

*The People of Sand and Slag as a Posthuman Dystopia*

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses Paolo Bacigalupi's *The People of Sand and Slag* as a posthuman dystopic work of futuristic fiction. The paper argues that science and technology will gradually dehumanize everything. Science and technology, in their climatic phase, will eventually become the new forms of power, knowledge and control. This technological 'hubris' inspired by human greed and lust for power is bound to meet its 'nemesis'. This argument of the paper will be developed in the light of the critical works of the key critics like Geoffrey Allan Plauche, Christy Tidwel and Lars Schmeink.

Keywords: Dehumanization, Dystopia, Hubris, Nemesis, posthuman.

**Introduction**

Posthuman is a concept in science fiction which means beyond being human. In Paolo Bacigalupi's science fiction short story *The People of Sand and Slag* the society and people are really posthuman, making it difficult for humans to live. The over exploitation of natural resources by humans by the use of science and technology is what can be called as the hubris of a postmodern materialistic society. Every hubris has its nemesis and what Paolo Bacigalupi portrays in his work in the form of a dull, grey and barren landscape inhabited by

dehumanized and mechanized posthumans is the nemesis which the posthuman society is bound to suffer.

Paolo Bacigalupi's *The People of Sand and Slag* is a story about three genetically modified human beings, who work as guards for a large mining conglomeration in futuristic Montana. Liza, Jaak and Chen are asked to track an intruder in their world. When they catch it they realize that it is merely a dog. They get awe struck that how a dog could survive in such harsh conditions. Therefore, they decide to keep it as a pet, and then they struggle to feed it, clean it and keep it healthy and alive. The story shows the dehumanization, which the future is bound to see, because of the technological advances and dying humanity. Lars Schmeink in his *Biopunk Dystopias Genetic Engineering, Society, and Science Fiction* writes about Katherine Hayles' work *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*:

Hayles's investigation is thus most useful in its reminder that the posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity. It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice. Located within the dialectic of pattern/randomness and grounded in embodied actuality rather than disembodied information, the posthuman offers resources for rethinking the articulation of humans with intelligent machines. (Schmeink 286–87)

At its core this story seems to be asking whether the vulnerable are worth saving. The dog here is an absolute dead end of its evolutionary chain, and there really is nothing that can be done with it, or for it without a great inconvenience. The story is a dystopic vision of the future, with an environment that has been wrecked for no good. But to the characters, this really is no big deal. They spend the end of the story on vacation in Hawaii, and it is every bit as wrecked as Montana was. There were burning pools of fire right off the coast, no plants grew, and there was deadly trash floating in the water and washing up on the beaches. It just did not matter to these people, mainly because no amount of ecological 'damage' would ever affect them, but also because this is obviously what they were used to. From their perspective it can easily be said that killing the dog was a way of putting it out of its misery. And a state of misery is definitely what the dog lived in. They even wondered the following, just after finding the dog tangled in a cluster of wire on the beach, panting, bleeding and dying.

Christy Tidwell her *The Problem of Materiality in Paolo Bacigalupi's 'The People of Sand and Slag'* focuses on the meaning of posthumanism. She writes,

A truly ethical posthuman future would...be an embodied posthumanism and it would also be a that is post-Humanist and post-Cartesian, a posthumanism that neither defines humanity in opposition to nonhuman nature and the environment nor defines nonhuman nature and the environment in terms of the human. Bacigalupi presents a

strong argument for precisely this by revealing what happens in the absence of such an ethical and embodied posthumanism.

Geoffrey Allan Plauche (2011) while reviewing *Pump Six and Other Stories* writes, they all seem to be set in a post-global warming/ post-energy crisis future Earth, may be a century or so hence. *The People of Sand and Slag* reflects Paolo's thoughts on technology and human advancement. The story is really about increasing technology in the world and still making some really bad decisions. The characters are given a choice between preserving something that's natural versus their entertainment and expediency, and they naturally choose entertainment and expediency first. It is not only the characters Liza, Jaak and Chen but is very much there in today's society as well. The people prefer entertainment and self-interest over being human and caring about humanity, which is leading to a posthuman dystopia.

Theresa Wojtasiewicz in her review on Paolo Bacigalupi's *The People of Sand and Slag*, published in Tangent Online, very aptly sums up the decadent scenario of the posthuman dystopian society under the threat of biotechnological advances and dying humanity. She writes:

Bacigalupi posits a future where humanity has adapted itself to living in a hostile environment. ... There is plenty of techie stuff entwined with the premise itself to satisfy the hardest of hard sf readers, but the main attraction of this story is the faint hope that those parts of us that can accept the "other" might still exist in a world where self-preservation and survival come first. (Feb,2004)

## Conclusion

*The People of Sand and Slag* is a serious exposition of the dehumanized future of humans in the posthuman society. The dog in the story represents humanity. It is a dystopic vision of the future, with a wrecked environment, not worth living. For Bacigalupi normal is alien, which means what dinosaur is for us, the dog was for them. Because they couldn't believe that a cut can take anyone's life. They regrow limbs and are immortal. It is very much clear that excessive growing technologies will act as hubris which will in near future lead to nemesis of humanity. The dehumanization is one of the key aspects of posthumanism seen clearly in futuristic dystopian works like *The People of Sand and Slag*.

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