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The Cell Phone and Madness: An Analytic Study of Stephen King's *Cell* (2006)

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Abstract

The basic assumption of this research is that Stephen King is aware of the disastrous impact of modern technology on environment and community. His writings demonstrate his ethical commitment to the people's right to live and work in a friendly and risk-free environment. *Cell* (2006) upgrades the readers' consciousness of the most pressing problems facing mankind. *Cell* can be regarded as an original contribution to dystopian novel. In addition, *Cell* points out the eco-critical risks threatening life on earth. Stephen King thinks that the horror of nowadays lies outside images of demons and monsters from Hell. It is, rather, linked with the man-made technology, which has managed to turn this world into a wasteland.

I. Introduction

Stephen King (born 1947 -) is a well-known contemporary novelist from USA. His works are associated with the Horror genre. *Cell* pays much attention to the uncalculated effects of cell phone communications and networks as a source of real horror, rather than to the conventional horror devices. *Cell* demonstrates the detrimental effects of mobiles on the human mind and, consequently, on the human community and the environment.

The narrative text of *Cell* suggests implicitly that there is a process of devolution involved, as a negative effect of the cell phone use. Here, one can observe Darwinism in reverse rather than in progress. So, instead of man's further progress to turn into a "Superman' or an "Overman", the humans are, somehow, losing their humanity, turning into a sub-human species.

Stephen King, to implant this notion in the readers' mind, right from the start quotes Konrad Lorenz:

> Human aggression is instinctual…. for this reason man is considered a very dangerous animal. (p. IX)

The use of cell phone deactivates the inner inhibition of the base and banal drives in the humans. King demonstrates the negative effect of the mobile (as the end product of a long chain of telecommunications systems) at least on four levels:

First: The Individual.
Second: The Family.
Third: The Community.
Fourth: The World or Universal Level.

The fourth level signals the end of ecosystem and might be reached when all systems fail, starting with the failure of the ecosystem. However, it should be noted that what King does is to imply and to suggest rather than to make a very direct statement. The dimensions and the levels referred to in the above are very much context-related, and can suffer much when decontextualized. Therefore, the adopted approach to the subject-matter will be focusing on selected utterances that can stand alone free from being misinterpreted.

II. Mind Pollution, Identity Erasure, and Cell Phone Hazards

Cell is a novel with some metaphysical implications representing Stephen King's apocalyptic vision. King has thematized a polluted environment and embedded it into the structure of the novel's background. It is a *tour de force* seeking to explore the detrimental effects of telecommunications, but it also reveals the absence of the normal, ordinary contact between people. The human race was once seen by H. G. Wells (1866-1956) to be divided into *Eloi* and *Morlocks* in the future (Wells, 1977, p. 48). Stephen King sees them as divided into "phone people … and the normal people." (*Cell*, p. 306)

The author shows that the network connecting the users can truly sever the family ties. This phenomenon can be termed ‘Family Pollution’, where the environment in the family becomes poisoned and hardly any family members can carry on a healthy link with the rest of the family. The disconnection becomes vaster, to affect the American Society and, soon enough, the entire globe. The analysis in this study will demonstrate that the novelist goes beyond the air pollution, arriving at the human mind and mentality pollution:

> When a human body is exposed to the electromagnetic radiation, it absorbs radiation, because the human body consists of 70% liquid. It is similar to that of cooking in a microwave oven when the water in the food content is heated first. Microwave absorption effect is much more significant by the body parts which contain more fluid (water, blood, etc.) like the brain which consists of about 90% water…. There are several health hazards associated with cell phones and cell towers. (Bhat, Kumar and G. K., 2013, p. 1423)

The same source states that the "younger the child, the deeper is the penetration" of the hazardous radiation, because when the radiation hits, it affects thinner skulls, of vulnerable people, especially children, so:

> it is critical that children under the age of sixteen use cell phones only for short essential calls as they have a much bigger danger of getting a brain tumour. (*Ibid*., p. 1423)

As can be noted here, the overall air pollution and morbidity is unrelated to the al smog in the air, but to the radiated skies. King may be the first to write about the air-pollution due to the cell phone waves. All kinds of invisible electromagnetic bodies travel in the sphere to hit the humans, eventually. In the universe of *Cell*, the only clean zone in North American is an area free from wave-polluted air, called Kashwak = No-Fo, in Maine, New Hampshire State.
The main characters include Clay, Tom, Alice, and Jordan. It is Jordan who describes the zone in this way:

> "It's in an unincorporated area called TR90," Jordan said. He tapped this on the map, also.
> "Once you know that, Kashwak Equals NoFo is sort of a no brainer, wouldn't you say?"
> "It's a dead zone, right?" Tom said. "No cell phone towers, no microwave towers."
> Jordan gave him a wan smile. "Well, I imagine there are plenty of people with satellite dishes, but otherwise . . . bingo."
> "I don't get it," Alice said. "Why would they want to send us to a no cell zone where everyone should be more or less all right?" (*Cell*, pp. 294-295)

The above selected utterances from the novel serve only as an example out of many, in which the novelist clarifies what he means by polluted air, or air-pollution. In the context of *Cell*, earlier than this quotation and subsequently after it, it is shown that the pollution mutates the cell phone users. The phone-crazies start to enjoy telepathic powers, but in a negative and a destructive way. It is because their brains receive "the Pulse", which is the phone signal that deformed their minds and badly affected their mental capacities.

At the family level, the cell phone, as a device and a network, weakens the family ties, which are already deficient and dysfunctional (in the text universe of the book). Already the family is revealed to be having problems like: disunity, incoherence, short-lived partnership, cold and detached emotions, and selfishness. Tom, for instance, only cares for a cat. That is his whole concept of the family. People cannot be that cold and selfish without an external factor like the waves of the cell phone. This confirms the finding that "a consistent association between the use of mobiles and cordless phones and astrocytoma grade I-IV and acoustic neuroma" can be reported because the exposure to the microwaves increases the risks of brain-related diseases, "significantly so for subjects beneath 19 years old."
(Hardell and Carlberg, 2009, p. 16)

Cell avoids explicitly naming the brain-diseases associated with the radiations but leaves the door open for implicit suggestions. , the social and the academic environments are deformed. The author shows the readers examples of looting and plundering taking place in the fictional but typical American neighborhood on Boylston Street, Boston. He uses this place as a symbol for the East Coast of North America. He shows the reader the destiny of Gaiten Academy. The events there enable the readers to deduce that Stephen King thinks the good old days of the Academy are gone, because the network Google does the thinking for the scholars. The thinking brain, nowadays, is the computer. So, this is the downfall of the academic establishment in USA.

The villain of the novel, called the Raggedy Man, puts on a gown or an outfit with the Harvard University Emblems. As the psychological milieu is defiled, the human race is the victim of the mobiles and wi-fi networks. People, at first, thought that technology improved their lives:

> …- women in power suits would no more leave home without their cell phones than without their AmEx cards, and flipped it open. (*Cell*, p. 5)

The cell phone has become a MUST. That is why its impact has become so destructive. It is like one always embraces the cause of cancer close to his/her heart:

> Mobile phones work by transmitting and receiving radio frequency microwave radiation, which is very dangerous and detrimental to human health.
> (Ayanda, Baba and Ayanda, 2012, p. 403)

The damages of cell phone go beyond cancer. In the novel, loss of memory and,

consequently, loss of identity are the outcome of the cell phone:

"WHO AM I?" Pixie Dark suddenly screamed. (*Cell*, p. 13)

The novelist himself laid emphasis on the question "WHO AM I?" which is becoming the typical question of nowadays in USA, but this time for a different reason. It is the cell phone, in the novel, that erases the personal identity and the private memories of the device owners. Instead of becoming human being in full, they become digits in the digitalized world. Stephen King indirectly poses the question: What is the current status of identity?

The characters of the users are lost in the dark. This is the vanishing of the identity. They are faceless and heartless, brainless and reckless, senseless and thoughtless. The only thing they are, is that they are numbers among billions of numbers. The only thing they can do is to obey the SMS. This is a new but bizarre sense of the flock, herd, and cattle instinct of inborn obedience to the sign issued by the SMS communication controls, symbolized by the Raggedy Man. This powerful individual has very little concern for nature and the environment. The buildings, the towns, the gardens, and the cities are burned. But the mobile network carries on, as if it had concern for its own life, as if it were the new species to replace all species on Planet Earth.

The control of the Raggedy Man is the clue that the contemporary life in USA is a dystopia. For this dystopian reason, the head of the Gaiten Academy commits suicide under the compelling telepathic imperative command of the Raggedy Man on page 279, Section 31, Part III, "Gaiten Academy".

III. Stephen King's Technophobia of the Cell Phones

Stephen King makes no effort at all to conceal his negative attitude to cell phones. He shows them to be as lethal as snakes:

> There were cell phones lying discarded in the roadway. Every few feet they passed another one, and none were whole. They had either been run over or stomped down to nothing but wire and splinters of plastic, like dangerous snakes that had been destroyed before they could bite again. (*Cell*, p. 84)

Thus, this device is as poisonous as a snake. Moreover, its effect can be seen on helpless children, who should own better and more useful things than mobiles:

> "My kid has a cell phone, did I tell you that?" To his own ears, his voice sounded as harsh as a crow's caw. (*Cell*, p. 100)

In other words, it is bad omen for children to possess such kind of device. The father's role in protecting the children is reduced because the technology is truly corrupting the humans ever since their early childhood. This is proven in one of Stephen King's most direct prose pieces :

> "By using cell phones, which have become the dominant form of communication in our daily lives, you simultaneously turn the populace into your own conscript army—an army that's literally afraid of nothing, because it's insane—and you break down the infrastructure…." (*Cell*, p. 116)

The above quotation proves that it is cheaper for the USA administration to turn people into obedient robots or artificial, mechanic soldiers to do what they want them to do. If a man's mind is a program, it could be altered with one push of the button, somewhere, there in the administration, to change the ordinary people into deformed, obedient objects:

> Salem Street was full of crazy people…. There was no mistaking the vacant faces, the eyes that seemed to look beyond everything, the dirty, bloody, disheveled clothing (in several cases no clothing at all), the occasional cawing cry or jerky gesture…. A boy … who walked with absolutely no sign of pain although one arm was flapping below the knob of his dislocated shoulder… they were being drawn by the braying alarm … in the direction of Malden Center. (*Cell*, p. 130)

The reader can remember who was in power when *Cell* was first published in 2006. Surely, they are perfectly obedient soldiers for any war in the future. Their kind of war-general cares very little whether or not the recruited mobile users were a young boy, a young girl, or a very old person. They are obedient followers, which is what really counts. It is more like mass-enslavement achieved technologically rather than by the old ways of the Middle Ages. It is achieved in a simple way: a phone call. Regarding the enslaved masses that lost their sanity owing to the phone-calls they had received, Clay says:

> *"Nobody* should have answered it," Clay said. "We all would have been better off."
> "Ah, but who can resist a ringing phone?" Tom asked. (*Cell*, p. 168)

Thus, the designers of the cell phone disease exploit the human weakness and the human inability to resist temptation: the temptation to resist the curiosity of the phone ringing. So, to answer the call changes them to murderous creatures which:

> "continue to kill the people we would classify as normal. I call that

> warlike behavior." (*Cell*, p. 207)

The mobile pulse deforms the humans in a way that makes them unable to feel pain, which is what the battlefield requires of the fighters. So, the victims of the cell phones will be generally insensitive to the world. They are unable to feel pain or fear:

> He poked the tip of his cane against one of the young man's infected bites. It should have hurt like hell, but the young man didn't react, only went on staring up at the sky…. (*Cell*, p. 210)

Stephen King clearly shows that the brain can be affected by the communications system because it operates in a similar way:

> "What do you think a brain is?" Jordan said. "A big old hard drive. Organic circuitry. No one knows how many bytes. Say giga to the power of a googolplex. An infinity of bytes." He put his hands to his ears, which were small and neatly made. "Right in between here." … Clay thought he *did* believe it. … It was also terrible: millions, perhaps even billions, of brains all wiped clean at the same time, the way you could wipe an old-fashioned computer disc with a powerful magnet. (*Cell*, pp. 215-216)

In this manner, humans devolved:

> "Primates give rise to man, man gives rise to phoners, phoners give rise to levitating telepaths with Tourette's syndrome. Evolution complete."
> Jordan said, "What's Tourette's syndrome?"
> Tom said, "Fucked if I know, son," and incredibly, they were all laughing." (*Cell*, p. 396)

So, the new race of creatures on Earth are life-organisms that are unable to think:

> *"…they can't really think.* I'm convinced of that. Not yet, anyway. What they depend on instead of rational thought is a kind of hive mind born out of pure rage." (*Cell*, p. 403)

The new form of creatures is described as:

> *These are the new people*, Clay thought. *Telepaths*

> *who don't take baths.*
> (*Cell*, p. 406)

They are extremely stench. Perhaps, being described as filthy is King's way to express his abhorrence of the messy confusion caused by the cell phone networks and the evil impact of the modern communications systems.

IV. Cell Phone and Insanity

The author implies in his narrative that cell phones cause insanity, since the early chapters of *Cell* relate the insane misdeeds to the impact of the cell phone on the brain and psychology of its users. The crazy crowds lose their minds. They are called phone-crazies (*Cell*, p. 85). The characters in *Cell* voice their viewpoints by the way they act. A good example of this is when Clay talks with the police officer on Boylton Street. He says to the officer:

> "Don't use them," Clay said. "Tell the others. *Don't use the cell phones."*
> "Why do you say that?"
> "Because *they* were." He pointed to the dead woman and the unconscious girl. "Just before they went crazy…." (*Cell*, p. 32)

There is another significant character in *Cell* called Alice. She explains the reason behind the mass madness that drove her own mother crazy. She believes that the cell phone disturbs the mental balance:

> "She would have killed me," Alice agreed in a whisper. "She didn't know who I was. My own mother." She looked from Clay to Tom. "It was the cell phones," she said in that same whisper. "It was the cell phones, all right." (*Cell*, pp. 61-62)

On the same page, Tom provides an explanation why the cell phone engenders madness:

> "…If you make a call or take one, you get some kind of a . . . what? . . . some kind of a subliminal message, I guess . . . that makes you crazy. Sounds like science fiction, but I suppose fifteen or twenty years ago, cell phones as they now exist would have seemed like science fiction to most people." (*Cell*, p. 62)

Once more, Alice reiterates her opinion that the cell phones are to blame for the massive insanity:

> Alice said, "It was the cell phones. They made people crazy." (*Cell*, p. 93)

It is worth noting that the novel uses the words "mad", "crazy", "lunatic", "insane", "dummy", and "deranged" abundantly. The

pages of *Cell* are fraught with these words and their synonyms. The word "mad" is used 175 times, while "crazy" is used 53 times, "lunatic" is used 27 times, "insane" is used 26 times, "dummy" twice and "deranged" once throughout the novel. If this tells anything, it warns the reader by telling him/her that using the cell phone is a real and serious risk that should never be overlooked.

Moreover, *Cell* shows that the pollution of the major American Cities is a direct outcome of the phone madness. One of the onlooker's remarks:

> "City burning?" the bald man asked. "Is, isn't it?" (*Cell*, p. 93)

The damage caused to the environment is given an interesting nomenclature by Stephen King; it is called 'Bioterrorism':

> "In a way, this is no different from the bioterrorism the government was so afraid of after nine--eleven," he said. "By using cell phones, which have become the dominant form of communication in our daily lives, you simultaneously turn the populace into your own conscript army—an army that's literally afraid of nothing, because it's insane—and you break down the infrastructure.
> Where's the National Guard tonight?"
> "Iraq?" Clay ventured. (*Cell*, P. 116)

Stephen King unequivocally accuses his country for having a share in the guilt burden. America is to blame for a lot of what is happening at home and abroad. The USA technology deformed, defiled, and disfigured Nature even in a land as far away from DC as Iraq. Human arrogance amounted to irresponsibility in encouraging the production of tools, devices and gadgets that require the depletion of the resources. Thus, the natural environment is drained out. The disfiguration of the landscape and natural scenery makes the world look extremely unfamiliar and overtly repulsive:

> Thousands of people stood on the Mystic River Bridge and watched as everything between Comm Ave and Boston Harbor took fire and burned. The wind from the west remained brisk and warm even after the sun was down and the flames roared like a furnace, blotting out the stars. The rising moon was full and ultimately hideous. Sometimes the smoke masked it, but all too often that bulging dragon's eye swam free and peered down, casting a bleary orange light. Clay thought it a horror-comic moon,

> but didn't say so. (*Cell*, p. 81)

The excerpt above includes a few points which are characteristic features intended by the novelist to be the focus of attention. They are:

Firstly: The people are caught in between two phases of their existence. One is gone forever; the other one is their future. It is an unhappy and an apocalyptic future.

Secondly: Nature is devastated by man-made fires and intentional destruction.

Thirdly: As there is no fire without smoke, the air, the clouds, and the moon are veiled with a repulsive smoke-screen.

Consequently, the real moon and the real stars in the sky look like images in the Funny Books of illustrated stories and publications alluded to in the novel. This is in itself the clue that the thin line between the probable and the improbable is gone. Thus, the pollution, which is the outcome of the human reliance on communication technology embodied in the cell phones, backfires as insanity and various kinds of disease. In this spirit, Charles Arai, the Chairman of Gaiten Academy's Department of English in the text of *Cell*, writes the word INSANE fourteen times on page 279 before he commits suicide. The most fearsome part of environmental horror story is the new version of humans after millennia of evolution:

> Hearing him talk that way, as if the phone people were organic computers in some kind of upload cycle, never failed to give Clay a chill. (*Cell*, p.302)

Humanity is devolving in a situation depicted as "a vivid dream" as well as "a lunatic nightmare" on page 313. It is "the end of the world" (*Cell*, p. 316) as one is used to know it. The Kingdom of Cell Phone Communication is already come. The Raggedy Man is shouting:

> *Let's keep it moving, ladies and gents,* the Raggedy Man sent. *We've got two hours until sunset, and we want to process as many of you as we can before we have to quit for the night.*
> Process.
> *Was* this a dream? (*Cell*, p. 359)

The communications technology is itself a disease that blurs the barrier between reality and unreality:

> The frequent mobile phone users are likely to suffer a tumour on the same side of their brain to the ear they used for phone calls. (Ayanda, Baba, and Ayanda, p. 404)

If the mobile affects the brain in the form of cancer or any malignant tumour, one must also presume that it can affect the mind, in addition to the brain. The brain can be diseased with a tumour. But the mind can be diseased with madness. Actually, this is hardly a shock. When the people carry on using the mobiles, what can be expected other than cancer in the organs and insanity in the mentality:

> The potential cause of cancer by mobile phones is therefore the damage to the body's cells, caused by vibrating signals emitted by mobile phones. (*Ibid*., p. 404)

The use of mobiles produces, in the long run, a very different species than the ordinary humans. In this respect, Sue Chaplain's remark in *Gothic Literature: Texts, Contexts, Connections* (York, 2011) is relevant and true:

> … Stephen King … reflects key historical contexts and conflicts that have shaped, and that continue to shape the country's political and cultural landscape. (Chaplain, 2011, p. 129)

V. The Conclusion and the Findings

The use of cell phones is a new theme in literature. It is a reality in our daily lives. It is presented by Stephen King as detrimental, destructive, and very risky. It may have more damages than expected. The implication of the narrative text is that there is a law of balance in the universe, which means that the ease which the mobiles cause in some walks of life will be counterbalanced with the pains caused in other areas. The use of the mobile leads to the disintegration of the individual and the disorganization of the family from mental, social, psychological, and environmental perspectives.

This novel is a clear response to the communications network which damages Nature and the environment. These networks are the challenges facing the American and global society. This is a good representative of technophobia in literature.

Stephen King reveals the various kinds of cell phone effects on the current times. The narrative contents offered by the novelist focus on the violence induced by the insanity of the mobile users, to the point where society ceases functioning properly. To be exact, the possession of a mobile reveals the selfishness of the user and his/her unwillingness to communicate in the natural and normal manner. Stephen King criticizes most bitterly the American system to justify why everything in these days malfunctions.

The bad news about the USA malfunctioning is that it causes the malfunction of the entire world as well, eventually. To conclude, Cell embodies today's main concerns that what sustains humanity is what threatens it: i.e., the communications network symbolized by the insane, cancer-causing device called cell phones, which can metamorphose the USA, the most indomitable system on earth.

The insane guys are American mobile phone-users rather than fanatics or Muslim religious zealots, alien zealots calling for adherence to their faith are way from the picture entirely. Instead of Islamophobia, it is technophobia that should be reckoned with.

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