

BOOK REVIEW: I AM AI

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Title	I AM AI
Author	Ai Jiang
Place of Publication	India
Publisher	Shortwave Publishing Printed at Repro India Ltd.
Publication Date	20 June 2023
Edition	First
Pages	80
ISBN	978-959565-09-3

The field of speculative fiction, Heinlein asserts, is dominated chiefly by gadget stories and human-interest stories. (Heinlein, Robert A. *On The Writing of Speculative Fiction*. mab333.weebly.com/uploads/3/2/3/1/32314601/writing_sf_-_01_on_the_writing_of_speculative_ficiton.pdf.) A vast number of science fiction narratives lie at the intersection of both. It is at this intersection Chinese-Canadian author Ai Jiang situates her novelette, *I AM AI* (2023).

The prose follows the story of cyborg Ai as she struggles to survive in a dystopian world on the outskirts of the city Emit which is governed by a corporation called New Era. The reader witnesses the trials and tribulations of the life of the outcasts coupled with the internal conflict of Ai who is able to temporarily bear her hardships because of the “small intimacies,” as Jiang calls it, of the people around her. The characters of Auntie Narwani, Nemo, Hermes, Wushui, and Joan through their unassuming minute actions of affection provide a sanctuary in a cold and indifferent world to Ai whose battery is rapidly deteriorating, leaving her on the verge of death. Ai trades her heart for a new battery and plans to get a brain implant soon but finds herself torn between the human and machine halves of herself. It is through this fragmented state of mind of her protagonist that Jiang explores what it means to be human.

‘Human’ in the story is defined against the machine and AI. The futuristic nightmare constructed by the plot is obscenely dependent upon and run by technology thus in turn stifling originality, individuality, and creativity. Artificial Intelligence is moved to the centre

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while humanity is pushed towards the periphery. The end goal and purpose of human life is reduced to rate of productivity and efficiency in the name of progress and betterment of the quality of life. The glaring commodity fetishism is the reason reviewers and critics of the book have highlighted the denunciation of the capitalist system and the heavy-handed push of AI into all areas of market and private life.

Though a story about human experience and connection, Jiang dives into the discourse of the ethics and implications of AI in narratives. The proponents of AI have argued that it is a tool to aid artistic creativity but the anxiety over AI taking over the creative process has already become a burning topic in the writing industry. Included in the demands of the 2023 strike of the Writer's Guild of America was ensuring the safeguards against AI and its use in scriptwriting. This action was supported by the 2023 SAG-AFTRA strike as well which demanded similar safeguards against the use of AI which could be used by production houses to recreate the images of actors. Same fear is mirrored in Jiang's dystopian future a thousand years from now where AI, which was supposed to supplement human creativity and imagination has supplanted it. In the light of this, the reader can understand the autobiographical tone of the book. Jiang, having named the protagonist after herself, uses the name "Ai" as a play on words to depict the dehumanization and the reification experienced by the postmodern subject who is stripped of their human characteristics and treated as a part of a machine. The reified artist then is seen undergoing alienation as Jiang refers to the art created by the marginalized for the use of the New Era as "soulless" on more than one occasion. Artistic expression becomes a second thought to advertisement as seen in the character of Hermes who is temporarily employed by the corporation as a token human artist to subdue the protestors raising their voices against AI generated art. The artists themselves do not feel connected to the art and produce it for the sake of survival outside the power structure. Such a disconnect further problematizes the conflict of identity within Ai. She questions the nature of her being by suggesting to walk out unprotected into the corrosive rain, simply becoming Ai as a puddle, instead of a human, a robot, or an AI. The will to escape the hardship imposed by New Era drives her to work beyond her capacity and even replace her heart with a battery to maximise efficiency. The replacement however does not get rid of her sense of belonging to the honeycomb which she powers and with her battery and is her proxy family. They demonstrate their affinity to Ai in simple acts of caring such as Auntie brining her soup, Wushui turning on the generator to power Ai, Niao leaving aside her favourite slippers to wear in the café, and Hermes transferring her coins to get the brain transplant. Even Joan, the mechanic who does not have much human left in him as Ai suspects, looks thoughtful to her. What is noted then is camaraderie in misery amongst the outsiders. In portraying such a relationship, Jiang is effectively able to establish the marginalised as a social group without compromising the individual identity and narratives in favour the collective. The individual narratives resonate with the members of the social group thus creating a solidarity and imparting a sense of belonging. This is confirmed by Ai herself in a different context when she talks of her debt being transferred onto Nemo upon her death since New Era sees anyone close to each other as related. The identity of family then is not of

Ai's choosing, rather they have become a family owing to their circumstances. Furthermore, these intimacies become one of the defining features of the human experience in the story, in the backdrop of the human-machine binary. 'Human' is then reinforced by these acts and gestures lending an aspect of performativity to the plot.

One of the most riveting aspects of Jiang's work is that even in dealing with such sensitive themes and ideas, the narrative does not become didactic. Ai understands the benefits and necessities of the inclusion of AI in the workspace as it is simply a tool for use. What she is against is the agenda of the hand that wields the tool. Her predicament lies in the fact that the time she lives in functions upon AI and is run by a corporation which has no regard for human life. This can be understood simply by looking at the name of the city i.e., Emit which is an anagram for Time. Emit is glowing, progressing, and entirely run on AI and so the people surviving outside of Emit are quite literally living behind their time. The narrative structure follows a present continuous tense as the reader experiences the conflicts of the dystopia with Ai, with the future ahead of her shrouded in uncertainty.

The story ends on two optimistic notes. The first being the essence of being human in Ai is not lost despite her getting rid of her heart as she decides to have a new heart implanted. She understands finally what it means to be human and that includes embracing life in its totality which dictates that pain and suffering are an important part of the human experience. This aligns with the existentialist philosophy professing that the goal and reward is the journey itself which lends meaning to existence. The reader sees Ai's refusal to accept efficiency as the aim of life anymore. Secondly, Hermes' painting of the honeycomb she made for Ai is showcased in a digital display on top of New Era's skyscraper. While New Era might have misconstrued its meaning for their own end, Ai, and Hermes are aware of the artworks' true implication and thus Jiang in this simple act offers a counternarrative to the dominant one in the book. The product of true human creativity shines atop the very corporation's building which aims to suppress it.

The distinctive feature of the book is Jiang's nuanced understanding of the developments in the world and the implications of technology upon culture, society, and individuals. She engineers a world which although futuristic is approachable to the reader in a condensed narrative charged with emotion and foresight. It is a true masterpiece which does not waste a single word and compels the reader to engage with the world they inhabit closely, questioning the very nature of things. Sophisticated and precise, Ai Jiang's novelette is surely one of the most compelling works of contemporary writing.