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REFLECTION OF THE MODERN COMMUNICATIONS AND CAPITALISM IN ISLANDS IN THE NET



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ABSTRACT

Islands in the Net is a cyberpunk novel written by Bruce Sterling. He is the chief figure of the Cyberpunk Movement of Science Fiction. The story of *Islands in the Net* takes place in future, similar to his earlier novels *Involution Ocean*, *The Artificial Kid* and *Schismatrix*. It takes place during 2023-25. The novel is actually published in 1988 but it predicts the future of 2023. Sterling is mainly popular for making bold predictions about the future. He boldly speculates the near future of politics and communication technology and current nationless terrorists, data havens. Science Fiction genre is associated with the future speculations about science and technology. *Islands in the Net* is SF novel which speculates the world of data pirates, nanotechnology, biotechnology, weaponry, global electronic net and the world politics. Unlike, pure Science Fiction fantasy, Sterling here is concerned with corporation world, terrorism and the international politics.

KEYWORDS : *Islands in the Net, Modern Communications and Capitalism, politics and communication technology.*



INTRODUCTION :

The story of the novel opens on the beach of Galveston- Mexico and later it moves on to the other places like Texas, Atlanta, Georgia, Grenada and the coastal area of South Africa and Singapore. Laura Webster is the protagonist of the novel. She works for the Rizome Industry as a public-relations employee. Rizome is a global corporation and mainly known as economic democrats. Laura Webster lives with her husband David Webster. They together run

a lodge on the island of Galveston. The lodge is not a public lodge but a resort meant only for Rizome workers and guests. The Lodge did most of its business as telex, straight print sent by wire, such as guest dossiers and arrival schedules. Most of the world, even Africa, was wired for telex these days. It was cheapest and simplest, and Rizome favored it (IN 16). The story of the novel is the story of Laura Webster. She and her husband are working for Rizome industry. Their loyalty and sense of duty make them idealistic young couple for the Rizome economic democratic corporation. The novel portrays the competition between corporate companies and the data pirates. The Rizome and the conspiracies

between other multinational companies are the main points of conflict. The other three multinational firms mentioned in the novel are- EFT Commerzbank Luxembourg, Islamic Bank of Singapore and Grenada United Bank Grenada. These three banks are not the ordinary banks, but they are data pirates. They are data hackers and engaged in data piracy. All of them have the firm grasp of data-haven dynamics. Through data hacking, all the three groups black-mail one another. The pirates of the groups dub thousands of video-tapes and sell them in poorly policed Third World markets. The corporation plays a vital role in the national economy during the period of globalization. Along with the corporate companies, the religious bodies also make efforts to pick out the benefits by providing religious and social services.

The conflict of the novel begins when Rizome group of industries organizes a conference on the Galveston beach. Laura's lodge is at the Galveston beach and it is the central place for Rizome's business control. Rizome organizes a conference at Laura's lodge. The members from EFT Commerzbank Luxembourg, the Young Soo Chim Islamic Bank Singapore and Grenada United Bank come to join the conference. The first day of the conference goes without any problem, but on the second day, Winston Stubbs, the member of Grenada Bank is assassinated. The incident creates the problem for Rizome's status. The terrorist group named "F.A.C.T." (Free Army of Counter Terrorism) takes the responsibility of the attack. Rizome here wants to prove that they are not guilty in the murder. So they decide to send Laura and David to Grenada to provide evidence that they have nothing to do with the assassination of Winston Stubbs. It is also decided in their committee meeting that Laura and David will remain in contact with company's Atlanta headquarters for 24 hours.

In Grenada Laura and David learn about the advanced technology flourishing on the island. Grenada is ruled by single political party named the New Millennium Movement. Eric Louison is the Prime Minister of the country. He is trying to keep the order on the island by following voodoo tradition. Sticky, the employee of the Grenada Bank tells an interesting thing about Prime Minister Eric Louison that he is eighty-eight years old and he rarely comes out of his secretive cabinet of data pirates. Generally the destiny of a country is shaped by the government of the country and the people living in the country. Eric Louison always tries to keep law and order and people support him by giving him respect. Laura is forced to leave Grenada in the havoc situation when Singapore attacks Grenada. After their escape from Grenada they reach Atlanta- Rizome headquarters. There she gets separated from her husband David and her daughter Laurretta.

She sets to Singapore for her diplomatic mission of improving the world. When Laura reach Singapore, the Singaporean people are celebrating the launching of the first Singaporean space rocket. Kim Sue Lok, the leader of People's Innovation Party and the Prime Minister of Singapore addresses the people in delight. Unfortunately, Singaporean celebration ends with the chaos as Grenada attacks Singapore in reaction to Singapore's previous attack on them. In addition Grenada thinks that Singapore's Islamic Bank is a rival of Grenada Bank and they may have motif to kill Winston Stubbs. This attack triggers panic and riots all over the country. In addition to it Razak, the leader of the Anti- Labour Party, tries to use the situation for getting into power. This attack creates the situation of crisis for Laura. She is cut off from the Net and she cannot contact with either her husband or the Rizome headquarters. As situation becomes critical for Laura and Rizome workers in Singapore, she decides to get herself arrested and wait in prison for the end of war. But unfortunately, she gets separated from her companions and later a chopper takes her on a cargo ship somewhere in the middle of the sea. One after another she gets trapped into the attacks and she has to run from one place to another. Later the cargo ship is bombed by F.A.C.T. and she is kidnapped on their submarine. There she learns some secret thing about F.A.C.T. and their activities. Later she is moved by plane into a prison in Bamako, the capital

city of Mali. Mali is a small African country which hasn't signed the Vienna Convention. The F.A.C.T. has taken over the government of Mali. As one of the famine countries of Africa F.A.C.T. has become the countries' front group. Apart from Mali Kymera, I.G. Farben and the Algerian State Department are the other three sources of F.A.C.T. Laura's imprisonment in Bamako is the result of the assumptions of F.A.C.T. that Laura is a threat to their organization. F.A.C.T. thinks that Laura knows that they have an atomic bomb which they have kept on a board of 'Thermopylae', a submarine where Laura has been kept on during her arrest. She spends some two years in the prison of Bamako. A South African country supported by European authority of the Vienna Convention attacks Mali and Laura is taken in convoy to the atomic site to be shot on a camera as a hostage with Azanian prisoner doctor Katje Selous. But convoy is attacked by a group named Inadin Cultural Revolutionist lead by Jonathan Gresham. This event really unlocks the way for her to set free and reach again to her family. Jonathan Gresham an American journalist and a radical who helps Inadin people (also called Tuaregs) takes Laura and Katje to Azanian relief camp to save the life of wounded Katje. Outside the relief camp Jonathan Gresham records Laura's statement about F.A.C.T.'s atomic bomb and uploads it on the Net. Meanwhile Laura gets involved romantically with Jonathan Gresham. At last she is set free by Jonathan Gresham and she arrives at Galveston. She meets her husband David and daughter Loretta after a long period. David already abandoned hopes that Laura was alive and got involved with Laura's closest friend Emily Donato. During her period of predicament her daughter was raised by her mother Margaret. In the end she resolves to continue Rizome's work of improving the world.

The novel opens with the scene of early morning on the beach when Laura is jogging. A black electrical cable snags her foot. She kicks the loosened wire off her shoes and knelt to pull the cable, she finds it furrows in the sand. She looks for a chunk or a stick to dig the sand but she doesn't find it. At last she digs the sand with her hands and she finds a dead machine. She finds an old fashioned, heavy unit of video cassette recorder. Some twenty years of grit and brine has made it a solid mass of corrosion. Laura drags it and looks for a local trash can on the beach. The scene is not big but it shows the sense of duty. The beach was conspicuously clean but Laura refuses to leave the filthy instrument to trip some tourist. Laura performs her civic duty and shows the sense of global duty. Bill Maurer takes this opening scene as a metaphor for the whole theme of the novel. He asserts:

The novel's opening occasions, for the protagonist and the reader, reflection on the modern communications, capitalism and media. It is also an unsubtle foreshadowing of what will become of Laura as the novel progresses. On a mission to root out shady dealings in offshore "data havens", like Grenada and Singapore, Laura eventually finds herself ensnared by the interlinking corporate connections bridging her world of "legitimate" business enterprise with the havens' illicit world of "bad" capitalism and illegitimate trade. Digging deeper, she uncovers the gritty, briny truth about her own corporation and, indeed, an entire corporate order in which the line between legitimate and illegitimate corporate activity simply vanishes into virtual space. (IN 467)

The novel's opening scene shows Sterling's faith and vision in future technology and the social awareness. It shows the postmillennial voodoo and the voodoo is the global wired electronic net.

An interesting proposition of wired network is found in *Islands in the Net*. Much of contemporary fiction is directly influenced by information technologies; cyberpunk, for example, takes informatics as its central theme (Hayles 30). It is fully wired island like today's internet for the control of industrial world. Bruce Sterling smartly speculates the future of Net, he writes:

Every year of her life, Laura thought, the Net had been growing more expansive and seamless. Computers did it. Computers melted other machines, fusing them together. Television-telephone-telex. Tape recorder-VCR-laser disk. Broadcast tower linked to microwave dish linked to satellite. Phone

line, cable TV, fibre-optic cords hissing out words and pictures in torrents of pure light. All netted together in a web over the world, a global nervous system, an octopus of data. There'd been plenty of hype about it. It was easy to make it sound transcendently incredible (IN 17).

The post-industrial period is full of principles of corporate companies and their conspiracies. Cyberpunk literature always covers the post-industrial policies and politics of the multinational corporations. The plot of *Islands in the Net* revolves around Rizome and their public relations specialist Laura Webster. Rizome is a multinational corporation which adheres to a philosophy of "economic democracy". Sterling portrays the associates of the Rizome as a rainbow coalition of politically correct, denim-clad, neo-yuppies who sing the anthem of their democratic and peace-loving company. Rizome is meant for economic benefit but its central committee and its CEO are elected freely by company's associates. So Sterling calls Rizome economic democrats. Rizome's all associates have different duties and positions, but regardless of their designation they all share equal rights. Rizome's corporate ethics are best summed up by Laura when she explains: "We in Rizome don't have jobs.... Just the things to do and people to do them" (IN 118). She further adds and says about Rizome business: "You can't just take a salary, make a profit, be deadweight in the system" (IN 118). Sterling really highlights the post-industrial psychology and frame of corporation world through the Rizome ethics. After involving in the process of globalization, the people now witness that lots of companies are kicking their employees out if they lack enough potential to earn more profit for them. The industries believe in the potential and efficiency of the employees so Rizome believes in the small groups. Laura says about their Rizome policy:

"This isn't politics. This is technology. It's not their power that threatens us, it's their imagination. Creativity comes from small groups. Small groups gave us the electric light, the automobile, the personal computer. Bureaucracies gave us the nuclear power plants, traffic jams, and network television. The first three changed everything. The last three are memories now." (IN 47)

Sterling in *Islands in the Net* also highlights the fact that the post-industrial approach has had the impact on the nature and function of religious bodies. Multinational corporations and religious bodies have their own policies and principles in the post-industrial and postmodern society.

An act of data hacking is now the major problem in the spread of internet. Sterling's genius lies in his prediction of data hacking before some twenty years ago. Cybercrimes of data hacking, software and video piracies are often seen in today's world. Today lots of software and hardware experts are seen engaged in the act of hacking. Company's networks, government's websites and the websites of some important institutions are found to be captured by such data hackers. The hackers steal the information and earn money either blackmailing the firms or selling data to the other firms. Such cyber activities of hacking and the business of the three mentioned firms are at the central parts of the novel.

The pirates dubbed commercial videotapes by the hundreds of thousands, selling them in poorly policed Third World markets. And their teams of software crackers found a ready market for programs stripped of their copy protection. This brand of piracy was nothing new; it dated back to the early days of the information industry (IN 42).

But the Rizome has different policy regarding the act of hacking information. They want to be loyal and follow the legal laws of developed nations to expand their business. She doesn't want to get the profit by evading the developed world's piracy laws. She says:

Thousands of legitimate companies maintained dossiers on individuals: employee records, medical histories, credit transactions. In the Net economy, business is impossible without such information. In the legitimate world, companies purged this data periodically, as required by law (IN 42).

Norman Spinard, the well-known science fiction writer critic, thinks that *Islands in the Net* is a near-future political thriller that asks all the hard questions and creates a future world that has the familiarity of the inevitability. Unlike other Science Fiction writers Sterling has always shown interest in international politics, government politics and the politics between the various corporate groups. Later it becomes the feature of Cyberpunk genre of Science Fiction. In *Islands in the Net* Bruce Sterling has mentioned the fictional book titled *The Lawrence Doctrine and Postindustrial Insurgency* by Colonel Jonathan Gresham. The book is banned by Vienna still it is read widely in the political underground. The book reminds T.E. Lawrence who helped the Arabs fight Ottoman Turks during World War I. Lawrence convinced Arabs that instead of fighting against Turks block their communication lines- railway, telegraph etc. Arabs won the war. Colonel Jonathan Gresham calls the World War I 'a proto-Net Civil War' as he thinks Arabs fought one enemy by destroying its communication network, for them it was railway and telegraph and now it is Net in *Islands in the Net*.

Thus, *Islands in the Net* portrays the society where Net is dominant. It is dominant in industry, government and in all the walks of society. Sterling speculates that even the computer system can rule the society in future. One of the characters of the novel Katje Sealous tells Laura about the Governments of Grenada and Mali which are dominated by wired networks. He says, "I've seen the guy who runs Grenada- I bet this Mali president doesn't even exist. He's probably nothing but an image on a screen and some prerecorded speeches" (IN 327). Bruce Sterling even successful in foreseeing the impact of technology on the young generation. About the havoc in the plot of the novel Sterling writes that 90 percent of the world's havoc is committed by men between fifteen and twenty-five. It is a kind of nexting the future in which we are living today. And it is normal today that the young generation is seen to be captivated by Net and modern technological gadgets. If they are cut off from Network, they feel restless and it is a kind of 'Virtual death' for Sterling. About such Network connectivity shut down, Sterling writes:

A monsoon breeze whipped at her hair. Laura looked over the city from the roof of the Rizome godown. The Net was a broken spiderweb. No phones at all. Television shut down, except for a single, emergency government channel. Laura felt the dead electric silence in her bones (IN 227).

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