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# ***The War of the Worlds: Reading the Fragile Existence of Humans in the Age of Anthropocene***

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### **Abstract**

H.G. Wells' science fiction *The War of the Worlds* (1898) in its imagined reality connects the isolated human existence with the universe and the unknown that exists beyond human understanding. The anticipation of the possibility of extraterrestrial life beyond human existence gave way to the understanding that humans on earth are not superior. Wells' being influenced by the ideas of evolution propagated by Charles Darwin drew a conflict between organic beings with and beyond life on earth and its ecosystems. If looked through an ecocritical perspective, Well's work can be seen as containing a greater sense of destruction and fragility of life on earth beyond human existence. The novel has inspired several other works and has been adapted into various films. While many interpretations of the text have revolved around social and political conflicts, a latest adaptation, an ongoing television series *War of the Worlds* (first aired in 2019) narrates concerns relevant to the age of the Anthropocene. One of the major changes is the aliens depicted in the series. The series re-imagines the weird Martians as aliens who are found to be a race of humans from the future. This paper will explore how the new adaptation draws from the original novel, but changing the aliens gives way to address the issues that are lurking in this age. With the arrival of the alien race on the Earth, the TV series shows an awareness of human beings as planetary forces through the struggle for survival between the two races of human life. The TV series brings about a dialogue relevant to the current time about who we are as humans, the fragility of human existence, and how humans are consciously transforming the planet we live in and its environment.

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Anthropocene, as coined and defined by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer in the early twenty-first century, denotes an ecological epoch that emerged due to the increased dominance of human beings on every process of the Earth. Jonathan Hay in the article “(Post)human Temporalities: Science Fiction in the Anthropocene” (2019) notes that Crutzen and Stoermer defined “the Anthropocene as the rapid intensification of our species’ adverse impact upon our host planet” (Hay 131). Hay in the same article considers the Anthropocene as a “damning acknowledgement of the planetary changes prompted by our species’ unqualified failure to sustain a mutualistic interaction with the Earth” (Hay 131). The connection between our incapability to maintain an interdependent relationship with the natural world and the adverse effect of our species’ action has been argued by Stacy Alaimo (2020) in an interview to come from the position that human beings have held in this age of Anthropocene. Alaimo states, “the way it’s often represented... is that the transhistorical human agent is separate from the world that “he” has transformed. I think that’s problematic because it gives us the illusion that we’re safely disconnected from the world we have negatively impacted” (Alaimo 138). Instead of being optimistic or taking pride in the position and role that we hold and play, Alaimo asks to address the interconnections with nonhuman nature and vulnerability to which different groups of human beings are exposed in this age as part of her ecological vision. A genre which, in its choice of subject and representation, problematizes and critiques the fixed position enjoyed by human beings is the speculative narrative of Science Fiction. Existing works of the Science Fiction genre tend to imagine conditions on the Earth, speculating on the future of the Earth. In such works, the unknown Space beyond the life on Earth in other worlds and dimensions are portrayed as threatening to the position of human beings and the survival of our home planet.

Benjamin Bühlerin, in his work, “Other Environments: Ecocriticism and Science Fiction” (2019) points out that science fiction works are compatible with ecocritical thinking, “the design of alien environments and the focus on the relationship between human and these environments make SF a particularly interesting genre for ecocriticism” (Bühlerin127). The stories work as “metaphors that address issues such as ecological problems, the consequences of

globalization, or the appearance of new technologies” (Bühler127). Patrick D. Murphy in the introduction chapter of the book, *Ecofeminist Science Fiction* (2021) while trying to define Science Fiction notes it to be “a mode of imaginative prose fiction” (Vakoch 1) which seems to have begun with the publication of Mary Shelley’s most celebrated *Frankenstein* (1818). The imaginative form of writing tends to speculate on the relationship between human and nature severed by technological advancements and the subsequent exploitations. As Serenella Iovino writes, “Unexpected kinships, cautionary tales, problematic intimacies, and visions of futures embedded in our present: for more than a century, speculative fiction has spoken the language of our ecological imagination” (Iovino). It therefore gives an opportunity for us to face the existing along with the imminent threats to our own and planetary existence.

Interestingly, Science fiction as we know it today had its beginning in the nineteenth century, coinciding with the beginning of the age of Anthropocene which Crutzen has dated to have begun in the nineteenth century with the use of steam engines and the rise of the industrial culture in England. Both the Anthropocene and the Science fiction tend to imply a posthuman future. The idea of the Posthuman is quite inseparable in a work of science fiction, playing a significant role ranging from embracing a technologically embodied human being of the future to implying a sense of fear through imagining a techno-scientifically modified future for the humans. The posthuman helps to identify the fragility of human existence and proposes the necessity to make changes that would help to achieve a symbiotic environmental condition for the survival of the earth and humans alike.

The idea of posthuman embraces plurality and rejects the rigidity of human exceptionalism that promotes anthropocentrism. It does not demonize science or technology that enhances or supports human life. It creates the possibility of developing a shift in the boundaries of agencies in relation to ecology. In “Posthumanism in Literature and Ecocriticism,” Serenella Iovino writes about the posthuman that “it moves, relentlessly shifting the boundaries of being and things, of ontology, epistemology.... And these boundaries, especially those between human and nonhuman, are not only shifting

but also porous: based on the — biological, cultural, structural — combination of agencies....” (Iovino 11)

In the current world, the extinction of several animal species due to the manufactured environment by human actions has created the fearful possibility of extinction of humans as we know. Threatening conditions for human lives due to their own unsustainable actions affect the chances of their livability on the earth. Currently, this seems to be an inevitable future. Acknowledging the enlarged, embodied human existence and the necessity for an ethical understanding in the present for a better future is proposed to be the prerequisite for survival in the age of the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene along with the depiction of a posthuman future in a work of science fiction gives us an opportunity to understand our time, to see what can be the impending future. This paper studies H.G. Wells’ novel *The War of the Worlds* (1898) along with the latest TV series adaptation, an ongoing show called *War of the Worlds* (aired since 2019). The original text and the adaptation present to us a posthuman future, two different environments and ecologies of two different spatial-temporal points of the age of the Anthropocene. Considering Crutzen had already stated that the Anthropocene “could be said to have started in the latter part of the eighteenth century” (Crutzen 23), Wells’ writing is included within the age of Anthropocene. The original text is based on the experiences of the author of the Victorian period and the TV series set in the twenty-first century provides a historical background to the narratives. It is proposed that these works provide grounds to look at the fragility of human existence and the fallibility of their power position.

Wells, while writing the novel, was influenced by the Victorian world that he lived in and he provided criticism to the prevalent social, economic, and political issues of the time through the representation of the Martian aliens as he himself talked about (Brown 7-8). Those who read the text as a critique of colonialism look at the interplanetary colonialism represented as a reversal of the European whites. This work looks at the apocalyptic space invasion story as a critique of the human position in complex ecological

conditions working as a warning about the impending future, fate of humans.

Acknowledging the wider universe, Wells plays on the position of humans. He raises questions while he toys with the idea of the world, real and imagined, through the imagining of the encounters between human beings and the Martian aliens. Considering that humans had claimed their position of exceptionalism on the Earth due to their power established through the industrial and colonial triumph of the Victorian world, Wells presents the term ‘world’ to critique humans. If we look at the various ways the term ‘world’ generally appears, we will see that it primarily indicates planets in the universe, mainly used to indicate the Earth. Secondly, it is used to indicate life created by human beings — their desires, anxieties, and interests connected through creative imagination that affects their relationships. Thirdly, the whole of everything, something that binds everything together in reality.

The epigraph used at the beginning of the novel— “But who shall dwell in these worlds if they are inhabited?... Are we or they Lords of the World?... And how are all things made for man?” (qtd. in Wells) indicates, if literally taken, the possibility of existence of multiple planets and lifeforms to question the position assumed by man on the Earth by breaking the illusion of fixed position of exclusivity of humans. Wells explores this fluidity of power and existence in the novel. A similar question is posited by Helen Feder in “Ecocriticism, Posthumanism, and the Biological Idea of Culture” about “we” and the “world.” Feder asks to think whether “We *or* the world or we *as* the world?” (Feder 225; emphasis added) as the general tendency of the human race is to think of ourselves as the peak of nature and its order. She goes on to add that in the idea of the world in relation to human self that is, “we are the world too—our bodies are themselves ecosystems, our atoms the very fibers of it” (Feder 225).

Wells presents the aliens in his novel to challenge and expose the vulnerability or fragility of both human beings and the environment which sustains us. Based in and around London and the Southern part of England, the alien life problematizes life on Earth as outsiders. The presence of the aliens, acting as the archnemesis of the humans,

indicates entanglements of life beyond humans. The aliens are described biologically as 'non-human' and based on this they are referred to as extra-terrestrial, animals, or creatures. In any work of science fiction, the aliens appear to be far more superior in intelligence and technology. Their awareness of the universe advanced in comparison to humans. While the human species in England continued to dominate their host planet through several destructive practices such as land use, exploitation of plant life, depletion of biodiversity, increase in atmospheric pollution due to burning of coal within their own country and in other colonial lands, the arrival of the Martian aliens mirrors their actions.

Anatomically distinctly different from the humans, the Martian aliens unwelcoming towards their host planet have arrived in cylinders which stuck, "into the skin of our old planet Earth like a poisoned dart" (Wells 59) notes the unnamed narrator. The 'Heat Ray' released from their war machines unmindfully trample over plants, slaughter humans, split and burn trees; depriving the humans of any vegetation or refuge. Scenes of destruction are seen to be uniformly affecting including the relics of human civilization such as "the towers of the Oriental College" and the natural world's "pine trees" (Wells 70). Humans are shown to have been reduced to the status of lower animals and insects. They hide in the underground and suffer from constant fear of being hunted down as food for the aliens. An interesting scene involving the unnamed narrator shows the reduced status of humans on the planet they assumed as their own. Along with attacking the earth with the heat ray which instantly kills any life and turns it into dust, the aliens also cause massive pollution with their invasive technique of discharging "enormous clouds of a black and poisonous vapour by means of rockets" referred to as 'black smoke' (Wells95). Along with spreading through the valleys, the Thames River is described in the novel as being covered by black smoke, choking humans to death. The dual extermination of the natural world and humans reflects two the reality of the fragility of human beings and their interconnectedness to the natural world. The Martian aliens from their position of power and through their actions show their ethical detachment from the planet they have come to inhabit after depleting the entire resource of their home planet.

The purgatory dystopic condition makes the Curate ask questions about the sins that humans might have committed to face such conditions as the possibility of mass extinction. As he is dying, the Curate's conscience makes him feel responsible, "There was poverty, sorrow; the poor were trodden in the dust, and I held my peace" (Wells141). The existential crisis raises questions about the consequences of seeing the world as "we" or "they" instead of seeing it as "us." The "we" is determined by the power position enjoyed. At a time when empirical achievements were being triumphed through the mechanical achievement of the industrial worlds, Wells discusses the dichotomy of mind/body dualism. "Without the body the brain would, of course, become a mere selfish intelligence, without any of the emotional substratum of the human being" (Wells139), says the narrator while talking about the Martian aliens whose anatomy is only composed of brain. The mind/body dualism fuels different forms of exploitation which thinkers find necessary to address "the ecological crisis of the age of Anthropocene" (Buran2). The Martian aliens share no conscious connection or commitment between themselves and the world they have come to inhabit. Their destructive actions for their selfish fulfilment raise a question for the human beings whose home is the earth. Why are human beings blind-sighted about the well-being of their own home and its survival?

Wells questions the moral problem of anthropocentric thinking and speculates about the impending future of life on the Earth by questioning the position of human beings as the end of all power positions on the Earth. Such an idea was distinct from what was being believed during the author's times. The TV series adaptation does not use the aliens as a 'nonhuman' outsider of the human self but rather focuses on the figure of the alien differently that is well suited to the posthuman world of the Anthropocene. Although similar in the essence of prevalent concerns, the presence of different aliens makes the adaptation interesting. The aliens are humans from the future, an alien race born out of an accidental union between two people with degenerative genes. At one point, these aliens were exiled to outer space where they took residence on an exoplanet. They have travelled back in time by manipulating space, time, and the universe on a quantum level to seek revenge. They have invaded

a time in the past to kill the scientist, Bill Ward, to stop him from creating a virus which further weakens their immune system. Another reason for their return is that they had exhausted the exoplanet of its resources which caused most of their race to die. They are posthumans, scientifically and technologically far more advanced than their predecessors on the Earth. They have evolved telepathic capabilities but they are fully aware that they are not indispensable or at the centre of the life system. Their position is not fixed. In their struggle for the survival of their race, they have chosen to claim the earth as their home.

These degenerating alien race humans therefore stand against the once complacent human beings of Earth. True to a science fiction narrative, a war is waged between the two sides, shown through the characters, creating a complex moral dilemma for the viewers of the series. Their war over the inhabitation of the earth guarantees the extinction of one human race at the end. The series raises conversation between the “we” and the “us” where the actors are not distinctly different but rather are a metaphorical representative of a dialogue between human predecessors and successors. Interestingly, the human alien race from the future deals with the current human beings and the earth from an alienated gaze quite similar to the viewpoint of the Martian aliens in the original text. The opening episode of the first season begins with Bill Ward’s monologue “they wanted to wipe us from the face of the Earth. But we kept asking ourselves “why?” (“Episode 1” 00:00:27-00:00:32). His words resonate with the question that is repeatedly asked throughout the series in all the aired seasons. I believe this distinction maintained between the two races of the humans, their struggles for survival shown separately against each other has the possibility of greater impact on the show’s consumer’s consciousness. There is guilt in Bill Ward’s action when he creates the virus to stop the cycle of wrath of the alien race but no remorse is observable in the act of mass killing done by the aliens. A leader of the aliens says “It’s either us or them” (“Episode 2” 00:18:22-00:18:23). Ward tries to find a reason for such behaviour. When he speaks of “all the centuries of mindless cruelty, [he states] maybe we shouldn’t have been surprised” (“Episode 1” 00:00:34- 00:00:38) it is an acknowledgement of the notoriety of human actions. Wells in the novel in a similar tone wrote, “we must



remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought....” (Wells 38)The series beautifully depicts the dilemma of cohabitation and the issues that arise.

The makers of the show have consciously delved into this narrative. In an interview, Gabriel Byrne who plays the role of Bill Ward, the neuroscientist, and the saviour of the current human race, speaks “In our time, the threat no longer comes from space, but from our very planet, whether we are talking about environmental disaster, alienation from the major industrial powers, or potential nuclear cataclysm. We have children, our children will have children ... And yet, nothing says that we are not going to disappear in the short term” (Kuru). Byrne sees the aliens as representing our anxieties for the future. The creator of the series, BAFTA award winner Howard Overman in an interview with *Variety* Magazine makes it clear that he wanted to explore the alien invasion in the series to understand what “that could mean for us today,” realistically setting in a posthuman world where there is no postapocalyptic rubble of the cities to “getting inside the characters’ heads” (Croll).

The actions of the alien-human race from the future are of particular interest. Their women suffer from infertility. Their wombs are incapable of carrying a child to full term, showing the dual impact of an imbalanced environment and their genetic defect. Eerily, their conditions mirror the issues that already many women across the globe suffer from at the current time. These alien women try to repopulate their race by stealing babies and fetuses of advanced pregnant women whom they nurture with the help of the technologically advanced machineries they developed. The fighting machines of this alien race resemble a real dog in its structure. Made of organic core with an exoskeleton made of metal, they work for and protect the aliens much like the real animals. Later in the third season, a machine dog playing with a ball is shown in a scene. This is one of the hints given to show the desperation of the younger human from the future. Such scenes possibly reflect a cry of plea for the preceding human inhabitants who in the future might not leave a habitable planet to survive.

Another issue that is significantly depicted in the series is climate change. Climate change as a manmade result is depicted in the season 3. Due to the massive manipulation done by both the races, a huge black hole is shown to have formed, enveloping the sky of London. It affects the climate and quality of breathable air for all living beings, even the machine dogs. This black hole formed in the current reality parallels an alternative future reality which is already heavily affected by the environmental effects of the appearance of this black hole. Catherine Durand, an astronomer, learns to project her consciousness by creating tiny black holes in a lab. She speaks of the possibility of multiple dimensions and multiple existences of the world. The black hole threatens to annihilate all the world. Durand tries to stop the annihilation from happening with the help of Ward and his friends.

The tension and war fought among the alien humans from the future and the current human race speculates the jarring future of life on earth for humans that is possible. It is not from outside but rather within the human race that resides the evil i.e., the one who will bring destruction, create a vulnerable environment, and will not leave a sustainable future for the upcoming generations. The arrival of the aliens is cathartic, an awakening call to recognize that we are biological, fragile beings who are vulnerable and dispensable. It is a struggle for biological survival despite our engineered technological achievements. To end, Katherine Hayles's words that she wrote in her monograph *How we became Posthuman* (1999) shares a good message and reminds us — "Let us remember the fragility of a material world that cannot be replaced" (Hayles 49).

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