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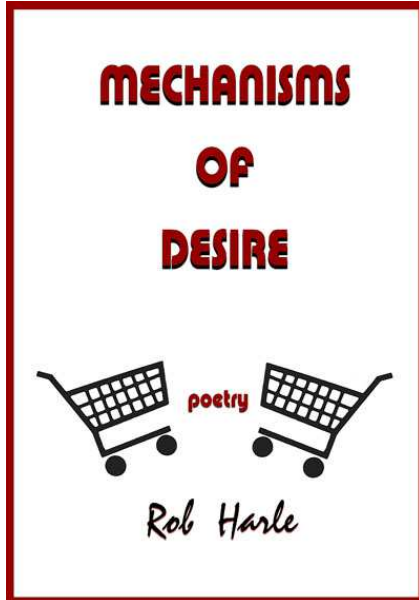
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Book Review

Mechanisms of Desire by Rob Harle



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Evolutionary history of mankind is interrelated with the evolution of technology in a very complex way and so much so that in order to understand patterns of cultures of the distant prehistoric times researchers resort to understanding techno-complex, the archaeological imprint of technology to be found across scattered evidences. Technology, again, creates epochs and can cause massive changes in the ways of life. While people adopt new ways of life with every major technological changes, concerns about the outcome of application of a new technology are also heard. It was, however, not until the implementation of digital technology in embedded systems serious moral and ethical questions would be raised about using technology in popular media and serious literature. In the present century, with the introduction of embedded systems, many of which function in networked environments, use of technology has increased at unprecedented rate. Even sometimes some gadgets are being treated as an extension of our bodily organs and mental faculties. This sometimes is interpreted as mindless rush for consumerism. On a more serious note, many see the human-machine proximity and even incorporation of digital parts as another stage of evolution, set to bring about unexpected and unpredicted changes.

Rob Harle's latest collection of poems *Mechanisms of Desire* explores deeply these concerns of our time. Rob Harle, a senior artist and poet, once described his artworks as "a kind of documentation of the *technoMetamorphosis*"ⁱ, and this can be applied to describe this collection of 39 poems, which explores "the philosophy of Transhumanism, Artificial Intelligence and the nature of Embodiment". Interestingly, some of the poems

have their illustrated counterparts in the form of digital arts in black and white. Rob Harle is very much aware of the mechanisms of digital technology and this helps him to explore certain 'dark' aspects technology carries along when it is applied collectively for satisfaction of consumerist greed. The poet seems to have no objection to the use of technology itself and he himself makes use of the latest technology to create his artworks; he objects only when the machine threatens to replace the human attributes and even humans in near future.

Mechanisms of Desire starts with a significant poem "Primal Desire". This poem may be called a prologue to the rest of the poems as it sets the thematic tone of the book in a very subtle way by relating our use of technology to our desires. The poet invokes the context of the Original Sin and mocks the present condition,

Can I suppress the urge to run wild,

To answer deep human needs?

Yes! Yes!

Next week I'll steal, secretly, silently

A shiny, red apple

Waxed-cooled-irradiated-sprayed

Yes!

That will satisfy my primal desire for adventure,

For life.ⁱⁱ

This kind of subtle references to the western myths is frequent in his poetry as he sees evolution a complex transformation and a complex journey as well. The poet uses myths to understand and examine ever-evolving structures of human desires, in relation to which the evolutionary path is found to be mysterious and terrible and uncertain. For the present, his prime concern is for the kind of philosophy people follow, and he painfully finds it all-pervasive consumerism which operates within the vicious cycle of greed. It is to be noted here that for him the western philosophy too has its own evolution as it is constructed upon the layers of grand western narratives. Almost as an iconoclast once Rob Harle wrote:

The old myths perpetuated by bureaucratic-authoritarian religious organizations, Newtonian style reductionist, non-holistic scientific investigation, and messianic, capitalist economic policy represent unsustainable practices and ideologies, which if continued, will bring about the extinction of humanity.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is exactly the theme of the poem "False Narratives" where he sees

society's mind insidiously programmed

consumes seductively false narratives;

the new way of the pure cyborg

(a contradiction)

Transhuman, posthuman becoming.

A Human to be rejoined with, the Other

(plastic, metal, silicone).

The poet's objection—almost theological, to this new stage of human evolution is obvious from this poem and his acute desperation can be detected in capitalization of words and

even in rhyming pattern of the poem. The same tone of desperation is to be found in the poem “Mechanisms of Desire” which castigates severely digital sex addiction:

Global voyeurism opens windows
 Change gender, trans-gender
 Cut-filter-distort-recompose
 As virtual orgasm penetrates the digital twilight.

Rob Harle traces everything back to the consumerist way of life and this is the point he wants to make repetitively in a number of poems in the collection like “SuperGloss”, “The Dark Night of the Troll”, “The Old Man and the Vineyard”, “Death by Supermarket” “Paracetamol” “Troll(ey) to A(isle) 9” “The Line” and other poems, all of which are also marked by his black humour. For instance, in the poem “The Dark Night of the Troll” he transforms ‘troll’ (supermarket trolley) into a symbol of human greed, which functions as a mechanism of a greater network,

Like all shrewd parasites
 Trolls do not mean to kill
 But bring turmoil and torment.

Another theme explored in the collection is his ambivalent anticipation of the future of artificial intelligence; he calls it “both a terrifying and exhilarating process”. On the one hand, he is sad to witness the same structure of consumerism eating upon human greed in the emergent digital technology; on the other, he is forced to think of a future, in which man-machine combination, free from the “false narratives” may engineer revolutionary changes. For instance, in the poem “Poetential” he writes,

“Terrified of an unending future,
 Yet horrified by the finite blackness of the past
 Heroic Cyborg
 “jacks into the Matrix”
 and
 Becomes Immortal.

But more frequently he talks about our newly acquired digital narcissism and the resultant helplessness.

Rob Harle admits that human existence is itself a mystery—“the unplumbed depths of existence”, which defies all forms of interpretative attempts. But still he looks for some kind of order, an order sometimes contemplated in the mystical—almost Tantric—system following the cosmic norms and this is obvious in his poem “Unfolding”,

Little by little
 The flowers reveal themselves.
 No frenzied flash
 No reckless rush.
 Simply
 A delicate unfolding.

Notes

ⁱ Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities, Volume III, Number 1, 2011.
< <http://rupkatha.com/V3/n1/19rob-harley-art.pdf>>

ⁱⁱ The poems are cited from the book *Mechanisms of Desire* by Rob Harle.

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