

The Endangered Ideals of Democratic Transhumanism in Annalee Newitz's *Autonomous*

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ABSTRACT: Drawing on James Hughes' postulations on transhumanism in *Citizen Cyborg* (2004), this paper explores Annalee Newitz's novel *Autonomous* (2017) as a blueprint of the endangered ideals of democratic transhumanism. With close reference to the text, the focus is to probe the degradation of autonomy, accessibility, and the fundamental right to free existence for all sentient beings in the 22nd-century hyper-technologized world. It is thus argued that *Autonomous* uncovers the endangered ideals of democratic transhumanism, such as the fear of exacerbating global inequalities, and the degradation of personhood and autonomy as a consequence of Capitalism. Moreover, this paper suggests a solution-oriented ideology of democratic transhumanism – an ethical approach to using emerging technologies, such as the universal availability of future technological enhancements. Ultimately, it suggests that democratic transhumanist choices are significant for the consequential future, resulting from our present-day decisions for liberation under fair governance rather than enslavement under corporate oppression.

Keywords: victimology, psychological turmoil, criminal deviance,
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Introduction

Man's desire to transcend the limits of the mortal body has become possible with technological advancements. Consequently, the notion of death is facing an open challenge with the set of goals that transhumanism vocalizes. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines transhumanism as "transcending the human limits: SUPERHUMAN" ("Transhuman"). The term "transhumanism" which is often symbolized with Humanity + or H+, was first used by the biologist Julian Huxley. He defined transhumanism in his literary work, "In New Bottles for New Wines" (1957) as the idea that humans can transcend themselves if they desire, and this rather points to the enhancement of humanity as a whole than individual transcendence. Thus, the concept could be realized through transhumanism where humans identify new possibilities to transcend themselves while remaining human (Huxley 17).

It is pertinent to mention here that transhumanism has three primary goals for the realization of full human potential: super-intelligence, super-longevity, and super-well-being. This idea of an advancing world is highly valued; however, conflict arises over which political approach should be taken to reach the end goal, which is posthumanism. One such approach is libertarian transhumanism, a political ideology associated with the free market and the principle of self-ownership without the state's interference (Philosophy Now). In contrast, James Hughes advocates for democratic transhumanism in his book *Citizen Cyborg* (2004) as an ideology that endorses the idea of technological development through the "use of reason and democracy to control our bodies" (208).

Democratic transhumanism, therefore, is based on the key ideal of the egalitarian principle that propagates the universal division and regulation of resources. Another ideal that Hughes tends to focus on is the non-anthropocentric personhood. Democratic transhumanism extends the idea of personhood beyond the human species and involves other sentient entities for existence as equivalent cyborgs in the future landscape. Lastly, democratic transhumanism advocates for the ideal of autonomy as the right of future entities to freely exercise their bodies. Thus, they can make rational decisions regarding themselves.

The term 'endangered' thus reflects the same imperilments that are associated with the deregulation of these ideals by undermining reason and democracy. There are numerous possible scenarios in which these ideals can face challenges. For instance, the universal accessibility of resources can be affected by the monopolization of power to benefit only those in power. The right to autonomy can also face challenges through the biopolitics of the corporate

system that takes away autonomous choices of future beings by controlling their bodies. The degradation of personhood can become a consequence of the scarcity of egalitarian principles if beings of the same species or the same level of self-awareness receive entirely unequal treatment.

The novel under scrutiny, Annalee Newitz's *Autonomous*, is set in 2144 AD, future world, where technological enhancements dominate society to the extent that humans and machines coexist. Jack Chen, the protagonist of the novel, is a pirate and an anti-patent agent who reverse engineers pharmaceutical products to make them cheaper and accessible for all. The conflict arises with the reverse engineering of an efficiency enhancer, Zacuity by Zaxy, which leads to the death of hundreds due to its addictive nature. However, Zaxy manages to save himself from any legal action despite breaking the law due to Capitalist influence. The orientation of the relationship between the other two major characters, Elias and a bot, Paladin, who are International Property Coalition (IPC) agents, reveals the conflicted identities and disputed autonomy. The inequality perpetuated by the system extends to the commodification of human beings through indentured servitude, offering a scathing critique on capitalism.

While democratic transhumanism advocates for its ideals to promote a future world promising enhancement through democratic regulation of resources and autonomy, Annalee Newitz's *Autonomous* depicts an ironic world where these ideals are directly challenged. *Autonomous* thus amplifies the fear of global disparities, which exacerbate rather than being mitigated with technological developments, and challenges the ethical fragility of democratic transhumanism by questioning the right of personhood for sentient beings in the transhumanist world. The novel also delineates the degradation of personal autonomy and democratic freedom in a hyper-technological world to depict the consequences of undermining democratic choices.

This present study, therefore, is significant since the revolutionized technological world is no longer a part of science fiction, but the present world is making every possible effort to realize the hyper-technologized world without a grave consideration of ethical usage and accessibility of future resources. If the progression for the future remains in the hands of several powerful corporations, the Humanity+ goal will become a commodity available only to those who can afford to pay. The currently progressing enhancements of bioelectronics, mind uploading, and genetic modification are constructing the future landscape for us. The lack of attention towards ethical redistribution of technology can lead to threatening consequences by shaping the future into a capitalist world of uncontrolled disparity. The primary text under examination becomes a pragmatic example of such dystopian possibilities.

Literature Review

Since its publication in 2017, Newitz's novel *Autonomous* has received considerable attention from researchers and readers alike. Much of the scholarly discussion that *Autonomous* churns focuses on the robot's dynamics and the involuted narrative structure. For example, Kaylee Dunn's (2023) research article, "Robot Romance: A Non-Binary Critique on Gender and Hegemonic Masculinities" scrutinizes the novel within the framework of "hegemonic masculinity" originally introduced by James W. Messerschmidt in his work titled, "The Salience of Hegemonic Masculinity" and is used to explore the romantic relationships between Eliaz and Paladin which is initially rather based on gender expectations (Dunn 2). Later in the same article, Dunn (2023) regards the writer's attitude as non-binary for Paladin's experience of identity and brings in the analysis given by Jennifer Farrell on the nature of the sexual relationship between Eliaz and Paladin being abnormal because of ambivalent gender attitude from her article, "Not Just in Factories: Robots in Bedroom" (Dunn 4).

Roine and Souranta employ a comparative framework in "Science Fiction and the Limits of Narrativizing Environmental Digital Technologies" to explore Newitz's *Autonomous* through the environmental impacts of digital technology by the interaction of humans with technical assemblage (3). Their research highlights the narrative conventions of mind-reading to note the effects of technology and the digital implications through the indentured robot protagonist, Paladin (Roine and Souranta 3-5). The article uses the worldbuilding device to describe individual autonomy and the larger societal system through the character of Paladin, who stands at the boundary between independent actors and programmed agents (Roine and Souranta 15).

In another article by Nouari et al. (2023) titled, "The Portrayal of the Posthuman Self through Narrative Techniques: A Comparative Analysis in Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* and Newitz's *Autonomous*", the novel is analyzed through an analytical framework by combining the Posthumanist theory and Gerard Genette's narratology to decipher the sociocultural implications and interplay between AI identity, moral and social intricacies (17). The fragmented narratives formulate a complex mosaic that extends beyond the sum of its parts. Nouari et al. refer to literary theorist David Herman, who describes the multidimensional narrative as a "collage of post-human experiences", where collage refers to the reading experience (29). Nouari et al. highlight that the exchange of provocative dialogues, the use of temporal fluidity, and metafictional elements in the novel serve the function of challenging the

conventions of the human-centric approach based on narrative technique (Nouari et al. 31-35).

A published dissertation by Muhammad Adani, from Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Indonesia (2024), titled “Dominance Power by the Capitalist in Annalee Newitz’s *Autonomous*: A Hegemony Study”, brings a novel aspect to analyze *Autonomous* through the prism of Antonio Gramsci’s theory of Hegemony (Adani 2-3). Adani adopts a descriptive qualitative approach to describe the three forms of hegemony from Newitz’s *Autonomous*: Ideology hegemony, power dominance, and state hegemony. These forms of hegemony are exercised by the pharmaceutical company, Zaxy, to maintain its capitalist attitude to make a profit (Adani 5-14).

Thus, the research gap in the present study is drawn from the lack of research on the chosen text from the perspective of the chosen theoretical framework. Secondly, the current study deals with real-world problems. For instance, democratic transhumanism as a theoretical framework deals with future concerns as much as it addresses current issues of equitable access, procreative liberty, and equality, but there is a lack of practical implementation of such a mode of governance in the real world.

Research Methodology

This study employs democratic transhumanism as its theoretical framework, a concept introduced by James Hughes in his book *Citizen Cyborg: Why Democratic Societies Must Respond to Redesigned Human of the Future* (2004). Democratic Transhumanism, as a framework, advocates for democratic control exercised through equitable access for self-aware species, morphological freedom, and the ethical use of technological enhancements, supervised by democratic governance to ensure the regulation of the public good rather than promoting corporate control to maintain elites’ interests and social hierarchies. Hughes describes democratic transhumanism as “a political movement based on both technological progress and individual liberty will then see ways that democratically regulated and distributed, freely exercised technology can create a more equal, empowered, and united world.” (216).

This qualitative research adopts textual analysis as a technique for examining the novel and exploring the engagement of its primary text with principles of democratic transhumanism. The examination utilizes the method of close reading to uncover the reinforcement of political and ethical implications for future technologies. A closer scrutiny of selected passages, characters, dialogues, and agencies within the plot is attempted to draw a connection between how the future possibility of human enhancement in the context of the

novel could endanger the ideals presented by James Hughes to retain a democratic world.

This research serves as a prism, presenting possible challenges from a 22nd-century hyper-technologized world, including inequality, growing gaps among various social groups, and technological inaccessibility. It also focuses on the compromise of liberty and the commodification of sentient beings under the influence of the capitalist system. However, in contrast to that, this research simultaneously takes preventive measures through James Hughes' democratic transhumanism that promotes a pragmatic and solution-oriented approach, dealing with the same transhumanist challenges highlighted through the primary text. For instance, in his book *Citizen Cyborg* (2004), James Hughes's ideas about democratic transhumanism respond to the libertarian transhumanists' concerns about freedom of mind and body, as well as bio-Luddites' concerns for solidarity and equality. In his book *Citizen Cyborg*, he articulates the condition for progress as, "If progressives want enhancement technologies to make society more equal, they need to make enhancement universally available" (Hughes 208).

Discussion

While Democratic Transhumanism advocates a future world promising enhancement with equality and autonomy, Annalee Newitz's world becomes paradoxical, where technology becomes a tool of exploitation rather than an instrument for enhancement. Set in the 22nd century, the novel *Autonomous* is shaped in a capitalist framework where power is monopolized in the hands of the elites, with unregulated drugs and the introduction of the indenture system that takes away freedom, and thus the right to autonomy becomes a privilege accessible to those who can afford a franchise. Newitz depicts the challenges of an unchecked, unregulated system that redefines the social order by maintaining hierarchies of the class system. In an article, "What is Capitalism?", the International Monetary Fund (IMF) defines capitalism as a system where assets are owned and controlled privately, and labor is purchased through capital (Jahan and Mahmud 44).

This discussion primarily examines the escalation of global inequalities in *Autonomous*. Under the influence of the Capitalist System, the availability of technological resources turns into a state of depletion for the underprivileged class. The disparities among entities further grow in forms of technological inaccessibility, economic disparity, and disparity in the treatment of subjects of the indenture system. Meanwhile, a variety of regions serve as the background for the disparity of existence. This research thus propagates for James Hughes's key Ideal of democratic transhumanism- Universal Accessibility. This way, it

emphasizes an equality-promoting society in contrast to disparities in the context of the novel.

The novel sets its stage in a future world where Capitalism prevails and power becomes a weapon in the hands of corporations for maintaining the availability of regulated drugs only for elites, while the poor community is left to rely on pirated drugs with zero credibility and high risk to their lives. For instance, a quote from chapter two of the novel reflects on how capitalist interest is retained by making pharmaceutical drugs accessible to the elite “when Zacuity came out of beta, the drug would be so expensive that only people with excellent medical care would ever take it” (Newitz 22). So, the progress becomes a paradox in a progressing world, and the addiction leads to “workaholism,” due to an excessive release of dopamine. Thus, Zacuity becomes a metaphor for monopoly by pharmaceutical corporations, and exclusive accessibility of the drug for one group with safety measures creates a significant difference between the performance of different social groups.

Contrary to this, James Hughes has emphasized his concern about the significance of universal availability through his explicit declaration in *Citizen Cyborg* (2004), “Universally available enhancements will make it most likely that each person will reach their highest potential. This principle, in fact, is already written into the Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights, adopted by the UN in 1998” (Hughes 218-219). Thus, universal accessibility has emphatic importance in democratic transhumanism and the same principle is being challenged at distinct levels in *Autonomous*. The portrayed inequalities lead to a cyclic process of economic imbalance. The patent system does not seem to add to the value of the secrecy of a corporation. However, it becomes an apparatus for the capitalist to retain their profits by making drugs unavailable to the public. The scenario is portrayed in the novel when “zaxy didn’t make data from their clinical trials available, so there was no way to find out about possible side effects” (Newitz 10). So, under the cover of maintaining the secrecy of the drugs, the pharmaceutical industries take away the bioethical right of product-users to know about the composition of drugs.

James Hughes discusses this same issue of patented drugs in *Citizen Cyborg* (2004), “If gene patents were necessary to spur useful innovation, there might be a pragmatic reason for their use, but they appear to be having the opposite effect, and be unnecessary to provide incentives for drug development” (Hughes 249). He thus reveals that the real purpose of the patent system is not to bring innovation or development. It is used instead as a trick to deal with competition and escalating drug prices. Consequently, it becomes a means of maintaining the capitalist interests of corporations.

Both James Hughes and Annalee Newitz are on the same page in opposing the domination of corporations and capitalist control. Hughes directly refers to Annalee Newitz in *Citizen Cyborg* (2004) and appreciates her explicitly stated goal about biopunk. Biopunk is a group that supports technology but opposes the capitalist system that exploits the technology by privatizing the enhancement as assets. Hughes's following statement highlights his similar views to Newitz, "Biopunks, according to Newitz, are committed both to the benefits that can emerge from genetic technology and to opposing the madness of patents on discovered genomes" (Hughes 232-233). Hughes supports her idea about the transparency and control of the patent system that merely benefits the corporate system, in addition to technological progress.

Furthermore, the novel's plot is quite paradoxical. Piracy is strictly considered a crime, but the monopoly of corporations or even violating the law by potential corporate control is normalized. It is even supported by law enforcement agencies such as the International Property Coalition (IPC). For instance, IPC shields Zaxy and works on a mission to find Jack, the protagonist, and kill her. The reason is obvious: "not because they wanted justice... The company had to cover up the connection between their new drug and these meltdowns. Killing her was by far the easiest way to do it" (Newitz 40).

In addition to the unavailability of resources, the commodifying attitude towards indentured entities does not simply extend to oppressive experiences. But another kind of discrepancy arises when these indentured beings are treated like objects for various uses. The indentured beings face another inequality after theft of their freedom in the form of specification of their roles: "Each market center had its specialty, from gardeners and domestics, to secretaries, engineers, and bookkeepers" (Newitz 198). These varieties of services are designed to fit into the roles of the system instead of working as skills for their personal growth. Another interpretation from this quote suggests that *Autonomous* openly challenges the notion that skills can prevent your future. However, the question then arises, if these entities are skillful enough to contribute efficiently, then why are they indentured?

The consequential economic disproportion tends to intensify when the competition increases in the market. Such fear has been under debate for a long period. James Hughes talks about the dreadful concern in *Citizen Cyborg*: "In the coming decades the work life will continue to shrink, and we may already be seeing the beginning of the true end of work in the weak recovery that began in 2003 with jobs being lost to automation and outsourcing as corporate profits grew" (Hughes 235). Thus, Hughes addresses the real-life problem of massive unemployment due to machines replacing human roles. This planned substitution would merely benefit the corporations.

A comparable practice is witnessed in the novel when people from marginalized areas take a reverse-engineered productivity enhancer while compromising its credibility. For instance, Jack makes it clear to her old friend Mali why people want Zacuity: "People want it. Plus, it is kind of a necessity. When you're competing for jobs with people who take it, Zacuity could mean the difference between employment and unemployment" (Newitz 71). It becomes clear from the above dialogue of Jack that the class gap widens when people face psychological pressure. It is emphasized through the use of the phrase "people want it" in the above sentence.

Thus, Newitz herself has stated the answer to the question of why these inequalities seem to escalate in the novel's plot by putting an explicit emphasis on the role of Capitalism. So, if the regulation of resources is not maintained, the consequences would be harsh. This idea resonates with Hughes's idea in *Citizen Cyborg* (2004), where he emphasizes the importance of regulation and distribution of technological resources equally, stating, "democratically regulated and distributed, freely exercised technology can create a more equal, empowered and united world" (Hughes 216). Thus, this quote makes Hughes's ideology obvious in support of democracy to regulate resources. He counts it as a promising idea for an empowered future.

Overall, Annalee Newitz's dystopian portrayal constructs a world that faces the pragmatic consequences of exacerbating inequalities. The exploration of the consequential degradation of status for citizens is depicted as a result of the absence of any practical governing or regulatory body. The novel's presentation of the situation becomes ironic to its title: *Autonomous*; a world where rights become privileges accessible to those who meet the expense of their price. The systematic oppression exceeds the consequential disparities, compromising other rights as well, in the context of the novel.

One of those compromised rights in the novel is the right to personhood, a theory that James Hughes defines by challenging the traditional anthropocentric approach in *Citizen Cyborg*:

After 400 years of democratic citizenship gradually being extended to include working men, women and all races, transhumanists argue that rights should now be extended to all self-aware minds. In bioethics, this view is known as "personhood theory": Only self-aware persons can have rights. "Persons" don't have to be human, and not all humans are persons. (Hughes 16)

Hughes' introduction of criteria of self-awareness in the above quote resonates with the sentience of entities. The standard presented by Hughes is formulated on the set of conditions for personhood given by Mary Ann Warren in an

article, “On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion”, where she describes the five criteria for personhood as “self-awareness, consciousness, self-motivated” activities in addition to the “capacity to communicate” and “reasoning” (Warren 13). Hughes has been a realist in this approach when he considers the evolving nature of personhood in an evolving world.

Further in *Citizen Cyborg* (2004), Hughes has articulated a certain set of conditions to be fulfilled to get personhood, “Full citizens are persons who fulfill all of Warren’s conditions such as adult humans, posthumans (at least the kind that most of us would choose to become), uplifted animals, and possibly some future human-level ai minds” (Hughes 244). In this way, there is a directly proportional relationship between personhood and citizenship, where both depend on each other directly. Hughes’ progressive model does not limit the right to personhood to a single group but considers enhanced non-human entities eligible too.

However, a starkly contrasting case seems to occur in the novel. For instance, despite giving full rights to uplifted beings, humans, and conscious bots, these entities also become subjects of subjugation. The major subjects of this theme become the characters of Paladin, a humanoid military bot, and an indentured human named Threezed. There are pragmatic examples of the exploitation of fundamental rights and the treatment of characters as commodities. These characters are subject to the corporate system despite their fulfillment of Warren’s condition.

There are various examples within the novel where Paladin uses his emerging consciousness. It is often referred to as “HUMINT” in the novel, to decipher the connotations for deriving exact meanings. In comparison to a normal bot, Paladin brings a contrasting example that distinguishes artificial intelligence from his “HUMINT”. He struggles to find out the contextual meaning of the very term. Even during combat with Arcata pirates at Arcata Solar Farm: “Faggot is generally a pejorative term for a homosexual man” (Hughes 80). But this over-generalized idea does not satisfy his consciousness, and he strives to find what the human consciousness meant by it. It becomes a conspicuous example of a bot meeting the criteria of self-awareness.

Moreover, Paladin is not just an intelligent bot with emerging consciousness but is sentient as well. Even from the beginning chapters of the novel, his sentient attitude is obvious when he is intentionally targeted and gets hurt during an experimental attack by IPC. His feelings as a reaction to this attack evoke a sense of discomfort through the following lines, “But after today’s mission, human faces would always look different to him. They would remind him of what it felt like to suffer, and to be relieved of suffering” (Newitz 16).

The presentation of his character there evokes a sense of empathy in the readers. This deliberate connection is made by Newitz to manifest Paladin's awareness of suffering.

Moreover, this mistreatment extends to the unprivileged human beings as well. The debate on the status of personhood becomes even more complex for enslaved human beings in the novel. For example, Treezed, a human who becomes a subject of indentured servitude- a system where various beings are enslaved. Even when he fulfills the general criteria set by Hughes, his status remains questionable through the disillusionment that he experiences. He lacks any visible identification trait and becomes a symbol of disillusionment faced by the oppressed class in the future. His emotional void is reflected through his "eyes whose emptiness was far more awful than bad software," indicating his psychological and emotional deterioration (Newitz 22).

The modern slavery in the form of the indenture system in the novel takes human status to another level of existential ambiguity. Human bodies become a form of currency to maintain the elites' interests. This idea directly challenges James Hughes's point from *Citizen Cyborg* (2004), "once a being attains self-awareness, they become persons, and they have 'a full right to life' and cannot be owned as a thing" (Hughes 243). Hughes also takes a critical approach in addressing the status of personhood. The absence of self-awareness reduces the status to property. He divides the property as sentient and non-sentient based on whether it can feel or not. However, he maintains, "things that can feel pleasure and pain oblige us to ensure that they not be caused unnecessary suffering" (Hughes 244). So even if we undermine the status of self-aware species, this criterion ensures the safeguard of sentient beings. But in contrast to this, severe harm is inflicted upon both humans and bots. For instance, "Treezed enters the indenture contract at the age of five when his mother sells him" (Newitz 69). On the other side, the African Federation held control over Paladin's memory by keeping a copy of her autonomy key, which could give them access to her memory (Newitz 175).

It is pertinent to note that *Autonomous* does not merely depict a compromise on the right of personhood, but the context of the novel becomes ironic to its title. The very right of autonomy is restricted in the novel's plot. The novel primarily presents the stake of bodily autonomy in a system where the pharmaceutical monopolies propose a distinct level of algorithmic subjugation. For instance, the introduction of addictive drugs, such as Zaxy, to control human bodies by making them dependent on drugs at the risk of their lives.

In response to C.S Lewis and Jurgen Habermas's argument on parental elitism that parents in the future might control the right of independence, Hughes'

Citizen Cyborg uncovers the future of autonomy by pointing that the parents in the future would be able to decide on early alterations and enhancements of future generations by projecting their own choices. James Hughes argues that the germinal choices of parents, like decisions about health and intelligence, are shaping the future of autonomy (Hughes 169-170). However, the novel presents a coercive design that produces forced labor. This labor is not a product of parental decisions, but the totalitarian good faces danger under pharmaceutical control that alters the body without bioethical consideration.

The drug becomes a powerful biotechnological tool to take control over bodies in the guise of enhancing their productivity. It rewires the neurochemical pathway that alters their deliberate choice of being associated with that work into compulsive labor. It reduces the dopamine receptors on neurons and thus transforms their self-determination into an abusive addiction. A disturbing picture of a girl presented by Newitz exemplifies the colonizing attitude of the system as, “The student wouldn’t stop doing her homework, and it was going to kill her...she bunched into a sitting position, fingers curled around an absent keyboard, typing and typing” (Newitz 7).

The public is impulsively made to choose the drug without being made aware of the possible side effects of the drug. Their bioethical right to know about the composition of the drug is compromised, too, in the novel’s plot. However, Hughes addresses the same idea in *Citizen Cyborg* (2004) as, “Short of threats to the future of life on Earth, most libertarians can also agree that laws should require the full disclosure...the need for consumers to have full information, or ‘fully informed consent’ in bioethics terms (Hughes 225).

The bodily captivation further extends to the cognitive entrapment of sentient species. For example, Paladin becomes a pragmatic subject for the system unless it gets autonomy: “Until he was autonomous, the Federation would always hold a key to the memories he’d encrypted in the Federation cloud (Newitz 99). So, Federations could access, edit, manipulate, or delete the memories that bots such as Paladin were saving consciously. So, its cognitive autonomy of processing the information and saving it consciously is already at stake.

The cognitive enslavement takes away robotic autonomy, with the introduction of programmed obedience. It also suggests the theft of epistemic autonomy of expression. For example, Paladin, the military bot, accepts the imposed categorization of gender pronouns as a part of programming. When Elias asks Paladin about her gender preferences, “Nothing in her programming prevented her from saying no to Elias, so she had chosen to say yes” (Newitz 189). Paladin gives her consent to be called with the pronoun “she” in the latter part

of the novel after the revelation of her brain's history. She does so merely because she is programmed to give consent to botadmin. The idea is forsaken that engendering entities with labels is legible only for humans and does not apply to machines.

Elias's behavior of anthropomorphizing a bot is either a deliberate attempt or an ignorant attitude. It results in his continuous act of engendering non-human entities till the last part of the novel. However, it costs Paladin her epistemic autonomy by taking away her right to believe in her understanding, "Maybe he would never understand that his human categories—faggot, female, transgender—didn't apply to bots. Or maybe he did understand" (Newtiz 242). The discovery of Paladin's brain background belonging to a female soldier serves well to satisfy Elias. He projects his gender ideologies on a bot who has nothing to do with these socially constructed ideas.

The economic oppression further develops a modern slavery in the form of franchises. The characters in the novel get enslaved for a reason they are not responsible for. Threezed writes in a journal about his experience of being indentured with a masked identity of "Slaveboy. 'He'd written a vivid, emotionless account of his school going bankrupt. All the kids' contracts were sold, and SlaveBoy found himself indentured to a mechanical engineering shop that developed turbines" (Newtiz 196). This idea of a lack of physical autonomy becomes an extension of the theft of bodily autonomy, where people cannot decide about their bodies, but the system decides their roles depending on the needs of the required labor force.

Therefore, the power of intimidation tops the power of accountability, and the influence of wealth suppresses the truth in the novel. *Autonomous* criticizes the corporate-driven transhumanist world that is backed by a capitalist mindset. The exploitations through the indentured servitude make autonomy a commodity, granted or earned rather than a fundamental right. James Hughes has addressed the solution to a free, democratic future of humanity as, "Just like evolving markets, democracies require millions of autonomous agents aggregating their interests, expressing themselves in competition and cooperation" (Hughes 224). However, *Autonomous* presents a fragmented future, where the corporate system does not just instruct the status of bots. But the position of the human species is also confused, standing on the verge of being treated as property or free citizens.

Conclusion

This paper, therefore, has shown that the technological enhancement becomes a vehicle for the empowered to take control over sentient beings in the context of

the novel through the exploitation of rights. The goal of Humanity+, which takes an ethical approach to human enhancement in its mission, is undermined in the circumstances of the novel. The significance of the conclusion directs our attention to our present-day world's decisions about ethical choices for technological availability. The research also suggests resistance to the reinforcement of existing disparities. It calls for our actions in the present world for the reimagination of a future that is more inclusive, equal, and autonomous by following the roadmap of democratic transhumanism. This is certainly possible under fair governance rather than oppressive capitalism, for liberation.

In light of the reconsideration of the presented arguments, we argue that democratic transhumanism is not just a speculative model; rather, it has emerged as a critical lens. It uncovers the instances of exploitation in the form of economic disparity that result in indentured servitude, engaging the future entities in cyclic slavery. Resultantly, the cognitive disparity becomes a consequence of the unavailability of enhancement products for the common; widening the gap among social groups. The theft of the bioethical right to know about the composition of products for consumers by the introduction of the patent system takes away the right of deliberate choice for the public.

This research thus posits that the challenges posed by unchecked technological progress would possibly lead to a compromise on equality-promoting, inclusivity-demanding, and an autonomous future. Similar scenarios are portrayed in the novel. Thereby, the possibility of problematized identity by the continuation of systematic oppression would become obvious. Such a commodification tilt for various entities, oblivious to their sentient status, as in the case of Threezed and Paladin, is convincingly illustrated.

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