in the cosmos by several other thinkers. Several transhumanist thinkers notice parallels between Nietzsche's idea of 'the über human' and the post-human view of the human being. Sorgner, for example, claims that transhumanism's idea of the posthuman and Nietzsche's concept of the über human are connected (2009: 29). On the other hand, Max More asserts that there is not just a resemblance but also a direct effect of Nietzschean thought on transhumanist philosophy (2010: 1). However, Nietzsche expresses worry about human beings' lack of morality and virtue when he states, "Human being is something that shall be conquered" (Del Caro & Pippin, 2006: 34). Transhumanism aims to improve human beings in terms of their biological limitations with the help of technological means. Leading transhumanist Bostrom admits that Nietzsche was an influence for transhumanism and that his idea of the 'über human' has some superficial parallels with transhumanism, but he believes that Nietzsche's über human did not aspire to revolutionize society via technology (2005a: 4). It is possible to perceive the liberty, advancement, and perfection of human in both Nietzsche's philosophy and transhumanism despite the striking comparison claimed by Bostrom.

Julian Huxley, an English biologist, is the first to use the term 'transhumanism' in his *New Bottles for New Wine*. He states his belief that human beings can transcend themselves entirely, not only individually but also as humanity. He names this belief as 'transhumanism' which means "man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature" (Huxley 1957: 17). However, since Huxley, the definition of transhumanism has gone through some changes and become "the keyword for the transgression of human's biological boundaries by means of technologies" (Ranisch & Sorgner, 2014: 10). Getting rid of the organic body and leaving the human condition behind have become the primary goal of transhumanism. Not only does Hauskeller argue that human beings can free themselves from biological constraints but he also emphasizes that mind-loading is the ultimate survival technique of transhumanist thinkers (2014: 5). As understood from the views of the transhumanist philosophers, the point of transhumanism is to bring nature under human control and to empower it to serve human beings because the only way of human enhancement is based on pushing technology and nature to the limit.

A posthumanist philosopher, Cary Wolfe asserts that "transhumanism should be seen as an intensification of humanism" (2009: xv). In this respect, transhumanism can be regarded as an extension of humanism, which affirms the freedom, progress, and enhancement of individuals. Another posthumanist philosopher Francesca Ferrando, who claims that the main focus of transhumanism is a human enhancement, explains its symbol as 'H+', an acronym for 'Humanity Plus'. Ferrando further explains that within the literature of transhumanism the term 'posthuman' refers to a stage that may advance after the current transhuman period according to posthumanism. "Posthumanism is concerned with a technology-saturated society (technoculture) and a profound shift in civilization and human experience or rethinking man's interaction with nature and the world" (Günenç 2022:202). The posthuman is regarded as "a paradigm shift which is already occurring by approaching and performing the human in posthumanist, post-anthropocentric, and post-dualistic ways" (Braidotti, & Hlavajova, 2018: 439).

Hence, it is possible to say that the term posthuman expresses a complete process in transhumanism while it expresses a process of becoming in posthumanism. Human existence and enhancement are more important than anything else according to transhumanism even if it means ignoring nature and non-human beings to reach the state of 'post-human'. Although it has some negative implications regarding the use of technology and science to the service of humans, it does not mean that dedication to technology is wrong or harmful; it is to become too absorbed in this passion and succumb to personal ambitions. The next part of this study analyses the play *Henceforward* by the English playwright Alan Ayckbourn within the philosophy of transhumanism by scrutinizing the characters and their indifferent use of technology to reach their ambitions.

Ayckbourn's Mechanized Future: *Henceforward*

Alan Ayckbourn is a British writer who has written more than eighty plays. The majority of his plays fall in between the genres of comedy and tragedy. He is often regarded as the most prolific dramatist to emerge from the United Kingdom after Shakespeare. Through the juxtaposition of contrasting situations, Ayckbourn investigates the darker side of human nature in his plays by using comic elements. "He has never ceased to entertain; but it is through entertainment that his work provokes and disturbs us, hits us where we live," says Alexander Leggatt (Luckhurst, 2006: 269). Ayckbourn is clearly more than just a comedy dramatist since he employs dark humour to express society's everyday fear and desperation in his plays. His plays mostly target marital problems and reflect the problems and weaknesses of British middle-class culture. He illustrates how challenging and complicated it is to be a person and engage in social interaction in the majority of his plays. In his plays, he often returns to the topic of marriage as a central motif. In his most recent plays, he has concentrated on a critique of the aspects of British culture notably in terms of family dynamics, the disintegration of marriage, and the effects on children. This research gives insight into the primary character of *Henceforward*, Jerome, who is a failed parent due to his artistic ambitions. It also sheds new light on Nan, an android that Jerome purchases and educates to serve his intentions. Both of these characters are discussed in detail in this study. In his dramatic career, *Henceforward* is Ayckbourn's first play that incorporates science-fiction themes into its plot. In this futuristic comedy, Jerome, a musician who has just separated from his wife and daughter, struggles to find creative motivation after experiencing emotional and psychological depletion. Jerome is unable to compose music when his daughter is not around for some time, a tragic loss of his artistic capacity attributed to the fact that he draws his creative energy from her. Contrarily, his ex-wife bans him from seeing his daughter because she thinks Jerome is abnormal. Jerome has an addiction to recording every single moment so that he uses the recorded sounds he captures to create his compositions, which is the reason why his ex-wife left him. Jerome and Corinna are former spouses who were unable to communicate well with one another, which ultimately leads to the dissolution of their marriage. Corinna is the one who complains about their relationship, while Jerome is the insusceptible one who ignores her problems. This is a recurring issue in Ayckbourn's plays discussing the interactions between women and men. Jerome has resentment for Corinna and defends his behaviour toward her when he explains it to Zoe, an actor that he hires to assume the role of his partner in the following way:

> **JEROME** : … *I have cause. I have cause to be vindictive… She's not the one who's been forbidden to see her daughter. Denied all those precious moments watching her child grow up. She is not the one who's been left to live alone in an empty flat. Unable to work – unable to write a single note of music for four years. Four years!* (1987: 31).

Jerome gets ready to meet with his ex-wife Corinna and a child welfare official to persuade them that it would be suitable for his daughter Geain to see her father. Jerome looks for assistance from an android that he calls Nan and modifies it so that it can behave like a human. He instructs Nan to become his partner so that he may demonstrate to Corinna and the officer that he can maintain a secure environment for his daughter at home and gain their approval. He authorises Nan in such a manner that she eventually becomes, in his perspective, the epitome of the ideal partnership. Viewed from this perspective, Nan can also be accepted as

a modern Galatea, a mythological ivory-made female figure who, in Çelik's words, can be taken as a female archetype shaped by man to his own taste, pleasure, purpose and desire (2019: 125). When Nan's human state is unable to deal with the situation, he attempts to find a solution in a manner that is beyond the bounds of what a human being is capable of doing. Viewed from this angle, Jerome's relationship with technology may be understood within the context of transhumanist philosophy. The fact that he turns to technology when confronted with the constraints of his human situation is consistent with the goals of transhumanist philosophy, which promotes the concept that technology is at the behest of humans to improve their circumstances. The Transhumanist Declaration, written in 1998 by transhumanists such as Nick Bostrom, Max More, and David Pearce, questions the limits of humanity and promotes the improvement of the human condition by technological methods:

> We favor allowing individuals wide personal choice over how they enable their lives. This includes the use of techniques that may be developed to assist memory, concentration, and mental energy; life extension therapies; reproductive choice technologies; cryonics procedures; and many other possible human modification and enhancement technologies (8th article of the version of March 2009) (Bostrom, 2005a: 26).

In her book *Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway makes the following statement: "*The boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion*" (1991: 149). The play *Henceforward* may be examined within the rhetoric of transhumanist philosophers since Ayckbourn imagines a technologically feasible mechanized future. Nan, a woman android, is used in the play *Henceforward* to provoke us into critical consideration about the future of the human species. This is accomplished by having Nan play the role of a human being, although there are times when she is unable to do so because she is being asked to go beyond her capabilities. As Nan is originally programmed to look after children, but as Jerome is the only company living in the apartment with her, she often acts like a child and plays with him instead. Nan may be a posthuman because she does not have a body made of biological material and Jerome has programmed her mind to react in a manner consistent with his expectations of her. Every time she funnily interacts with him, Jerome needs to adjust her settings as follows:

JEROME : *Nan, stop.*
NAN : *Stopped, Nan.*
JEROME : *Nan, register.*
NAN : *Register, Nan.*
JEROME : *(Standing in front of her so he can scan his face) Not child. Not child.*
NAN : *Not child. Registered, Nan.*
JEROME : *Nan, take a nap.*
NAN : *Take a nap, Nan.*
JEROME : *(Muttering) I don't know why I bothered to switch you on again, really.*
(She heads back to the bedrooms.) (Ayckbourn, 1989: 9).

The action of the play takes place in "a recognizable future" (Billington, 1990: 199) in which "law and order have broken down and people live in computerized bunkers enslaved by the very machines they have created" (1990: 165). Ayckbourn paints a picture of the future that seems to be "a place where both technology and people fail to function in the way they were intended" (Allan, 2001: 228). It is also a dystopian future in which Jerome "cannot find a good reason to opt for humanity" (McGrath, 2017: 67). He is a composer who works in isolation, and although he is surrounded by machinery, he has no human companionship nearby.

The first scene of the play takes place in Jerome's apartment, which is shown in a manner that highlights the contradictions in his existence, which are caused by the presence of machines. Even though the electronic equipment is organized and clean, "*the rest of the room -the living area- is in fair chaos*" (Ayckbourn, 1987: 1). Because of his isolation, he has no choice but to program an android to perform by the requirements of his selfish desires. Many of the women in Ayckbourn's plays are victims of self-obsessed men who do not notice the damage they are doing to women (Holt, 1999: 27). Nan may not be a real woman, but much like the majority of Ayckbourn's other female characters, she suffers from the effects of having

a male figure in her life. Nan is a robot that was intended to be a 'nanny', but it has certain dysfunctional features that Jerome is attempting to repair by following the instructions in the handbook that he got from the manufacturer where he purchased Nan. Within the context of the play, she is referred to as "Jekyll and Hyde" which refers to someone who seems to have two distinct personalities, as Ayckbourn suggests in the stage direction: "*Her sunnier nature is the result of her initial 'nanny' factory programming; her darker side the result of subsequent modifications by Jerome himself*" (Ayckbourn, 1987: 7).

In addition, Jerome asks Zoe, an actress who is currently without a job, to play the role of his partner so that he might persuade his ex-wife Corinna and the officer from the Child Welfare Department to allow his daughter Geain to live with him. When Zoe arrives at Jerome's flat for the interview, it is understood that she was attacked by the Daughters of Darkness in the neighbourhood - a metaphor that Ayckbourn uses throughout the play to show the conse-quences of living in a mechanical society. They provoke tension in the public locations and instil a sense of fear among those who come to the neighbourhood; this behaviour might be seen as a foreshadowing of something of a mechanical dystopian society in the near future. According to what is shown in the play, human connections are damaged, and the characters are always on guard against the threats that may originate from the outside world. Whenever Zoe leaves the front door open, Jerome is startled and he quickly runs to check to see whether it is secure. He then gives Zoe a severe warning not to leave the door open:

> **JEROME** : (*He rushes out of the room into the hall, seizing his walking stick as he goes. Zoe, alarmed, flinches slightly as he dashes past her. Jerome appears briefly on the video screen. We see that his stick is in fact a swordstick which he has now drawn. He checks to left and right, then closes the door…*) Never leave my front door open.
> **ZOE** : (*Muted*) No. I'm sorry. (*Pause.*) You see, there were these people…
> **JEROME** : I know there are these people. Why the hell do you think I keep it shut?
> (Ayckbourn, 1989: 11).

As can be observed in most of his works, Ayckbourn generally writes plays with a tone that is somewhere between comedy and despair. Although *Henceforward* is the most desper-ate play he has written, he still manages to make the audience laugh despite the prevailing gloomy and pessimistic vision (Billington, 1990: 194). Ayckbourn portrays a future in which we are no longer the ones to make use of technology; rather, the technology that we have created is the one to make use of us. He also illustrates that human beings are more complicated and contradictory than robots can ever be. Jerome finds himself in such a paradoxical position that he cannot see that he is avoiding rather than pursuing the things he wants. He is in pursuit of love and is attempting to compose a musical piece to represent pure love, but at the same time, he would much prefer to be in the company of machines than real humans. Jerome makes it clear in the play that he disapproves of the majority of people on Earth when he suggests: "If human beings behaved a bit less like human beings and a bit more like machines, we'd all be better off" (Ayckbourn, 1987: 89).

Conclusion

While humanism is the philosophy that promotes human superiority, Posthumanism sug-gests that human beings are not favoured; instead, there is some interconnection and mutual reliance. This results in the fact that all species are treated on equal terms. As a result of this equality across all species, the borders between humans, non-humans, and Inhumans are be-ginning to blur. On the other hand, within the framework of transhumanism, we call into ques-tion what may be considered natural. The concept of transhumanism may be described as either a belief or a theory in which it is postulated that the human race is capable of developing beyond its present-day physical and mental constraints. Therefore, in contrast to posthuman-ism, transhumanism can be said to be a man-centred philosophy.

Alan Ayckbourn, who is most known for his dark comedies, generally centres his works on the challenges that people face in their day-to-day lives, and, with his play *Henceforward*, he shifts his attention to the future, resulting in an environment that is both technically chal-lenging and spiritually depressing. In Ayckbourn's canon, the play *Henceforward* is the first

one that offers such a picture despite this fact because it dramatizes Ayckbourn's fears and projects us not into a science fiction fantasy future but rather into an almost recognizable future. Even though the play's first act is relatively tentative, *Henceforward* makes us think over whether we are, quite literally, engrossed by our word processors and personal computers, and whether we do genuinely prefer logical machines to irrational human people in our daily lives. On the other hand, *Henceforward* is more along the lines of a dramatic early warning system that has a large degree of potential for prediction. Not only does Ayckbourn challenge the changing idea, but he also queries what transhumanism means when he asks what is natural. In the same way, Jerome alters the sounds to obtain his perfect song and designs Nan according to his image of what an ideal lady should be like. Nan is a genuine person whom he makes by recording Zoe's voice and clothing that belonged to his ex-wife. He utilizes Zoe's attitude and historical background to make her seem more desirable and exploits her face. As a sculptor would do, he fashions a sculpture to locate the perfect example of the ideal lady he has in mind. However, Geain is the only one who is aware that Nan is a computer program or an android. As a result, ideas that we hold such as what is normal, what is beautiful, what is love, and what it means to be a mother are challenged and questioned in the play. In a nutshell, change occurs not only in human beings but also in conceptions and meanings as a result of technological advancements. Ayckbourn aims to draw attention to evolving ideas through the characters he creates, and he wants his readers to rethink what it means to be human. What makes someone a human being?

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