

**Racial and Colonial Connotations in Isaac Asimov's *The Caves of Steel***

Girisha D.

PhD Research Scholar.

Department of English.

Annamalai University.

Annamalai Nagar.

Tamil Nadu.

&

Assistant Professor of English

GFGC, Arts, Science and Commerce

Jyothi Nagar,

Sira

Karnataka-572137

Dr. C. Shanmugasundaram

Assistant Professor of English

Department of English

Annamalai University

Annamalai Nagar

Tamil Nadu

**Abstract**

The paper tries to discuss colonial and racial issues and plausible solutions for them through a study of Isaac Asimov's *The Caves of Steel*. The trend in the Science-Fiction genre has been to portray the domination of the developed over the developing. Allegorically robots also represent colonised people. In *The Caves of Steel*, Asimov has made a consistent effort to transform the attitude of people by suggesting that robots too could be taken as human partners. Further, he has presented these robots as incorruptible, divine and a better breed.

**Keywords:** Colonial, Racial, Science-Fiction, Robots

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Isaac Asimov has been one of the most significant and prolific writers of Science-Fiction. While his works concern themselves with various aspects of scientific progress such as time and space travel also, his works in the area of robotics have had special significance, since he has attempted to deal with the problems that could arise in day-to-day human life due to the use of these 'man-machines.' In his novels Asimov has tried to imaginatively depict changes in human behaviour in the days to come. Hence, he has projected thickly populated worlds against thinly populated worlds, and worlds with large number of robots against robodess societies to study the change in the attitude of the Homo sapiens in these novels. The future worlds are also characterised by great advancements in the fields of science and technology. The base so formed helps to study the socio-psychological adjustments of the people of the future. It is evident that future forms of robots decide the destiny of man. The robots in turn, philosophise and draw a conclusion to the effect that humans too, should be bound by the laws of humanics.

The novel, *The Caves of Steel*, is serialised in *Galaxy* in 1953 and was published in book form in 1954. It seems that Horace Gold first suggested the theme of the story. As Gunn, in *Isaac Asimov*, points out, the theme "was a pure murder mystery set against a science fiction background" (110). *In Memory Yet Green* (1979) Asimov sincerely asserts that "Science Fiction at Its Peak" occurred to him in 1953 only. He states that thereafter his writings became more direct and spare. In addition, he reflects that it was *The Caves of Steel* that lifted him a notch higher in his own estimation. It is a dystopian theme, which describes contemporary life but is placed three thousand years in the future. At that time Earth's population has congregated to live in 'Cities.' The agrarian sectors and the yeast industries are located at the outskirts of the Cities and the terrestrial metallic robots perform simple jobs there. In addition to the description of R. Sammy, the office boy robot, the novel presents the robots at the shoe counter which are programmed to perform certain duties. But a

representative woman of the medievalistic group exhibits her anguish because she complains that robots had taken away the jobs of the people of that society.

In order to balance this kind of a plot, the novel introduces a space town in which the spacers had a strong belief in robots for their progress. They believe in a C/Fe culture - a hybrid of humans and robots in equal number. The spacers have reached saturation in colonising fifty worlds. In order to solve the problem of Earth's population explosion, the Spacers recommend the colonising of the Outer worlds by Earthpeople with the help of robots. While the spacers peacefully live in an unpolluted uninfected Spacertown, Dr. Roj Nemennuh Sarton has designed and constructed a humanoid Robot Daneel Olivaw who resembles his own maker in appearance. But Dr. Sarton is murdered when the Police commissioner Julius Enderby goes there to meet him. During the investigation, it is found that no Spacer is involved in the murder. Further robots are equipped with the First law and hence are incapable of murdering a human being. The absence of a weapon in the vicinity of the murder place has complicated the case. In addition, the only check-post at the point of intersection of the two worlds reports that no intrusion has occurred. Hence, Dr. Fastolfe who is placed in charge of the investigations suspects that the medievalistic group from the Earth might have committed the murder. Enderby appoints Elijah a C-5 Plainclothesman to investigate the murder case. He is provided with a robot partner - a humaniform robot Daneel Olivaw of Aurora by the spacers. But the Police commissioner imposes a restriction on Elijah that he alone should solve the murder mystery case in order to impress the Spacers with the capability Earthmen.

During the investigation process Elijah tolerates the contemptuous feeling of superiority that the robot evinces at the shoe counter, Space town, at his quarters and finally at the Yeast factory. Apart from the professional detective elements, Elijah has to face the problems posed by the conservative fundamentalist groups and the labour unions that oppose

the use of robots on Earth. Elijah suspects that the concept of C/Fe might be the prime motivation for the opposition to the use of robots on Earth by the Medievalists. They think that robots would take away their jobs in future. In this regard, Elijah reflects:

Your Dr. Sarton was attacking the problem of Earth's conversion to C/Fe from a new and promising angle. Our conservative groups or Medievalists, as they call themselves, were perturbed. They were afraid he might succeed. So they killed him. (64-65)

Elijah in his initial investigation suspects that Daneel might be the real Dr.Sarton. In another incident Daneel tries to save Elijah. On examination, Elijah confirms that the first law is intact with Daneel. Hence, Elijah is convinced that the robot partner is serious enough to join hands with him for further investigation. The description of their cooperative efforts could be very well traced to the incidents that take place at home, the shoe shop, the interrogation cell, and the Yeast factory. Finally all these converge in the main investigation. As time runs out, Elijah is pressurised to draw his conclusions and he docs so by applying the formula of motivation, means and opportunity. As per Elijah's analysis, which he arrives at through the circumstantial evidence of a shattered spectacles lying at the murder scene, it is only Enderby who has not only been motivated, but also had the opportunity and means to carry out the crime. Since, a weapon is absent from the murder scene, and since no human being dares to cross the open space, Elijah speculates that Enderby must have arrived in space town before schedule and obtained a charger (the murder weapon) from R. Sammy, whom he has ordered to pass through the open space to bring and return the same. However, since Enderby is short-sighted, the medievalist robot hater has erroneously killed Dr. Sarton instead of the humanoid R. Daneel Olivaw since R. Daneel is a robot replica of his maker Dr. Sarton. Elijah ends his investigation within the stipulated time. Later, Elijah pleads with Enderby to convert the medievalists to accept space colonization. Finally in his report Elijah requests the authorities

not to convict his boss. As in most of the Science-Fiction stories, this novel too has a happy ending.

Asimov has carefully and tactfully handled the dystopian fictional theme in presenting the 'back to soil' movement in this novel. He has succeeded in blending the detective elements with a Science-Fiction setting. He has incorporated the mythical elements pertaining to the etymological and lexical origins of the words Elijah and Jessica. He has complicated the plot by presenting the contemporary psycho-social issues in the continuum. In the process, he has also dealt with medievalistic ideologies in the two symmetrical worlds that he has presented.

Discrimination is a global issue with multiple ramifications as in race, class, nation, and gender. Science fiction has often dealt with the problems of racism and colonialism. Usually, Science-Fiction works present an empirical world of natives, settlers, spacers, and aliens. In most of these works, the Earthpeople triumph over the plausible people of the outer worlds. Aliens are often viewed as monsters and hence, most of the stories depict the ultimate victory of the colonising Homo sapiens over the species of the other worlds. Certain works like satires could also in such cases open up horizons to study the problem of oppression - particularly the attitude of the colonisers towards the colonised. Asimov's Science-Fiction works, particularly the Foundation trilogy, open up issues for debating the salient feature of colonisation. Similarly, robots allegorically represent the colonised people.

The genre of Science-Fiction deals with the problems of the entire class of Homo sapiens. It finds plausible solutions for varied problems of humanity, which might arise in the future or in the near future. It is possible to examine robotic SF from a colonial point of view, if one equates robots to the colonised and human beings to the colonisers. From such a perspective, an attempt has been made to analyse the attitude evinced towards robots by humans in the robotic novels by Asimov. Similarly, one could also think of robots as a

different race of beings, and the conflict between human beings and robots would then take on the shades of racism.

Among the novels *The Caves of Steel* deals with the oppression of the Spacers by the Earthmen. Even though the Spacer world is described as self-sufficient, it relies on Earth for police force and the investigation processes. Julius Enderby the Commissioner of Police who is a much-trusted man in the Spacer world visits them often. Readers are lately informed that Enderby has attempted to smash the unique property of the Spacers, namely, the humaniform robot R. Daneel Olivaw who was the replica of Dr. Sarton - his maker. Accidentally, Dr. Sarton was killed due to his resemblance with the robot. Hence, the first novel itself exposes the imperial power of the human masters over the spacers and the robots belonging to them. Elijah's attitude of a 'White man' is noticed throughout the novel by the exhibition of his unreasonable anger against the metallic robot Sammy. He gets irritated whenever Sammy calls him 'Lije.' Quite often, Elijah as a representative coloniser exhibits his imperialistic tendency towards the humaniform robot Daneel. Though in appearance and status Daneel equals Elijah, the latter distrusts the former several times. Perhaps, due to robophobia Elijah quite often expresses his anguish towards Daneel. Recalling the past incidents Elijah introspects his own action, "Twice he had accused R. Daneel, once as a human being in disguise, and once as an admitted and actual robot, each time as a murderer. Twice the accusation had been bent back and broken" (181). As a coloniser Elijah might have had an ingrained fear that the colonised in the form of a humaniform robot might topple the imperial set up. Also, Daneel informs Elijah that there is a kind of disagreement among the Spacers: "There are some who think that a modernized Earth will be a dangerous and an imperialistic Earth." (60). Thus, Elijah does not take Daneel into confidence throughout the novel and tries to segregate him from the rest of the human society. His anti-robotic attitude also comes to the fore in the following derogatory remark he makes about human- robot

(C/Fe) culture: “C/Fe, damn it! C/Fe! You’re so full of the benefits of a C/Fe culture... (261). In addition, Elijah’s attitude does not change while he interrogates a blue collared worker Francis Clousarr at the New York Yeast factory. It is worth noting that the factory is also segregated from the rest of the human dwellings in New York City. Elijah suspects that the worker might have a hand in the medievalistic activities. He does not mind using a ‘guide rod’ on him. Thus, Elijah’s mental process is seasoned to find culprits and misfits not in his own class but to locate them in workers’ class, which is nothing short of an imperialistic attitude.

Dr. Fastolfe a Spacer also advises Elijah regarding the process of colonising the outer worlds with the help of robots. He correlates the present process with human history:

A group of displaced men as you call them, are what we need to serve as a nucleus for colonization. Your ancient America was discovered by ships fitted with men from the prisons ... Yet those very robots can accompany humans, smooth the difficulties of initial adjustment to a raw world, make colonization practical . (124)

In turn, Police Commissioner Julius Enderby also exhibits the same kind of an attitude of a coloniser. He emphatically states that the Spacer robot should not be allowed to solve the murder mystery. In other words, he instructs Elijah to find the solution for himself. Julius provides clues which are insignificant and ultimately complicate the case. Enderby puts the blame on Elijah even before the table is turned on him. Later he states that in order to save his wife Jessie, Elijah might have used the tool to smash R. Sammy. Thus, it can be inferred that imperial attitude is the inner current in the novel.

Akin to colonial problems, racism also poses certain grave issues. It is easy to differentiate any human race by observing the skin colour, bone structure, facial appearance, and speech and so on. But it is difficult to distinguish two robots of a similar make. In this

regard, it is interesting to study the nature of robots or computers, which are endowed with all the human qualities. As a branch of Science fiction, Robotics deals with the change in the behaviour of man in a technologically advanced society with robots. Interestingly, Ludwig von Bertalanffy discusses the behaviour of man as a robot in the twentieth century. Human behaviour, according to Bertalanffy, is basically governed by 'utilitarian principles'. Therefore man too is programmed just as robots are. The toilet training in the early childhood days, the setting up of economic goals to derive maximum benefits with minimum expenses which includes a student striving to score the highest marks, or an adult attempting to maximise his earnings are a few examples to cite. Man is a machine because his nervous system is trained to function in the desired direction only. *Robots, Men, and Minds: Psychology in the Modern War*, Bertalanffy observes, "Stimulus-response, input-output, producer-consumer are all the same concept, only expressed in different terms" (12). It seems that the theory of psychohistory propounded by Isaac Asimov in *Foundation* series is an extension of Bertalanffy's idea. Asimov has applied this principle in *The Caves of Steel* and *Robots and Empire* to measure the change in the behaviour of man when he is placed in a robotic society. On the whole, it is possible to trace an attempt to overcome imperial power in Asimov's robot novels. Initially, imperialistic attitude is noticed in *The Caves of Steel* as in Elijah and Enderby's attitudes. The positive effects of the C/Fe culture are also felt. The imperial tendencies gradually diminish from novel to novel.

Asimov has made the work less fantastic and more realistic by inserting certain contemporary experiences. *The Caves of Steel* have contributed to its acquisition of mainstream novelistic features: the description of men's personal; eating habits; table manners; humiliation caused by travelling in Expressways; strip running; a woman losing her purse during transit; a whisper in the bedroom; the description of the natural Solarium; the public kitchen and the Spacers' ignorance of the Earthly diseases. Though Science-Fiction is

criticised severely for its thinness of characterisation, Asimov has fairly sketched the characters of Elijah, Jessie, Enderby, and Daneel in *The Caves of Steel*.

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