

Last Flight from Earth

Set among the stars, *Last Flight from Earth* is Shahzad Rizvi's vision of the future after the end of the world. A fusion of science fiction and romance, it's the story of a young woman, Jemima, and her desire to start a new life. Fleeing from the destruction of Earth, Jemima boards a spaceship bound for a refugee colony on Mars. There, surrounded by breathtaking technology, Jemima has a conversation with a robot and is shocked by its honesty. "Robots are always honest. Dishonesty is a humanoid activity," the robot tells her.

During her flight, Jemima is assaulted by a crewmember, Assisto. She describes "the strong odor of rotten teeth and sour breath" and her realization of an "unwanted and unpleasant intrusion in her body." When Assisto's genetics are assessed, it is decided that he "is incapable of learning from his mistakes and is devoid of guilt or remorse," similar to a wild animal. The juxtaposition of the robots' logical behavior and Assisto's inability to control his primitive urges leads readers to question what is truly human. Is it adherence to a moral code, kindness, and compassion, or simply control of our most destructive and primitive desires? This theme reappears throughout the story.

Once on Mars, Jemima is faced with a decision to remain a human or become one of the Martians, called Starloids. Believing her family to be dead, she considers leaving her painful memories of Earth behind and embracing a new future as another species. However, she is rejected as a result of her indecision: "She found herself lying in a huge bin," not transformed as she had expected.

The theme of rejection continues throughout the novel. The humans have been forced from their home and experience natural disasters on Mars, a planet they are ill-suited for. At the same time, they are reluctant to become one with the aliens. They find themselves wondering where they belong.

The Starloids begin to wonder the same thing, after Jemima finds a relic that changes their understanding of their origins. The Starloids react to this by giving the humans equal rights: "...this discovery fundamentally changes our views about the Humanoids among us. They have just as much right to this planet as we do..." By showing the Starloids coming to this judicious conclusion quickly, Rizvi illustrates the fact that Starloids behave with more fairness and regard for others than human beings have typically shown in history.

The comparison between two characters, human Scott and Starloid Star, further illustrates this idea. Both claim to love Jemima. Scott is considered a hero by Jemima's parents for helping with their evacuation from Earth. However, it's Star who comforts and wins the love of Jemima, despite his rueful claim that as a Starloid he lacks the ability to understand human emotion. He does this by listening to her thoughts about her former love, Imran, and helping her to heal. He says, "I am so sorry for your loss and I know I cannot take the place of someone lodged so deeply in your heart. But I do love you and I'll try to be worthy of you..." By contrast, Scott is revealed to be a murderer. He shows that his love for Jemima was ego-driven and unstable when he says, "You were the only woman I didn't want to kill. I had big plans for us." Star volunteers to become

the protector of humans on Mars, while Scott causes the near annihilation of the human race.

The opposition of these two characters leaves readers asking again, what is human? Rizvi continues this theme as Star is asked to convert back into a human and help save the species. He does so, and his former identity as a human is revealed. Once Star becomes human again, the responsibility to bring forth a new race of humans falls to Star and Jemima. In effect, they are the new Adam and Eve. This is but one of the echoes of religion in this novel; others include the use of words such as *convert* and *revert* to describe the decision to become Starloid or not. After converting temporarily into a Starloid, Jemima poignantly asks Star, “What am I now?” The author’s consideration of the issues of identity and belief brings to mind other stories of immigrants, navigating the joys and perils of being strangers in a strange land.

At the core of the book is the love shared between Star and Jemima. Though Star was once a human, he remembers nothing from that time, and yet Jemima, who has lost her planet, finds a new home with Star. Despite her parents’ pressure to get together with Scott—“Scott is a fine young man, we wish you would...”—Jemima puts her faith in her love and hope for a new life. When Star takes her to Mars’s moon, she is impressed by how he goes above and beyond what she expects from a lover. This illustrates the nature of Star and Jemima’s relationship, as well as the author’s apparent belief that true love will find common ground.

Last Flight from Earth is more than a post-apocalyptic fantasy. At the heart of the story is the author’s desire to understand what makes us human, when we are capable of both immense ugliness, and profound generosity of spirit. The story’s message is that love unites all creatures, and that our differences pale beside our similarities.

B. Searle
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