

A DISCOURSE OF CRITICISM OF AGE/ART TENDING TOWARDS PESSIMISM: CYBERPUNK



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Fatih ARSLAN ¹ 

Aybüke GÜÇLÜ DEMİR ² 

¹ Firat University, Turkish Language and Literature, farslan@firat.edu.tr

² Firat University, Turkish Language and Literature, Aybukeguclu21@gmail.com

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Abstract

The reflection of science fiction in literature has first started to be seen in texts about utopia (light world) and then about dystopia (dark world). Writers show the reflections of products, which have emerged as a result of scientific developments, on society through these texts and create draft structures which can be examples for new scientific activities in the text level by transcending science through the power of their imagination. In the process of determining the subject of our study, the concept of *Cyberpunk* which has partially come into existence in these texts, grabbed our attention during our field work on dystopic texts. We observed that this concept appears rather in the content spiral of dystopic texts in a partial manner and that the sub-heading is not dealt with within a framework of a specific critical method. Taking this as our starting point, we aim at identifying the critical framework of the concept of *Cyberpunk* in the area of literary discourse.

1. Introduction

"Today's science fiction is tomorrow's reality."

I. Asimov

Humanity, which wishes to acquire a place in nature, makes use of products in the scientific field as a fundamental ground to sustain its continuity and create its nature that reflects its own life cycle. Humanity is attributed superior identity characteristics such as being able to acquire a place in the material world, having the ability to initiate and end ages with timelines and being able to assume dominance over nature with the help of technological products created by scientific fields. After making their presence felt in the material area, these technological products have included artistic areas, which reflect humanity's spiritual area and are the products of the world of thought, in their sphere of influence as well. In artistic works, which are the junction points where imagination and reality meet, technological products' coming to effectual existence has shown itself under Science Fiction. This fictional area has emerged "due to two main factors created by the developments which have taken place in Europe"

in the aftermath of the industrial revolution at the end of the 19th century. "The first factor is the sense of emptiness that arose as science weakened the effect of religion and the second is the social and economic changes brought on by technological developments and the industrial revolution in and between countries" (Rabkin, 2000). Science fiction, which has been used in an effective manner as a theme in areas of art such as cinema, architecture and visual arts, the moment it emerged, is dealt with within the world of fiction by writers who are the creators of this world, which does not go into action but remains in the limbo of explanation in the area of literature.

Literature, which is the mute canvas of the mental world of humanity, is one of the primary social sciences which narrates the negative atmosphere in society created by technological developments in the fictional plane of cyberpunk. The simulation of the age of technology is transmitted to the reader in the plot-time-subject-setting chain of novel narrations within the cyberpunk fiction discourse. Towards the mid-eighties, the concept of cyberpunk, whose seeds started to be sown in the world of literature through Bruce Bethke's story *Cyberpunk*,

which tells the story of a young hacker gang, started sprouting with William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* (1984). Cyberpunk, which continues to expand the area of interpretation in the world of literature as well, is a combination of the words, cybernetics, which is defined as a method of virtual management and punk, which emerged in England in the 1970's as a type of rock music and reflects the cultural formation of a dissident lifestyle. Writing texts about cyberpunk, which has a dense meaning string in lexical terms, embodies a very difficult adventure, because the writer should be able to make realistic prophesies about advanced technologies with the skill of a scientist, besides the need to have great technological knowledge. Due to this, there are very few writers who narrate the cyberpunk environment in the world of literature. In Turkish literature, writers who have gained identity by dealing with the cyberpunk discourse, where advanced technology and low quality of life are dominant, came into existence after the 2000's. These text writers have been evaluated rather in the context of dystopic fiction by literary researchers; however, these texts "radically redefine brain-computer interfaces, artificial intelligences, neurochemical techniques, human nature and the nature of I through a mental invasion, as they appear as a scabbed genre in the reality of the age of technology and not in a totally imaginary manner like dystopic texts" (Sterling, 1986). The main reason why we work around these definitions is to analyze the position of the concept of cyberpunk, which has been active in numerous scientific areas in the recent years as a criticism of the age of technology, through the new critical discourse point of view. As a prototype of this critical point of view developed in relation to the cyberpunk discourse, one of the initial representatives of this genre in Turkish literature, Hikmet Temel Akarsu's novel *Cyber Tragedy or Iphigeneia* was determined as the subject of study and was dealt with in the context of plot-subject-setting-time.

2. Transition from Plane to Typeset... Cyberpunk

In the world of literature, one of the main structural aspects of texts which have narrative value is plot. Writers form the comprehension and interpretation flow plane of the text which passes from the work to society and from society to the readers with the help of plot. The literary text writers of the digital age symbolize events that attempt to interpret the network of entropy (chaos and destruction), which exists in society due to technological developments and industrialization, through the cyberpunk discourse, because plot planes, which emerge as a result of technological activities which have been developed by humanity with high hopes, where wretched lives are narrated, are typeset for the reader in the world of literary text through the cyberpunk fiction discourse.

Fictional works with cyberpunk themes have frequently been used in literary genres in recent years. Writers who make use of this technique narrate the malevolent consequences of technological developments to the reader within the plot by simulating them. This malevolent simulation act within the plot emerges from "the struggle of man with man, man with society, man with nature and himself" (Çetişli, 2009), because man, who is a product of an act of creation, has continuously been struggling to create new creative activities to determine his place on earth since his existence. On the other hand, writers who are the implementors of this creative struggle in the literary stage classify fictionalizing cyberpunk under three headings: The first plot narrates the negative consequences of experimental developments; the second plot narrates industrialization which upsets ecological balance, and the third plot reflects the negativity network caused by the developments in information technologies. Hikmet Temel Akarsu's novel *Cyber Tragedy or Iphigeneia*, which takes Euripides' tragedy *Iphigeneia Aulis* which he sees as Euripides' immortal genius as the starting point and narrates the age of technology, is formed around a cyberpunk plot which reflects the negativity network brought by the developments in information technologies. Through the narration of "the extraordinary growth of big companies, human genius as a monument of greed and creativity and turning the world into an arena where the big fish swallow the little fish and the tension caused by this is experienced non-stop, into a field of endless conflict and competition; the ruthless abandonment of those who lose the party to poverty, turning them into slaves, ruining and making them miserable and the joined rebellion of slaves who do not wish to take this ruthless enforcement" (Akarsu, 2003), the plot of the novel is typeset to the reader.

The novel *Cyber Tragedy or Iphigeneia* tells the story of how the technological partnership between Diana Yeats, who is the heir of Macrofast company where big software companies manage the technological network of the world and is identified with the mythological character Artemis and Ardan Memnu, who is the owner of a local, small software company and is identified with another mythological character, Agamemnon, turns into an individual war of pleasure. In the novel, the events based on the conflicts in the cyber world initially start with the pervasiveness of television in society as human traps. Then, Diana Yeats and her father Zigg Yeats make the whole world addicted to the internet, which is the representative of the digital age, like an addictive power. As a result of this act, Diane Yeats, "had concentrated Macrofast on a horrific database program which analyzed all people's behavior styles. Communication, internet, bank transactions, telephone calls were being recorded by a program called "Eccehomo". However, time was of essence for the research and development group, which consisted of

pedagogues, sociologists, men of letters, philosophers and genetic engineers, to complete the classification program and implement it on humans” (Akarsu, 2003). During this time, the communication with Ardan Memnu, who is the owner of one of the local software companies, constitutes the cyberpunk fiction discourse framework in the novel.

While the relationship between Macrofast’s owner Diana Yeats and Ardan Memnu, the owner of a local software company called Profast initially develops over technological software applications, it progresses with hedonism brought by individual existential throes. Ardan Memnu set her out to “plateaus created with fantasies only an expert director could manage and made the princess of the virtual world experience exciting adventures in the world of the miserable. After the aspiring adventures in the world of creatures, Diana Yeats would go back to Silicon Valley as stronger and reborn person who has solved her digestions problems as to swallow ashes and was burned in the embers of masochist gratifications” (Akarsu, 2003). Thus, the two love the infinite repetition of the adventures that give them pleasure and always find themselves within a structure of taking pleasure from similar adventures. However, due to the virtual technological construction which gives the power to manage everything, “the individual misunderstood this world, which he depended on to the extent of his innermost point, as he owned it” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2015). İpek, who is the opposing force that wakes the individual up from this virtual world which allows him to experience the culmination of hedonism, is the character who makes this plot chain to be nested as a young hacker and the person who attempts to overthrow the twisted network of relationships created by her father Ardan Memnu and Diana Yeats from the virtual world and the program which will imprison all humanity to a virtual prison called “Ecehomo” which is an evil construction. The writer takes the relationship network he creates between Ardan Memnu-Diana Yeats-İpek as the starting point to narrate the evil magic of the power of being in power presented by the virtual world and human values which degenerate and take on an evil identity and the conflicts of the sense of parenthood. Thus, the reader is presented a picture of chain of events on how the power given by developed technological creations to their creator and users is misused, how it can be dangerous when combined with human pleasures and the realms of existence of miserable lives which emerge after cyberpunk, in other words advanced technology.

3. From Representation to Submission... Cyberpunk Actants

In the last century, humanity has struggled to attain the happiness of material and spiritual power that it has and will have in the advanced technological areas. Humanity believes that it will have

a better life standard with these powers it dreams about attaining. However, although technological advancements speedily increase each day, hour and minute... in the face of time, poverty, calamity and corruption which exist in this world increase as well. This duality which has become the problem of our age is narrated by people who are the actants of cyberpunk fiction in literature, because the literary world does not progress in the reality-imaginary universe anymore. It embodies the virtual world which is now a third universe. This leads to the emergence of individual models which newly gain an identity that reflects the virtual world. Especially the power of being in power given by technological developments causes, “the emergence of Narcissus identity and duality, the emergence of masculine and feminine powers in oneself, in particular one’s reality and idealization” (Bachelard, 2006). Within this axis, we can analyze the critical discourse characters of cyberpunk fiction under the following heading in reference to the novel *Cyber Tragedy or Iphigeneia*:

a) Characters in Limbo who are not able to Realize their Existence in the Artificial World Colony Presented by the Virtual Environment

The person wishes to be the ruler of his own life to avoid maybe’s in his cycle of life. This dominance begins with material power and progresses towards spirituality. In this journey, the person believes that he can rule over his inner world or his spirituality, which is his fragile point, by material power. However, two aspects are forgotten in this move forward: Duality. Each emotion and each thought in one’s spirituality has an opposite value. Therefore, the individual who is not able to rule over his spiritual world in a sufficient manner goes through identity pains by remaining in limbo. This ambivalent mood in individuals turns into a deadlock and gets stuck with the age of technology. Technological developments provide the individual with the union of forces that can hold sway over life. The inability to destroy these oppositions in individuals’ spirituality despite this power causes personality disorders such as borderline, schizoid, anti-social.

This ambivalent approach created by the age of technology is frequently given place to over people in cyberpunk fiction as well. In our novel’s prototype analysis, Ardan Memnu is one of the leading characters which represent people who are in limbo. He is, “a strange individual, who has chaotically experienced almost all economic formations from slaver society to feudalism and from capitalism to post-capitalism within the same century, who could not neither be an Easterner nor Westerner and is a product of the primitive values of a society abashed with identity crises and a life led with the sophisticated instruments of the new age” (Akarsu, 2003). While he continues his personal life with his family and his small software company Profast, he grabs the

opportunity to cooperate with a software company called Macrofast that controls the world's informatics network. This leads to the start of an existing unraveling in his own identity and in his family's identity.

Ardan Memnu falls under the spell of the age of technology with the power of controlling everything and everyone in both the virtual and the real world presented to him by the owner of Makrofast, Diana Yeats. It is with the power of this spell that no one is able to withhold Ardan Memnu from the target he locked in on. "An evil Ottoman man with four children with a feudal spirit would try to win Diana Yeats's factor in a crazed mood and terrorize the whole place with the power he would obtain by doing so" (Akarsu, 2003). However, Ardan Memnu begins to experience anti-social personality disorder as a result of the effort he spends to preserve this power given to him and to satisfy Diana Yeats's perverse and insatiable pleasures. "Anti-social behavior is a chronic and treatment resistant mental disorder which does not cause apparent deterioration in one's basic affectivity and thought structure and cognitive skills and creates difficulties in interpersonal, familial and work related relationships in particular due to the disorders in the behavioral area and inquietude in society" (Paris et al., 2013). In the novel, The power intoxication Ardan Memnu experiences, the acts of killing he commits in moments he experiences sexual dissatisfaction pleasures, his use of banned substances and the cruelties he does to people in the virtual world, besides his wish to provide a good future for his wife and children as a father and his attempt to save his daughter İpek's life when she becomes a part of the same evil system are the representations of the anti-social personality disorder he experiences in cyberpunk fiction as well.

Another novel character who is under the spell of the insatiable power created by technological advancements is Diana Yeats: "She had grown up in a cheek by jowl manner with all the creatures of the virtual world in the lonely nights of her childhood imbued with lack of communication and artificial acts of affection. Her father reaches the peak of the Silicon Mountain by sweeping off all of his enemies and the cultural decadence, which emerges while he takes the souls of the people hostage with the artificial worlds he creates, engulfs his own daughter as well (...)" As a result of all this, Diana grows up intimately with creatures, goblins, elves and dragons within a period that is inflamed by her family's superficial, non-functional interest and the literary tendencies of the age and she carries the terminator personality she acquires in front of the white screen to her daily-life as well. Diana is well on her way to becoming the deviant princess of a new type of humanity under the effect of the fantasy genre and takes immense pleasure from destroying all her rivals in a

vandalistic manner through the evil virtuosity she displays on her keyboard" (Akarsu, 2003).

Diana Yeats, who is the representative value of narcissistic personality in the world of technology she grows up in, wishes to keep the power staff in her hands both with the dissatisfaction of the deviant actions she experiences and her wish to control everyone. In fact, the emotional world of such narcissistic people is weak. They show little empathy to other people's emotions, take little pleasure from life with the exception of the praises they receive from others or her own phantasies of greatness and become uneasy and get bored when external glitter disappears, and no new source feeds them. Generally, "their relationship with others is extremely exploitative and sometimes parasitic. It is as if they feel they have the right to control others, own them and exploit them without any trace of guilt" (Kernberg, 1975). Diana Yeats, who carries these personality traits, is depicted to the reader as the representative of narcissistic power which is the creator of the evil atmosphere of the cyber world.

b) Convex Characters who are Identities of Societies that are at the Peak of Technological Developments

People who are actants of virtuous values such as humanism, justice, charity by displaying extravert actions in society are representatives of extravert personalities. In the novel Cyber Tragedy or Iphigeneia which is the prototype of the cyberpunk critical discourse universe, the character which reflects this personality value is Akil Levy. He, "has had a good education and has understood from early ages on that the power that shapes the future is the cyber universe provided by technology. He believes that if we leave aside the great power agents in the world of the future, everyone will become computer users at the engineer level. However, what was difficult is to comprehend what the newly formed psychological, sociological and legal concepts will entail" (Akarsu, 2003). Convex people like Akil Levy "have the tendency to associate their activities with intellectual results and try to attribute these results to practical data, phenomena or ideas" (Jung, 2019). In line with these efforts, while Akil Levy forms the topographical map of society in the mental world in the novel, his boss Ardan Memnu's daughter İpek is displayed as the trigger of his extravert personality, because Akil Levy, who is the convex representative value of cyberpunk critical discourse, can only save his girlfriend İpek who is stuck between the power struggle of Profast, the company she works in and Makrofast, is by doing good for society through destroying the Eccehomo system the software companies have built as a cyber prison to imprison humanity. Akil Levy, who realizes his goal at the end of the novel, once again reminds society of the preciousness of humane values as one of the illuminating aspects of the dark atmosphere of the cyberpunk age.

c) Characters as Representatives of Prometheus who Revolt against the Technological Developments that Cause the Destruction of the Universe

Human beings, who are the actants of the technological developments which have turned into the rulers of our age, try to establish their spiritual areas through cyber networks by dominating the world like Greek gods who are close to them with their physical and spiritual characteristics. Our prototype novel's writer Hikmet Temel Akarsu has made use of the identities of Greek gods while creating the character world in the novel, taking Euripides' tragedy Iphigenia Aulis as the starting point, because "Greek tragedy aims at revealing the great characteristics of man in a loving manner and narrates that conditions determined by the external world should be taken into consideration in the realization of man's greatness" (Bonnard, 2006). İpek, who is depicted as the Iphigeneia of the cyber world, watches her father Ardan Memnu with awe for years and is given place to in the narrative place in an almost father-daughter relationship that serves Freud's Electra complex. However, after finding out her father's satisfaction of evil pleasures with Diana Yeats and his plans about the Eccehomo system, which is a cyber vortex which will make humanity dependent on itself, her deep wish and ideal to be like her father leaves its place to rage. This rage does not result in negative consequences. İpek, saves her father from this spell of having great power and prevents humanity from being imprisoned within the Eccehomo system and gives the fire of freedom to humanity as the Prometheus of the age of technology. In order to succeed in this, she plans on accessing the codes of the Eccehomo system as one of the dissident hackers of the cyber world. She makes use of hacking to talk to Diana Yeats as her father and accesses the codes of the system. These codes would allow her to hack the Eccehomo project. "As soon as that area was accessed, İpek could easily trash the place and even completely crash the system. In the Hacker-cracker-breaker culture, she was as good as her father. She could beat the hell out of the damn site. The moment she destroyed and crippled the site, that vile project which had sworn to conquer the world could be delayed for a while" (Akarsu, 2003). As a result of this delay, she would be able to save her father and humanity from this cyber vortex. However, things do not go as planned and when her enemy Diana Yeats finds out about her plans, she attempts to punish her by ending her life. With the help of Akil Levy's mind games, the administrators of the cyber world think that İpek is dead and have to face the delay of the Eccehomo project which is the power of the cyber kingdom.

The writer gives the message through the İpek character that the degeneration created by the cyber world in the real world which is experienced by young minds should be prevented. According to the writer, İpek within society, "Iphigeneia is immortal. She

raises the flag of rebellion in each family and defends love and justice even today. The faithful young generation which is the guarantee of humankind will fight until the end. We see its evidence each day and night and everywhere. Long live lucky youth who make a flag out of disobedience... Long live those who water their rage with the blood of their love... Long live Iphigeneia... Damn the unjust gods of Olympus..." (Akarsu, 2003).

4. From the Setting of Existence to the Vortex of Destruction... Cyberpunk Towers

Both the physical formation and the individual and social creation of setting is done by man. Therefore, it needs to be interpreted like a silhouette which reflects humanity, since setting where the man's interpretation is fixed, "consists of the identity structure and meaning man attributes to it" (Lynch, 2010). Taking this act of interpretation, the settings of the age of technology emerge as areas created by the individual after his struggle to break new ground in the world of informatics through technological activities on earth. The cyberpunk towers which emerge with this understanding consist of "as the monstrous show of strength of multinational companies which constantly expand with technological networks, as their systems which mercilessly swallow numerous weak individual bodies and contain everything" (Cavallaro, 2000).

In the novel Cyber Tragedy or Iphigeneia, which is the explanatory prototype of cyberpunk fictional plane, it is reflected how settings, which are based on the understanding that everything is accessible by being built on the body of advanced technology, get off track and turn into a vortex. In the novels, the writer defines people who have cyber power given by technological developments as gods who "are as savage, egoistic and hedonistic as the unjust gods of Mount Olympus that live in Silicon Valley" (Akarsu, 2003) Therefore, Silicon Valley, which has gained an identity as a holy setting, is a place where families that have all the structural opportunities at the peak of technology live. The cyber administrators who reside there satisfy their hedonistic feelings by playing with people who live in what they call the Violent Country as if they are playing a real-life version of the nineties' popular virtual baby game. However, these gods are different from other gods in the sense that they are unhappy because they try to create a new system of slavery in the Violent Country through new cyber programs since they have satisfied almost all of their indulgences. The Violent Country which is the opposite setting to the Silicon Valley in the novel is a place where virtual slaves are stacked and people who wish to attain the life of the gods that rule the cyber world. Slavery, which has become chronic since the existence of humanity and has presented itself in various manners, appears in the Violent Country as a situation

“where people, who live in extreme poverty and under pressure, mostly become a part of the flesh trade with the hopes of reaching a better life and this process in general” emerges “as various forms of slavery such as being forced to work and sexual slavery” (Fitzgibbon, 2010). The writer presents the negative consequences of advanced technological activities, or in other words the topographical map of the material and spiritual worlds of the present time and the future to the reader as well taking the people who live in the axis of both settings as the basis.

5. Passage of Age... The Cyberpunk Dial

The concept of time has been interpreted in various ways since the existence of humanity. Plato interprets the concept of time with his representations of reality and motion; Aristotle as a concept that can be counted on the basis of physics and Heidegger with our world of perception. As for today’s age of technology, the interpretation of time has been reshaped with the existence of the cyber world. “Our present world’s reconstruction as a computer image has unwittingly changed the concepts of time, symbol and number” (Borst, 1997). This has caused “the perception of time in people’s minds not to develop much, the removal of the dimension depth related to time and experiencing only the moment” (Best and Kellner, 2011). Time’s tendency for consensus emerges with digitalized economic foundations in the people of the age of technology. Thus, “all demands fit into a light beam or a drop of water” with time in the cyber universe (Arslan, 2019) and time makes a consensus.

On the other hand, time in the cyberpunk plane is shaped with the momentary actions within the age. People’s fight against the society they live in forms the foundation of these actions, because “this age was the age of egocentricity, selfishness, winning, fighting to keep afloat and going all way” with a perception of time that neither had a beginning nor end and was remote from reality” (Akarsu, 2003). The novel *Cyber Tragedy or Iphigeneia* which is a prototype of cyberpunk narrative criticism, reinterprets the perception of time in the created technology universe and narrates time over the war action of people to remain alive in the following manner: “The drums of war beat in a horrific manner in Little Asia, the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus and İstanbul which was the center of the software market. Everyone was getting ready for a terrifying war in which all tactics were going to be used, no one would pity the other, all methods from hacking to market fights, financial slander, police conspiracies, legal struggles and the putting technological innovations into action would be tried. It was quite apparent that the losing side would be turned into slaves, lose everything, be imprisoned and ruined...” (Akarsu, 2003).

The people of the cyber universe, who perceived time with the beginning and ending of such wars will take part in momentary battles after each developed technological activity. And this will create new cyberpunk dials in the future.

6. Conclusion

Mechanical products developed in the cyber age, in which technology pervades all areas of life, form individuals’ life inventory. Therefore, technology creates either a positive or a negative sphere of influence in the life of the individual. These influences have become a consequence dealt with by various scientific areas. The concept of cyberpunk which lifts the lid off the negative effects of technology on individuals was analyzed with the discourse criticism point of view in this study as well.

The concept of cyberpunk, which has mostly been dealt with as a theme within dystopic texts, is a discursive criticism network which develops a new plot-subject-setting-time point of view. In our study, Hikmet Temel Akarsu’s novel *Cyber Tragedy or Iphigeneia* was taken as a prototype and was analyzed in terms of this innovative criticism discourse of the concept of cyberpunk. After determining the main building blocks of the plot created by the understanding of cyberpunk discourse, the character categories which emerge as a result of technological developments were listed. Then, the setting and perception of time, which are attempted to be interpreted through the newly emerging personality characteristics, were explained. Therefore, besides adding a new critical discourse to the area of literature, this study will present the positive or negative effects of societies’ attitudes towards developing technological actions to the world of social sciences.

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