

The Golden Line

A Magazine of English Literature

ISSN 2395 - 1583 (Print), ISSN 2395 - 1591 (Online)

MENU



Fighting the Freaks: Secular Individualism Vs Religion in Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*

POSTED ON: MAY 23, 2023 BY: EDITOR

Dr. Rajkumar Bera

Assistant Professor, Midnapore City College, Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal

Abstract

Neal Stephenson's classic science fiction *Snow Crash* endeavours to map out the paradigm of modern scientific world where the characters try to find more freedom but more they are controlled by the power of internet, religion and modern systematic cybernetic world. The novel reoccupies some of the positions and priorities of an older notion of the secular, enforcing a religion/secular binary. Stephenson has created in his novel such a world where the followers of the Reverend Wayne are put in an eternal vortex to find their identity that remains unfixed and fractured through friction and fraction between secular individualism and religion. The critical and popular success of *Snow Crash* is a reminder that the novel's chief protagonists, who enforce a binary separation of the secular from the religious, remain deeply relevant expressions of secular subjectivity.

Keywords: scientific, internet, religion, cybernetic, secular, friction, fraction, subjectivity

A classic cyberpunk *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson implies a futuristic world that we can trace as our own consumer driven society. In the book, the United States has been carved up into separate territories by gangs, churches, the mafia, and corporations. Each of these actors competes against one another to control territory, create spheres of influence, and to protect themselves from emerging dangers. The federal government claims sovereignty over all of its former territory, but in reality, it is only one actor in a landscape of sub-state entities and can only hold a small physical footprint. But physical territory is not the only entity these actors concern themselves with. Many people spend much of their time in a place called the metaverse, where they interact through avatars. Perhaps one of the most relevant themes of *Snow Crash* is the clash between individualism and religion in the deep spectrum of identity. Identity is depicted as precarious, fragmented, and negotiable. In a world with weak, non-existent, or failing nation-states, it can also be highly tribal. The novel brings forth the exceptionalism in rule of work that permeates the spaces of the novel, lives of the characters and religious thoughts to create a discourse where human identities are set in a vortex to get the solidarity of secular sensibility with fractured religion.

The novel *Snow Crash* begins with the spirit of religion in a series of gradual illuminations and advocates the existence of religion in the novel through the character L. Bob Rife, a media mogul and frank patron of capitalist progress for the betterment of society. Bob Rife arranges the Raft, a floating city which circumvents the Pacific Ocean assembling prospective immigrants as it crosses the coast of Asia and setting them down the coast of North America. Rife in his television interview, argues that the Raft is an emblem of capitalist redemption which is well reflected through the voice of Hiro, the protagonist, in the following –

Industry feeds on (Raft dwellers) and spits back images, sends out movies and TV programs, over my networks, images of wealth and exotic things beyond their wildest dreams, back to those people, and it gives them something to dream about, something to aspire to. And that is the function of the Raft. It's just a big old krill carrier.

[T]he journalist gives up on being a journalist, just starts to slag L. Bob Rife openly ... That's disgusting. I can't believe you think about people that way.

Shit, boy, get down off your high horse. Nobody really gets eaten. It's just a figure of speech. They come here, they get decent jobs, find Christ, buy a Weber grill and live happily ever after. What's wrong with that? (119)

Rife who is a typical capitalist upholder admits that there is a certain amount of exploitation, subjugation and coercion in his version of immigration. His materialistic corporation feeds on the distressed immigrants of the Raft as a source of television program and films that depicts the life of the inhabitants of the Raft as adventurous as well as horrific. Then, the dwellers of the Raft come to the shore in the dark heart of commercialism and the franchise economy, adding “more fuel” as Rife rightly points out to the capitalist machine. Rife, unlike the exponents of “secular redemption”, Rife makes an argument that is not matched to the ground of general view of humanity, rather on different value of commercial success. Rife quite authoritatively promotes the organised system of suppression, exploitation and absorption as good thing as he believes that the Raft dwellers get polished and discipline through this system and they live also happily experiencing this system. The ideology of happiness that Rife offers to the inhabitants of the raft ultimately directs them to a realm of economic and materialistic success in which they strongly involve themselves without any knowledge of the latent desire of the capitalists who determine the process of success and the lives of common people.

The belief of Rife regarding religion is materialised with capitalistic outlook. His view of religion is quite contrary to Asad's view of “secular redemption”. Rife devoutly believes that capitalistic redemption and secular redemption can go simultaneously without any conflict. Identity in capitalistic strand depends on the

whimsicality of authority's discursive practices. As the flow of the action of the novel *Snow Crash* develops, the fusion of the mixture of Christianity and Capitalism is unfolded gradually as a conspiracy to attain an absolute control over the individual subjects. This conspiracy hints a direct threat to the secular protagonists who struggle hard to eradicate such maltreatments from the society to create a better society where they can find a free space for breathing, freedom and a consolidated identity. In course of action of the novel, two major characters Hiro and Y.T. unearth the very conspiracy as they inquire into a phenomenon named "Snow Crash" that Rife was controlling and manipulating. At the outset of the novel, three things never seem to be connected or associated with Snow Crash – firstly, in the world of programming, hackers gradually become ill and sometimes turn into comas, after looking at bitmaps that spread through the computer virus called Snow Crash; secondly, in physical reality, people get addicted with drug also named Snow Crash that leads them to world of unconsciousness and warble with strange and unknown language; thirdly, a new religious franchise, named the Reverend Wayne's Pearly Gates, attracts a major portion of followers with the combination of nationalism, Elvis worship and some version of Pentecostalism. Readers for the first time in the novel *Snow Crash*, come to know about the happenings at the Pearly Gates in one of Reverend Wayne's famous bestselling publications named "*How America Was Saved from Communism: ELVIS SHOT JFK*" when Y.T. approached a franchise place which is considered as a place of Mafia activities, to investigate Snow Crash. Y.T. also observes the worshippers who paid a fee for their sense of religiosity. This observation is well delineated in the following-

The customer stomps towards the double doors, drawn in by hypnotic organ strains. The interior of the chapel is weirdly coloured, illuminated partly by fluorescent fixtures wedged into the ceiling and partly by large coloured light boxes and simulated stained-glass windows. The largest of these, shaped like a fattened Gothic arch, is bolted to the back wall, above the altar, and features a blazing trinity: Jesus, Elvis and the Reverend Wayne. Jesus gets top billing. The worshipper is not half a dozen steps into the place before she thuds down on her knees in the middle of the aisle and begins to speak in tongues: "ar ia aria r isa ve na mir ia ii a is a, ver na a mir ia a sari ia ..." (195-196)

As the text progresses, the followers of the Reverend Wayne are revealed as the mere believers in Christ by performing their vague rituals, rather as the believers of Wayne and Elvis who modify them through the teaching of official Christianity to adopt pop-culture chauvinism. Such meaningless and hopeless life of the followers of Wayne is reflected through a conversation between Y.T. and one of the followers of the Reverend Wayne. Y.T. through her thorough investigation discovers the gradual sickness of the hackers after being revealed to the mysterious bitmaps in the Metaverse. After being kidnapped and captured by Rife's organization, the hackers are thrown to the Raft and finally are returned to North America as the practitioners of the new religion represented by the Reverend Wayne. Y.T. voices out for the first time regarding this matter in the following-

"Where were you before? You didn't grow up on the Raft, did you?"

"I was a system's programmer for 3 verse Systems in Mountain View, California," the woman says, suddenly whipping off a string of perfect, normal sounding English.

"Then how did you get to be on the Raft?"

"I don't know. My old life stopped. My new life started. Now I'm here."

Back to baby talk.

...

"You want to leave? I can get you out of here."

"No," the woman says. "I've never been so happy."

"How can you say that? You were a big time hacker. Now you're kind of a dip, if I may speak frankly."

"That's okay, it doesn't hurt my feelings. I wasn't really happy when I was Hacker. I never thought about the important things. God. Heaven. The things of the spirit. It's hard to think about those things in America. You just put them aside. But those are really the important things- not programming computers or making money. Now, that's all I think about." (263)

In the above passage, the hacker discards the importance of materialistic experience in order to achieve a spiritual self that is not possible in the realm of cyber world where machines, programming and different instrumental virus govern human bodies and minds. Her weak vocabulary, spiritual scarcity and her conscious distinction between her former life and new spiritual life suggest her inability to articulate her new strange experience. Y.T. points out that the arms of the woman are "all tracked out like a junkie's" and traces out that the hackers are forced to give blood when they were on the Raft. The novel *Snow Crash* quite suggestively hints at the link of religious addiction to the larger discourse of addiction in cyberpunk in which not only religious experience is addictive but also the secular forms of transcendence.

The novel *Snow Crash* importantly deals with the conflict between two opposite forces that control human life in their respective systematic ground – whereas Y.T.'s discourse with the followers of the Reverend Wayne implies the gap between the sense of religiosity and the secular life in terms of emotional and inherent acquaintance, Hiro's attempt to investigate is a kind of rational and academic. Hiro in course of time learns from Y.T. that snow crash, a drug that induces glossalalia, is made from the blood of hackers who are infected by bitmaps. Hiro well makes out that the hackers warble in a manner of incoherence as snow crash addicts. These warbling are associated with the sounds created by the followers of the Reverend Wayne. Out of curiosity, Hiro asks his ex-girlfriend Juanita who for the first time ignites the spark of investigation in his mind – "This Snow Crash thing – is it virus, a drug, or a religion?" and Juanita responds, "What is the difference?" (200). Juanita suggests that it is very tough to apart drug, religions and viruses from each other.

Hiro's search for the truth about *Snow Crash* is grounded entirely in Metaverse in conversation with an advanced piece of software called the Librarian. Much of his research is spent with the file called "Babel/Infocalypse" that directs Hiro to the Biblical story of Babel. In Genesis, Babel is a story of human high ambition and divine judgement. Human beings build up a tall tower to heighten their greatness but God interrupts and brings a great change in human language. The story taken from Genesis 11, the version of the New King James, is conveyed in the following-

And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the earth." But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. And the Lord said, "Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth and they ceased building the city. Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth. (4-9)

Through investigation, Hiro exhibits that Snow Crash interacts with genetic aspects and the metavirus is essentially linguistic, "based in the deep structures of the brain that everyone shares. These structures consist of basic neural circuits that have to exist in order to allow our brains to acquire higher languages" (395). Thus, metavirus is the operating system on which various kinds of software can be run and offers extraordinary power to anyone who can manipulate it. Regarding this, Ng says- "someone who knows the right words can speak words, or show you visual symbols, that go past all your defences and sink right into your brainstem" (395).

Neal Stephenson underscores the fact that "rational religion" is closely equal with secular endeavour by linking a correspondence between the man action of the novel and the ancient past that Hiro investigates. Hiro merges the apparent opposite boarder lines of religion and modern cyber world to create a religio-scientific discourse in the world of science fiction. He utters "Enki was a priest who just happened to be especially good at his job. He had the unusual ability to write new programs-he was a hacker. He was, actually the first modern man, a fully conscious human being, just like us" (397).

The novel thus gives voice to a more pointed critique of religious believers as |"freaks" through the character of Y.T. The two different reactions to the religion in the novel are Hiro's rational and pragmatic thinking towards religion as an irresistible and dangerous virus and Y.T.'s direct and hostile to it. These two different proportioned measures can be associated with William Connolly's idea of secular subjectivity. According to Connolly, the secular subjectivity must be seen as possessing multiple registers. He believes that secular commitment to rational thought is troubled and complicated by the material structure of brain. To him, secularism gives room to resister variegated forms of religious aspects, rituals and practices. Connolly suggests that it is possible "for believers and nonbelievers from a variety of faiths to double over in laughter together ... across the space of difference ... Doing so partly because each party harbours in itself an ineliminable element of difference from itself ..." (45)

Thus, Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* depicts the benefits and drawbacks of our modern scientific development that the users confront today in our present societal structure, internet and religion. Stephenson his novel tries to concentrate on the power and the process of control of the private owner of the organizations. The novel focuses on the franchise caricature rather than only private organizations. Secular individualistic identity and religious freaks are merged and also subverted through post-humanistic discourse of our modern world where there is no alternate universe but a caricature of the world in which we live and suffer.

Works Cited

Altizer, Thomas J. J. *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*. The Westminster Press, 1966.

Ballinger, Robin. *Sounds of Resistance. The Global Resistance Reader*. Edited by Louise Amoore, Routledge, 2005, pp. 423-436.

Clark, Andy. *Natural Born Cyborgs*. Oxford University, 2003.

Connolly, William. "Europe: A Minor Tradition." *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*. Edited by David Scott and Charles Hirschkind, Stanford UP, 2006, pp. 75-92.

Dorf, Richard C. *Computers and Man*. Boyd & Fraser Pub. Co., 1977.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How we became posthuman: virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics*. University of Chicago, 1999.

Porush, David. "Hacking the Brainstem: Postmodern Metaphysics and Stephenson's Snow Crash." *Configurations*, 1994, pp- 537-571.

Stephenson, Neal. *Snow Crash*. Bantam, 2003.

Dr. Rajkumar Bera presently is working as an Assistant Professor at Midnapore City College, affiliated to Vidyasagar University, West Bengal. He has taught at various renowned institutions such as Ravenshaw University in Odisha, Midnapore College and K.D. College of Commerce and General Studies under Vidyasagar University. His area of interest is Indian Writing in English, Literary Theory, Literary Criticism and New Literature. He has published many articles in various renowned national and international journals and edited books.

Email: rajkumarbera.bera@gmail.com

[Volume 5, Number 1, 2023]

<input type="text"/>	Go!
----------------------	-----

Recent Contents

- [Exploring the Implications of Parallel Universe, Multiverse, and Time Travel in Science Fiction](#)
- [Shoes Flying In The Wind](#)
- [Influence](#)
- [Science Fiction beyond Modern Periphery: A Postmodern Reading of *The Hungry Septopus*](#)
- [Representation of Biopolitics and Climate Change Crises in Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*](#)
- [Breaking Boundaries of Genre: Reading Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*](#)
- [The Scientification of Science Fiction: A Study of the Truth of Posthuman Ontology in Fictionalized Science with Scientific Epistemology](#)
- [Manipulating Memory in Science Fictional Imaginary: Reading Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*](#)
- [Science Fiction and Its Presentation in Dystopia: An Analytical Study of Few Science Fictional Dystopian Texts](#)
- [Can the Horror of Technological Singularity be the Critique of Enlightenment? Detangling the Different Forms of Horror and Hyperrealism of the Uncanny Valley in I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream by Harlan Ellison](#)
- [The Time Travelling Custodian: Exploring Possibilities of Time Travel in Tulku Lineage of Buddhism](#)
- [Beyond the Certainty of the Dinner Party: Epistemological Horizons in H.G. Wells and Octavia Butler's "Amnesty"](#)
- [Fighting the Freaks: Secular Individualism Vs Religion in Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*](#)
- ['The Dystopian Turn': Re-envisioning the Future through Speculative Fiction](#)
- [The importance and need of magazines in nurturing and evolving a genre: A case study of Kalpabiswa](#)