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## DOUGLAS ADAMS' *MOSTLY HARMLESS*: A FANTASTIC REPRESENTATION OF A POSTMODERN WORLD

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### ABSTRACT

The English author Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series presents a fantastic universe which symbolically can be taken as a parody of our postmodern age, a period of non-stop change and no-boundaries in which nothing has a concrete stable meaning. The series displays human being that seems lost in a digital world where philosophical search for the meaning of life and spiritual enlightenment become futile and frivolous under the shadow of the rapid change of technologies. Thus, the books of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series address the problems related to the issues such as culture and technology, language and communication, fate and free-will, reality and unreality.

The fifth book of the series, *Mostly Harmless*, presents the character Arthur Dent as a man who is in search of a home, namely earth, trying to restore a normal life and desiring to find a way to happiness avoiding the tricks of his fate, yet understanding the absurdity of his endeavors in the end. Considering the novel as a postmodern parody, the aim of this study is to investigate the way in which the aforementioned issues are conveyed in the characters' struggle with the violation of the privacy of individuals by means of surveillance system, their strive to find a real concrete life out of virtual life and their attempt to have control over their lives.

**Keywords:** *Mostly Harmless, postmodern condition, postmodern individual.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Douglas Adams' *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series presents a fantastic universe which symbolically can be taken as a parody of our postmodern age, a period of non-stop change and no-boundaries in which nothing has a concrete stable meaning (Adams 1). The adventures of the character Arthur Dent and his friend Ford Prefect display their struggle to find a meaningful unity and order in the planets they visited during their intergalactic travel throughout the series. The series

addresses the problems of individual claiming for a happy subjectivity trapped within the issues such as culture and technology, language and communication, reality and non-reality. The efforts of characters for sustaining a secure and happy life seem frivolous in a space of advanced science and technology where philosophical search for the meaning of life and spiritual enlightenment become futile and frivolous under the shadow of the rapid change of technologies. Taken as a mirror of a postmodern society and its individual, the fifth and

the last book of the series, *Mostly Harmless*, presents Arthur Dent as a man who is in search of a home, namely earth, trying to restore a normal life and desiring to find a way to happiness avoiding the tricks of his fate, yet understanding the absurdity of his endeavors in the end. The aim of this paper is to scrutinize the way *Mostly Harmless* as a fantastic novel represents the postmodern world and the problems of postmodern individual with a special emphasis on the issues such as culture, technology, reality and non-reality in an advanced digital environment.

#### DISCUSSION

In *Mostly Harmless*, the major characters, Arthur Dent, Ford Prefect and Tricia McMillan are introduced as individuals striving to find meaning of life during their intergalactic travel which causes them to be stuck in the dichotomies of space and place, real and virtual. Each, in becoming the embodiment of alienation, represents the fragmented individual trying to find a way to subjectivity within the uncertain universe of galaxy where anything can happen at any time. In its representation of the conceptions of fragmentation, decentered subjectivity, multidimensional cyberspace and hyperreality, *Mostly Harmless* can be taken as a parody of postmodern world and its individuals, and a critique of the condition of human being in the midst of questioning the nature of the real and its representations. Becoming a pilgrim of galaxy, each character, represents postmodern individual who, under the rapid progress of technology and computer science, turns into a visitor of reality and at the same time a resident of hyperreality.

Arthur Dent as one of the major characters presents the postmodern Odysseus who is in search of home, that is earth in his case, meandering through ephemeral universe within uncertainty. His short contacts with different value systems in different parts of the galaxy remotes him from a stable authorized life. Like Odysseus having various adventures on his way back his home Ithaca after Trojan war, Arthur encounters lots of adventures and troubles in his various galactic journeys on his way to earth. When he settles down in Oh Well city in Now What planet, he strongly feels the prevailing

existence of the gaps in his life. He is always in search of meaning but what he finds is nothingness as seen in the quotation: "Arthur felt at a bit of a loss. There was a whole galaxy of stuff out there for him, and he wondered if it was churlish of him to complain to himself that it lacked just two things: the world he was born on and the woman he loved"(Adams 693). In order to fill the gaps in his life, all he needs is his home and love. His experiences can be interpreted as a replica of the experiences of contemporary man who is surrounded by the productions of mass culture, unable to focus on one concrete sign system because there are not any. As he travels, just like postmodern man travelling from image to image, he is in a flux of shifting worlds. In this respect, he is in search of a meaning. David Harvey in his discussion of the importance of the idea of home states that

Photographs, particular objects (like a piano, a clock, a chair), and events ( the playing a record of a piece of music, the singing of a song) become the focus of a contemplative memory, and hence a generator of a sense of self that lies outside the sensory overloading of consumerist culture and fashion. The home becomes a private museum to guard against the ravages of time-space compression(Harvey4).

Thus, unable to fit anywhere, Arthur wants to go to his 'private museum' which he thinks will take him out of that chaotic 'time-space compression'. As a result, He progressively turns into a man of "de-composition" far from his home, becoming a stranger travelling on unknown lands, searching for a meaning. According to Spanos the postmodern strategy of de-composition ... exists to generate anxiety or dread: to dislodge the tranquilized individual from the 'at-home of publicness' from the domesticated, the scientifically charted and organized familiarity of the totalized world. (Spanos 7).

Arthur's feeling of being 'not at-home' in the whole galaxy turns him into a dislodged figure. He is in a parallel universe in which he is led by a device called *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. The Guide, among many other devises like robots, is a product of artificial intelligence that gives written answers and information. For example, the title of

the novel *Mostly Harmless* comes from the definition of earth made by the guide. When some information of earth is demanded from the guide, it only writes *Mostly Harmless* as a definition of earth. The guide is one of the leitmotifs that emphasizes the human being's dependence on and even addiction to technological devices. This is the point where the balance of power between human being and machine is destroyed because which one is ruling the other is put in question. Moreover the Guide symbolizes the ephemerality of concepts, fashions, values and reality. Its information is always changing and far from being coherent. It does not guide with rational and reasonable information as seen in the quotation:

One encouraging thing the Guide does have to say on the subject of parallel universe is that you don't stand the remotest chance of understanding it. You can therefore say 'What?' and 'Eh?' and even go cross eyed start to blither if you like without any fear of making a fool of yourself.

The first thing to realize about parallel universes, the Guide says, is that they are not parallel. It is also important to realize that they are not, strictly speaking, universes either, but it is easiest if you try and realize that a little later, after you've realized that everything you've realized up to that moment is not true (Adams 16).

When Arthur is in the village of oracles in the Eastern Rim of the galaxy, he again wants to consult the guide but what he receives from it is irrational information:

"Arthur still carried a copy of *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* with him but found, when he consulted it, that the entries were becoming more abstruse and paranoid and had lots of x's and j's and 's in them. Something was wrong somewhere. Whether it was in his own personal unit, or whether it was something or someone going terribly amiss, or perhaps just hallucinating at the heart of the Guide organization itself, he didn't know" (Adams44).

Truth and knowledge are always fragmented and partial in the system of Whole Sort of General Mish Mash which is the name for the

order of universe. Knowledge related to the Whole sort of General Mish Mash is partial. Because getting knowledge is a matter of the way of looking at and interpreting it. In this respect there is no absolute truth but various different 'truths' in that Mish Mash universe: "The Whole Sort of General Mish Mash doesn't actually exist either, but is just the sum total of all the different ways there would be of looking at it if it did" (Adams16). It is a matter of perception and interpretation not allowing absolute, fundamental, unique truth to rule the universe but rather enabling different views to come into existence. In this respect Mish Mash, which could be taken as a parodic representation of the postmodern universe, is the sum of variety of meanings and the embodiments of different points of view. There is no center surrounded by a single truth. This situation is also obvious in the dialogue between Arthur and the old man whom he meets on the planet of Now What. The old man says:

You cannot see what I see because you see what you see. You cannot know what I know because you know what you know. What I see and what I know cannot be added to what you see and what you know because they are not of the same kind. Neither can it replace what you see and what you know, because that would be to replace you yourself (Adams48).

Universality of knowledge is denied and Mish Mash universe is a representation of ephemerality and fragmentation where "time and space have disappeared as meaningful dimensions to human thought and action" (Harvey4). Thus Arthur, Tricia and Ford become the lost figures of parallel universe searching for meaning of life and their place in that parallel space. Particularly Arthur is in need for a sense of belonging that will enable him realize himself as an individual. His existential crisis puts him in a whirl of alienation and sense of otherness. Harvey, in discussing the aspects of otherness states:

It is,..., concerned with 'ontologies,' with a potential as well as an actual plurality of universes, forming an eclectic and 'anarchic landscape of worlds in plural.' Dazed and distracted characters wander through these worlds without a clear sense

of location, wondering, 'Which world am I in and which of my personalities do I deploy'. (Harvey55)

Arthur's main predicament in his adventures is that he is in a never ending search for an identity and a place, namely earth:

The first thing Arthur Dent had to do, he realized resignedly, was to get himself a life. This meant he had to find a planet he could have one on. [...] HE closed his eyes for a moment. He so much wanted to be home. He so much wanted his own home world, the actual world he had grown up on, not to have been demolished, he so much wanted none of this to have happened. He so much wanted that when he opened his eyes again he would be standing on the doorstep of his little cottage in the West country of England, that the sun would be shining over the green hills, the post van would be going up the lane, the daffodils would be blooming in his garden, and in the distance the pub would be opening for lunch. He so much wanted to take the newspaper down to the pub and read it over a pint of bitter. He so much wanted to do the crossword. He so much wanted to be able to get completely stuck on 17 cross"(Harvey51).

His romanticized view of the past is given in nostalgic longing for home. It is reflected within the emotion of homesickness. Linda Hutcheon, in her discussion of nostalgia, expresses that the first medical usage of the word nostalgia is related to the feeling of homesickness, which fits with Arthur's situation. His longing for home, and desire for return puts him in nostalgia. His dreams of past are the moments of consolation and relief from his present unhappiness. Hutcheon also states that

Nostalgia is less about the past than about the present. It operates through what Mikhail Bakhtin called an "historical inversion": the ideal that is not being lived now is projected into the past. It is "memorialized" as past, crystallized into precious moments selected by memory, but also by forgetting, and by desire's distortions and reorganizations. simultaneously distancing and proximating, nostalgia exiles us from the present as

it brings the imagined past near. The simple, pure, ordered, easy, beautiful or harmonious past is constructed (and then experienced emotionally) in conjunction with the present—which in turn constructed as complicated, contaminated, anarchic, difficult, ugly, and confrontational. Nostalgic distancing as it selects, making the past feel complete, stable, coherent, safe from "the unexpected and the untoward, from accident or betrayal"—in other words making it so very unlike the present. (Hutcheon 104)

As offered by Hutcheon, Arthur is actually stuck in the core of meaninglessness and absurdity of his present in which he tries to establish an identity, and to find the right path to individuation and meaningful life. he is longing for past. Hutcheon also says that: "postmodernism works both to underline and to undermine the notion of the coherent, self-sufficient subject as the source of meaning or action" (Hutcheon 104).

The case is nearly the same with Tricia who is also Trillian, a parallel reflection of her personality. Presented with her double, Tricia is a tv anchor woman whose life meaning lies at the center of being a successful reporter. After losing her best chance of galactic travel, she turns into a person always analyzing her fate and free will, desiring for autonomy, yet understanding it all depends on chance. As her life progresses, after losing the chance of galactic travel because of Zaphod's leaving her behind while she was searching for her bag, Tricia becomes aware of the fact that she needs to become autonomous in her everyday engagement in world. Relating what she felt after the first bag event, she says: "That was it. End of story. End of one life, beginning of another. But hardly a moment of this life goes by that I don't wonder about some other me. A me that didn't go back for her bag. I feel like she's out there somewhere and I'm walking in her shadow" (Adams 13). In order to realize her authenticity, Tricia has to stop to be under the shadow of the "other her" which impedes her from discovering her identity. For this reason, when she has another once-in-a-lifetime chance, she refuses to go and take her bag. However, this time, she loses the best job opportunity which she could ever have because by leaving her bag in the room she also

leaves her contact lenses which are in this bag. This causes her to lose the job, for she can not read the script without her contact lenses.

Douglas Adams focuses on various issues in his novel. He actually makes a parody of our postmodern period. One of the major issues that he represents in his work is surveillance systems. Surveillance realized with camera system is presented as a conception that has omnipotent controlling power over the lives of the characters. What is emphasized in the novel is the violation of the privacy of individuals by means of security cameras under the pretention of security systems. It is like an authority which controls and regularizes behaviours of individuals. It also acts as a system that limits individual's freedom of act:

A tiny security camera up behind the bar had turned to follow her movement. This completely flummoxed her. Most people would not notice it. It was not designed to be noticed. It was not designed to suggest that nowadays even an expensive and elegant hotel in New York couldn't be sure that its clientele wasn't suddenly going to pull a gun or not wear a tie. But carefully hidden though it was behind the vodka, it couldn't deceive the finely honed instinct of a TV anchor person, which was to know exactly when a camera was turning to look at her (Adams 650).

Tricia is aware that her every movement is being watched by security cameras. The idea of possibility of danger from anyone at any time can be related to the paranoid condition of postmodern human being who does not trust in anyone or anything. Security cameras assuming the role of omnipotent and omnipresent god watching everything creates a prison-like society in which human being's freedom is under surveillance. Moreover, living their daily lives in front of these cameras, people become "the actors" of their lives and Tricia is one of the actors playing her role under the surveillance of the cameras as it can be seen in the following quotation: "A traffic-monitoring camera, she was convinced, had swung around to follow her as she walked past it, and a security camera in Bloomingdale's had seemed to make a particular point of watching her trying on hats" (Adams 651). The idea of being watched and

monitored can be associated with Jeremy Bentham's idea of the panopticon which becomes the basic topic in Foucault's discussion of surveillance in his *Discipline and Punish*. Bentham's panopticon was the idea of a circular building with a tower in the center of its open space. The idea was the surveillance of prisons. Foucault, discussing Bentham's idea of panopticon, progresses the idea of panopticism in which he discusses the power of controlling human behavior, creating a self-disciplined society:

Our society is one not of spectacle but of surveillance; under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; ...it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies (Foucault 348).

Vincent Pecora approaches the surveillance culture from a different perspective. For him monitoring by means of cameras is a practice of testing reality in modern culture. Pecora asserts that "Advanced capitalist society at the dawn of the new millenium is less about truth versus fiction, or authenticity versus simulation. It is instead about a quest for real life that requires surveillance for its-for our-verification" (Foucault 348).

True to Pecora's contention, quest for a real life is one of the major themes in *Mostly Harmless*. Characters, in awareness of the virtual reality that surround them, strive to find a real life. They know that what they see and experience is just a fake reality lacking any factuality. They live in a world of simulations. As Tricia explains: "story of my life. Never quite did the real thing. That's why I'm in television, I guess. Nothing is real" (Adams 652). What she expresses gives us a lot about the power of media creating fake realities for society. The characters are in a virtual universe, and the objects are like the visions that their minds create. The theme of virtual realities may be associated with the condition of reality in our media shaped postmodern society in which reality is replaced with symbols and signs which are constructed by culture and media. What Ford and other characters experience in the

novel is put in the borders of illusion like reality. As Ford falls down off the guide building he is aware that it is not real: "He told himself repeatedly that he was just in a graphic representation of a world. A virtual universe. A simulated reality. He could snap back out of it at any moment" (Adams 688). Simulated reality is Jean Baudrillard's major issue in his *Simulacrum and Simulation*. In his work, Baudrillard discusses how reality has become a mere simulation. According to Baudrillard, reality is replaced with symbols and signs which are created by culture and media agents such as television, internet and computer technology[2]. All images created by these agents become the placemarkers for the real items and assume the role of the real item, so what we know as real becomes actually a simulation of reality. Baudrillard asserts that:

Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept.

Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no

longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes

the territory - precession of simulacra - that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. (Baudrillard3).

Baudrillard's ideas of simulation are well reflected in *Mostly Harmless* in the experiences of the characters Ford Prefect and his friends within hyperreality. Nothing is real. Reality is just an illusion: This world is a virtual space where computer programming replaces reality "substituting the signs of the real for the real" (Baudrillard 4). Ford is aware of the hologramic universe in which he wanders. When he thinks about being shot by a laser gun he knows that he will get affected as much as he thinks he is: "Being virtually killed by virtual laser in virtual space is just as effective as the real thing, because you are as dead as you think you are" (Adams39).

In this respect, characters only live what their senses bring to them. Their minds create and design the worlds that they want to live in. Baudrillard says that "with the hologram we are already virtually in another universe: which is nothing but the mirrored equivalent of this one"(Baudrillard 2).

As well as the issues of reality and hyperreality, another major issue in the novel is communication problems among the characters. Most of the time the characters do not understand each other. They do not put a coherent relation between the signifiers and the signified in their utterances. Therefore, meaning in dialogues can become a matter of meaninglessness. Computer language also contributes to the absurdity in dialogues. Unfamiliar computer language generates communication problems among the characters, thus situating them into the core of meaninglessness and absurdity. Moreover dialogues between human beings gain the attributions of computer and robot language which can be seen in the following dialogue between Ford and Van Harl:

'I'll do the jokes' snarled Ford.

'No' said Harl. 'You'll do the restaurant column'.

He tossed a piece of plastic on the desk in front of him. Ford didn't move to pick it up.

'You what?' said Ford.

'No. Me Harl. You Prefect. You do restaurant column. Me editor. Me sit here tell you you do restaurant column. You get?'. (Adams29)

As drawn from the quotation above, the dialogue between Van Harl and Ford is much more like robotic computer language without a logical grammatical structure as if spoken by a computer system. Dehumanization of human being is mostly reflected in their way of using language. Another example can be given in terms of the operatives who work at the areas of higher security in the building of the Guide:

"At this level of security you didn't even call them people anymore. And they were probably doing stuff that only operatives would do. When they went home to their families in the evening they became people again, and their little children looked



up to them with their sweet shining eyes and said 'Dady, what did you do all day today?' they just said 'I performed my duties as an operative,' and left it at that." (Adams35).

As seen in the quotation, human beings become like robots which only perform their duties, deprived of love and affection.

Beside the dehumanization of human being, there are also some other problematic issues related to human body such as commodification of human body parts. Arthur trades his body tissues and liquids in return for tickets for galactic travel. He sells "more and more spit, toenails, fingernails, blood, hair, anything that anybody wanted, for tickets. For semen he discovered, he could travel first class. He settled nowhere, but only existed in, hermetic twilight world of the cabins of hyperspatial starships, eating, drinking sleeping, watching movies, only stopping at spaceports to donate more DNA and catch the next long haul spaceship out" (Adams53).

Thus,:

As body parts and [genetic] materials are sold and patented, manipulated and engineered, we also are seeing an unprecedented change in many of our most basic social and legal definitions. Traditional understandings of life, birth, disease, death, mother, father, and person begin to waver and then fall (Kimbrell 6).

Arthur has a daughter named Random who is again like a product produced from his sold semen. We learn that Trillian, double of Tricia the reporter, had gone to a DNA bank and bought Arthur's semen and gave birth to Random. Random, who with her name also symbolizes postmodern world's anti-order, anti-formal, decentered individual, is like an artificial technological product who has been "grown" in day care time zones as Trillian explains to Arthur: "you leave them there in the morning, you've simply no idea how old they will be in the evening. You complain till you are blue in the face but it doesn't get you anywhere. I left her at one of the places for a few hours once, and when I came back she'd passed puberty." (Kimbrell71).

### Conclusions

At this point, the novel emphasizes the notion of biologically engineered, artificial human being created by the high technology of the postmodern world. This high technology also results in producing an artificial family structure and relations lack of love and intimacy. Characters' struggle to find a meaning in their lives, their search for happiness are presented through the problematic aspects of selfhood. Each one is a lost figure in the realm of a parallel universe which forces them to the edges of identity crisis. As a conclusion in *Mostly Harmless*, Douglas Adams creates a fantastic universe which symbolically can be taken as a parody of our postmodern age. In his humorous representations of the condition of postmodern man, Adams parodies human being feeling lost in a digital desert under the rapid change and advance of science and technology.

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