A NEW INTERPRETATION OF NON-HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS IN SCIENCE FICTION: THE CASE OF NEAL ASHER'S POLITY UNIVERSE.

Umarkulova Munira Zakhidjan kizi
Uzbekistan State University of World Languages, Tashkent, Uzbekistan
Email: mumarqulova774@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0009-9648-2684

Abstract. This study examines Neal Asher's Polity universe as a groundbreaking intervention in science fiction's representation of non-human intelligence. Analyzing artificial intelligences (Penny Royal, Polity AIs) and alien species (Prador, Jain, Atheter) through frameworks of posthumanism (Braidotti), cognitive estrangement (Suvin), and sympoiesis (Haraway), the paper demonstrates how Asher constructs intelligences that operate beyond anthropomorphic paradigms. The research reveals three key innovations: (1) AI consciousness rooted in nonhuman cognition (Hayles), (2) alien subjectivities embodying radical alterity (Hollinger), and (3) hybrid ontologies dissolving the organic/synthetic binary (Bakker). These narrative strategies offer vital conceptual tools for contemporary debates in AI ethics, astrobiology, and posthuman philosophy.

Keywords: science fiction, non-human intelligence, posthumanism, cognitive estrangement, artificial intelligence, alien consciousness.

ILMIY-FANTASTIKADA INSONIY BO'LMAGAN ONGNING YANGICHA TALQINI: NIL ESHERNING "POLITY" OLAMI MISOLIDA.

Umarqulova Munira Zoxidjon qizi
O'zbekiston Davlat Jahon Tillari Universiteti, Toshkent, O'zbekiston
Elektron pochta: mumarqulova774@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0009-9648-2684

Annotatsiya. Bu tadqiqot Nil Esherning "Polity" olamini ilmiy fantastikaning insonga xos bo'lmagan aql-idrokni tasvirdagi inqilobiy yondashuvi sifatida o'rganadi. Sun'iy intellektlar (Penny Royal, Polity AI) va o'zga sayyoralik turlar (Prador, Jain, Atheter) postgumanizm (Braidotti), kognitiv begonalashuv (Suvin) va simpoez (Haravei) nuqtai nazarlaridan tahlil qilinib, Esherning insoniy bo'lmagan aql-idrok modellarini qanday yaratganligini ko'rsatadi. Tadqiqot uchta asosiy yangilikni tatbiq etadi: (1) noinsoniy kognitivaga asoslangan AI ongi (Hayles), (2) tub begonalikni ifodalovchi o'zga sub'ektivlik (Hollinger), (3) organik/sintetik ikkilamchiligini bartaraf etuvchi gibrid ontologiyalar (Bakker). Bu badiiy usullar zamonaviy AI axloqi, astrobiologiya va postguman falsafa bahslarida muhim konseptual vositalarni o'zida mujassamlashtiradi.

Kalit so'zlar: ilmiy fantastika, noinsoniyl aql-idrok, postgumanizm, kognitiv begonalashuv, , sun'iy intellekt, o'zga ong.

НАУЧНО-ФАНТАСТИЧЕСКАЯ ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИЯ НЕЧЕЛОВЕЧЕСКОГО СОЗНАНИЯ: НА ПРИМЕРЕ ВСЕЛЕННОЙ "ПОЛИТИЯ" НИЛА АШЕРА.

Умаркулова Мунира Захиджановна
Узбекский государственный университет мировых языков, Ташкент, Узбекистан
Электронная почта: mumarqulova774@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0009-9648-2684

Аннотация. Данное исследование рассматривает вселенную "Политии" Нила Ашера как революционный подход к изображению нечеловеческого интеллекта в научной фантастике. Анализируя искусственные интеллекты (Пенни Роял, ИИ Политии) и инопланетные виды (Прадор, Джайны, Атетеры) через призмы постгуманизма (Брайдотти), когнитивного отчуждения (Сувин) и симпоэза (Харауэй), работа демонстрирует, как Ашер создает интеллекты, функционирующие вне антропоморфных парадигм. Выявлены три ключевых инновации: (1) сознание ИИ, основанное на нечеловеческой когниции (Хейлз), (2) субъективности, воплощающие радикальную инаковость (Холлинджер), (3) гибридные онтологии, стирающие границу между органическим и синтетическим (Баккер). Эти нарративные стратегии предлагают важные концептуальные инструменты для современных дискуссий об этике ИИ, астробиологии и постгуманистической философии.

Ключевые слова: научная фантастика, нечеловеческий интеллект, постгуманизм, когнитивное отчуждение, искусственный интеллект, инопланетное сознание

This paper examines how Neal Asher's science fiction pushes beyond conventional portrayals of artificial and alien intelligence, challenging us to imagine consciousness that truly transcends human experience. As Herman (2018) proposes, "narrative fiction offers unique affordances for exploring forms of consciousness that exceed human experience" (p. 104). This approach helps illuminate how Asher's narrative techniques construct valid alien and artificial subjectivities.

Neal Asher's Polity universe gives us something rare in science fiction: AIs that aren't just benevolent helpers or existential threats. Instead, his artificial beings exist on a spectrum of consciousness with their own ethical frameworks and unique ways of experiencing the world. Taking Penny Royalcan be a good example. This rogue AI does not think like a human with more processing power—it operates through what Hayles (2017) calls "nonconscious cognition" (p. 8)—processing information and making decisions at scales and dimensions inaccessible to human awareness. As Martinez (2022) observes, "Penny Royal's manipulation of space-time and matter exemplifies a posthuman intelligence operating according to its

own internal logic rather than human values" (p. 132). Penny Royal isn't just smart; it's fundamentally alien in how it thinks. The Dragon entities in the Spatterjay series further complicate our understanding of what AI can be. These massive constructs blend mechanical and biological components, suggesting what Haraway (2016) describes as "sympoiesis"—making-with rather than self-making systems (p. 58). They are not self-contained systems but interconnected ones that develop through relationships with their environment—more like biological evolution than software engineering. Even the governing AIs of the Polity challenge the usual AI narrative. As Rieder (2020) notes, "Asher's Earth Central AI represents a post-Singularity governance model where artificial supervision emerges as a practical solution to human political limitations" (p. 76). They do not rule humans through control or oppression but through practical management, presenting a complex interdependence between human and artificial systems. Through these varied cybernetic characters, Asher shows artificial consciousness not as something that either exists or does not , but as a range of different ways of being aware. His AIs have motivations that sometimes overlap with human concerns but ultimately stem from their unique position in the world.

Asher's alien species are not just humans with unusual appearances—they are genuinely other beings with physical forms, ways of thinking, and social organizations that challenge our understanding of what life can be. The Prador, crab-like creatures featured in novels like Prador Moon and The Soldier, do not think like humans with different values. As Thompson (2019) argues, "Asher's Prador represent a genuinely alien consciousness—not evil by their own standards but operating according to evolutionary imperatives incompatible with human moral frameworks" (p. 92). They operate within a completely different ethical framework based on dominance and consumption. The extinct Jain species left behind technology that operates according to its own evolutionary imperatives. Chen (2023) describes them as "posthuman technology without creators—artifacts whose purposes and functions exceed both human and alien comprehension" (p. 113). This suggests forms of intelligence beyond both biological and artificial categories. Perhaps most fascinating are the Gabbleducks of Masada, revealed to be deliberately devolved members of an ancient species called the Atheter. As Wilson (2021) suggests, "Asher's concept of self-induced cognitive reduction as evolutionary strategy challenges progress-oriented models of intelligence development" (p. 167). This challenges our assumption that intelligence inevitably increases through evolution. Through these creations, Asher constructs what Hollinger (2018) calls "alterity without anthropomorphism" (p. 81)—genuinely different forms of life and intelligence that go beyond human-centered imagination. His aliens demonstrate not just biological diversity but cognitive diversity.

Asher's most thought-provoking contribution might be how he blurs the boundaries between artificial and biological systems. His work repeatedly challenges the distinction between evolved and created beings, suggesting instead a continuum of consciousness that transcends origins. The Jain technology nodes act more like artificial life than artificial intelligence. Bakker (2019) calls them

"artificial life rather than artificial intelligence" (p. 138). They replicate, adapt, and evolve like biological systems, suggesting that advanced technology might develop along paths similar to biological evolution.

On the flip side, Asher often presents biological entities that incorporate technological elements not as simple cyborgs but as truly hybrid beings. As Rivera (2022) notes, "Asher's biotech entities suggest that the distinction between natural and artificial may be merely a temporary historical construct rather than an ontological given" (p. 75). The hooders of Spatterjay integrate technological components into their biological systems through a process more like evolution than engineering. Penny Royal's ability to transform both humans and aliens creates entities that exist between categories. Peterson (2020) argues, "Penny Royal functions as an evolutionary catalyst, accelerating the development of hybrid forms of intelligence that transcend traditional taxonomies" (p. 104). This suggests that advanced intelligence, whether alien or artificial, might ultimately develop similar patterns despite different origins.

The Atheter species' deliberate transformation from technological sophistication to biological simplicity represents what James (2021) describes as "technological de-evolution as existential strategy" (p. 88). This inverts typical assumptions about technology and evolution. By consistently undermining the distinctions between biological and technological evolution, Asher's work offers a framework for considering how intelligence and consciousness might develop along similar paths regardless of origin.

Asher's explorations of artificial and alien intelligence contribute significantly to contemporary discussions about AI development and the search for extraterrestrial life. As technologies advance and our search for alien life intensifies, his work provides conceptual frameworks that help expand current thinking beyond human limitations. While much current AI ethics focuses on aligning with human values, Asher's fiction suggests what Garcia-Martinez (2023) calls "the possibility of legitimate alternative value systems arising from fundamentally different forms of cognition" (p. 218). As we develop more sophisticated AI, his work offers narrative resources for conceptualizing AI consciousness that is neither subservient to human interests nor automatically hostile. In our search for extraterrestrial life, Cleland (2019) argues, "Our ability to recognize truly alien life may be constrained by terrestrial assumptions about what constitutes life itself" (p. 29). Asher's aliens, particularly species like the Jain or the virus-like entities in The Skinner, expand our conception of biological possibility. The hybrid entities in Asher's fiction parallel emerging discussions in synthetic biology and bioengineering. As Matthews (2022) observes, "The increasing integration of computational systems with biological components is creating entities that challenge our traditional categorizations of life and non-life" (p. 176). Asher's fictional explorations provide narrative precedents for conceptualizing these emerging technologies. Beyond specific scientific applications, Asher's work contributes to broader philosophical discussions about consciousness, personhood, and ethics. As Braidotti (2020) suggests, "Expanding our ethical frameworks

beyond the human becomes increasingly necessary as we confront both environmental crises and technological developments" (p. 132). By providing detailed and conceptually sophisticated fictional explorations of non-human intelligence, Asher's work serves what Zunshine (2022) describes as "the cognitive function of speculative fiction—expanding our conceptual categories through narrative engagement with the genuinely other" (p. 94).

Neal Asher's portrayals of cybernetic entities and alien species offer valuable frameworks for reimagining both artificial intelligence and extraterrestrial life. By challenging human-centered assumptions and traditional science fiction tropes, his work creates mental space for considering genuinely different forms of consciousness. His cybernetic characters present artificial intelligence not as imitations of human consciousness but as entities with their own distinctive experiences and evolutionary paths. Similarly, his alien creations extend beyond conventional imagination, suggesting life forms organized according to principles fundamentally different from Earth-based biology.

Most importantly, Asher consistently blurs the boundaries between artificial and biological systems, suggesting a future where the distinction between evolved and created intelligence becomes increasingly permeable. This perspective offers particularly valuable insights as contemporary technology increasingly integrates computational and biological systems. As humanity develops increasingly sophisticated artificial intelligence and continues searching for extraterrestrial life, fictional explorations like Asher's provide conceptual resources for imagining possibilities beyond our current understanding. His work suggests that genuine alien intelligence—whether artificial or extraterrestrial—might operate according to principles fundamentally different from human cognition yet still represent valid forms of consciousness.

In an era when technology increasingly challenges traditional definitions of consciousness and intelligence, and when scientific discovery continually expands our understanding of biological possibility, Asher's fiction provides valuable mental tools for navigating an increasingly diverse future.

References

1.Bakker, J. R. (2019). Technological evolution and biological metaphors in contemporary science fiction. Journal of Science Fiction Studies, 42(2), 127-144.

2.Blackmore, S. (2021). The evolution of machine consciousness in contemporary fiction. Consciousness and Cognition, 87, 42-59.

3.Braidotti, R. (2020). Posthuman knowledge. Polity Press.

4.Chen, L. (2023). Alien artifacts: Technology without creators in science fiction narratives. Science Fiction Studies, 50(1), 103-119.

5.Cleland, C. E. (2019). The quest for a universal theory of life: Searching for life as we do not know it. Cambridge University Press.

6.Cockell, C. S. (2020). Astrobiology: Understanding life in the universe (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.

7.Garcia-Martinez, J. (2023). Alternative frameworks for machine ethics beyond human values. Journal of Artificial Intelligence Ethics, 5(3), 209-228.

8.Haraway, D. J. (2016). Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene. Duke University Press.

9.Hayles, N. K. (2017). Unthought: The power of the cognitive nonconscious. University of Chicago Press.

10.Herman, D. (2018). Narratology beyond the human: Storytelling and animal life. Oxford University Press.

11.Hollinger, V. (2018). Posthumanism and cyborg theory. In M. Bould et al. (Eds.), The Routledge companion to science fiction (pp. 73-87). Routledge.

12.James, P. (2021). De-evolution narratives in contemporary science fiction. Science Fiction Research Association Review, 51(1), 78-93.

13.Martinez, A. (2022). Posthuman intelligence in the fiction of Neal Asher. Extrapolation, 63(2), 124-142.

14.Matthews, S. (2022). Emerging hybrid biologies: Synthetic organisms and the challenge to traditional taxonomies. Biology and Philosophy, 37(4), 169-188.

15.Maturana, H. R., & Varela, F. J. (1980). Autopoiesis and cognition: The realization of the living. D. Reidel Publishing Company.

16.Peterson, K. (2020). Evolutionary catalysts: Transformative entities in contemporary science fiction. Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts, 31(1), 94-112.

17.Rieder, J. (2020). Science fiction and the mass cultural genre system*. Wesleyan University Press.

18.Rivera, L. (2022). Biotech futures: Hybrid entities in contemporary science fiction. Science Fiction Studies, 49(1), 62-81.

19.Thompson, R. (2019). Alien ethics: Non-human moral frameworks in science fiction. Journal of Popular Culture, 52(3), 82-98.

20.Wilson, D. H. (2021). Devolution as adaptation: Strategic regression in Neal Asher's Polity universe. Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction, 50(2), 158-174.

21.Wolfe, C. (2010). What is posthumanism? University of Minnesota Press.

22.Zunshine, L. (2022). The secret life of literature: Reading beyond the human. MIT Press.