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DAN BROWN'S *INFERNO*: A TRANSHUMANIST VISION FOR A  
BETTER WORLD

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ABSTRACT

The pressing global issues have always been a concern in literary works, and many works have come out dealing with intriguing plots mixing reality and fiction. At times, literature foresees future events and depicts them interspersed with fictional elements to create a thrilling work. Dan Brown's *Inferno* is a perfect amalgam of science, technology, symbolism, literature, and history, depicting the issues of overpopulation. The solution presented by Dan Brown through the portrayal of the antihero Bertrand Zobrist, a billionaire biotechnologist, is the invention of a deadly virus that causes sterility among one-third of the human population. Moral and ethical conflicts resonate throughout the novel as the release of the virus that never kills but sterilises is a serious concern for organisations like WHO and the Catholic Church. The underlying philosophy that drives the theme of the novel is transhumanism and its vision of a world with human beings capable of dealing with all kinds of threats and challenges. The dialogue and viewpoints of characters like Zobrist and Sienna Brooks reflect the urgency of the concerns of transhumanists and the need to pay attention to the warnings about the dangers impending upon the earth. This paper aims to analyse how the transhumanist vision of the world is unravelled in *Inferno*. *Inferno* also makes the reader alert about the vulnerability of human beings amidst spreading diseases caused by pathogens, the overpowering of technology, and the possibilities of an apocalyptic end to the world.

**Keywords:** *Inferno*, Dan Brown, transhumanism, biotechnology

Introduction

*Inferno* is an amazing novel written by the famous American novelist Dan Brown. He is one of the world's bestselling authors. *Inferno* is the sixth novel of the Robert Langdon novel series. He first introduced the world to Harvard symbologist Robert Langdon in *Angels and Demons* (2000). He is also

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the author of the international bestsellers *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Lost Symbol*, *Deception Point* and *Digital Fortress*. Dan Brown is best known for his thriller novels and they are mostly treasure hunts that usually take place over a period of 24 hours. They feature recurring themes of cryptography, art, science, religion and conspiracy theories.

*Inferno* is also an excellent thriller. It was published in the year 2013 and a film adaptation was released in the United States on October 28, 2016. Brown states in the introduction of the novel that all artwork, literature, science, and historical references in the novel are real which enhances the curiosity of readers. *Inferno* is the underworld as described in Dante Alighieri's epic poem *The Divine Comedy*, which portrays hell as a profoundly structured realm inhabited by entities known as 'shades' - bodiless souls trapped between life and death (Brown 19). In this mystery thriller World Health Organization, the vast historical and literary significance of Florence, great architectural wonders of the world including St. Mark Basilica in France, the wonderful sights of Istanbul and Vienna are presented skillfully by Dan Brown.

Brown sets up a fictional problem, human overpopulation, and places it in the middle of secret codes and Renaissance art, fiction and architecture. The problem in the novel is the release of a deadly virus engineered by transhumanist and brilliant biologist, Bertrand Zobrist. He sees himself as a savior of the mankind willing to do what others won't. Zobrist insists that if the human population does not dramatically reduce now, the world will become just like Dante's fictional depiction of hell as in *The Divine Comedy*. Both the villain Zobrist and the heroine Sienna Brooks-a young, genius doctor who befriends Langdon in his hunting throughout Florence trying to stop Zobrist's plague-are insistent that because we keep having children (and the "evil" catholic church discourages the use of contraception) the end of the human race is inevitable. Sienna actually tells Langdon:

I can tell you without a doubt that without some kind of drastic change, the end of our species is coming. And it is coming fast. It won't be fire, brimstone, apocalypse, or nuclear war... it will be total collapse due to the number of people on the planet. The mathematics is undisputable (145).

Population explosion is a grave issue faced by the world. It is estimated that by the end of this century world's population will touch a thousand billion (United Nations, n.d.) Population is growing at such a pace. The discussion about this population bomb is very active everywhere in the world. In the transhumanist perspective, population control is inevitable for the healthy survival of human race. This idea is presented through the excellent portrayal of the novel. The theories and estimations that Brown presents in the novel are worth discussion and debate. As a relevant theory, transhumanism seeks the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its currently human form and human limitations by means of science and technology. This theory has a wide range of applications because the field of science and technology is skyrocketing which is helpful in tackling our limitations.

### Understanding Transhumanism

Transhumanism is a class of philosophy that seeks to guide us towards a posthuman condition. Transhumanism shares many elements of humanism, including a respect for reason and science. In 2002, the WTA (World Transhumanist Association) modified and adopted The Transhumanist Declaration. It gave two formal definitions for transhumanism.

- The intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities.

- The study of the ramifications, promises, and potential dangers of technologies that will enable us to overcome fundamental human limitations, and the related study of the ethical matters involved in developing and using such technologies (Bostrum).

The famous philosopher Max More gives the following definition: Transhumanism is a class of philosophies of life that seek the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond human limitations by means of science and technology, guided by life promoting principles and values (Philosophy Now).

Transhumanism can be viewed as an extension of humanism, from which it is partially derived. Humanists believed that we might not be perfect, but we can make things better by promoting rational thinking, freedom, tolerance, democracy, and concern for our fellow human beings. Transhumanists has parallels with this but also emphasize on what we have the potential to become. In the attempt to modify ourselves, we are not limited to traditional humanistic methods, such as education and cultural development. We can also use technological means that will eventually enable us to move beyond merely human. Humanism which saw man as the primary object has its origin in the great age of Renaissance. The human being and the natural world again became legitimate objects of study. Renaissance humanism encouraged people to rely on their own observations and their own judgment rather than to defer in every matter to religious authorities. Renaissance humanism also created the ideal of the well-rounded person, one who is highly developed scientifically, morally, culturally and spiritually. A landmark of the period is Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486), which proclaims that man does not have a readymade form and is responsible for shaping himself.

We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine (Mirandola 85).

The age of Enlightenment is often said to have begun with the publication of Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum*, the new tool (1620). In this work, Bacon advocated the project of "effecting all things possible" (Bacon 322), by which he meant using science to achieve mastery over nature in order to improve the living condition of human beings. The legacy from the Renaissance combines with the influence of Isaac Newton, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and others to form the basis for rational humanism, which emphasizes empirical science and critical reason rather than revelation and religious authority as ways of learning about the natural world and our place within it. Thus, Transhumanism has its roots in rational humanism.

According to Nick Bostrom, the transhumanist expert, a major inspiration for transhumanism was Friedrich Nietzsche, famous for his doctrine of *der Übermensch* (*Superhuman*). In his *A History of Transhumanist Thought*, Bostrom quotes Nietzsche:

I teach you the over man. Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him? All beings so far have created something beyond themselves; and do you want to be the ebb of this great flood and even go back to the beasts rather than overcome man (86).

What Nietzsche had in mind, however, was not technological transformation of human beings. Despite some surface level similarities with the Nietzschean vision, transhumanism with its Enlightenment roots, emphasis on individual liberties, and its humanistic concern for the welfare of all humans.

The word Transhumanism appears to have been first used by Aldous Huxley's brother, Julian Huxley, a distinguished biologist, in *Religion without Revelation* (1927), he wrote:

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The human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself-not just sporadically, an individual here in one way, an individual there in another way- but in its entirety, as humanity. We need a name for this new belief. Perhaps Transhumanism will serve: man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature (105).

The World Transhumanist Association was founded in early 1998 by Nick Bostrom and David Pearce, to provide a systematic organizational setup for all transhumanist groups, across the globe. The two founding documents of the WTA were the Transhumanist Declaration, and the Transhumanist FAQ. (WTA 2002). The Declaration is intended as a concise statement of the basic principle of transhumanism.

The document was produced by Bostrom but major parts and ideas were also contributed by several others, including the British utilitarian thinker David Pearce, Max More, the American feminist and disability rights activist Kathryn Aegis. The WTA's membership grew rapidly, and local chapters mushroomed around the world. Activities focused mainly on internet discussion, development of documents, representation in the media, organizing of an annual TransVision conference. And publication of the scholarly online journal of Transhumanism, (later renamed to *Journal of Evolution and Technology*). In short, transhumanism has evolved over the course of time to a more recognized form and its ideas and activities are gaining currency.

### **Transhumanist Vision in Inferno**

Inferno is an amalgam of science, philosophy, symbolism and the moral and ethical conflicts of the modern world. It presents the story of Bertrand Zobrist, a genius biotechnologist who creates a deadly virus that has the capacity to sterilize the one third of the population of the world. He is an ardent prophet of transhumanism that aims to improve the quality of human life by every possible means. Sienna Brooks, an avid supporter of Zobrist's ideas in the beginning also has her strong opinions about the impending danger caused by overpopulation. The novel's key protagonist is Robert Langdon, Harvard expert in ancient and medieval symbolism. He is trying to decode the algorithm behind the virus created by Zobrist with the help of Elizabeth Selensky, the head of WHO. The tale is set in three cities namely Florence, Venice and Istanbul and takes the readers stepwise from West to East and from the Renaissance into the medieval and the byzantine era.

*Inferno* is undoubtedly a science thriller. It talks about virology, pathogens, and mathematical models. The villain Bertrand Zobrist is in the extreme of Transhumanism. He is not a coward before his unpredictable future; that is why he goes in exile and successfully develops the deadly virus. Many transhumanist perspectives can be identified through the dialogs and actions of Zobrist and the heroine Sienna Brooks. The transhumanist view on overpopulation is clearly visible from the portrayal of the characters and incidents.

In the *Inferno*, Zobrist is a billionaire, a biotech genius, a Dante enthusiast, and above all, a Transhumanist. He believes that only a massive reduction in global population can solve humanity's future crises. (20) Zobrist and his followers argue that "something had to be done. The disconcerting mathematical truth of the exponential growth curve is indisputable: the collapse of our species is coming." (190) In short, Zobrist underlines his decision to launch a global genetic engineering project with an ethical algorithm that causes no deaths but only infertility. Moreover, as Sienna explains, "Zobrist is not an exception. He is a pioneer, representing a new way of thinking and acting." (379) In laboratories around the globe, bioscience is moving ahead at an unsettling pace, and genetic engineering has moved into the most advanced level. In this context, it is certain that many will follow in his footsteps to re-engineer our human future as Dan Brown sees it.

Like Zobrist, Sienna believes in the Population bomb equation, i.e., the mathematical idea that population growth will cause an "apocalyptic collapse", a "mass extinction event". She further says that

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"the best thing that ever happened to Europe was the Black Death". Through its long-term socioeconomic benefits, it functioned as "a catalyst for bringing about the Renaissance". (191)

Zobrist is purposefully made to look utterly evil as it creates more tension in the novel, but his ideals and strange actions that challenge the increasing human population and decreasing global resources for food, energy, etc. are doubtlessly significant. At the end of the book, even after Robert Langdon has victoriously attempted to defuse Zobrist's infertility-inducing plague, Langdon himself has mixed feelings about the morality of his own attempted intervention. Here, the transhumanist perspectives of the novel (Dan Brown's) become very relevant.

There are many other hidden ideas related to human survival and improvement of human nature is present in the novel other than overpopulation - our increasing vulnerability to new plagues ranging from Ebola, Zika and the latest Covid 19, the increased concerns about bio-terrorism, and the new philosophical and moral issues surrounding robots, Artificial Intelligence and so on. The debates surrounding the origin of Covid 19 is still going on and we cannot diametrically dispel the possibility that it was a bioweapon accidentally jumped out of its chamber. The potential danger of technology overpowering human beings is one of the underlying themes of *Inferno* as described by Al-Hameedawi and Al-Moussaw in their paper titled "A Marxist Study of Dan Brown's *Inferno*". They warn about the "technological hegemony" that is hidden in the current era of technological revolution which exerts great control over global population. In fact, technology has grown like a virus that has infected severely the whole population. Life without technology has become unimaginable for us.

Blending fiction and reality Brown attempts to draw our attention to serious global issues which are to be discussed with utmost alertness:

Although it is a fiction novel, it does not mean it does not exist in reality. Indeed, the novel has blurred the lines between reality and fiction as its author incorporates the real organization and some events within the storyline. Although it is fiction, there is some hidden truth that inspires the story. The world seems that it is shocked by a couple of hazardous viruses that threaten humankind's existence every few years. Those include Ebola, Bird Flu, MARV, Zika, the list goes on. Those threatening lists remain a threat to humankind's safety, and they may have nothing relate to Brown's *Inferno*, but the novel does depict the real phenomenon. That is why any fantasy fiction, including a novel, is made as the artist was at some point relate to reality, so does *Inferno* (Rachmawati & Laksmi 2020).

Although, the exaggeration of the overpopulation issues in *Inferno* is neglectable, studies and critical discussions suggest that a slightly transhumanist view is imperative to deal with the population problem as suggested in the article "A Malthusian Reading of the Pandemic in Dan Brown's *Inferno*": The Malthusian view of the pandemic in Dan Brown's *Inferno* is imperative to maintaining an equilibrium between the ability of human beings to reproduction and the natural resources on the earth to produce subsistence for survival. The population, if it goes unchecked, will bring an apocalypse (Mirkhan & Sharif 2023).

Thus, the issues that *Inferno* deals with has a serious futuristic vision and it is in align with the transhumanist vision of a better world with human beings capable of shielding themselves from every danger.

## Conclusion

The villain- Bertrand Zobrist- ardently believes the idea of the great poet Dante that the darkest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral crisis. (15). This often-repeated statement by Zobrist questions the inactive world leaders and their indifferent attitude towards burning issues of the day. As the true believer of a transhuman future, Zobrist is not afraid of his death itself. Instead, right in front of death he prays: "Dearest God, I pray the world remembers my

name not as a monstrous sinner, but as a glorious savior you know truly am I. I pray mankind will understand the gift I leave behind. My gift is the future. My gift is the salvation. My gift is Inferno." (22).

It is sure that, *Inferno* is also another widely discussed novel of Brown with an irritating content as in *The Da Vinci Code*. But the problems that Brown delineates in this thrilling work are worth for thought and debate. It is estimated that the world's population would touch the mark of thousand billion with the end of this century and as per the general principle of Economics, resources are limited and the wants are unlimited. The competition for survival will be tough and eventually it will lead to the complete devastation of human race.

In the background of the latest pandemic that caused havoc across the globe for about two years -COVID 19- the thoughts given by Brown have greater significance. Dan Brown perhaps, foresaw a gigantic pandemic like the plague seven years ago before the outbreak of Covid from China in 2020. The discussion based on *Inferno* also clarifies the doubts regarding the interconnectedness of science and literature as whether we can separate science and literature into water tight compartments. The novel also marks the popularization of the ideologies of transhumanism as stated by Brown: Although Transhumanism so far has been a marginal, "academic" phenomenon, it is about to "explode from the shadows into the mainstream" (453). One of its fundamental tenets is that "we as humans have a moral obligation to participate in our evolutionary process [...] to use our technologies to advance the species, to create better humans" (453).

In search of a better life with minimum limitations, humans must fly on the wings of technology and science. That will change every walk of human life. At the same time, we should also be aware about the potential dangers of the cutting-edge technological developments. The threats of bio-terrorism must also be taken into consideration. If technology is misused or extreme transhumanist ideas are promoted, it will be the beginning of real inferno. It is the readers who should choose what to do and where to stand in this world of total uncertainties and threats.

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