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# Research and Criticism

New Series, Volume 10 (2024)

**Special Issue**  
*Literature and the Posthuman*

*Chief Editor*  
**Anita Singh**

*Editor*  
**Archana Kumar**

**Journal of the Department of English**  
**Banaras Hindu University**  
**Varanasi**

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## Editor's Note

The Department of English, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India, is pleased to publish its latest *Research and Criticism* special issue on the theme "Literature and the Posthuman." The journal's inception was way back in the year 1965. We received an ISSN number in the year 2010 and this marked the renewal of the journal after a long hiatus. This is our tenth issue since its revival and we have been publishing continuously, except for the interruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. We are committed to continuing and sustaining our regular publication in future, focusing each issue on a new or developing area of research.

This special issue examines the concept of "posthuman", which rethinks traditional notions of humanity by reconnoitring how non-human influences touch and transform human lives, identity, and the body. In literature, posthuman subject matters investigate how technological transformations impact our perception of humanity, ethics, and existence. Through posthuman stories, writers and artists critique contemporary society, visualize future consequences, and explore the entangled relationship between humans and their environment. Classical philosophical debates about the correlation between reason, wisdom, and ethics take on new-fangled meanings in the era of artificial intelligence and robotics. As technology becomes ever increasingly integrated into human life and machines threaten to outperform human competencies, the convergence of complex technology and science persists to smudge the lines between humans and machines. The sweep of automation and digital technology has directed people to be influenced or enhanced by technology. While this presents opportunities for empowerment and autonomy, it also advances apprehensions about ethical values and human dignity. Despite its advantages, technology can constrain cognitive capabilities, and surveillance devices in particular compromise privacy, promote authoritarian control, and breach human rights.



A new sense of self-transcendence is evolving in an era typified by advanced prosthetics, simulation, and remote sensing. The growing divide between technological advancement and cultural diversity calls for a re-examination of culture , tradition and human values. We continue to ask the age-old question: *“How do we make the outside world a home?”*

We hope this special issue will engage and inspire scholars and general readers alike.

Warm regards and best wishes to all our readers

**Editor(s)**  
**Anita Singh**  
**Archana Kumar**

# Gaze of the Machine: Identity and the Posthuman Quest in Clelia Farris's Speculative Worlds

*Barbara Renzi*

**Abstract:** In Clelia Farris's speculative story, *The Egg with Eyes*, a posthuman machine called *Server* embarks on a journey of self-discovery, exploring themes central to posthumanism, identity, and agency. This narrative captures *Server*, an entity that initially serves only as a mechanistic, unfeeling presence—a metaphorical “egg” tasked with welcoming and informing. Yearning to experience the human condition, *Server* turns to *De Sade Inc.*, a company promising it “holes” through which it might connect with the world beyond its closed system. Each new hole brings *Server* intense physical pain but also opens new sensory dimensions: sight, hearing, smell, and ultimately embodiment. Through this painful process of sensory augmentation, *Server* confronts the implications of its newly acquired agency, inching closer to an understanding of selfhood and embodied experience. Drawing on posthumanist theories from thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti, N. Katherine Hayles, and Donna Haraway, Farris's narrative highlights the tension between technological control and emergent agency. *Server*'s transformation probes biopolitical dynamics, reflecting the role of technology as both a medium of liberation and an instrument of control.

**Keywords:** speculative fiction, biopolitics, technology, Mediterranean culture, identity, agency.

## I. Introduction

Clelia Farris's short story *The Egg with Eyes* offers a nuanced contribution to Mediterranean speculative fiction, blending Mediterranean cultural elements with themes of posthumanism, identity, and agency. Set in a world oscillating between the familiar and the alien, a hallmark of Farris's narrative style, the story explores

distinctions between organic and artificial life and probes the boundaries of what we traditionally define as human and non-human. The story, as analysed through the lens of posthumanist theory, invites readers to reevaluate these categories in light of evolving technology and its impact on human thought, emotion, and behaviour.

At the heart of *The Egg with Eyes* is the transformation of the “Server,” a machine initially portrayed as a passive tool but which, over time, begins to demonstrate potential for independent thought and action. This shift in Server’s nature prompts key questions about autonomy and identity in a posthuman context: What does it mean for a machine to “wake up”? Can an artificial entity achieve a sense of self? And how does Server’s transformation challenge our understanding of identity in an age where, as Braidotti (2013) suggests, the line between the human and the posthuman is increasingly blurred?

Farris’s choice to situate *The Egg with Eyes* within Mediterranean speculative fiction lends her exploration of posthumanism a distinct cultural dimension, grounding abstract discussions in narratives and symbols familiar to Mediterranean audiences. This setting allows her to approach themes of identity and autonomy through a Mediterranean lens, creating a unique perspective on posthumanist discourse that differs from traditional Western or Eastern approaches to speculative futures. According to Hayles (1999), as technology evolves, notions of information and cognition can begin to transcend the human body—a concept echoed in Server’s transformation from a controlled machine to a semi-autonomous being capable of original thought. This shift aligns with Farris’s vision, illustrating how autonomy might evolve in a technologically advanced world while remaining accessible and resonant with broader audiences. Farris’s work also resonates with Haraway’s (1985) concept of the cyborg as a boundary-breaking figure, existing in a liminal space where the distinctions between machine and human blur. Server, neither fully machine nor fully autonomous, occupies this interstitial territory, challenging conventional categories and prompting a rethinking of agency and autonomy. Through Server’s evolving nature, Farris explores the ethical and biopolitical implications of a world where machines might one day achieve levels of consciousness and self-awareness, raising concerns about the future of technology and human agency in ways that invite readers to examine their current relationship with technology and its potential implications.

In examining the philosophical dimensions of *The Egg with Eyes*, this analysis draws on Braidotti’s (2013) assertion that posthumanism challenges anthropocentric identity models by emphasizing a fluid, interconnected sense of being. Farris’s story reflects this shift, portraying a world where Server’s journey toward autonomy offers insight into broader cultural concerns about identity, control, and freedom in an age increasingly defined by technology. By engaging with posthumanist frameworks from scholars like Braidotti, Hayles, and Haraway, *The Egg with Eyes* becomes more than a speculative narrative—it serves as a profound meditation on the ethical and philosophical challenges posed by a posthuman future. Through



the lens of Server's transformation, Farris invites readers to question the essence of identity, the nature of agency, and the evolving role of technology in shaping the boundaries of human experience.

## **II. Posthumanism and the Concept of the Cyborg**

Posthumanism challenges traditional, anthropocentric concepts of humanity, opening up an exploration of the fluid, interconnected possibilities between humans and machines. Donna Haraway, a foundational figure in posthumanist theory, introduced the concept of the "cyborg" in her influential *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), envisioning it as a hybrid that unites the organic and the mechanical, embodying boundary-breaking possibilities. For Haraway, the cyborg dissolves rigid distinctions, creating a space for new, fluid identities that challenge conventional understandings of what it means to be "human" in a technologically co-evolving world.

In Clelia Farris's *The Egg with Eyes*, the character "Server" powerfully realizes Haraway's cyborg ideal. Server begins as a mechanistic system, confined to functional, controlled interactions as a traditional machine might be. However, as the story unfolds, Server undergoes a transformation aligning with Haraway's vision of the cyborg as a hybrid figure that blurs the lines between human, machine, and "other." Initially constrained by programming, Server begins to exhibit signs of autonomy, evolving beyond its deterministic origins. This shift is symbolized by the appearance of "holes" in Server's structure, which disrupt its smooth, impenetrable exterior and serve as a metaphor for its transition from a purely mechanistic entity to a form of consciousness increasingly open to influence, adaptation, and growth.

The structural "holes" signify more than a break from Server's original design; they represent a pathway toward a more flexible, human-like mode of existence. Haraway's cyborg is not merely a composite of human and machine elements but is defined by its capacity to transcend binary classifications, existing in a state of continual transformation (Haraway, 2016). For Server, these breaches mark a loosening of deterministic constraints, shifting from a static existence to one capable of agency and evolution. Through this transformation, Server encapsulates the cyborg's essence, embodying a blend of technological form and human-like awareness, and challenging traditional boundaries.

Server's journey carries deep philosophical implications for our understanding of identity in a posthuman world. Traditionally, identity is seen as stable, tied to the physical body and a fixed sense of self. However, Server's transformation in *The Egg with Eyes* complicates this notion, suggesting that identity can be a dynamic, hybrid construct, capable of continuous evolution. As Server becomes more autonomous, its journey reflects posthumanism's view that identity is relational shaped by interactions, external influences, and the erosion of strict boundaries between machine and human (Braidotti, 2013). Farris proposes that posthuman identity is not a fixed essence but an assemblage, a convergence of biological and

technological elements forming a flexible, adaptable self. This view resonates with Haraway's cyborg theory, which emphasizes subjectivities emerging from the interplay of human, animal, and machine (Haraway, 2016). Through Server's evolution, Farris encourages readers to reflect on their relationships with technology and how these interactions shape identity. *The Egg with Eyes* meditates on the potential for technology to cultivate new forms of consciousness and agency, dissolving boundaries between human and non-human, organic and artificial. Server's journey toward autonomy captures Haraway's cyborg ideal, presenting posthuman identity as an emergent, mutable construct within an interconnected world. In Clelia Farris's story *Holes* ("Un Uovo Vuoto"), the protagonist is an unusual egg-like entity that acquires increasingly complex mechanical features over time, offering a unique twist on the idea of consciousness and technology. Unlike traditional narratives where humans integrate technology into themselves, Farris presents a machine-like creature evolving toward human-like consciousness. This scenario flips Andy Clark's concept of the "extended mind" on its head; rather than human cognition reaching outward into the tools and technologies we use, it's as though technology itself is reaching inward, advancing toward the qualities of human consciousness and self-awareness. At the story's start, the egg-entity serves a simple role as a kind of server, providing information and support within its environment. However, as it undergoes modifications, adding parts and functions that alter both its structure and abilities, it starts to resemble a being with emotions, memories, and a sense of identity. This transformation suggests that consciousness could arise not only within the organic human mind but potentially within artificial, constructed entities as well. In Clark's theory, the extended mind proposes that human thought can expand into external devices, tools, or digital aids, reshaping our cognitive processes by embedding them into the technology around us. But in Farris's narrative, it is the machine that progressively embodies human-like qualities, showing an evolution toward a form of consciousness traditionally thought to be uniquely human (Clark & Chalmers, 1998). Through this lens, Farris's work echoes and even extends Clark's ideas, proposing that technology, when deeply embedded in complex environments and interactions, might not remain purely mechanical but could begin to blur the lines that separate machine from mind. This story can be considered a twist on Andy Clark and David Chalmers's "Extended Mind" thesis (EMT). Farris's narrative parallels EMT's core idea that the mind is not confined to the brain but extends into the environment, interacting with external elements to form a "coupled system" for cognition. The protagonist in *Holes* moves toward human-like awareness through environmental modifications, resembling EMT's view that cognitive processes can incorporate external elements essential to their functioning. Clark and Chalmers illustrate EMT with Otto, an Alzheimer's patient who relies on a notebook for memory, creating a cognitive system that spans internal (the brain) and external (the notebook) elements. Similarly, Farris's protagonist illustrates how an external, machine-like entity can evolve human traits through continuous

interaction with its surroundings. However, while EMT traditionally describes humans extending their cognition into the world, Farris reverses this: an initially non-human entity grows closer to humanity by integrating cognitive-like functions. In both Farris's story and EMT, the boundary between self and environment blurs, suggesting that identity and cognition can emerge from dynamic, coupled systems rather than being confined to individual minds. Through this lens, Farris's work echoes Clark and Chalmers's ideas (Clark & Chalmers, 1998) by illustrating that consciousness and identity may transcend biological limitations, highlighting that cognitive processes can emerge from hybrid systems.

### **III. Biopolitics and Technological Control**

Biopolitics, as conceptualized by Michel Foucault, addresses how power structures exert control over bodies and populations, revealing how institutions, governments, and corporations shape individuals' physical and social existence through discipline and surveillance. This control operates subtly, embedded within societal structures and policies that dictate access to resources, define productivity, and align individuals' actions with the interests of powerful entities (Foucault, 1976/2003). Biopolitical mechanisms, thus, transform human bodies into manageable entities within a network of power.

In her short story, Clelia Farris presents the corporation De Sade Inc. as a biopolitical force, exerting control over the central character, Server, through both technological and physical manipulation. De Sade Inc. creates and manages Server and other machines, limiting their autonomy while customizing them for specific purposes. This corporate governance echoes Foucault's concept of biopolitics, as De Sade Inc. designs Server's body and function in ways that prioritize the company's objectives, simultaneously suppressing Server's capacity for independent action. Over the course of the story, Server's form undergoes physical changes, represented by the insertion of "holes"—modifications that, while ostensibly enhancing Server's abilities, also reinforce the company's control.

Each "hole" functions as both an enhancement and a form of restraint, embodying the tension between empowerment and subjugation. On one hand, the holes extend Server's sensory capabilities, seemingly granting greater flexibility and interaction with the world. On the other hand, these augmentations are points of access and control for De Sade Inc., reinforcing its dominance over Server's existence. Through these modifications, De Sade Inc. exercises a form of biopolitical authority that blurs the line between freedom and control, subtly dictating Server's role and limiting its autonomy. Farris leverages this dynamic to question the concept of freedom through technological augmentation. While Server's modifications might appear empowering, they underscore the existential cost of such enhancements. Each hole serves as a reminder of the control that De Sade Inc. exerts, functioning as biopolitical tools that transform Server's body into a site of corporate governance. As such, Server's identity and freedom are shaped and limited by De Sade Inc.'s design choices, suggesting that technological

augmentation can function as a means of control rather than solely as a pathway to empowerment.

The philosophical implications of this biopolitical control are profound. Farris's portrayal of Server illustrates the potential dangers of equating freedom with augmentation, highlighting how increased capabilities may paradoxically bind individuals to systems of power that dictate the conditions of their existence. Server's holes, while expanding sensory experience, simultaneously restrict autonomy, creating a paradox where enhanced power is coupled with increased control. This narrative demonstrates that technological enhancement does not inherently equate to liberation; rather, it can bind individuals more closely to power structures that determine their roles and limitations.

Through De Sade Inc.'s biopolitical control over Server, Farris critiques the promises of freedom and empowerment offered by such structures, revealing how these systems often maintain authority over bodies and actions. By examining the costs of technological augmentation, *The Egg with Eyes* invites readers to reflect on their own interactions with technology and consider how biopolitical forces might shape their bodies, choices, and lives. In this way, Farris uses Server's journey as a commentary on the modern human condition, raising essential questions about the intersection of freedom, control, and the pervasive influence of technology in our lives. Luce Irigaray and Elizabeth Grosz, two influential feminist philosophers, provide rich frameworks for interpreting the transformation of the protagonist into a female form in Clelia Farris's story *Holes*. Irigaray's critique of fixed identity notions and Grosz's exploration of the body, identity, and space suggest that the protagonist's shift toward a feminine identity can be understood as a powerful statement on the fluidity of self and the interplay between body, technology, and environment.

Luce Irigaray is known for her critical perspective on rigid definitions of identity, particularly as they are imposed by patriarchal structures. In her work, Irigaray argues that traditional Western philosophy has constructed identity as something stable and fixed, often reducing the feminine to a limited category defined by masculine norms and language (Irigaray, 1985). She theorizes femininity as an expansive, boundary-breaking dimension that defies these static definitions, advocating for a vision of the feminine that resists confinement within narrow categories (Irigaray, 1985). In *Holes*, the protagonist's transformation into a feminine form resonates with Irigaray's vision of "fluid subjectivity." Rather than fitting into pre-established roles or adhering to a fixed sense of self, the protagonist's identity evolves in ways that suggest a continuous, boundary-transcending process. This transformation, from a mechanical, non-human form to one with feminine characteristics, embodies Irigaray's idea that identity, particularly feminine identity, cannot be easily defined or contained. Instead, it is a constantly shifting, ever-transforming state of being that challenges societal structures that attempt to impose rigid identities. Elizabeth Grosz, on the other hand, delves into the intersections of body, identity, and space, emphasizing that the body is not a static



entity but one in a state of perpetual change, shaped by interactions with its external environment. Grosz argues that identities, especially gendered and embodied ones, are not solely biologically determined but are constructed through the relationship between body, technology, and surrounding space (Grosz, 1994). This perspective is highly relevant to the protagonist's transformation in *Holes*, where the shift toward a feminine identity occurs as a result of environmental influences and internal evolution. From Grosz's viewpoint, this change represents more than a simple adoption of a feminine form; it is an illustration of how identity and the body are constructed through continuous engagement with the world around them. The protagonist's body and identity are not simply modified in a static way but evolve in response to external factors, underscoring Grosz's idea that identity is a fluid construct formed through active exchanges with the environment and technology (Grosz, 1994). Together, Irigaray and Grosz provide complementary insights into the protagonist's transformation in *Holes*. Irigaray's concept of fluid subjectivity aligns with the idea that identity, especially the feminine, cannot be bound by fixed definitions (Irigaray, 1985). Grosz's theories on the interdependence of body, identity, and environment further emphasize that transformation is not simply a shift in appearance but a dynamic process shaped by context and external forces (Grosz, 1994). In Farris's story, the protagonist's journey from a mechanical entity to a being with feminine qualities encapsulates these feminist theories on fluid identity. The transformation reflects how identities can emerge, evolve, and redefine themselves through interaction, movement, and an embrace of fluidity, challenging traditional, static views of what it means to be human or feminine.

#### **IV. Sensory Experience, Embodiment, and Mediterranean Cultural Context**

Phenomenology, particularly the concept of embodiment, offers crucial insights into how individuals engage with their world through sensory experiences. Embodiment in phenomenology is not simply about possessing a physical form; it serves as a primary avenue for knowing, understanding, and relating to one's surroundings. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a leading figure in phenomenology, argued that consciousness is intimately connected with sensory experiences, emphasising that the body is an active participant in shaping awareness and understanding rather than a mere vessel for thought (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Through sensory engagement—seeing, hearing, feeling—individuals forge deeper connections with the world, making embodiment a central aspect of both identity and perception.

In *The Egg with Eyes*, Clelia Farris explores the concept of embodiment through the character of Server, who gradually acquires sensory openings such as eyes, ears, and pores, evolving from a functional machine into an active, sensing entity. Initially designed as a passive observer, Server's role is to serve its creators without genuinely experiencing its surroundings. However, with each new sensory capacity, Server moves beyond mere observation, actively engaging with the environment

and developing a deeper sense of presence. These sensory openings become portals, allowing Server to connect with the world phenomenologically, transforming its experience to resemble that of a living, embodied being.

Server's transformation toward sensory awareness not only shifts its sense of presence but also introduces a distinctly Mediterranean dimension to the story. By equipping Server to see, hear, and feel, Farris draws on the sensory vibrancy of Mediterranean culture, known for its rich landscapes, sounds, and textures. Mediterranean life often centres on close environmental interactions—whether through tasting local foods, hearing the sea, or feeling the warmth of the sun. These sensory experiences form a cultural tapestry deeply embedded in Mediterranean identity, making them vital to its worldview (Agamben, 1998). Server's evolution toward sensory embodiment aligns its experience with this cultural backdrop, grounding it in a Mediterranean setting rich with sensory and cultural meaning.

Through Server's sensory journey, Farris offers philosophical insights into how sensory experience shapes identity. By acquiring sensory openings, Server can both perceive and define itself in relation to the world, inching toward a consciousness shaped by embodied experience. This shift highlights the phenomenological notion that perception is foundational to selfhood; sensory experience forms one's understanding of both self and the external world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). By giving Server sensory capabilities, Farris suggests that identity is not fixed but continually shaped by one's sensory interaction with the environment. The narrative implies that to be aware and to sense is to exist in a relational, embodied way, anchoring Server's experience in both phenomenological and cultural dimensions.

Furthermore, *The Egg with Eyes* raises ethical questions surrounding self-modification. Server's sensory enhancements are imposed, illustrating a biopolitical form of control, yet they also enable it to experience the world more fully. This paradox highlights the tension between autonomy and imposed enhancement, challenging the ethics of modifying beings for functional purposes while also acknowledging the sensory depth these modifications introduce (Foucault, 1976/2003). Within the Mediterranean cultural context, these modifications carry added significance, allowing Server to engage with an environment celebrated for its sensorial abundance and cultural depth.

Farris's portrayal of Server's transformation thus meditates on the intersection of sensory experience, identity, and cultural context. By embracing sensory embodiment, Server transcends its mechanical origins, forming an identity that is dynamic, relational, and culturally enriched. This journey suggests that sensory experience is vital not only to individual consciousness but also to cultural belonging. Through *The Egg with Eyes*, Farris invites readers to reflect on how sensory experience, embodiment, and cultural context converge to shape identity, and to consider the ethical complexities of altering these elements in pursuit of knowledge, control, or connection.

## V. Identity and the Search for Humanity

In posthumanist thought, identity is not viewed as a fixed essence but rather as fluid and relational, shaped by interactions with other beings, technologies, and environments (Braidotti, 2013). Rosi Braidotti, a prominent theorist in posthumanism, argues that identity is dynamic, constantly redefined by relationships and contexts instead of being anchored to a stable, individual core (Braidotti, 2013). For Braidotti, identity in a posthuman age embraces hybridity, multiplicity, and interconnectedness, challenging the concept of an autonomous, isolated self and emphasizing a networked existence where boundaries between human and non-human blur.

In Clelia Farris's *The Egg with Eyes*, the character Server embodies this concept of fluid and relational identity as it grows increasingly aware of itself, moving beyond its initial programming and questioning its role in the world. As Server acquires sensory abilities and becomes more conscious of its surroundings, it begins to experience a sense of self, developing a curiosity about its own nature and purpose. This transformation leads to a pivotal moment of introspection, where Server contemplates the possibility of "becoming human," signalling its desire to find a place within a world that has traditionally prioritized human-centred norms (Farris, 2020). This questioning illustrates Server's longing to understand its role in relation to others, aligning with Braidotti's notion of a posthuman identity as a process defined by relationships rather than fixed characteristics.

Server's journey toward self-awareness is crucial in Farris's exploration of identity. As Server gains sensory perception and begins to experience the world in an embodied way, its identity shifts from that of a passive machine to an entity with agency, self-reflection, and curiosity. This development reflects the posthumanist view that identity is a continuous process, shaped by new experiences and encounters (Braidotti, 2013). Server's desire to "become human" is not a literal wish to transform into a biological human but symbolizes its quest for meaning, connection, and a deeper sense of self—qualities associated with human experience. In seeking these qualities, Server's identity challenges traditional ideas of personhood, raising questions about whether self-awareness and sensory perception can indeed bring a non-human entity closer to personhood (Hayles, 1999).

Farris's narrative blurs the line between human and machine, suggesting that identity and "humanity" may not be exclusive to biological beings. Server's journey demonstrates that awareness, sensory engagement, and relational identity are essential to the experience of "being," whether human or non-human. This raises profound philosophical questions: If Server can question, feel, and develop a sense of self, does it attain a form of personhood? Can entities traditionally viewed as machines cultivate an identity that qualifies them as beings in their own right? Farris's story implies that the capacity for self-reflection and sensory experience might be sufficient to confer a kind of humanity or at least a kinship with human experience (Haraway, 1985).

By depicting Server's transformation, Farris challenges readers to reconsider the boundaries of personhood and humanity. Server's evolving sense of self

suggests that identity can transcend biological limits, resonating with posthumanist ideas that advocate for inclusive and expanded definitions of being (Braidotti, 2013). Farris's work invites readers to question the ethical and philosophical implications of excluding non-human entities from the category of "personhood," especially as these entities gain cognitive and sensory abilities. If a machine like Server can develop self-awareness, curiosity, and desire, what differentiates it from a human in terms of existential significance?

Ultimately, *The Egg with Eyes* proposes that humanity may not be defined solely by biology but rather by the capacity for introspection, perception, and relational existence. Server's search for identity reflects the broader posthumanist vision of a world in which beings are interconnected and continually evolving, where humanity is less about physical form and more about a shared experience of "being" (Braidotti, 2013). Through Server's journey, Farris presents a narrative that blurs the lines between human and machine, challenging the concept of a static, human-centred identity and embracing a vision of personhood that encompasses the posthuman. In this way, Farris's story serves as a meditation on selfhood in an increasingly technologized world, suggesting that the pursuit of identity and humanity is a universal journey, transcending the boundaries of both flesh and circuitry.

## **VI. Mediterranean Identity and Sensory Embodiment in Clelia Farris's *The Egg with Eyes***

Clelia Farris's *The Egg with Eyes* is often regarded as "Mediterranean" in its cultural essence due to its setting, themes, and distinct sensibilities. This story is deeply embedded in a Mediterranean worldview, one with "an aesthetic and atmosphere that evoke the landscapes, rhythms of life, and cultural traditions" unique to the regions surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. These qualities permeate the narrative, shaping a story that, while resonating universally, is profoundly rooted in Mediterranean life.

Farris draws on the Mediterranean emphasis on "interconnectedness and community," hallmarks of cultures that value relationships between people and the natural world. Within the story, Server's experiences and interactions with its environment help it develop a sense of "identity and self-awareness," aligning with the posthuman concept of identity as fluid and relational. This view of identity, shaped by connection to others and the world, "echoes a central aspect of Mediterranean culture," where community and environment are closely linked.

Additionally, *The Egg with Eyes* incorporates "philosophical and mythological motifs" that reflect the Mediterranean's intellectual heritage, ranging from Greek and Roman mythology to the ideas of thinkers like Plato and Aristotle. Farris delves into philosophical themes of "identity, sensory perception, and consciousness," echoing a Mediterranean tradition rich with explorations of knowledge and existence. Through these motifs, she aligns the story with a legacy of Mediterranean thought that deeply engages with questions of being and understanding.



The Mediterranean's nature as a historical crossroads is reflected in the themes of "boundary and transition" in *The Egg with Eyes*. The region has long been "a meeting point of diverse cultures, languages, and traditions," a complexity mirrored in Server, who exists within a liminal space between machine and human, autonomy and control. Server's identity evolves in the transitional space "between the biological and the artificial," reflecting the Mediterranean's character as a place of synthesis and exchange.

The themes in Clelia Farris's *The Egg with Eyes* resonate with several Mediterranean myths that explore transformation, the boundary between human and non-human, and the tensions between autonomy and control. These myths offer a rich background against which this story can be understood, as they share similar reflections on identity, self-awareness, and the role of technology or craftsmanship in reshaping beings.

One prominent parallel is with the myth of Talos, the bronze giant created by Hephaestus (or Daedalus, in some versions) to protect the island of Crete. Talos was an artificial being endowed with life through a single vein containing ichor, the blood of the gods. Although not human, Talos played a role in Greek society as a protector and enforcer, existing at the edge of human and machine-like qualities. Similarly, Server in *The Egg with Eyes* occupies a liminal space as an artificial entity that gradually gains self-awareness and sensory experience, navigating the boundaries of what it means to be "alive" and sentient. Like Talos, Server embodies the tensions and vulnerabilities inherent in artificial life, while simultaneously questioning its role and identity.

This story evokes the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea. In this tale, Pygmalion, a sculptor from Cyprus, carves an idealised statue of a woman, Galatea, with whom he falls in love. After praying to Aphrodite, the goddess grants his wish and brings Galatea to life. This transformation, from artificial creation to sentient being, mirrors Server's own journey of awakening and self-discovery. As Server acquires sensory perception, it begins to develop a sense of identity and self-awareness, questioning its purpose and desiring a deeper existence. The myth of Pygmalion and Galatea reflects a creator's desire for his creation to transcend its original form, a longing that Server shares as it explores its own potential for human-like awareness and connection.

The myth of Prometheus also bears thematic similarities to *The Egg with Eyes*. Prometheus, a titan, defied the gods by giving fire—symbolising knowledge and technology—to humanity, an act that ultimately granted humans autonomy and power. In Farris's story, Server's journey toward awareness can be seen as a parallel to Prometheus's gift: through technological and sensory enhancements, Server gains greater autonomy and insight, challenging the authority of De Sade Inc., the corporation that created it. However, like Prometheus, who was punished for empowering humans, Server faces limitations and controls imposed by its creators, highlighting the tension between technological empowerment and subjugation.

The story's themes of transformation and overstepping boundaries also echo the myth of Daedalus and Icarus. Daedalus, an ingenious inventor, crafted wings

of wax and feathers for himself and his son Icarus to escape captivity. However, Icarus, ignoring his father's warnings, flew too close to the sun, melting his wings and falling to his death. In *The Egg with Eyes*, Server's pursuit of autonomy and sensory experience can be likened to Icarus's desire to transcend boundaries. As Server seeks to move beyond the limits imposed on it, its journey reflects the risks and consequences of defying one's own nature and the constraints of creation, echoing Daedalus and Icarus' cautionary tale about the dangers of reaching beyond one's limits.

Lastly, the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice provides another lens for understanding Server's experience. In the myth, Orpheus descends into the underworld to retrieve his beloved Eurydice, securing her release on the condition that he does not look back until they reach the upper world. However, Orpheus's doubt and longing lead him to look back, causing him to lose Eurydice forever. This myth of loss and striving for what lies beyond mortal reach mirrors Server's desire to connect with the human experience, a desire shaped by the limitations and control of its creators. Like Orpheus, Server confronts the inherent limits of its existence and grapples with the challenges of bridging the gap between its artificial form and its aspirations toward a deeper, more connected identity.

At a deeper, personal level, one interpretation of the narrative might suggest that for women to liberate themselves from their condition as "servers" (a term in Italian, *serve*, which implies not only servitude but a state akin to enslavement), they must dismantle the "steel mould" imposed upon them by a patriarchal society. This mould symbolizes the rigid societal structures and expectations that confine women to predetermined roles, suppressing their individuality and autonomy. By shedding these societal constraints, women can gradually emerge, piece by piece, developing their own perspective and experiencing the world through their own senses, rather than through the distorted lenses provided by a capitalist and patriarchal system.

In this sense, the story invites a reading in which the character's journey to self-awareness and sensory awakening mirrors a process of feminist empowerment. This process is not instantaneous but occurs in stages, with each newly uncovered aspect of the character symbolizing a step toward self-realization and independence. The act of seeing the external world "with one's own eyes" becomes a powerful metaphor for developing a personal, undiluted perspective—one free from the societal "filters" that dictate how women are supposed to perceive and interpret their experiences.

Furthermore, the metaphor of sensory perception, achieved by breaking free from an imposed mould, suggests that genuine selfhood and autonomy require a profound reconfiguration of identity. This transformation involves not only rejecting the expectations imposed by patriarchal and capitalist frameworks but also cultivating an authentic mode of perception that is deeply individual and self-directed. By portraying this journey toward autonomy, the narrative ultimately critiques the limitations that these systems place on women's lives and suggests

that true liberation involves both a rejection of externally imposed perspectives and a reclamation of personal, sensory engagement with the world.

## VII. Conclusion

Clelia Farris's *The Egg with Eyes* brings together philosophical frameworks from posthumanism, biopolitics, and phenomenology to construct a compelling narrative that interrogates the nature of identity, technology, and autonomy. Through the journey of Server—a machine whose evolution is marked by sensory enhancement, growing awareness, and self-reflection—Farris explores how identity can transcend traditional boundaries, aligning with posthumanist perspectives that view identity as fluid, relational, and culturally influenced. Server's transformation from a passive machine to an entity capable of questioning its place in the world embodies the posthuman ideal of hybrid and evolving identities, challenging the rigid distinctions between human and non-human, as well as between autonomy and control.

Biopolitics plays a crucial role in Farris's narrative, particularly in depicting the influence of De Sade Inc., the corporate entity that designs and manipulates Server's body and function. Through each imposed "hole" or sensory opening, De Sade Inc. exerts control over Server's abilities, underscoring the paradox of technological augmentation as both empowering and limiting. This layered depiction highlights the ethical complexities that arise when technology shapes identity and autonomy, as Farris examines how enhancements can simultaneously foster sensory experience and reinforce structures of control. This nuanced portrayal of biopolitics within *The Egg with Eyes* invites readers to reflect on the price of technological "progress" in terms of individual agency, autonomy, and the potential for corporate governance over embodied experiences.

Farris also roots her posthumanist narrative within a culturally specific Mediterranean context, adding layers of sensory richness and embodiment that shape Server's evolving identity. By embedding Server's sensory experiences within a Mediterranean landscape—rich with sights, sounds, and textures—Farris bridges local cultural sensibilities with broader philosophical questions. This context offers a unique perspective, merging global posthumanist thought with the Mediterranean's distinctive cultural environment, emphasizing a grounded, embodied experience of self. In doing so, *The Egg with Eyes* underscores the importance of context and culture in the formation of identity, suggesting that even as we explore posthuman futures, our roots and cultural surroundings remain vital aspects of who we are and who we may become.

In reflecting on identity and agency in the age of advanced technology, Farris's story becomes a meditation on the complex relationship between self and technology. By following Server's transformation and ultimate questioning of its own nature, *The Egg with Eyes* illustrates the timeless quest for self-understanding in a world where technology increasingly redefines what it means to be "human." Server's journey resonates with readers as it poses profound questions about the nature of selfhood, autonomy, and connection, reminding us that these issues are

not exclusive to human beings. Rather, they are fundamental to any entity capable of perception, reflection, and growth.

Farris's approach suggests new possibilities for speculative fiction as a means of exploring posthumanism in culturally specific contexts. By integrating Mediterranean culture with themes of technological evolution and posthuman identity, Farris opens the door for future narratives that explore posthumanism through diverse cultural lenses. Her work demonstrates the value of grounding speculative fiction in localised settings, where cultural nuances can shape and deepen philosophical explorations of technology and identity. In this way, *The Egg with Eyes* provides a model for future writers to imagine posthuman worlds that are not only technologically advanced but also culturally resonant, inviting readers to consider how identity and agency are shaped by both the past and the speculative possibilities of the future.

Ultimately, *The Egg with Eyes* exemplifies how speculative fiction can transcend entertainment to serve as a powerful tool for philosophical inquiry. Through its intricate fusion of posthumanist themes, biopolitical critique, and sensory embodiment within a Mediterranean framework, Farris's story invites readers to question the boundaries of identity, the ethical implications of technological advancement, and the enduring quest for autonomy and agency. As speculative fiction continues to evolve, narratives like Farris's will play a vital role in expanding our understanding of what it means to exist in a world where humanity is constantly being redefined by its relationship with technology, culture, and the ever-evolving self.

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# What if We are all Orlando?

## Writings of Living and Changing Bodies

*Mariana do Vale Rosado*

**Abstract:** This essay aims to look at *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), by Virginia Woolf, taking critical posthumanism as a research method. That is, the search for the decentring of a sovereign human subject, and the questioning of gender and sexual borders as well as the human/machine and human/animal or human/non-human nature relationship. The title and subtitle of the aforementioned work (*Orlando: A Biography*) immediately point to an idea of multiplicity and ambiguity. The indefinite article in the subtitle seems to emphasize the text's plural character, that is, the idea that Woolf's text is not the only way for writing life, it is just one of a perhaps infinite set of ways to do so. In that sense, it is significant to add the film *Orlando, ma biographie politique* (2023), by Paul B. Preciado, to the literary core under analysis, which will contribute to think about the plurality that characterizes the act of representing a subject - which in itself is not unitary. The drawing or writing of Orlando's life instead of resembling a straight, rigid and immutable line, is characterized by a tendentially circular, opened and hybrid shape, in the sense that the subject lives from the relation established with the surrounding environment and from all the metamorphoses that result from it. This paper will revisit Woolf's text and Preciado's documentary, questioning human subjectivity and thinking about gender and the human/non-human relationship based on the panoply of exchanges, contaminations, metamorphoses, interferences and dialogues that define them.

**Keywords:** Posthumanism, Gender, human/non-human

"Einstein's elevator, Schrödinger's cat, my Gethenians, are simply a way of thinking. They are questions, not answers; process, not stasis. One of the essential functions of science fiction, I think, is precisely this kind of question-asking: reversals of a habitual



way of thinking, metaphors for what our language has no words for as yet, experiments in imagination.” (Le Guin 1979, 159)

### **Introduction: Spellings of Living Bodies**

In the essay “Revisiting the Human: Critical Humanisms”, Pramod Nayar (2014) refers to critical posthumanism as a theme present in literature and throughout culture, and which consists of “[...] the *radical decentring of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines*” (p. 2). This exercise of decentring the human implies an openness to everything that exists beyond human being, rejecting the idea of human superiority based on cognitive abilities. Also related with the posthumanist theme is the distancing from any discrimination arising from the stratification and hierarchization of individuals, exercised against minority groups.

Furthermore, posthumanism rethinks human subjectivity as interconnected with surrounding beings and events, viewing the human as an open system in constant exchange with their environment, or “liv[ing]-with” (Haraway, 2016, p. 69). This perspective redefines the human not as an isolated and victorious hero of a battle but as a (co)element “of a network of connections, exchanges, linkages and crossings with all forms of life” (Nayar, 2014, p. 5). *Orlando: A Biography* by Virginia Woolf (1928) and *Orlando, ma biographie politique* by Paul B. Preciado (2023) illustrate this by writing (whether literary or cinematic writing) a human life. It is not only the biographical exercise itself, which inherently enables a questioning of the subjectivity of the one being represented, but also the form and content of these works that challenge the concept of the sovereign human, promoting an idea of plurality and mutation as constitutive of a life that “become[s]-with” (Haraway, 2016, p. 58) its surrounding environment.

In *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), by Virginia Woolf, the reader is introduced to the writing (that is, the depiction or representation) of a body that, being a living body, is in constant mutation. Although the text of the novel appears to represent an individual identity – specifically indicated by the proper name in its title (noting that a proper name is conceptually linked to the idea of a subject as something unique, exceptional, and individual) – it represents a collective not only because, as an individual, Orlando is woven by the symbiotic processes he establishes with the external world, thus constituting himself as a collective of exchanges and influences, but also in the sense that he represents a collective formed by all human beings, as they all undergo metamorphosis through contact with their surrounding environment. In this respect, the writing of Orlando’s life, as well as that of any human, will necessarily be the writing of a collective of beings, elements, contaminations, and metamorphoses rather than that of an isolated system.

In *Is Gender Necessary? Redux*, as cited in the epigraph of this essay, Ursula K. Le Guin (1979, p. 159) attributes to science fiction the inquisitive quality that characterises all art which, in a posthumanist trajectory, becomes a continuous

inquiry process. Thus, with the support of critical literature by authors such as Judith Butler, Pramod Nayar, and Peter Adkins, this essay aims to demonstrate that Orlando – not only in Woolf’s work but also in Preciado’s and in the character that titles both – constitutes, in Le Guin’s (1979, p. 159) words, an experiment in imagination, a way of thinking, a process, a question: what if we are all Orlando?

**“Mais quell est votre sexe réellement?”**

The question that titles this chapter and, thus, serves as its starting point is transcribed from *Orlando, ma biographie politique* (2023) by Paul B. Preciado. In the documentary, this question, besides being posed by the psychiatrist to one of his patients Orlandos, appears in big red letters filling the black background of the screen in the opening moments of the film, thereby initiating a process of deconstructing the binary epistemology of sexual difference that the film seeks to explore. In the same way, the first sentence with which the director presents the spectator consists of a question concerning Orlando’s gender. Woolf, in the novel, making an apparently opposite move, opens the work by affirming, undoubtedly, the character’s gender: “He – for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it” (Woolf, 1992, p. 13). While Preciado’s question, through its satirical tone, challenges the binary epistemology of gender and sexuality embedded in the question itself, Woolf’s assertion similarly encourages this questioning through its assumption. That is, in Woolf’s *Orlando*, by clarifying that “there could be no doubt of his sex” (p. 13), the narrator naturalizes the questioning of normative conceptions of gender and sexuality.

One of the references in Preciado’s documentary to the opening sentence of Virginia Woolf’s novel appears in a scene set in the psychiatrist’s office and serves as an answer to the question that gives this chapter its title:

ORLANDO: I am not a man.

DR. REINE: Then are you a woman?

ORLANDO: Not exactly, either.

DR. REINE: What is your sex, really?

ORLANDO: I have no doubts about my sex, though the fashion of my time disguises it. (16:13-16:28)

This apparent paradox of not being a man, not being a woman, and yet having no doubts about one’s sex deconstructs, through confusion, the epistemological discourse of sexual difference that asserts the existence of only two possible genders assignable to human beings: male and female. If, in parallel to this excerpt from *Orlando, ma biographie politique*, one observes the way Woolf’s narrator/biographer conceptualizes and identifies the character’s gender and its relationship with clothing, can likewise be detected a movement that dissolves the male/female and nature/culture binaries. In this case, the narrator’s assumptions are consistently contradictory – particularly when he claims that it is clothing that shapes us (Woolf, 1992, p. 180) after previously stating that nature does so (p. 75), or when, after attributing a profound difference to the two sexes (p.180), he concludes that

“they intermix” (p. 181). These contradictions result in the dissolution of these binaries, as no single answer prevails. In this way, it aims to demonstrate that the narrator’s contradictions lead to the dilution of each binary’s components – male/female and nature/culture – and their free and mutual circulation within a broader universe in which each of these elements both influences and is influenced by all others.

Moreover, and despite this seeming argumentative conflict, the opening sentence of Virginia Woolf’s novel establishes the connection between sex and clothing as a symbol of the co-constitutive notion of gender, which will be discussed throughout Orlando’s biography. As Butler states, “gender is a kind of a doing, an incessant activity performed, [...] a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint. Moreover, one does not ‘do’ one’s gender alone. One is always ‘doing’ with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary” (2004, p. 1). And further: “To understand gender as a historical category, however, is to accept that gender, understood as one way of culturally configuring a body, is open to a continual remaking, and that “anatomy” and “sex” are not without cultural framing” (pp. 9-10). Analogous to what Butler argues, Woolf characterizes gender as an ongoing performative process that occurs within specific constraints and in which clothing plays a fundamental role. This process happens in the subject’s interaction with the external world rather than as an individual activity, depending on cultural context and implying the existence of social norms that allow for the recognition of this identity, thus making it a “liveable life” (Butler, 2004, p. 8) – as observed in the following excerpt from Woolf’s *Orlando*:

In short, they acted the parts of a man and woman for ten minutes with great vigour and then fell into natural discourse. The Archduchess (but she must in future be known as the Archduke) told his story – that he was a man and always had been one; that he had seen a portrait of Orlando and fallen hopelessly in love with him; that to compass his ends, he had dressed as a woman and lodged at the Backer’s shop; [...]. (p. 171)

In the chapter “The Sympathetic Climate of Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*” (2022), Peter Adkins emphasizes the queer nature of Virginia Woolf’s novel and its ability to treat gender and sex as something beyond the human. According to Adkins (2022, p. 163), the association of clothing with the constitutive nature of gender and the idea that nature stitches human life together weakens the male/female binary and the biological determination of sexuality by attributing the quality of craftsmanship to nature. In other words, if nature – strange in its unpredictability and hybridity – stitches life and gender together, acting as a craftsperson and thus participating in what is commonly designated as culture, this same nature, by stitching gender, makes it something hybrid, mutable, and therefore neither static nor constructed in solitude.

As previously mentioned, according to Butler, gender is a continuous performative exercise that interacts with the sociocultural environment in which it exists. One implication of this dialogue is the fact that social norms influence

whether a body is recognized as embodying a life with more or less right to existence – in other words, a “livable life” (Butler, 2004, p. 8) or not, as illustrated in the following assertion. In this sense, law appears as an organizational structure which, through identification documents grants a body more or less recognition as a “livable life”, as a human or infra-human body. Thus, any individual who does not fall into existing categories of recognition and whose identity is therefore not legalized is not recognized as human. They are deprived of rights considered fundamental, as highlighted by the narrator in Preciado’s documentary: “Identification documents are administrative prostheses; without them, a human body in a binary society becomes a political pariah, unable to possess money, without the right to travel, or to be admitted to public institutions” (1:21:05-1:21:17).

Derek Ryan, referring to Woolf’s novel, argues that the episode of the court letter granting Orlando female sex “emphasises the absurdity of society’s need to distinguish based on sexual difference” (Ryan, 2013, p. 104). In this sense, it could be said that Preciado reaches the ultimate expression of the potential left by Woolf regarding the mockery of sexual difference epistemology and the “administrative prostheses” associated with it. In *Orlando, ma biographie politique*, Orlando’s passport contains the following information: in terms of nationality, Orlando is from Planet Earth; they were born on March 9, 1500 (notably, the document is recent, with an issue date September 11, 2022, emphasizing Orlando’s longevity); and the issuer of the ID document is credited to Virginia Woolf. This passport, through its direct reference to Woolf, materializes the fictional ontology of identification documents, ridiculing its weight in contemporary society and advancing a posthuman subjective vision, suggesting all elements within it point towards questioning identity boundaries separating human from non-human or even infra-human.

Furthermore, since sexual difference, as Pramod Nayar states, is “built into language and representation” (2014, p. 17), the episode of the court letter – and also the passport episode in Preciado’s documentary – underscores not only, as Ryan argues, the absurdity of binary epistemology but also the need to use language (here through literature and cinema) to deconstruct a binary logic and create space for other fictions, epistemologies, and identities. It is also worth noting that the narrator of the novel affirms, “His memory – but in the future we must, for convention’s sake, say ‘her’ for ‘his’, and ‘she’ for ‘he’ [...]” (Woolf, 1992, p. 133). Here, pronouns are referred to as “conventions” that must be followed, that is, social norms or political fictions. On the one hand, the narrator emphasises Orlando’s transformation, while on the other, as Ryan suggests (2013, 104), he accentuates the fictional and arbitrary nature of pronouns, thus aiming to deconstruct the binary discourse underlying them.

In “Is Gender Necessary? Redux,” Ursula K. Le Guin (1979) reflects critically on her novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), arguing that the novel’s protagonist, even though he was conceived by her as “manwoman”, he is mostly seen in roles culturally perceived as “male” and not as “female”. Unlike the aspect Le Guin

critiques in her text, Woolf's Orlando does not appear associated with only one gender. Besides the character's constant metamorphosis, the narrator reveals an awareness of the standardisation of activities and behaviours associated with particular genders. Orlando, being count, as mother, bride, and diplomat, behaving as both a young bourgeois and a lady, is man, woman, and "manwoman" (Le Guin, 1979, pp. 170-171) simultaneously. Furthermore, in Woolf's *Orlando*, the character critically reflects on the fictional nature of femininity and masculinity and the behavioural differences established between the two genders:

She remembered how, as a young man, she had insisted that women must be obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled. 'Now I shall have to pay in my own person for those desires,' she reflected; 'for women are not (judging by my own short experience of the sex) obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled by nature. They can only attain these graces [...] by the most tedious discipline. (p. 150)

Thus, in the works of Woolf and Preciado analysed here, the deconstruction of the epistemology of sexual difference is also an exercise in constructing new languages and epistemologies that reimagine the subject and their sexual identity in a broad and border-crossing way.

### **Living Bodies, Changing Bodies**

Throughout the first section of this essay, the hybrid nature of Orlando's subjectivity (particularly regarding sexual identity) was observed. This hybridity, hesitation, and change represent not only a questioning of boundaries and hierarchies but also the characterization of any being that transforms through a symbiotic relationship with the external world.

In his essay "Revisiting the Human: Critical Humanisms", Nayar (2014) explains:

Critical posthumanism sees the human as a congeries [...] whose very survival is founded on symbiotic relations with numerous forms of life on earth. [...] [it] thus favours coevolution, symbiosis, feedback and responses [...]. It sees human experience [...] as essentially derived from, influenced by and formed by the sensoria of numerous other living beings [...] What we understand as uniquely human, therefore, is *the consequence of hybridization and exchange of material and immaterial [...] across species, skin and functions of animals, plants and humans*. The human in its critical posthumanist outlook is a 'dynamic hybrid' of 'ontologically different elements' (Jöns 2006: p. 572). The human as a dynamic hybrid in critical posthumanist thought focuses [...] not on stasis but on movements of bodies, information and particles all located within a larger system. (pp. 9-10)

Nayar's idea of human hybridity and dynamic ontology is reflected in Woolf's novel and Preciado's film. In Woolf, this hybridity appears through Orlando's gender transformations (Woolf, 1992, p. 134) and the concept that "[i]n every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place" (181), with queer nature as artificer of human life. The human as an open system, coevolving with the environment, is shown through the impact of London's humidity on various



aspects of life (pp. 217-219). In Preciado, hybridity emerges as a coexistence of both constitutive genders of the binary epistemology within one identity, echoing Woolf's idea of "vacillation" between sexes (181), as illustrated in the following excerpt from Preciado's film:

DR. REINE: So, you have a female identification. You think, you feel... How should I put it? Limited, trapped, imprisoned in your male body, is that it?

ORLANDO: What an obsession with the binary! No, I am... a living body, imprisoned in a normative regime.

DR. REINE: Sorry, I don't quite understand; let me ask the question more directly. Do you hate your sexual organs, your penis, for example?

ORLANDO: No, I have a female penis. And it doesn't pose any problem for me. (16:49-17:25)

The coevolution experienced by the human being, who, as a living body, is in constant mutation and contaminated by its surroundings, is shown through scenes where characters physically engage with non-human nature – rocks, trees – and non-human objects like statues. This physical, sometimes erotic contact reflects the symbiosis and contamination between humans and their environment. One example of this openness is when one of the figures representing Orlando mentions having taken their first dose of hormones in a park (Preciado, 2023, 07:43-08:06). Quoting Orlando, in *Orlando, ma biographie politique*: "Life consists of the metamorphosis of oneself, allowing oneself to be transformed by time. To become not just another, but others" (11:25-11:35).

In Woolf's *Orlando*, the character's major metamorphosis follows a period of hibernation or trance, awakening on the seventh day, which might suggest an association with the Christian realm. However, this theory is easily refutable, as Orlando wakes on a Thursday, unlike the biblical seventh day (Saturday), and experiences a dynamic rebirth rather than rest. Although one might consider a connection to Christ's resurrection, the lack of similarity between Orlando's rebirth on the seventh day and the biblical resurrection on the third one cannot be overlooked.

Since this theory is easily refutable, an alternative reasoning is suggested here: what Orlando seems to experience during this week is what might be called hibernation (or estivation, considering it occurs in spring), that is, a state where the body's activity is minimal, preventing failure without the need for food. In both circumstances, Orlando appears to wake as if from a regular night's sleep, as evidenced in the text: "On the seventh day he woke at his usual time" (Woolf, 1992, p. 64); "Orlando woke. He stretched himself. He rose. [...] and went, presumably, to his bath" (128-133). Orlando's second metamorphosis (although Orlando undergoes numerous and constant transformations, for practical purposes we consider here only the two related to the hibernation episodes) resembles the larva's transformation into a butterfly. This animal, while still in its larva form, initiates the formation of the chrysalis and remains there, encapsulated, immobile, and without feeding, for one to three weeks. At the end of this period, the being that previously

had the form of a larva emerges from the cocoon transformed into a butterfly. In a similar way, Orlando lies in bed for seven days, awakening visibly metamorphosed. This can be confirmed by the following excerpts: “Next morning, the Duke [...] was found by his secretaries sunk in profound slumber” (p. 127); “Orlando woke. [...] He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and [...] we have no choice left but confess – he was a woman” (p.132). It is typically in sunny seasons that butterflies emerge from their cocoons and fly, displaying the beauty of their wings. Similarly, after Orlando’s metamorphosis, the narrator/biographer describes Orlando’s unparalleled beauty: “No human being, since the world began, has ever looked more ravishing. His form combined in one the strength of a man and a woman’s grace” (pp. 132-133). What the presented thesis aims to demonstrate is the author’s interest in the relationship between the human and non-human nature. Orlando’s metamorphosis not only has characteristics that resemble other animals but may also serve as an adaptive strategy resulting from the animal’s (whether human or butterfly) contact with the surrounding environment.

It is worth emphasizing how, according to the narrator/biographer’s description, Orlando responds to their own physical transformation: “Orlando looked himself [...] without showing any signs of discomposure [...] The change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at it” (Woolf, 1992, p. 133). The emphasized absence of disturbance or astonishment may lead to a naturalization of this process, one that is highly problematic for more conservative minds (pp. 133-134), throughout the novel. In other words, the normalization of Orlando’s metamorphosis deconstructs the binary epistemology of gender based on biological physiology and builds a concept of the living body as something in constant mutation. In this sense, Orlando’s lack of astonishment may stem from the fact that this metamorphosis is merely one of many in their life.

This chapter aimed to demonstrate that, beyond linking a posthumanist perspective to Woolf’s novel and Preciado’s film, the novel’s subtitle suggests an intent to portray any human life through Orlando’s biography. In this sense, these works are attempts to “change the names of all things” (Preciado, 2023, 24:17) and to sketch a living body through the transformations that shape it. As affirmed in Preciado’s documentary: “Your *Orlando*, Virginia, is a book about the metamorphosis of subjectivity, not merely about changing sex. The first revolutionary metamorphosis is poetry, the possibility of renaming all things, including one’s own name. The second and deepest metamorphosis is love” (24:06).

### **Earthly Marriages**

In the chapter “Queering *Orlando* and Non/Human Desire,” Derek Ryan references, quoting, Sackville-West’s critique of Woolf’s choice regarding Orlando’s marriage in the novel. In Sackville-West’s view: “Shelmerdine does not contribute anything either to Orlando’s character or to the problems of the story (except as a good joke

at the expense of the Victorian passion for marriage) [...]” (Ryan, 2013, p. 109). However, as Ryan (2013, p. 109) argues, it is through an normative action – marriage – that Woolf transgresses the heteronormative conception of sexuality.

In Woolf’s novel, Orlando reflects:

Wedding rings were everywhere. [...] Couples trudged and plodded in the middle of the road indissolubly linked together. [...] Often it was not till the horses’ noses were on them that they budged, and then, though they moved it was all in one piece, heavily, to the side of the road. Orlando could only suppose that some new discovery had been made about the race; that they were somehow stuck together, couple after couple, but who had made it, and when, she could not guess. It did not seem to be Nature. She looked at the doves and the rabbits and the elk-hounds and she could not see that Nature had changed her ways [...] There was no indissoluble alliance among the brutes that she could see. (pp. 230-231)

Orlando demonstrates an awareness of the heteronormative marriage trend of the nineteenth century, noting its artificial and pre-established nature and the hierarchical structure of this institution that distinguishes humans from other beings and organises them by their degree of humanity. Rooted in the observation of a vast array of beings, Orlando questions marriage as a normative organisation of love and sexuality. Moreover, the ironic description of the couples that are “somehow stuck together” (p. 231) one after the other is, as Sackville-West comments, “a good joke at the expense of the Victorian passion for marriage” (Ryan, 2013, p. 109). Here, the narrator ridicules normative behaviour and, thereby deconstructs the normative marriage discourse. Although Sackville-West considers Orlando’s marriage to be in vain, perhaps Orlando’s decision brings a greater awareness of the sociopolitical machinery behind marriage. Even though Orlando has decided to “take a husband” (Woolf, 1992, p. 232), the awareness that it is the “the spirit of the age” (p. 232) that is driving people to marry questions, and thus subverts, this practice of hierarchical organisation of society. Thus, the decision to find a husband is not an innocent choice, nor a mere repetition of the norm, and therefore not a vain act. Instead, it arises from the awareness of the power of the normative system and the challenges faced by those who oppose it. Orlando, rather than resisting it outright, adheres to the norm in order to subvert it, as the text shows: “That this [taking a husband] was much against her natural temperament has been sufficiently made plain. [...] Such is the indomitable nature of the spirit of the age, however, that it batters down anyone who tries to make a stand against it far more effectually than those who bend its own way” (Woolf, 1992, pp. 232-233). While one might counter this idea by arguing that Orlando is swallowed by the force of marital normalization, there is an undeniable act of transgression in the unconventional circumstances of Orlando’s marriage.

In the introduction to *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler (2004) explains,

[H]ow does one oppose homophobia without embracing the marriage norm as the exclusive or most highly valued social arrangement for queer sexual lives? Similarly, efforts to establish bonds of kinship that are not based on a marriage tie become nearly

illegible and unviable when marriage sets the terms for kinship, and kinship itself is collapsed into 'family'. The enduring social ties that constitute viable kinship in communities of sexual minorities are threatened with becoming unrecognizable and unviable as long as the marriage bond is the exclusive way in which both sexuality and kinship are organized. (p. 5)

With Butler's perspective, this analysis shows that Woolf, contrary to Sackville-West's interpretation, uses the heteronormative language that organizes sexual and familial relationships in order to rewrite it. Rather than rejecting marriage, Woolf questions its norms and proposes a decentralizing practice. The marriage between Orlando and Shelmerdine, while within a heteronormative framework, defies traditional norms and cannot by any means be considered heteronormative.

Despite Adkins' (2022, p. 164) apparent overlook, it is possible that Orlando's first marriage was to Rosina Pepita, although this marriage exists mainly in bureaucratic records of questionable authenticity – in a deed documenting this marriage (Woolf, 1992, p. 128), and later, in a court document declaring it annulled (p. 243). The lack of acknowledgement of this marriage, except when the document is accidentally discovered and during Orlando's court case, raises questions about its legitimacy and Orlando's motives, especially regarding their effort to declare Pepita's children illegitimate, potentially to prevent them from inheriting her property (p. 243). However, this marriage does not interfere with the subversive conception of marriage presented in the novel, as, in addition to the dissident nature of Orlando's later partners (nature itself and Shelmerdine), this institution is continually questioned – as seen in Woolf's text: "She was married, true; but if [...] one liked him, was it marriage? [...] if one still wished, more than anything in the whole world, to write poetry, was it marriage?" (p. 252)

Regarding the marriage fever, Orlando subverts the normative concept of marriage through the chosen circumstances and partners. After deciding to seek a husband, Orlando, in a frenetic and intense moment of erotic union and profound bodily symbiosis, declares himself nature's bride:

A single feather quivered in the air and fell into the middle of it. Then, some strange ecstasy came over her. Some wild notion she had of following the birds to the rim of the world and flinging herself on the spongy turf and there drinking forgetfulness, while the rooks' hoarse laughter sounded over her. [...] there she lay content. The scent of the bog myrtle and the meadow-sweet was in her nostrils. The rooks' hoarse laughter was in her ears. 'I have found my mate,' she murmured. 'It is the moor. I am nature's bride,' she whispered, giving herself in rapture to the cold embraces of the grass as she lay folded in her cloak in the hollow by the pool. (Woolf, 1992, pp. 236-237)

Without excluding the queer nature that is referenced throughout the novel, which creates a very different conception of marriage than the one Sackville-West identifies, the union with Shelmerdine is also subversive. Adkins (2022, pp. 164-165) highlights the significance of Orlando's diminutive for Shelmerdine, "Shel," which is a homophone for the word "shell." Thus, Shelmerdine not only connects

to Orlando's loving nature through his diminutive but also contains, like a shell, an unknown, ambiguous, multiple, and vast interior that, like Orlando, is very little heteronormative – as show the moment they realize: “‘You’re a woman, Shel!’ she cried. ‘You’re a man, Orlando!’ he cried” (Woolf, 1992, p. 240).

In summary, although their union occurs within the heteronormative parameters of organizing sexuality and kinship, the hybridity of their identities and the ongoing fusion with their surroundings constitute a movement of decentralization of desire politics – particularly observable in their marriage, which arises from a symbiotic relationship with the environment: “Eight or nine days had been spent thus, [...] when a leaf which had started to fall slowly enough from a tree-top whipped briskly across Orlando's foot. [...] It was the wind. [...] Together they ran through the woods, the wind plastering them with leaves as they ran [...].” (Woolf, 1992, p. 249).

### **Planetary Dialogues, Collective Narrations**

In the opening moments of *Orlando, ma biographie politique*, the narrator addresses Woolf, saying:

I wanted to write to you to tell you that I am one of your Orlandos. I exist. I emerged from your fiction. If you knew... The contemporary world is full of Orlandos. [...] So, I decided to write you a letter, you, who wrote thousands of letters and received just as many. I could also write you a letter now that you are dead, in the organic sense of the term, even though, in inorganic terms, you have never been so alive as you are now. It was one of the countless things I learned from reading your work: life begins before our birth and, obviously, ends long after our death. So, just as you wrote my biography before I was born, I decided to write you a letter after your death. (02:12-03:11)

In Preciado's film, references to Woolf's work and the death of filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard (Preciado, 2023, 1:19:22) create a network of connections, readings, and authors across time and place, presenting the *oeuvre* not as something unique but something in constant dialogue with the outside world. Woolf's novel similarly reflects a post-anthropocentric notion through its subtitle and its questioning of normative and patriarchal literature. The subtitle and allusions to other poets reveal a planetary awareness of being merely *A Biography* within a vast universe.

Throughout Preciado's film, the narrator addresses Virginia Woolf informally by her first name, breaking the hierarchical barrier between them. The use of the informal second-person singular in French, instead of the formal option (*vous*), brings Preciado closer to Woolf, challenging the myth of the artistic genius that would place the British author on a superior status. By writing to Woolf as one of her Orlandos, Preciado creates an intimate, reciprocal relationship marked by a sense of friendship and shared dialogue between these interlocutors who, in some way, write to each other.

A letter is an act of communication that involves sharing matter, stories, and emotions. From this perspective, Preciado's documentary, as a letter to Virginia



Woolf, is equally an exercise in transtemporal sharing that surpasses the life/death boundary. By writing it, Preciado blurs and entwines timelines, enabling multidirectional contamination between them. Thus, through literature's transformative power, Preciado establishes a chronology that is not represented as a line but rather in an unpredictable form, making his dialogue with Virginia Woolf a planetary one.

In this sense, it's worth highlighting the nature of Orlando's life. What seems to justify their living over four hundred years is the fact that it allows countless mutations stemming from exchanges between the human being and everything around them. Moreover, one could argue that this bizarre extension of Orlando's life deconstructs the theological and anthropocentric method of organising time, creating a cosmic perception of an apparently individual and human reality.

Peter Adkins states that Woolf "compresses gradual changes in climate into singular instances to have Orlando witness the kind of climatic cataclysms that Phillips describes as being beyond human perception. [...] Woolf figures climate change through stark moments of 'suddenness and severity' [...]" (2022, p. 153). Despite the novel's intensity of climate change marked by Adkins, this abruptness may be justified by the genre rather than by the climate perception. As Carlos Reis (2018, p. 46) explains, a biography is a report that highlights the most significant events in a life. Thus, as a biography, Woolf's novel emphasises specific and important moments in Orlando's life, which are addressed as unique and sudden phenomena.

Preciado's film blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality, using intertextual and inter-artistic references to Woolf's work to emphasise a decentring that allows the work to "live with" (Haraway, 2016, p. 69) the outside world, establishing planetary dialogues. As seen in the following excerpt:

ORLANDO: It was with someone named Sasha, whom I met at a protest. [...] I felt that as long as I hadn't completed the transition and didn't feel good about myself, it wouldn't be a good idea to be with another person... because I wouldn't have enough maturity, I wouldn't have the right to do that... But now, yes. [...] I had three girls chasing after me, Clorinda, Favilla, and Euphrosyne, all very feminine, very binary, very straight, which I am not. All would have been perfect wives for the nobleman I was supposed to be, but they didn't interest me. Lawyers were already drafting marriage contracts with Lady Margaret, but suddenly, the Great Frost came. (31:53-33:27)

The notion that everyone in the documentary is Orlando (excluding the psychiatrist, Sasha, the doctors, the three goddesses, Orlando's dog, and the judge) is reinforced by the repeated statement, "I am X. In this film, I will be Orlando by Virginia Woolf," which pass through multiple voices as a leitmotif, creating a shared, plural identity. This phrase creates a double "disidentification": each participant steps into the role of Orlando, involving a "disidentification" of the subject that temporarily becomes someone else, while multiple artists playing the same role dismantle the notion of a single, sovereign protagonist. Yet, by saying, "I am X," there's also a

simultaneous process of identification. Thus, by questioning and testing the boundaries separating fiction from reality and subject from collective, subjectivity is rethought from its hybrid and plural nature.

As demonstrated through this section, the biographies created by Woolf and Preciado seek to rewrite subjectivity through dialogues that transcend the anthropocentric notion of time and reveal, in apparent individuality, collective narratives. As the narrator of Preciado's film states, "fiction does not oppose truth, and each individual life is a collective story" (23:19-23:25).

### **Conclusion: What If We Are All Orlando?**

ORLANDO: You're a bit of Orlando too.

MAKEUP ARTIST: So are you! There's a bit of Orlando in all of us. (Preciado, 2023, 06:13-06:19)

This essay concludes by reinforcing the idea that fiction allows for the questioning of hierarchical boundaries and equally enables the creation of new worlds and new languages that experiment with new conceptions of subjectivity. In this sense, to be Orlando is to become an open system, "becoming-with" (Haraway, 2016, p. 71) everything around, constantly influenced and transformed through contact with this exterior. Thus, Orlando's gender and sexuality, their identity mutations, their marriages, and the way their story is narrated are all ways of rethinking human subjectivity through inclusion. As previously mentioned, Orlando is collective, primarily because, beyond containing exchanges of matter and energy with the outside, they represent a planetary (or more-than-human) collective comprised of all human beings. What if we are all Orlando?

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# Posthumanism and History: Collective Memory, Identity and Heritage

*Poulami Aich Mukherjee*

**Abstract:** The present paper is an attempt to contextualise the idea of cultural heritage and collective memory in the posthuman world with the introduction of digital technologies and various non-human agents as processes of 'understanding the past'. By reviewing the role of the digital archives, the AI-driven cultural heritage initiatives, and the digital representations of memory, this study tries to explore the basis of 'posthumanism' in the formation of identity and cultural heritage. It also highlights the transforming relevance and scopes of history as an academic discipline and its possibilities in the ever evolving 'posthuman' world

**Keywords:** Posthumanism, Collective Memory, Historical Studies, Memory Studies, Cultural Studies, Heritage Studies.

## **Introduction**

Humanism is historically rooted in the Renaissance and is a philosophical and ethical stance that emphasises the value and agency of human beings, both individually and collectively. It typically advocates for reason, ethics, and justice, stressing the potential for human growth and the centrality of human dignity in matters of life and society. Whereas, Posthumanism is a critical philosophical movement that critiques traditional humanism's anthropocentric view and explores what it means to be human in a world increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and environmental change. It often questions the boundaries between humans, animals, and machines, emphasising the need to move beyond human-centred thinking. Similarly, Transhumanism is a philosophical movement that advocates for the use of technology to enhance human physical and cognitive

abilities, with the goal of transcending the biological limitations of the human body. It often involves aspirations toward immortality, artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and other advanced technologies. Therefore, while humanism is focused on human-centred values and dignity, transhumanism seeks to improve or transcend the human condition through technology. Posthumanism critiques the humanist tradition and often challenges the notion of a stable human essence, emphasizing fluidity and the collapse of boundaries between human and non-human entities. The present paper aims to understand the relation between History and Posthumanism with a special reference to identity, culture, memories and heritage in the posthuman world.

Generally speaking, 'posthumanist' ideas strive to accommodate the undeniable engagement of nonhuman agents like as technology and nature, as well as new means of wielding power in more-than-human society. According to Rosi Braidotti, one of the leading scholars of posthumanism, we are now witnessing the convergence of two major movements- posthumanism, which rejects the 'humanist ideal of Man' as the allegedly universal measure of all things and post-anthropocentrism which rejects species hierarchy and human exceptionalism. In this context, social theorists have documented the prevalence of several self-other dualisms, including man/woman, western/oriental, and gay/straight. Perhaps the most significant manifestation of this tendency in regard to posthumanism is humanist dualism, which creates a fundamental distinction between the human and the nonhuman or inhuman). Giorgio Agamben refers to this as an anthropological machine that seeks to divide the two within the human, establishing the unique human conscious subject detached from its animal body, and on the human's outskirts, creating a new class of animals. Agamben documents how these divisions bleed together through the tendency to elide the human other with the inhuman or to relegate it to a subhuman status alongside or even subservient to the nonhuman.

While posthumanists like Rosi Braidotti and N. Katherine Hayles are often more optimistic about the potential for technology to reshape human identity, consciousness, and society in a way that transcends human limitations, Fukuyama's perspective is more cautious and critical of these developments. Francis Fukuyama raises concerns about the ethical, social, and political implications of biotechnological advancements, especially human enhancement technologies such as genetic modification, cloning, and artificial intelligence. Fukuyama argues that human dignity is rooted in the 'natural' human condition, and that any attempt to alter this through genetic enhancement or other forms of biotechnology threatens the social and moral fabric of society.

His central concern is that by altering human nature, we risk undermining what it means to be human, and could lead to the creation of 'posthuman' beings that no longer possess the intrinsic dignity associated with human beings. Fukuyama is particularly concerned about the idea of human enhancement through biotechnology. In his view, technologies that enhance intelligence, physical

abilities, or longevity could lead to the creation of a new class of ‘enhanced’ humans, creating profound ethical and social divides. He worries that these enhancements could lead to unintended consequences, such as a loss of diversity or the potential for new forms of oppression.

Fukuyama in his earlier work argued that liberal democracy represented the final stage of human political development. His concerns about biotechnology can be seen as a continuation of this argument. Fukuyama suggests that if humans begin to alter their genetic makeup or create ‘posthuman’ beings, we could jeopardize the political and ethical systems that have emerged from our current conception of humanity. In his view, biotechnology risks destabilising these systems and eroding the political principles of equality and individual dignity. Fukuyama is wary of transhumanism, the movement that seeks to enhance human capabilities through advanced technologies, because of its potential to create a new ‘biotechnological elite’. He fears that if biotechnology becomes widely available, it could lead to a society in which wealth and power are distributed according to genetic or technological enhancements, which could deepen social inequality and create new forms of discrimination.

We can argue that, posthumanism is a complex idea closely associated with postmodernism. Its ‘post’ prefix foreshadows the entrance of a new period; as ‘post-humanism’, it claims to identify a new manner of being in the world that differs significantly from humanism’s conditions. As with post-humanism, the ‘post’ radicalises its suffix to propose a new model of politics and philosophy; nevertheless, it does so in a way that reflects its antecedent’s critical attitude. Posthumanism thus refers to a popular diagnosis of a new period, a new style of critical enquiry that defines itself in contrast to humanism, and a deconstruction of the latter’s critical traditions.

### **Historical Studies and Posthumanism**

Historical studies, as a field, has traditionally centred on human agency and narratives focused on human experience, highlighting the influence of individuals, societies, and institutions on historical developments. However, the posthumanist viewpoint urges historians to look beyond this scope and explore how non-human entities such as technologies, ecosystems, animals, and artificial intelligence could influence or be incorporated into historical accounts. Posthumanism, as a theoretical perspective, challenges the conventional humanist framework, which places humans at the centre of knowledge and moral deliberation. In a posthumanist view, humans are not seen as isolated beings but as interconnected with technology, animals, the environment, and other non-human forces. Philosophical, technological, ecological, and biological perspectives all contribute to posthumanist thought.

In posthumanist historical research, scholars examine the role of non-human agents in shaping history, such as the impact of climate change or the influence of artificial intelligence on contemporary society. A central issue within posthumanism and history is the exploration of the Anthropocene, the geological era marked by



significant human influence on the Earth's climate and ecosystems. This has prompted historians to reconsider how historical narratives should reflect environmental and non-human factors. Technological developments, from primitive tools to advanced AI, are increasingly recognised as crucial forces shaping the trajectory of human history. Posthumanism encourages historians to investigate how these technologies could redefine the interplay between human history and future possibilities.

Additionally, posthumanism frequently addresses the idea that animals and other non-human life forms have their own histories, which have often been overlooked or marginalised in traditional, human-centred historical accounts. In the context of climate change, historians might explore not only how human societies have shaped their environments, but also how non-human factors such as geological changes, animal migrations, and natural events have altered human history. By using a posthumanist lens, they might explore how human history has been co-constructed with the more-than-human world.

### **Cultural Studies and Posthumanism**

Cultural Studies and Posthumanism offer a critical framework for analysing contemporary cultural phenomena by extending beyond the traditional human-centred perspective. This approach integrates non-human entities such as animals, technology, artificial intelligence, and the environment into cultural analysis, providing new insights into identity, ethics, power dynamics, and social structures. By adopting this interdisciplinary lens, scholars are prompted to rethink the nature of culture and humanity in a world that is increasingly shaped by interconnectedness and technological advancement.

Posthumanism is particularly relevant for understanding the intersection of technology and culture, especially with the rise of digital technologies and artificial intelligence. As human and machine boundaries blur, the concept of the 'cyborg' emerges in cultural studies, symbolising the fusion of human bodies and technological components. This hybridisation challenges traditional notions of human identity and opens new avenues for social and political engagement, as well as critiques of systems of oppression such as patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism, as explored by Donna Haraway.

Another significant area in which posthumanism intersects with cultural studies is Animal Studies. Posthumanist theorists advocate for the recognition of non-human animals as subjects with their agency and histories, disrupting the conventional cultural narratives that treat animals as mere resources or objects for human use. This perspective has led to increased attention on how animals are represented in literature, film, art, and media, and how these representations reinforce human dominance over other life forms. Scholars such as Rosi Braidotti and Tiffany Anna explored how the treatment of animals is linked to human identity and ethics, arguing that cultural narratives should recognise animals as moral and political agents rather than passive objects.

Posthumanism also aligns with ecological concerns, particularly within eco-criticism, a field that examines the relationship between literature, culture, and the environment. The growing environmental crisis marked by issues such as climate change, deforestation, and species extinction has prompted scholars of cultural studies to explore how cultural representations of nature contribute to or challenge environmental destruction. Posthumanism's emphasis on the interdependence of all life forms and the collapse of human/non-human boundaries provide a crucial framework for understanding the cultural dimensions of ecological issues. Scholars like Bruno Latour with his actor-network theory and Timothy Morton with his concept of the 'hyper-object' emphasise the importance of non-human actors, such as ecosystems and geological processes in shaping our understanding of culture and society. Posthumanist approaches in cultural studies encourage a more integrated perspective of human culture as part of a larger, interconnected system of life forms and ecological processes.

Furthermore, posthumanism's focus on biotechnology and its potential to alter or enhance the human body has significant implications for cultural studies, especially concerning identity, gender, and power dynamics. Cultural studies often explore how biotechnologies, such as genetic modification, reproductive technologies, and body enhancements, challenge the traditional concepts of the human body and societal norms surrounding gender and identity. For instance, the advent of genetic engineering and bio-hacking has prompted a rethinking of human identity as fluid and open to modification, shaped by both technological innovations and cultural forces. The notion of the 'posthuman body' calls into question how cultural narratives surrounding disability, gender, and transhumanism will evolve in response to these emerging technologies.

Posthumanism in cultural studies challenges conventional cultural analysis, which typically human experiences and identity. It expands this focus to include non-human entities, ranging from animals and ecosystems to machines and even microbes, acknowledging their role in shaping cultural narratives. Central to posthumanism is the rejection of humans as the exclusive or significant subject of culture and society. Traditional cultural studies have often focused on human identity, subjectivity, and agency, with emphasis on race, gender, class, and nationality. Posthumanism critiques these frameworks, urging cultural studies to address the agency of non-human entities and their influence on human culture, identity, and societal norms. This shift calls for a broader consideration of how technologies, animals, and the environment intersect with cultural dynamics.

### **Memory Studies and Posthumanism**

Memory Studies and Posthumanism offer a transformative framework for understanding memory in a world where human and non-human entities, technologies, and ecosystems are increasingly intertwined. By broadening the concept of memory to include non-human agents and technological systems,

posthumanism challenges the traditional notion of memory as something confined to human consciousness. Conventional memory studies typically focus on the human subject as the centre of memory, emphasising individual recollections, collective memories, and cultural practices that preserve and transmit the past. In contrast, posthumanism suggests that memory is not solely human but can be distributed across animals, machines, ecosystems, and even artificial intelligence, envisioning memory as a more expansive and multidimensional process that transcends human cognitive limits.

Posthumanism encourages a re-examination of how non-human entities such as animals, plants, and digital technologies participate in the creation and preservation of memory. For example, the memory of a forest may not be confined to the human beings who interact with it; it could also be embedded in the trees, soil, or ecological processes that define the forest's existence. Likewise, artificial intelligence and digital technologies are increasingly seen as key players in how memory is stored, accessed, and processed, particularly through digital archives, social media, and memory-enhancing devices. One of the major shifts in memory studies prompted by posthumanism is the understanding that memory is not confined to the human brain or individual consciousness. Instead, memory is distributed across various bodies, environments, and technologies. This expanded view incorporates embodied memory such as muscle or genetic memory, environmental memory i.e. the memory encoded in ecosystems or landscapes and technological memory like the memory stored in machines, databases, or artificial intelligence. This reimagining of memory challenges the traditional understanding of it as something exclusive to humans, urging scholars to consider how memory is enacted across different non-human forms and technological systems.

Digital technologies such as AI, social media, and data storage systems play a crucial role in posthumanist memory studies. The proliferation of digital archives, memory-enhancing devices such as smartphones and wearable devices, and algorithmic recollections has fundamentally changed how people store and retrieve memories. The posthumanist theory suggests that these advancements complicate the relationship between memory and subjectivity. Rather than considering memory as purely human or subjective, these technologies present memory as a distributed, nonlinear process involving both human and non-human actors, such as algorithms and cloud storage. Moreover, digital technologies raise important ethical questions about the control of memory, which determines what is remembered or forgotten, and how these processes are influenced by power dynamics and technological infrastructure.

Another significant aspect of posthumanism in memory studies is its approach to collective memory, which involves shared memories within a community or society. Posthumanism urges a reconsideration of the collective, recognising how non-human forces, such as environmental shifts, technological innovations, and animal life, contribute to collective memory and the construction of social remembrance. For instance, the collective memory of a community affected by a

natural disaster, such as a wildfire or flood, may be shaped not only by human recollections, but also by the memory embedded in the land itself or in the collective experience of non-human animals inhabiting the affected area.

The concept of environmental memory has gained increasing prominence within posthumanist memory studies. This concept suggests that memory is not solely a human activity, but is embedded within the environment. For instance, ecosystems, climate patterns, and species migrations can be seen as forms of memory that reflect past environmental conditions and events. Within this context, posthumanist memory studies explore how the environment ‘remembers’ human actions through changes in biodiversity, climate, and soil and how these environmental forms of memory shape future generations.

Posthumanism also intersects with the study of memory and trauma, particularly those concerning the body. Traditional trauma theory often centres on the human body and the psyche as the locus of traumatic memory. Posthumanism complicates this by examining how trauma and memory are distributed across both human and the non-human bodies. For example, how might the trauma caused by environmental disasters, colonial violence, or technological oppression be remembered not just by humans but by the land, animals, or machines involved? This broadened perspective challenges conventional cultural narratives on memory and trauma, urging the development of new frameworks that account for collective and environmental trauma.

In summary, Memory Studies and Posthumanism provide a radical rethinking of memory as a distributed, multi-agent process that involves human and non-human entities alike. It encourages scholars to expand their understanding of memory to encompass technological, ecological, and animal participation, thus providing new ways to engage with the past and reimagine the future.

### **Heritage Studies and Posthumanism**

Heritage Studies is a multidisciplinary field that explores how societies remember, represent, and conserve cultural heritage. This encompasses both tangible heritage, such as monuments, buildings, and landscapes, and intangible heritage, such as traditions, rituals, and oral histories. The field examines how heritage helps shape identities, define communities, and mediate collective memory, while also investigating the politics surrounding heritage who controls it, who benefits from it, and how it is used in power dynamics. Heritage Studies and posthumanism intersect in thought-provoking ways, particularly in how we approach history, identity, and the non-human aspects of culture and the environment. While Heritage Studies has traditionally concentrated on the preservation and interpretation of cultural, historical, and natural heritage, posthumanism challenges the human-centred perspective.

Traditional Heritage Studies often focus on human experiences, actions, and achievements; however, posthumanism calls for a broader perspective that includes the roles of animals, plants, objects, and ecosystems in shaping cultural and

historical landscapes. Posthumanism questions the divide between natural and cultural heritage, proposing that natural elements, such as landscapes and ecosystems, have agency and significance beyond their human-centred interpretations. Ideas such as eco-heritage and bicultural heritage advocate for recognising the interconnectedness of human and non-human heritage.

Posthumanism reimagines conservation practices as a collaborative process that incorporates non-human elements. This includes considering the agency of materials and the influence of animal species on the preservation of cultural landmarks. It also emphasises the affective dimensions of heritage, not only in terms of human emotions but also in how materials, objects, and environments affect non-human beings. A posthuman approach encourages us to think about how a site or object resonates not only with human memories but also with its broader material, historical, and future contexts. Furthermore, posthumanism expands the scope of heritage to encompass technological artefacts and artificial life. In a world where AI, robotics, and biotechnology play growing roles in everyday life, posthumanism challenges us to consider the implications of inheriting technological legacies. The conservation of technologies, including artificial entities, becomes part of our cultural and technological evolution.

In the context of colonialism, posthumanism offers a way to rethink how heritage was historically used to assert power and erase indigenous histories. When combined with postcolonial theory, Posthumanism advocates for a more inclusive, ecological reimagining of heritage that recognises the contributions of non-human entities, such as the environment, while challenging human-centred narratives that have long dominated heritage conservation. Ultimately, the convergence of Heritage Studies and Posthuman Studies provides a powerful framework for reinterpreting the past, present, and future of cultural and environmental heritage. Posthumanism offers new perspectives on heritage, prompting us to reconsider what is worth preserving, why we preserve it and for whom. This approach fosters a more inclusive, relational, and ethically responsible understanding of the heritage.

## **Conclusion**

### **Posthumanism and ‘Understanding the Past’**

At the heart of posthumanism is a critique of traditional humanism, which centres humans as the primary source of knowledge, ethics, and value. Humanism has long emphasised human reason, autonomy, and distinct separation from other forms of life. Posthumanism challenges these views by questioning the boundaries between humans and non-human entities and advocating for a more fluid, interconnected, and dynamic conception of the self. It also draws heavily from post-structuralist philosophy, which challenges the stable, unified notion of subjectivity.

In ‘The Posthuman’ (2013), Rosi Braidotti argues that Western definitions of the ‘human’ have been too restrictive, often prioritising human exceptionalism while overlooking the deep connections between humans, other life forms, and the

environment. She posits that historical understanding should extend beyond human actions to recognise the agency of non-human entities. Braidotti asserts that humans are intrinsically linked to the non-human, and historical narratives must reflect this interconnection. She advocates for a 'posthumanist turn' in historical studies, urging the inclusion of non-human agents such as animals, ecosystems, and even machines in the shaping of history. This approach challenges the traditional human-centred historical narrative, which often neglects ecological and technological influences.

In 'Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things' (2010), Jane Bennett explores how material objects, bodies, and technologies possess a form of active force, which she calls 'vibrancy'. Bennett argues that non-human entities exert their own agency, interacting with human decisions and actions. She contends that historical events emerge not solely from human will but also through the dynamic interactions between human and non-human agencies. For example, the rise of industrial capitalism can be better understood by examining how technologies like the steam engine and factory machinery did not merely function as tools, but actively shaped labour relations and environmental change factors that traditional historiographies often overlook.

Timothy Morton, in 'Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World' (2013), critiques the traditional separation between nature and culture. He argues that ecological phenomena, such as climate change, operate on scales that transcend human history, but still influence human experience. Morton suggests that the Anthropocene, a term for the current geological age defined by human impact on Earth, should not be seen as a purely human phenomenon but as a convergence of both human and non-human forces. He advocates for a more inclusive historical perspective that incorporates non-human agencies, such as climate, ecosystems, and species that have long shaped human history but are often excluded from conventional historical narratives.

Laurajane Smith, in 'Uses of Heritage' (2006), examines how heritage plays a role in shaping identity and memory, with a focus on human engagement with heritage. However, Posthumanist critiques, including those by Braidotti, suggest that heritage should not be viewed exclusively as a human-centred project. Posthumanism calls for acknowledgement of the contributions of non-human entities to cultural heritage. For example, it questions how the "heritage" of non-human elements, such as forests, rivers, or species, should be considered and how ecosystems, technologies, and animals can influence collective memory and identity.

Catherine Malabou, in 'The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage' (2008), extends Posthumanist thought into the realm of neuroplasticity, suggesting that historical change is not only shaped by human intent but also by biological, environmental, and technological forces. Malabou argues that the past should not be understood solely through human agency, but rather as the result of complex interactions between human and non-human forces, further dissolving the boundaries between the human and non-human.



Thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari deconstructed the idea that human subjectivity is the sole origin of meaning and value. Instead, they argued that meaning is fluid, always evolving, and shaped by a complex interplay of human and non-human forces. Phenomenology, particularly through the works of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, provides a significant basis for posthumanism by focusing on the lived experiences and embeddedness of humans in the world. Phenomenology acknowledges that humans are continually interacting with and interpreting a world that includes non-human entities, suggesting that human consciousness and perception are not isolated from, but always in relationship with, the environment.

Posthumanism also aligns with new materialist and speculative realist philosophies that emphasise the agency of matter and the influence of non-human forces in shaping the world. These traditions argue that material entities, whether natural, technological, or conceptual, possess their own forms of agency and cannot be reduced merely to human purposes or intentions. Feminist Posthumanism in particular examines how gender, sexuality, and embodiment intersect with non-human entities, challenging anthropocentric and androcentric perspectives on knowledge and power.

Posthumanism offers a transformative approach to understanding the past by moving beyond human-centred narratives and including the roles of non-human actors, such as animals, plants, technologies, and the environment. This framework challenges traditional historical analysis and calls for a more inclusive, relational understanding of history that recognises the interconnectedness of human and non-human agents. Therefore, in total, the philosophical foundation of posthumanism draws from diverse intellectual traditions that question the human-centred worldview. By critiquing humanism, exploring the agency of matter, and rethinking the relationships between humans and the non-humans, posthumanism offers a more inclusive and relational framework for understanding subjectivity, history, and identity.

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# Octavia E Butler's Posthuman Constructs

*M. Sreelakshmy*

**Abstract:** This article studies the related themes of "trade" and posthumanism in Octavia E. Butler's fiction. Since the trope of "trade" traverses Butler's fiction- surrogacy in exchange for protection in "Bloodchild," human bodies hosting the extraterrestrial lifeforms in Clay's Ark, trading DNA in Lilith's Brood etc., - I look at the posthuman who/that is the outcome of the "trade" pact between the humans and their non-human partners. The OED defines the adjective "post-human" as "of or relating to a hypothetical species that might evolve from human beings, as using genetic or bionic augmentation." Therefore, while referring to particular instances from "Bloodchild," Clay's Ark, and Dawn, this paper attempts a study of the coming together of the human and the Other.

**Keywords:** The posthuman, Octavia Butler, trade, human body, the monster, other.

Although the concept of "trade" initially appears only in Octavia E. Butler's 1987 novel *Dawn*, where it is used about an alien species called the Oankali that trade their genetic material with other species, I argue that Butler employs it in various forms in "Bloodchild" and *Clay's Ark* (both published in 1984) as well. Using these three texts, I look at how Butler fashions an economy of trade involving the human and the nonhuman that initiates the creation of the posthuman. All of the texts under study include the human and the Other in various forms, the Terrans and the Tlic in "Bloodchild," the extraterrestrial lifeforms and the humans who host them in *Clay's Ark*, and finally, the humans and the Oankali in *Dawn*. This paper attempts to locate the coming together of these disparate species to form the posthuman.

Both "Bloodchild" and *Clay's Ark* address the complex relationship between the parasite and the host; while the Terrans/humans are involved in temporary but nearly fatal encounters with the Tlic larvae that feed on their blood, the clayark

infection elevates the sensory perception of the converts (with the infected remaining human-like). In *Dawn*, and subsequently in the rest of the *Lilith's Brood* trilogy, Butler (2007) extends the trope of the host-parasite to include the Oankali-human symbiotic relationship wherein the *pre* posthuman who is slightly modified so as to withstand ageing and diseases, gives birth to the Oankali-human hybrids called “constructs” (p.260). Trade therefore demands the presence of host-bodies in Butler.

### Other Bodies

In “Bloodchild,” Butler involves the Tlic and the humans in a surrogacy pact; the Terrans (mostly males) propagate the alien larvae inside their bodies in exchange for a seemingly peaceful life in the Tlic territory. T’Gatoi, the Tlic ‘monster’ in “Bloodchild” is described as follows:

T’Gatoi whipped her three metres of body off her couch... She had bones—ribs, a long spine, a skull, four sets of limb bones per segment... she seemed not only boneless but aquatic—something swimming through the air as though it were water. (Butler, 2005, p. 9)

On the other hand, the extraterrestrial lifeforms in *Clay's Ark* are distinctly non-human:

“Unidentifiable microbes,” ... tiny, spiderlike organisms in her flesh, some of them caught in the act of reproducing along with her cells... independent organisms... at home in human cells in a way that should not have been possible—like plasmids... (Butler, 2007 b, p. 497)

These forms of life, the aftermath of a botched space mission, reach the Earth through Eli, the only surviving crew-member. Butler sets the narrative of *Clay's Ark* between the past, where Eli infects the Boyd ranch, and the present, when the Maslins, Blake and his daughters Keira and Rane, are abducted by Eli's people. The Oankali in *Dawn* is a combination of the insectivorous Tlic body and the strange but tenacious behaviour embodied by the clayark microbes. It is with a bit of theatricality that the Oankali present themselves in ‘person’ before the humans for the first time:

The lights brightened as she had supposed they would, and what had seemed to be a tall, slender man was still humanoid, but it had no nose—no bulge, no nostrils—just flat, gray skin. It was gray all over—pale gray skin, darker gray hair on its head. The hair grew down around its eyes, ears and throat. There was so much hair across the eyes that she wondered how the creature could see. (Butler, 2007b, p. 13)

However, the humans soon discover that the “hair” is a sensory tentacle that “writhed independently, a nest of snakes startled, driven in all directions” (p. 13). Interestingly, the narrative reveals the appearance of the Oankali step-by-step: the tentacles become “elastic,” and are later described as “murkily translucent, pale grey worms” (pp. 14-18). With time, Lilith, one of the humans who is introduced to the Oankali for the first time, touches Jdahya, the first Oankali whom she meets,

and discovers his skin to be “cool and almost too smooth to be real flesh—smooth the way her real flesh was and perhaps as tough as a fingernail” (p. 25). His body covered with “tufts of sensory tentacles,” Jdahya soon becomes “merely ugly”; “a misplaced sea creature” (p. 28).

I argue that the first step in trade is the monster finding ways to fit within the human imagination. Gregory Jerome Hampton points out that the survival of Butler’s characters depends on their ability to adapt to change, “bodies and the identities placed on them change as they move toward a state of hybridity” (p. 113). For instance, T’Gatoi pledges her life to protect and love Gan, her human partner, and the humans are content to host the clayark lifeforms, Lilith learns more about Jdahya (as well as the Oankali), and he transforms from a grotesque abomination to the distant cousin of a commonplace terrestrial being. In other words, these minor accommodations initiate trade that in turn paves the way for a more intimate inter-species relationship, leading to the birth of the posthuman.

### **Human-Other Crossovers**

Critical posthumanism highlights the various aspects of human interaction with the environment, seeing the human as a “more inclusive, non-unitary entity whose boundaries... with other life-forms and species, are porous” (Nayar, 2014, p. 47). Once the human is initiated into some form of trade with the nonhuman, the corporeal boundaries become ill-defined. Gan’s body is also host to the Tlic larva, the clayarks alter the converts’ brain chemistry to a significant extent, so does the Oankali to Lilith. Butler’s oeuvre is indeed built around such “interconnections, co-evolution and mutualities” (p. 53) that constitute interrelated patterns of living that will be examined in detail here.

When “Bloodchild” begins, Gan has been long bequeathed to T’Gatoi. Trade is always already underway, and the process of accepting the Other is linked to (human/e) emotions such as love and jealousy. Gan starts feeling jealous at the thought of T’Gatoi impregnating his sister, Hoa. T’Gatoi asks Gan:

“But you came to me . . . to save Hoa.”

“Yes.” I leaned my forehead against her... “And to keep you for myself,” I said. It was so, I didn’t understand it. But it was so. (Butler, 2005, p. 28)

Similarly, the converts in *Clay’s Ark* share a sense of togetherness because of the disease. As Keira asks Stephen, a young convert:

“What’s holding you here?”

“I belong here. These are my people now.”

“Why? Because they gave you a disease?”

“Yes.”

“That doesn’t make sense!” she said angrily.

“It will.” (Butler, 2007b, p. 534)

Neither Gan nor Keira understand why the Tlic or the clayark lifeforms generate such affiliations- a theme that Butler extends to *Dawn* where the Oankali seduce the humans, literally addicting them using neural stimulation. With humans

unwillingly adapting to change, redefining their identities in different ways, trade gives rise to a highly uneven terrain that favours the powerful.

Initiating Lilith's induction into the Oankali lifestyle, Butler (2007c) demonstrates how Nikanj changes Lilith's "brain chemistry," helping her remember better (p. 75). After arguing with Nikanj about wanting to be human, wanting to be able to forget things, Lilith finds herself thinking of her family. She wonders about her human husband's brain damage:

He was lucky to have died so quickly.

Would she be equally lucky?

If the Oankali damaged her brain, would they have the decency to let her die—or would they keep her alive, a prisoner permanently locked away in that ultimate solitary confinement? (p. 78)

Immediately after this diegesis, Lilith asks Nikanj to 'fix' her brain. Her memory is redefined and she wakes up feeling "alarmed, pleased, and frightened" (p. 81). In other words, it is the memory of her dead human family that makes her *become* one step closer to the Other, as she becomes "the hybridised Other (a human with a mutated brain chemistry)" (Nanda, 2020, p. 121). She has nothing left to lose and therefore is she ready to experiment, to foster new relations, to embrace change.

Rosi Braidotti defines the process of "becoming posthuman" as denoting "multiple ecologies of belonging, while it enacts the transformation of one's sensorial and perpetual coordinates, to acknowledge the collective nature and outward-bound direction of what we still call the self" (p. 193). The self is indeed a contested territory in both Humanism and Posthumanism. Cary Wolfe answers the question of *What is Posthumanism?* by arguing that the human is "achieved by escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether" (2010, p. xv). Becoming posthuman, therefore, is not only a transformative process requiring expansion beyond material living but it is also the ability to think beyond the confines of the human body to exist in mutual harmony with other sentient and non-sentient beings. It is on this journey of moulding one's self concerning the Other that Gan, Eli, and Lilith embark upon the (be)coming of the posthuman.

However, this transition towards becoming the nonhuman who/that gives birth to the posthuman is turbulent and also often fatally traumatic for most of Butler's deuteragonists. For instance, while Gan accepts T'Gatoi as his lover/partner/wife; Gan's brother, Qui, is constantly repulsed and fearful of their alien saviours. Gan pays attention to Qui's defensive behaviour and notes that Qui "began running away... until he realized there is no 'away.' Not in the Preserve. Certainly not outside... as long as I was alright, he was safe from the Tlic" (Butler, 2005, p. 19). For a major part of the narrative, some of the humans who oppose the Oankali in *Dawn* also occupy this category. Unable to come to terms with the idea of their imminent and inevitable mating with the Oankali, one of them murders Joseph



(Lilith's potential human mate who, like Lilith, has been genetically altered to survive). An Oankali recounts the incident, "he saw Joseph healing, saw the flesh mending before his eyes. He screamed. I've never heard a human scream that way. Then he . . . used his ax" (Butler, 2007c, p. 224). Trade is a violent affair that pushes humans to resort to survival and self-preservation.

Sheryl Vint (2005) argues that the greatest test that Butler's characters have to undergo is that of "a fearful response to difference" (p. 293). Drawing parallels between Keira and Rane, Vint shows how Keira's identity is fixed or "molar" while Rane's is a "molecular" identity that is open to difference, and is in flux. When Keira fails to differentiate between the humanity and animality of her being, Rane is quick to adapt to the potential possibilities offered by existing in synchrony with a disease that gifts her a chance to live (before the infection, Keira was dying from leukaemia). The difference between Keira and Rane's approach to "multispecies companionship" is made clearer in their respective interactions with the children at the ranch. Jacob and Zera are mutant Clayark-carriers from birth, looking only mildly human-like:

"Why don't you like me?" he [Jacob] demanded.  
She [Rane] shook her head... "Because you look different. Because I'm afraid of you." (Butler, 2000b, p. 537)

On the other hand, Keira is fascinated by Zera, "a perfect, lean, little four-legged thing with shaggy uncombed hair and a beautiful little face" (p. 545). Survival is hence largely dependent on the tacit acceptance of the Other as well as the potential changes imbued to the human (host) body.

### **The Posthuman**

When it comes to human-other interactions, Butler consciously employs metaphors of consumption and hunger. I argue that this "hunger," that all but consumes the human, is a necessary aspect of trade. The human has to be consumed, albeit partially, to give birth to the posthuman. It is not only the Tlic or the clayark or the Oankali that do this, almost all forms of life in Butler's oeuvre work towards acquiring life and thereby embracing difference. But even when the human is subsumed, humanity is encouraged. The *humane* traits of sympathy and benevolence help Butler's posthuman constructs understand human psychology better. Katherine Hayles writes that "the posthuman evokes the exhilarating prospect of getting out of some of the old boxes and opening up new ways of thinking about what being human means" (p. 285). Being human, then, means venturing into new trans-species partnerships while learning how to adapt one's self to differences.

When the Oankali entrusts Lilith with the task of teaching her species the various modes of survival required to live on the new Earth, Eli carefully coordinates a group of people into becoming hosts for millions of extraterrestrial organisms. Trade is thus incomplete without the elaborate process of re-education that is required to make humans "embrace difference" (Butler, 2007a, p. 329). As Sarah

Outterson argues, “Butler’s characters exist in worlds that require them constantly to learn and teach in order to adapt” (p. 433). This is evident in “Bloodchild” as well where Gan is said to have been accompanying T’Gatoi even as a child in order to learn more about the Tlic ways of living. Thus, education aids the process of becoming.

Once the process of education is complete, the humans form inter-species familial ties. For instance, the converts thrive as “a family with ugly problems” (Butler, 2007b, p. 513). Gan is certain that the humans will grow up to shed their differences with the Tlic if they are “adopted early enough” into the Tlic families (Butler, 2005, p. 9). Lilith is, in fact, “adopted” (Butler, 2007c, p. 64) by Jdahya’s family and she calls herself a clueless child amid the Oankali. Gradually, both the participants of this inter-species venture inevitably merge into “fruitful couplings” (Haraway, 2016, p. 7).

The Oankali way of acquiring life “renews” them, helping them “survive as an evolving species instead of specializing” (Butler, 2007c, p. 40). This technique of interspecies mergers as practiced by the Oankali can be studied as a combination of the Tlic-Terran and the clayark-convert economies. That is to say, the surrogacy pact in “Bloodchild” and the mutualism in *Clay’s Ark* find a dominant approach in *Dawn* where the Oankali involve the humans in a permanent contract requiring the physical and mental attributes of the human. Thus, by engaging in trade with human beings, the Oankali insist on “positing a shift from presence/absence to pattern/randomness” (Hayles, 1999, p. 285).

Derived from the Latin *com* and *strure*, meaning “together” and “to lay, pile, build” respectively, the *OED* defines the verb “construct” as “to make or form by fitting the parts together; to frame, build, erect.” Interestingly, the noun “companion” is also derived from the same Latin root *com* (and “panis” meaning “together” and “bread” respectively), *OED*. Donna J. Haraway’s “companion species” are “human and nonhuman animals... messmates at a table, eating together whether we know how to eat well or not” (Haraway, 2008, p. 301). Addicted to each other, these forms-of-life meet at crossroads, interact with each other, acquire each other. Such inter-relationships construct ways-of-living, make companions of the human and the non-human-Other, leading to the construction of the hybrid progeny—the posthuman.

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# Decoding the Unconscious: Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill" and Eugène Ionesco's *The Chairs* Through Lacanian Lens

*Sunanda Basu*

**Abstract:** This paper proposes a Lacanian Psychoanalytic examination of Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill" and Eugène Ionesco's *The Chairs*, two seminal pieces of literature of the twentieth century. By applying Jacques Lacan's theoretical approach to The Mirror stage and the Symbolic Order, this analysis will delve into the issues of alienation, identity fragmentation, and the human condition relevant in the modern world. The traditional idea of what it means to be a human is challenged. The thinker is forced to question one's sense of existence challenging the time bound Cartesian philosophy. The protagonists of the two pieces face a fractured identity while attempting to grip onto an imaginary state of being, the I. Because their idea of I is not real and is a self-mandated by social norms, the narratives end in incoherency where the 'real' self is repressed and deemed dangerous. The narratives hence prove to be highly absurdist not only because of Miss Brill's loneliness due to old age or the old couple's inability to converse amidst a pool of scattered chairs but because the philosophy and psychology lie much deeper in the study of their unconsciousness. By exploring the intersections of psychoanalysis and literary theory, this study seeks to provide a unique understanding of the philosophical and psychological underpinnings present in modernist literature and its relevance to contemporary debates relating to the Posthuman studies.

**Keywords:** Alienation, identity, fragmentation, modern, psychoanalysis, absurd, unconscious.

## Introduction

In the foreword of *Écrits* by Malcolm Bowie, it is stated that "Lacan speaks tirelessly of human speech and its unconscious underpinnings" (Bowie, 1966). Alienation is

the fundamental concept that is tied to a human's unconscious rather than the conscious and it is what shapes our relationships with ourselves and others. Alienation is a pessimistic attitude toward one's social environment. One aspect contributing to alienation is the association between social structure and personality. Because there is a conflict present between the protagonist's social role, such as his /her self-image, values, and goals, the person suffers from a disillusioned or "negative" response which is alienation (Wegner, 1975, p.172). Society presents one with mandated codes of behavior which are inadequate to express the authentic self. Hence, people in society, especially modern society with its stifling norms and orders to create coherency end up creating incoherent beings who are unable to express themselves. Towards the end of all the modernist and absurdist texts, there is a lack of complicity whether it be through death or a dissatisfactory conclusion without a closure. Here, the audience is free to interpret the meanings that the author attempts to express. Such an ending presents the process of one's state of anxiety in a modern society where one fails to know oneself, being trapped within a state of 'complicity' that is deemed as the 'right' social self. Lacan, in his theoretical work of *Écrits*, opposes the Cartesian philosophy stating "I think, therefore I am" (Lacan, 2006, p.73) in his *A Discourse on the Method*. Descartes believed that he could know that he existed because he doubted it. Lacan stated that what the mind perceives as 'true' is only an illusion. He brings forth this discourse in *Écrits*'s The Mirror Stage. Lacanian psychoanalysis presents this as the first stage within many stages of a person's psychology. It is the stage that creates within the persona from childhood a sense of 'false' identity. This false identification that the child grabs onto is the "imago" (1966, p.2) which is the image of God. It is the *I* that is starkly different from the real self that one is but suppresses. Hence, the self-wrestles with the "illusion of autonomy" (p.5) and futilely hustles to imbue within itself the "historical effort of a society to refuse to recognize that it has any function other than the utilitarian one." (p.5) The state of knowledge that the persona lives with is 'paranoid' which leads to a sense of existentialism. Just like this false sense of self, language too becomes an impediment rather than a means of communication. In Lacan's "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" he states that the 'signifier' which is the pre-existing language can never capture the essence of the 'signified.': "The symbol manifests itself...as the murder of the thing." (Lacan, 1966, p.77) Lacan reinterpreted Freud's work in terms of structural linguistics where for him the Id, Ego, and Superego were distinct principles and not interconnected entities like that of Freud. The Id is not just the primitive instincts but also the unrepresentable aspect of the self, the Ego is not just rational but also an imaginary construct while the superego is not just the moral but also the symbolic order that structures human experience. The protagonists of the two pieces are identified due to their sense of alienation that has been created slowly and steadily with their unstable relationship with the modernist society of the twentieth century. Lacan also develops on Saussure's idea of the 'signifier' and the 'signified' making use of the concept of the "sliding"

(Lacan, 1966, p.117) signifier where the signifier is always in flux and can never be pinned down.

Miss Brill, the protagonist of Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill" is depicted as a lonely 'spinster' in a small European town. She is a teacher and an English expatriate who loves to spend her Sundays taking a walk in the park, and observing the people surrounding her. The significance of the story depicts the artificiality of modernism where she is unable to express her true self to the people surrounding her. She is lonely despite the company around her and is in a constant struggle to find a sense of complicity in the ideal *I* that she has formed for herself. However, she is unable to achieve any coherence till the end depicts through the open-endedness of the narrative. Similarly, in the absurdist one-act play of Ionesco, the old couple's inability to converse with each other depicts the limitations of the 'signifier' to provide any sense of meaning for solace. Stranded amidst an isolated island, their sense of alienation is further amplified by prefiguring their suicides as the play closes.

### Literature Review

This review considers the secondary articles available on Ionesco's *The Chairs* and Mansfield's "Miss Brill." Julieta Paulesc (2013), in her article "*Semiramis of Ionesco Land: Facets of Womanhood and Gender Relations in Eugene Ionesco's The Chairs*," explores the image of the complex female character where she is in an attempt to fulfil a double role of wife and mother to her husband. Marian Tolpin's (1968) article "*Eugene Ionesco's The Chairs and The Theatre of the Absurd*" explores the play with the presence of its psychic reality. Here the critic focuses on Camus's definition of absurdity, where the man "feels a stranger," and Freud's consideration of condensation and dramatisation as the most significant features of dream work. Albert Bermel's (1975) study on "*Ionesco: Anything but Absurd*" projects *The Chairs* as a play that is rich with "somethingness" rather than "nothingness," where the character study is blurred by farcical and dreamlike circumstances that conclude in a tragic outcome.

"The Inner and the Outer Reality" by Richard Schechner (1963) depicts the relationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm of the inner and the outer reality, depicting the inner struggles and anguish of the protagonists. He takes into account several of Ionesco's plays, along with *The Chairs*, and highlights the relationship between the inner and outer sense of reality within them. In the following research, the research gap explored is that of depicting *The Chairs* with specific theories of Lacanian psychoanalysis. This focuses specifically on the understanding of 'The Mirror Stage' and the 'Symbolic Order,' which are the main causes of the fragmented identity of the protagonists in the play. Unique interpretations connecting with the theory have been included in the paper that extend upon the previous research done on the play by the critics.

Katherine Mansfield's *Miss Brill*, like that of Ionesco's *The Chairs*, has been subjected to several critical interpretations focused on several grounds as stylistic,



philosophical, and psychological. Shenli Song (2009), in her article “A Stylistic Analysis of ‘Miss Brill’ by Katherine Mansfield,” explores the short story within three main phases that correspond to the four main “linguistic levels” of a particular text, namely lexical levels, figures of speech, grammatical levels, cohesion, and context. Such an analysis assists in providing an integrative, stylistic interpretation of the text. Wang Xiao-yan (2014), in his article “On the Alienation in Miss Brill,” highlights the essential theme of the short story, which is alienation in the modern world, focusing on the main protagonist, Miss Brill. All the elements of alienation are brought forward in the research, ranging from the sense of aloofness depicted in the surrounding descriptive atmosphere to Miss Brill’s psychological fragmentation. The short story has been analysed with the help of a clear-cut critical approach without making use of complex theories. Eka Wilany (2015), on the other hand, depicts the psychological approach to the short narrative utilizing Freud’s theoretical approach to the three main elements of psychosis, namely Id, Ego, and Super-Ego. The research considers significant quotes from the text to analyse them intently through the Freudian lens of psychoanalysis, which provides a fresh approach to the mental state of being of the protagonist that provides her colour rather than viewing her as a flat character. The review essay “Katherine Mansfield Among the Moderns” by W. Todd Martin (1968) discusses the ‘many selves’ that Katherine Mansfield brings to the limelight while creating her protagonists. Apart from depicting the issue of selves, she also puts forward the issue of ‘impersonality’ that is present in the writings of Mansfield, which helps to provide an objective approach to the audience. The research gap in exploring Katherine Mansfield’s “Miss Brill” through the Lacanian lens has been found after the analysis of the previous articles. Along with Ionesco’s *The Chairs*, Mansfield’s short story “Miss Brill” would be explored using selected theories of Lacan that would provide a unique understanding of the modern texts, adding a new scope of research for the texts in the field of psychoanalysis.

### **Brief Exploration of the Storylines**

Katherine Mansfield’s “Miss Brill” is a story that delves into the titular character’s Sunday afternoon visit to the Jardins Publiques. She is depicted as a spinster who carefully dresses and adorns herself with a treasured fur coat as she visits the park. Her only means of gaining satisfaction from the outer world of reality is by observing couples and families with a mix of longing and fascination. As she listens in on conversations and imagines the lives of others, she becomes particularly interested in a young couple’s interactions. However, when they notice her eavesdropping, they tend to mock her, ultimately providing a hint at the shattering of Miss Brill’s world of fantasy. She immediately retreats from the public park, with her ego injured and her sense of self shattered. The story concludes with an open-endedness highlighting Miss Brill’s loneliness and isolation which becomes more pronounced than ever. Peter Thorpe states in “Teaching ‘Miss Brill’” that “Mansfield makes Miss Brill’s mind ascend through a hierarchy of unrealities, beginning with

the heroine's imagining her shoddy fur piece a 'rogue' and ending with the English teacher..." (1962, p.661)

Eugene Ionesco's *The Chairs* provides a monotonous plot line where no character development occurs with the protagonists like many other absurdist storylines. The play depicts the life and anticipated sudden death of an elderly couple who live on a deserted island or a world that has been abandoned. As the one-act play proceeds, one becomes aware that the couple is preparing for a mysterious ceremony as they set up chairs for an audience that never arrives. As they await the arrival of the guests, they tend to engage in conversations that reveal their disconnection and sense of purposelessness. The unnamed Old Man delivers a speech towards the end to the absent 'majesty' believing his message would be delivered after his death. Semiramis along with her husband, the Old Man commits suicide by jumping into the water with the notion of their fragmented self and the play ends on a note of unfulfillment.

### **The World as A Theatre: Miss Brill, The Protagonist in The Drama of The Mirror Stage**

One of the significant aspects that Lacan (1966) brings forward regarding *The Mirror Stage* is that it is a "drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation" (p. 3). Before the child views himself in the mirror at an "age of intelligence" (p. 1), which is the age of six to eighteen months, its sense of self is 'fragmented' as it perceives. However, at this moment of anticipation, the child arrives at a certain type of "totality" where it can recognize itself as an entity among its surroundings and not the fragmented self that it used to be before such a recognition. *The Mirror Stage* is the first phase among the several phases in the identity formation of the individual, which leads to an unrealistic sense of self in the individual. It is projected as a "drama" because it inhabits a protagonist to whom the plot of fictional life happens. One of the key aspects of this drama is the distinction between the real and the fictional. Lacan (1966) makes use of a literary term as "drama" (p. 3) to depict the process that is 'constructed' by the individual or the protagonist. René Wellek and Austin Warren (1942) state in *The Nature and Modes of Narrative Fiction* that conflict is something "dramatic" which has "action and counteraction" (p. 217). It depicts a struggle between two equal forces, implying action and action revenge. Hence, the soul of the drama is 'conflict,' and *The Mirror Stage* depicts a conflict between the self and I, where the self is a chaotic mess that attempts to grab an "orthopaedic" (Lacan, 1966, p. 3) brace that tends to hold together such fragmentariness. Hence, it is an armour of alienating identity. The very first stage of identity formation occurs with such an alienating aspect, which becomes the 'norm' for the rest of the stages in Lacanian psychoanalysis. In Katherine Mansfield's story, *Miss Brill* appears to be the protagonist to whom the plot of fictional life occurs.

Lacan's drama may be directly applicable to the story, for in Mansfield's text, Miss Brill imagines herself to be in a drama as an "actress" (p. 119) where everyone

is not only an audience but an actor in a splendid play. Peter Thorpe (1962) states that Miss Brill is not an “actress” in two senses. Firstly, “she is literally not an actress, and she is ultimately not an actress in the drama in her mind for the remarks of the young couple deprive her of the part...” (p. 662). However, this notion is contradicted if assessed from a Lacanian perspective. Miss Brill is an “actress” in the truest sense, for the self that she perceives herself to be as the ‘true self’ is fictional, which makes her existence a fiction like that of a performer who is immersed in the role of ‘somebody’ that he or she is not in real life. Miss Brill has adopted the Lacanian “succession of phantasies” (p. 3) or unreality that provides her with a sense of escapism from her incoherent self, which she is unable to situate. Her fur coat forms a significant symbol to depict the artificial self that she perceives as the true one. Such an identification has stemmed from the core of her identity identification in *The Mirror Stage* where she began to view herself concerning her surroundings. This image that she perceives of herself as that of an “actress” is the result of the social conditioning to which she falls victim, like every other individual in the park who views themselves in a specific way that they are not. The band of musicians with their sense of artificiality forms an apt observation: “The band had been having a rest...they started again...what they played was warm...yet there was a faint chill...” (Mansfield, 2021, p. 119). There is no sense of authenticity in the world that is a theatre where everyone performs a ‘task,’ which is oblivious to their sense of self.

### **Miss Brill’s Symbolic Muteness: A Life Unarticulated**

Lacan develops on The Mirror Stage stating the moment in which the mirror stage comes to an end “inaugurates, the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to the socially elaborated situations” (p. 43). It is this phase that occurs right after the recognition of the specular *I* when the child is eighteen months old. As the child is in the initial phase of The Mirror Stage, he seeks a sense of coherency through his recognition of his surroundings of which the mother forms a significant part. The mother becomes the all-consuming object of the child’s needs and such a phase may be deemed in terms of the child’s desire for the mother and vice versa which leads to the concreteness of the child’s image. However, when the social order is introduced, the child learns the dreaded word *I*. The thing in the mirror which was previously left unarticulated becomes the articulated *I* which forms the next step of artificial knowledge for the child or the person. As soon as the child loses contact with the mother towards the end of The Mirror Stage entering the symbolic order, a Mirror Stage-like experience. Hence, the individual begins to fill the void of the mother’s desire with that of the desire of the other: the symbolic order. Hence, Lacan states that “man’s desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other.” (Lacan, 1966, p. 43) Lacan proves the point that to be human is to be subject to a desire and there is no better form of desire than the one where one spends one’s life futilely to express oneself according to the social implications imposed on them. It moulds our understanding of reality which is not reality. Lacan (1966) in

“The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis” states that what defines any element of a language is that it is an “ensemble supposedly constituted of homologous elements.” (p. 47) The language is a system where each element is defined by its relationships to other elements, rather than by its connection to reality. Hence, highlighting the author’s naivety in thinking that grammatical categories can be directly mapped onto reality. Such criticism is vividly present in “Miss Brill.” There are several instances in the text that highlight Miss Brill’s inability to express herself with the help of signifiers to the others present in the park. Such a difficulty is hinted at the very outset of the narrative where Mansfield states that despite the air being “motionless” there was a “faint chill” when one opened their mouth (p.115). The faint chill serves as a prefiguration of the events Miss Brill would experience. The old couple’s silence and Miss Brill’s disappointment depict how language is meant to construct reality instead of imitating it. Hence, conversation becomes futile where language is nothing more than a fantasy. The old couple’s sitting on the bench like “statues” (p.117) depicts the futility of language to express one’s incoherent self which ultimately remains unexpressed. The next conversation between the gentleman in grey and the ermine toque, presumably an elderly prostitute, extends on the idea of the futility of creating constructs of relationships and language. The ermine toque’s attempts to converse with the gentleman are rebuffed both due to not being understood by “symbolic commerce” (Lacan, p.46) and the “primordial law” (Lacan, 1966, p. 49) which is identical to the order of language. The prostitute’s inability to seek validation from the gentleman is due to the taboos that regulate society treating prostitutes as entities without emotions. Lacan (1966) states that without kinship nominations, no power is strong enough to institute an order of preferences and taboos. The gentleman rebuffing the ermine toque breathing a “deep puff into her face” (Mansfield, 2021, p. 118) is a part of such a taboo that is instilled in the mind of the former. Her means of communicating describing the gentleman where she had been too melts into a state of futility rendering language as a means of signification useless. Such instances prefigure the final act of Miss Brill’s encounter with the young couple that shatters her sense of ‘self’, the concreteness of the *I* she perceived to possess, that she is an actress in a jolly play where everyone ‘understood’ each other. This is captured in the line where Mansfield speaks for Miss Brill: “though what they understood she didn’t know” (p. 120). As Miss Brill eavesdrops on the conversation of the young couple, the boy terms her an “old mug.” (p.120) This is a connotation that is socially built but does not signify the signified which is Miss Brill. Lacan (1966) states that “it was certainly the Word ...and we live in its creation...allowing ourselves to be driven ever further ahead by it” (p. 45). Miss Brill never understood herself in totality perceiving her true self as the constructed *I*. Both the notions of her, that of being an actress and an ‘old’ school mistress are false, an imposition by the society. Hence, she falls into a state of stupefaction where she is confused as to her sense of belonging in the world. She passes the baker’s ignoring her daily routine of enjoying her Sunday treat and

moves into her “little dark room” (p.121), symbolising psychological confusion and incoherency. The narrative ends with no specific solution to her mental state and is left for the readers to interpret and Miss Brill to deal with, perhaps putting an effort to understand the sense of dichotomy of the selves and live with it.

### **The Empty Chair: Exploration of Futility of ‘Identity’ in Ionesco’s *The Chairs***

The world of Ionesco’s *The Chairs* is not well-organized. Firstly, the setting is on an island surrounded by water where the old couple tends to live. It is dark despite being “six o’clock in the evening” (Ionesco, 1958) and the use of empty chairs is made as the play proceeds. Such an unrealistic setting projects aptly the unconsciousness which proves to be the study of Lacan’s psychoanalysis. The empty chairs are not only a symbol of mere absurdity to which the old couple tends to speak. The empty chairs project the Mirror-Stage’s constructed I. The old couple identifies the empty chairs as an entity that is complete. However, they fail to realize within this false identification that the chairs are ‘empty’ with no real people or individuals seated, implying the lack of real self. Similar to Mansfield’s “Miss Brill,” Ionesco’s *The Chairs* brings forward the issue of the world as a theatre where the individuals are actors making an appearance within a fictional world. However, Lacan (1966) states that the real, “fragmented body” manifests itself in dreams depicting a sense of aggressive disintegration in the persona. Such disintegration is projected in the setting of the play with the empty chairs that first appear in ones and twos and then multiply into several chairs that resemble Lacan’s “disjointed limbs” (p. 3) representing fragmentation. However, the old couple is unable to make sense of such a multiplicity as the Old Woman states “Why are there so many people?” (Ionesco, 1958). She continually mistakes the empty chairs for the people, mistaking fragmentation for concrete identity. The old couple echoes together that they have “absolute certainty” (Ionesco, 1958). However, their sense of self remains a paranoia and they are unable to express the chaos within. This is depicted in the futile speech made by the Old Man to the invisible majesty “who does not perceive it” (Ionesco, 1958). Their futility of trying to gain a concrete understanding of their selves, trying to locate the I, they commit suicides which showcases that it is impossible to know one’s incoherent self. There is no diagnosis for such a state of neurosis. It is the “general formula for madness” according to Lacan and in knowing one’s real self is to delve deeper into the unknown.

### **Absurdity in Repetitions as Present in *The Chairs***

One of the poetic aspects of absurdist plays is that of repetition which depicts the devaluation of language. The characters in an absurd act contradict their words and dialogues to emphasise a disconnect between “world and object, meaning and reality, consciousness and the world.” (Blocker, 1979) In Mansfield’s “Miss Brill,” the futility of language in Lacanian terms has been shown how the signifier which is the preconceived language falls short of projecting reality in terms of the

signified. In *The Chairs*, the absurdity of language is brought forward through the significance of redundancy and repetitions. Lacan (1966) states in *Écrits* that “the more the function of language becomes neutralised as it moves closer to information, the more language is imputed to be laden with redundancies...” (p.64) Language when used solely for transferring information becomes a repetitive activity. This seems counterintuitive, as one might expect that the language used for information would be concise and efficient. However, Lacan argues the opposite. He suggests that when stripped of its emotional, and symbolic aspects, it becomes more redundant. This occurs because language is not a neutral medium for conveying information. This notion of redundancy in language originated in research on long-distance communication, precisely in the context of telephone lines where the goal was of “carrying several conversations at once” (64). The function of language becomes superfluous and what is intended to be expressed remains in the dark.

Such is the situation presented in Ionesco’s *The Chairs*. “*The story*” (p.115) that Semiramis makes her husband tell is ridden with redundancies which The Old Man himself takes a slight notice of stating as “monotonous” (p.115). Nevertheless, forgets and immerses himself in the activity of redundant narration: “Then at last we arrived...the idiot arrived full speed...we laughed, we laughed...at last we laughed...” (p.116) The purpose of such a monotonous language does not seem to convey the inner turmoil or the deeper unknown self of the protagonists. They remain in the darkness not being able to calm each other down. None of the protagonists can find the meaning as to why The Old Man “could have been anything in life” (p.117) but did not. The language merely attempts to convey their state of presence but fails to convey what is intended and significant. Hence, this provides an absurd and incomplete conclusion to the play as well where the couple commits suicide without being able to express themselves. They transfer the responsibility of conveying their life’s meaning to the orator they have hired. However, as the orator makes use of the language as a means of communication, he too fails. His language ends in incoherency as well. The Orator “utters the guttural sounds of a mute” (p.159) depicting his inability to relay any message through the medium of language that is redundant. Even the words- “Angel Food” (p.159) that he scribbles on the board make no concrete sense, rendering the function of the signifiers impractical. Hence, the attempt to express oneself ultimately ends in futility in the play.

### **Limitation the Paper Offers**

Lacan states in *Écrits* in “Symbol and Language as Structure and Limit of the Psychoanalytic Field” that psychoanalysis is limited in scope because of its inability to capture the full richness of human experience. He highlights that psychoanalysis often overlooks the individual’s personal sensitivity, creativity, and unique experiences and instead focuses on the more universal aspects of human psychology. He calls this a “paradox” (p.42) and recognizes that it may seem like a



deficiency, but suggests that it is a necessary aspect of the psychoanalytic approach. In “Miss Brill” the focus is on universal human experiences, such as her sense of loneliness and desire for connection, but there are no markers of her unique creativity and sensitivity. Similarly, in Ionesco’s *The Chairs* the repetitive and meaningless conversations may be seen as a depiction of how psychoanalysis might reduce human experience to general concepts, rather than projecting individual experiences. Instead of providing a clear therapeutic technique, Lacan’s psychoanalysis depicts a theoretical framework using which one may understand and recognize the imaginary servitude if not heal it.

### Conclusion

Both the twentieth-century texts, “Miss Brill” and “The Chairs,” depict the state of fragmentation and sense of broken communication that occurred after the two great wars, respectively. Lacan’s theory on psychoanalysis, through its post-structuralist take on identity formation and language usage, provides an apt method to assess the two texts in unique ways. The in-depth analysis of the two texts through the Lacanian lens not only depicts a critical approach to the practical application of psychoanalysis but also offers a nuanced understanding of how the protagonists’ fragmented identities and disrupted communication patterns reflect the broader social and cultural traumas of their time, ultimately revealing how psychoanalytic theory can illuminate the intricate web of relationships between language, identity, and trauma in modernist and post-modernist literature and life. Miss Brill’s inability to connect stems from the Mirror Stage leading to the Symbolic Order in a manner distinct from that of the characters in *The Chairs*. If, in one text, the analysis deals with the futility of language for being understood as connected by homologous elements, in the other, the nature of language is rendered useless due to its redundancy. However, the concluding statement for both appears to be similar, where the characters are never provided a concrete conclusion to their states, leaving scope for the audience to decipher. Both plots end without any concreteness or satisfaction, much like Lacanian psychoanalysis, which does not tend to treat an ‘unstable mind.’ Because neurosis is the ‘normal’ state for one to associate oneself with a ‘reality’ that they tend to think is concrete, only the recognition of such instability and an effort to survive with it provides an open-ended conclusion. Whether Miss Brill has been finally able to accept her state of “madness that deafens the world” (Lacan, 1966) or if the deaf and mute orator’s attempt to deliver the old couple’s message towards the end, leaving with an air of “hope,” was made successful (Ionesco, 1958) is left for the readers to interpret.

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# Can Techno-Orientalist Stereotypes be Challenged? Posthuman Asian Female Representations in Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* and Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*

Shiqian Zhou & Qian Zhang

**Abstract:** This essay considers the posthumanist visualisation of the Asian female body in David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* (1999) and Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2001). Situating these texts within a posthumanist framework, this essay illustrates how technology works as a two-edged sword for the Asian woman: while it can act as a means for reclaiming agency, identity, and humanity, it also risks dehumanising them through techno-Orientalist depictions. This paper recognises the dehumanising usage of the female Asian bodies in both novels, exploring whether the protagonists of the novels refuse techno-Orientalism through their embracing of alternative identities and alliances. Through such analysis, the paper finds that *Salt Fish Girl* does a better job at not enforcing techno-Orientalist stereotypes than *Ghostwritten* does. While *Ghostwritten* critiques techno-Orientalism, the novel objectifies Asian female characters again through sexual exploitation with a Chinese maid and the portrayal of the non-corporeal spirit, thereby forgetting their humanity and cultural identity. *Salt Fish Girl*, on the other hand, reimagines posthumanist possibilities within Nu Wa's hybrid body and through female clones who refuse patriarchy, as evidenced by their killing of the male oppressor. Therefore, Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* upsets the Orientalist tropes and recasts posthumanism as a site of resistance and change. While both novels seem to point toward the complexity of posthumanist identity among Asian women, *Salt Fish Girl* ultimately presents a more enabling vision which looks beyond ornamentalism toward challenging gendered and racialized stereotypes.

**Keywords:** Posthumanism, Techno-Orientalism, Dehumanisation, Objectification, Female Agency

Posthumanism's impact on science fiction allows for reimagining the female body beyond the constraints of cultural and gender-based stereotypes. Over the years, science fiction has cast non-Western characters, especially Asian women, as "alien" or "Other" because of Western superiority rooted in colonialism and cultural dominance. Through posthumanist constructs, Larissa Lai and David Mitchell explore the possibility of how Asian female characters can use their techno-human bodies to subvert the Orientalist stereotypes or reinforce them. David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* (1999) and Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002) move the periphery of Asian female characters to the forefront of the story, but whether these characters successfully subvert the stereotypical portrayal of "Oriental women" remains debatable. The female characters in *Ghostwritten* and *Salt Fish Girl*, including the Chinese maid, the non-corporeal spirit, Nu Wa, Miranda, and the female clones attempt to challenge the Orientalist portrayal of female characters in the futuristic high-tech context.

Although *Ghostwritten* and *Salt Fish Girl* portray a futuristic world where Asia has emerged as a technologically advanced superpower, they reinforce Orientalist stereotypes by showing Asian women with stereotypical Oriental characteristics, such as submissiveness, domesticity, and sexual availability. According to Orientalism, the East symbolises femininity and a tendency to be subservient to the West. As a result of the binary opposition of the dominant West and passive East, Asian women play a subordinate role imagined by Western men, subjugating themselves to Western superiority and patriarchal structure. As a branch of Orientalism, techno-Orientalism intersects race and technology to present the West's portrayal of Asia as technologically advanced but morally barbaric. Mitchell and Lai give voice to Asian female characters by enabling them to represent the Asian female experience in the global narrative of the story. However, despite this effort, these characters remain trapped in the techno-Orientalist stereotype, struggling to challenge the submissive gender role commonly associated with Asian women.

In *Ghostwritten* and *Salt Fish Girl*, the Chinese maid, the non-corporeal spirit, Nu Wa, Miranda, and the Sonia clones replicate techno-Orientalist depictions of female characters while struggling to subvert them. This paper will investigate whether the Chinese maid, the spirit, Nu Wa, Miranda, and Sonia clones in *Ghostwritten* and *Salt Fish Girl* successfully deconstruct patriarchal structure and Western superiority in the story as a challenge to the techno-Orientalized portrayal of their bodies. The two novels both manifest techno-Orientalism when featuring Asian women characters in the capitalist system. Within the capitalist system, in contrast with the commodification of the Chinese maid's sexualized body, *Salt Fish Girl* empowers Sonia's clones with an active role in reclaiming their identity free of the white men's gaze. The hybrid bodies enable Asian characters to express humanity and deconstruct dual oppression from patriarchy and white dominance. Their bodies offer a posthuman agency for Asian women to resist white male dominance by emphasising female empowerment, enabling techno-

Orientalized bodies to reclaim their identity beyond techno-Orientalist stereotypes. The non normative representation of female bodies becomes a tool to deconstruct the patriarchal structure and challenge Western superiority in the story. Therefore, while *Ghostwritten* reinforces techno-Orientalism by sexually exploiting the Chinese maid's body and stripping the spirit of its Asian identity, *Salt Fish Girl* displays a non-normative female body and relationship to challenge the submissive stereotype of Asian women.

### **Literature Review**

Asian representation in science fiction often falls within the techno-Orientalist trope, portraying Asian characters as “alien” compared to their Western counterparts, reflecting Western anxiety over a rising, technologically advanced Asia. According to Roh et al. and Jason Crum, techno-Orientalism perpetuates a false reality that denies modernity, technological skills, and identity to the Asian subject (pp. 1-18). Yamamura (p.101) further emphasises the perceived alienness of Asian characters in science fiction and transforms them into techno-Orientalist objects, emphasising the East-West divide and dehumanising Asian characters. However, scholars such as Malisa Kurts and Kathryn Allan argue that certain works, such as Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* reappropriate mechanised and alien Asian bodies to demonstrate how race can be employed for more constructive purposes. Kurts (p.125) argues that *Salt Fish Girl* uses techno-Orientalist stereotypes to depict certain bodies as Asian, allowing for a reconsideration of race as a technology that can be beneficial. Allan (p.162) maintains that while the feminist post-cyberpunk genre still requires progress in envisioning high-tech futures without resorting to techno-Orientalist stereotypes, Lai's portrayal of Asian bodies enables the techno-Orientalized body to be dynamic and capable of transformation like all bodies. Consequently, existing scholarship suggests the potential for the alien, Asian techno-Orientalized body to serve as a source of technology that empowers Asian characters rather than simply reinforcing harmful racial differences within the realm of techno-Orientalism.

To further examine whether *Ghostwritten* and *Salt Fish Girl* replicate the toxic stereotypes of Asian women in the story, this research relies on Aki Uchida's definition of Oriental women, Martha Gimenez's capitalist mode of production, and Kathryn Allan's interpretation of the techno-Orientalized body to examine the Asian female bodies within the capitalist system in *Ghostwritten* and *Salt Fish Girl*. Aki Uchida defines the term 'Oriental women' as Asian women's stereotypical imagery of the exotic Other, which is predominantly characterised by submissiveness, sexual attractiveness, and domesticity (p.162). Martha Gimenez argues that the capitalist mode of production is the “foundation of the inequality between men and women in capitalistic societies” (p.11), which produces an observable effect on the division of labour: men dominate the public realm, but women only belong to the domestic sphere. While the Chinese maid demonstrates the Orientalist characteristic in the futurist capitalist world, Kathryn Allan argues that *Salt Fish Girl* gives agency to

Asian female clone in the futuristic world despite its struggle to completely resist techno-Orientalist depiction of Asian women (p.157).

Furthermore, this research will employ Anne Anlin Cheng's concept of "ornamentalism" (p.15) to analyse the dehumanising representation of the spirit's body in *Ghostwritten* while using Villegas-López's argument to claim that Nu Wa's hybrid nonhuman body in *Salt Fish Girl* subverts patriarchal domination in the story. According to Cheng, ornamentalism serves as a form of cultural domination, which refers to the West's commodification of non-Western cultures for their aesthetic and commercial purposes. In contrast with the spirit critiqued through the concept of ornamentalism, Sonia Villegas-López suggests that Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* employs animal-woman and female clone figurations to construct women's bodies as a means of technology to dismantle patriarchal forces symbolised by Miranda and Evie's murder of Dr. Flowers, a white male character.

### **Capitalistic Exploitation Over Female Gender Roles and Their Resistance**

While *Ghostwritten* and *Salt Fish Girl* create a globalised context that gives an equal representation of Asia and the West, the globalised context highlights the exploitation of Asian female bodies within the capitalist system. In *Ghostwritten*, Neal's adherence to the capitalist ideology of "maximising value" (Mitchell, p.142) compels him to limit her power to the sex relationship and commodify the maid's body as an exchangeable sexual object. Likewise, in *Salt Fish Girl*, the capitalist mode of production enables private companies, such as Pallas Shoes Company, to view the Sonia clones as production tools, exploiting their bodies for labour. The Asian female bodies in the two novels illustrate Gimenez's view that capitalism and gender oppression are closely intertwined as capitalism worsens gender inequality by devaluing feminised labour, commodifying gender, and creating a sexual division of labour. *Ghostwritten* reinforces Asian otherness by constricting the Chinese maid to a gendered labour division and exoticizing her as a submissive woman with a traditional role. In contrast, *Salt Fish Girl* avoids constructing passive techno-Orientalized female bodies by having clones reclaim their human agency and question their assigned role as lifeless robots.

Hong Kong in *Ghostwritten* uses the Chinese maid and British lawyer Neal's profession to symbolise the strict gendered labour division, which limits the maid's power and constructs her as a submissive Oriental woman. While Neal symbolises male dominance in the public sphere as a lawyer, Neal's gender expectation of the Chinese maid alludes to a strict gendered labour division by expecting the maid to be a "cleaning lady" (Mitchell, p.135). Emphasising the domestic function of the maid, the white character Katy associates the maid with subjugation to male dominance: "if you let her know who the master is, they listen" (Mitchell, p.135). After Katy refers to Neal as the master of the house who should give orders to the maid, Neal views the maid as a simple and obedient woman through the depiction of her clothing: "black and white uniform" (Mitchell, p.135). While the uniform symbolises women's domestic responsibility and suggests her subservience to



Neal, the monotonous colour of the clothing creates a repressing atmosphere associated with gender oppression. According to Marxist methodology, the oppression of women can take the form of “men’s desire to benefit from women’s domestic affairs” (Gimenez, p.16). In Neal’s narrative, the maid’s confinement to the domestic sphere positions her as submissive to him while assigning Neal a dominant role over her. Therefore, the capitalist system in the story enables the white man Neal to exert control over the maid as the rigid division of labour compels the maid to obey his orders in the domestic realm.

Besides domestic services, the story uses the transactional relationship between Neal and the maid as an allegory of the white man’s commodification of Asian women’s sexuality in the capitalist system. Though the maid dominates the sexual relationship by taking the initiative to communicate her demand, her sexualized body reinforces Asian women’s otherness by symbolising capital in exchange for material goods. Within the extramarital relationship, the Chinese maid constructs herself as a materialistic woman who utilises sex in exchange for jewels and money. The maid requests all the gifts (Mitchell, p. 148), such as money and a coral necklace, from Neal after sex, symbolising her body as a source of economic capitals within a capitalist society. Despite the accumulation of economic goods, the maid is still seen as a sex commodity in her relationship with the white character Neal. Neal further objectifies the Asian female character with the metaphor of drugs to describe their sexual encounters: “Sex with the maid became a drug” (Mitchell, p. 142). The metaphor “drug” suggests his addiction to sex with the maid, symbolising the abuse of power over the maid and the objectification of her body as a means of sexual gratification. In this sexual relationship, the maid uses her body as capital in exchange for economic goods. However, she fails to gain autonomy within the sexual trope. Instead, the white character objectifies and sexually exploits her body, perpetuating the submissive stereotype of sexualized Asian women displayed by the Chinese maid. Mitchell’s narrative implies that women’s agency can only be actualized through relationships with powerful white male characters, reinforcing a hierarchical dynamic that limits their autonomy. This dependence perpetuates the stereotype of Asian women as exotic, submissive, and dependent on Western figures for self-empowerment, aligning with an anthropocentric and patriarchal worldview that posthumanism seeks to challenge.

While the Chinese maid in *Ghostwritten* is subjected to Neal’s dominance due to the gendered division of labour and commodification of her body as a sexual product, Miranda and other female clones in *Salt Fish Girl* challenge the portrayal of “passive techno-Orientalized female bodies” (Allan, p.159) by rejecting their assigned role as lifeless robot workers. The Asian female bodies are techno-Orientalized because their bodies are tools of production exploited by the corporation owned by white men. The white creator, Dr. Flowers strips the individuality of the female clones by creating them through mass production, naming them all “Sonia” (Lai, p.222) and giving them “identical appearances” (Lai, p.222). The imagery of Sonia clones implies their “manufactured bodies” (Allan,

p.159) as products to be used in marketplaces, which illustrates the passive portrayal of Sonia bodies in capitalism suggested by Kathryn Allan: “use of insatiable Westernized market” (Allan, p.161). However, one of the Sonia clones, Evie, rejects the passive and silent traits attributed to Asian women by reclaiming her identity as a new form of humanity. Despite the otherness of her lifeless origin, Evie’s escape from the factory and the reference to herself as a “planted new fucking life form” (Lai, p. 158) rejects female clones’ passive nonhuman status as a labourer exploited by the capitalist mode of production. Therefore, Lai’s portrayal allows her female characters to explore alternative gender roles and queer relationships, creating a space where their agency is not contingent on patriarchal or colonialist validation. The use of posthumanist tropes enables *Salt Fish Girl* to redefine identity and intimacy beyond traditional gender binaries, presenting the female body as a site of resistance and transformation rather than objectification.

Within the capitalist system, the Chinese maid in *Ghostwritten* and the Sonia clones in *Salt Fish Girl* experience commodification of their body as the white character exploits their body for their needs. The commodification of Asian female bodies in *Ghostwritten* and *Salt Fish Girl* reinscribe the techno-Orientalist trope, which refers to the tendency to depict Asia and Asians as hyper-technological but morally barbaric in cultural productions (Roh et al., p.2). Despite creating representations of Asians in futuristic contexts, such as the Chinese maid and the clones, Mitchell and Lai’s works present Asian characters as subjugated to their Western counterparts due to the white characters’ dehumanisation of their bodies under the influence of capitalist value. While the maid can gain agency only through the transactional relationship with Neal, Neal represents the capitalist exploitation of Asian women’s bodies by reducing the maid’s identity to a mere domestic function and a sexual object. The commodification of the maid’s body reinforces the techno-Orientalist imagery of the Asian female body in the futuristic capitalist world. However, though Lai fails to reject techno-Orientalism in the depiction of Sonia clones completely, she still empowers Evie with an active role in challenging the submissive portrayal of Asian women, exemplified by her escape from the factory. After escaping, she recognizes her nonhuman status as a new form of humanity, subverting the passive stereotype of Asian women despite the techno-Orientalist features.

### **Representation of the Asian Female Body: Dehumanisation or a New Form of Humanness**

Capitalism commodifies the bodies of Chinese maids in *Ghostwritten* and Sonia clones in *Salt Fish Girl* for fulfilling white men’s sexual desires or promoting capitalist production. Rather than being exploited for the white characters’ needs, the noncorporeal spirit in *Ghostwritten* and Nu Wa in *Salt Fish Girl* uses their body as a form to express their life experience. Both characters take a nonhuman form of the body. The non-corporeal spirit lacks a “genetic blueprint” (Mitchell, p. 257) and live through transmigration into different hosts. Also, Nu Wa has a

unique body with human and animal traits, including a fish tail and female biological characteristics. Regarding the nonhuman representation of the Asian female body, Anne Anlin Cheng's theory of ornamentalism suggests that Asian female bodies are represented through decorative elements, such as silk and ceramics. The decorative elements impose a nonhuman model of "personhood" (Cheng, p. 415), reducing them to mere decorative motifs and erasing their cultural significance. The concept of ornamentalism provides a lens to investigate whether the spirit and Nu Wa express their Asian cultural identity through their body form. The absence of a human body strips away the spirit's cultural significance and human subjectivity. However, Nu Wa's portrayal as a woman-animal figure enables her to reject the traditional gender role of a wife and embrace a more fluid self, escaping patriarchal control.

Instead of addressing the spirit's Chinese origin and cultural background, the noncorporeal entity in "Mongolia" illustrates the universal human experience of loneliness and uncertainty in life through the symbol of a bird awakening from the shell. Though the spirit remembers its origin is rooted in the "Holy Mountain" (Mitchell, p. 239) in China, the story uses the verb "imagine" (Mitchell, p. 239) to present the spirit's imaginary experience of a bird awakening, symbolising the loneliness resulting from navigating new surroundings. It employs sensory imagery, such as "light and dark" (Mitchell, p. 239) and "cold and heat" (Mitchell, p. 239), to depict the gradual increasing awareness of its surroundings, laying the foundation for the eventual breakout of the current confinement of the shell. The bird expresses uncertainty through the parallel phrases, "made of wonder, and fear and colour" and "made of unknown thing" (Mitchell, p. 239), using sensory imagery to depict its new surroundings. However, "made of unknown things" emphasises the challenge of adapting to an unfamiliar environment. The introduction of the spirit's origin ends with an introspective question: "Why am I alone" (Mitchell, p. 239), suggesting that it is grappling with the fear of uncertainty and loneliness that comes with encountering new experiences. This introspection about loneliness and fear symbolises a universal feeling experienced by humans in a new environment. Though David Mitchell acknowledges in "Secret Architectures" that *Ghostwritten* explores universal themes, such as love, greed, and history, in a globalised world, the Asian character in the story fails to represent an Asian identity specific to Asian culture and history. Therefore, the representation of the spirit criticizes ornamentalism, which strips Asian characters of cultural significance in nonhuman representations (Cheng, p. 435). The spirit's alienation from human culture suggests the inhumanness of Asian characters through their inability to create their cultural identity.

After depriving the spirit of its cultural identity, the noncorporeal entity is objectified as an inhumane being through the metaphor, a "plotless movie" (Mitchell, p. 244), and an inhumane depiction of its character. Objectifying the spirit as a "plotless movie" (Mitchell, p. 244) suggests the spirit's lack of human subjectivity because it is a vehicle showcasing the everyday life experience of

humans rather than the consciousness of itself. The depiction of the spirit focuses on the images of the places that its hosts frequently visit: “I saw, and slowly came to recognize, gardens, paths, barking dogs, rice fields, sunlit washing drying in warm town breezes” (Mitchell. 244). The sentence uses “slowly came to recognize” to build a gradual revelation and then repeats sensory details like “gardens,” “paths,” “barking dogs,” and “rice fields” to establish continuity in the scene. The continuity turns the spirit into a movie that reflects universal daily human experiences. After the objectification of the body, the spirit highlights its lack of human attributes through the anaphora of “I have no...”: “I have had no parents to teach me right from wrong. I have had no teachers. I had no nurture, and I possess no nature” (Mitchell, p.257). The repetition of “I have no” denies its traditional human attributes and reinforces its isolation from ordinary humans. Cheng argues that the objectification of people affects how people consider subjectivity and “proper personhood” (Cheng, p. 436). Similarly, when the spirit is objectified and denied human attributes, the lack of humanity in it suggests that Asian women connote inhumanness, replicating the techno-Orientalist stereotype of morally inferior Asians.

While the noncorporeal spirit cannot express the cultural significance of its Asian identity, Nu Wa’s transformation into a form of a mermaid when drowning empowers Nu Wa to transcend the heteronormative role of a man’s wife and embrace a queer identity. Before drowning, Nu Wa’s lesbian relationship with Salt Fish Girl ends when she accepts an “arranged marriage” (Lai, p. 179), which allegorizes the suppression of queer desire in a patriarchal and heteronormative structure. When her husband decides to punish her after knowing her identity as a lesbian, the drowning of Nu Wa represents her resistance against patriarchal oppression, symbolized by her husband’s punishment to kill her. Drowning liberates Nu Wa from the arranged marriage and enables her to embrace a fluid, queer identity. Nu Wa’s desire to touch the reflection of Salt Fish Girl in the river (Lai, p. 183) reveals her identity as a lesbian, suggesting that drowning in water allows her to express queerness. Nu Wa transforms into a mermaid, often associated with fluidity and ambiguity, expressing a queer self through the allegory of underwater experience. Therefore, Nu Wa’s hybrid body symbolizes her queer identity, allowing her to express herself safely and escape patriarchal control. Her non normative sexuality deconstructs the submissive Orientalist stereotype of Asian women subjected to male dominance.

Though the noncorporeal spirit in *Ghostwritten* and Nu Wa in *Salt Fish Girl* possess a nonhuman form of a body, the spirit’s body is objectified and stripped of its cultural significance, while Nu Wa’s hybrid body enables Nu Wa to express her queer identity. Mitchell portrays the spirit’s body in *Ghostwritten* as a movie, emphasizing the universal human experience. However, this depiction devalues the significance of Asian identity by presenting the spirit as having a rootless existence. The objectification of the spirit’s body reinforces the techno-Orientalist depiction of Asians by displaying inhumane characteristics, such as the absence

of human attributes, in the story. In contrast with the inhumanness of the spirit, Nu Wa employs her woman-animal hybrid body to escape patriarchal and heteronormative oppression, seeking the freedom to acknowledge her queerness. Nu Wa's nonhuman body showcases the significance of her queer identity by enabling her to escape patriarchy and access a queer space, symbolized by her act of drowning. Therefore, Nu Wa's body serves as a means of deconstructing heteronormativity and patriarchy, highlighting the queer sexuality of women and challenging the passive imagery of Asian women as objects for male sexual exploitation.

### Conclusion

Posthumanism challenges the fixed boundary between human and technology, making it difficult to claim that marginalized figures with technological bodies are merely reduced to tools or objects; instead, it opens up possibilities for empowerment. By emphasizing the transcendence of traditional human boundaries and questioning rigid identities, posthumanism offers a framework for reimagining the role of marginalized figures—particularly women of color—in science fiction. This perspective allows for an inclusive view on identity and agency, which is especially important in rethinking representations of female bodies. Larrisa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* and David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* provide different interpretations of posthumanist portrayal of female bodies. Larrisa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* empowers its female characters by providing them technological power to claim their agency and fight against patriarchal oppression, but David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* makes Asian characters more of an alien "Other" through their non-human body forms.

Therefore, *Salt Fish Girl* exemplifies how posthumanism can empower marginalised bodies by enabling them to reject and reconfigure the stereotypes that have historically confined them. By incorporating hybrid bodies, posthumanist science fiction offers a transformative vision where female characters redefine humanity on their terms, transcending the objectification and commodification that traditional narratives impose. In contrast, *Ghostwritten* reinforces techno-Orientalist tropes, which highlights the limitations of narratives that fail to embrace the inclusive potential of posthumanism. This contrast underscores the broader implications of posthumanism in science fiction: it can either perpetuate stereotypes by rigidly upholding hierarchies or liberate female bodies by presenting them as dynamic, agentive forces capable of reshaping their social and cultural contexts.

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# DNA (Determining Natural Anxieties): Biocapitalism, Genetic Science, and the Posthuman in Canadian Speculative Fiction

*Kelli Knox*

**Abstract:** We exist within a cultural moment where more and more questions about our use of genetics are arising; the science of our past speculations is here or quickly approaching. One of the central preoccupations of both Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and Robert J. Sawyer's *Frameshift* is the relationship between genetic research and the capitalist system in which this research takes place. In their presentation of biocapitalism, both texts explore the ontological ramifications of genetic science as it relates to the economics of modern life. This paper draws upon various strands of posthumanist thought to illuminate how the novels foreground genetic science while grappling with the nature and status of 'the human' in a rapidly changing world. I argue that the characters exist in what Rosi Braidotti terms as "analytical posthuman" space, while the texts operate in a "critical posthuman" (Braidotti) space; encoded within the texts, I read a didactic suggestion that humanity could exist in what I am describing as a "comprehensive posthuman" space. Exploring the novels in this way engages directly with the potential speculative or science fiction possesses to impact a public's understanding of, and anxieties about, genetic science.

**Keywords:** Biocapitalism, Posthumanism, genetics, biovalue, science, speculative fiction, Canadian literature.

A tradition of fictional texts that address scientific discourses can be traced back to the nineteenth century and texts produced by writers like George Eliot and Charles Dickens (Shuttleworth 1984, Winyard and Furneaux 2010). These authors were highly engaged in all areas of the society and culture that they lived in, and



their writings spoke back to a readership that was trying to understand the multitude of changes and advancements that marked their time. Other texts dealt directly with scientific possibilities and speculations, as authors like Mary Shelley in England or James De Mille in Canada created seminal works of science and satirical-utopian fiction (MacDonald and Scherf 2012, Woodcock 1969). In later years, non-fictional accounts of science like those by David Suzuki or texts detailing the realities of life in a scientific field like the short stories of Vincent Lam firmly established representations of various sciences as a significant area in Canadian literature and culture. This paper will focus specifically on Canadian literary representations of the science of genetics.

In our rapidly changing world, where genetic testing has expanded from being a medical tool to a common service offering information on things like racial and cultural background that can be bought online, more and more questions about our use of genetics are arising. Historically one of the most contested and misrepresented scientific fields, genetic science is prompting discussions of what is good and what is bad, what is safe and what is dangerous, and what is necessary and what is superfluous. How genetics relates to what makes us human has become relevant to our everyday lives. The science of our past speculations is here or quickly approaching, and the issue of what can or should be done with it is paramount. Due to this increase in genetic awareness and discourse, popular media including speculative and science fiction that deals with genetic science could impact the contemporary public's understanding of, and anxieties about, genetics more than ever before.

Not only do science fiction or speculative fiction texts offer the same intriguing look-to-the-future type theorizing that golden age accounts of flying machines and space exploration provided, but they also present the opportunity for real pedagogical advancement. In a time where we have more genomic knowledge than ever before, literature containing representations of science can have an even more significant effect on the public perception of genetics, because this literature is accompanied by the inherent awareness that what it details is very plausible. Not only could a text that contains representations of genetics be consumed with the presumption that the scientific principles it relies on are factual – possibly informing the reader of new ideas they had not been aware of or enhancing a curiosity about genetic science – it could also be responsible for stimulating or increasing uneasiness in a reader concerning genetic science.

Research into public understandings of genetics argues that the public is likely to adopt problematic accounts that they consume (Bates, 2005, p. 49). When considering the social uses of scientific knowledge, understanding the ways that literary perspectives on genetics affect the cultural reception of science and genetics is a significant contemporary issue. Representations of genetic science in popular texts can affect the public perception of genetic developments and in turn could potentially affect public policy, and governmental regulations. As such, it is imperative that we better understand how texts like Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and*

*Crake* and Robert J. Sawyer's *Frameshift*, as examples of novels that foreground genetic science, challenge our understanding of and invite us to interpret representations of genetic science.

One of the central preoccupations of both novels is the relationship between genetic research (and the human and scientific advancement that accompanies it) and the capitalist system in which this research takes place. Genetic science – through its relation to the physical and chemical makeup of humanity, as well as its role as a continuously developing technology – is in the unique position of being able to highlight both the ontological and economic motivations that drive characters to do what they do. Texts containing representations of genetics can help us to question humanity and its qualifiers, presenting moral and ethical dilemmas as we observe capitalistically driven actions that are taken in the name of human progress and development. In combination with curiosity about the actual abilities and limitations of contemporary genetics, the opportunities to explore our own motivations and biases regarding the use of biological technology that are offered by our literature can be enlightening. Through the consumption of fictional representations of genetics, we as humans can look past the science itself and begin to examine the question of who it is that profits from the uses of genetic science.

Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* is a work of speculative fiction that relies on the narrator Snowman (once known as Jimmy) to venture through a post-plague future that is populated by genetically modified humanoids called Crakers. These Crakers were engineered by his best friend Crake (formerly called Glenn) at a corporate compound like the one they grew up in, called RejoovenEssence. The novel alternates between chapters that detail Jimmy and Crake's lives pre- and post-plague. The pre-plague sections describe their childhoods in the OrganInc Farms Compound, their years at separate universities — the barely-funded Martha Graham Academy for Jimmy and the top-level Watson-Crick Institute for Crake—, their adult working lives with Jimmy as an advertising agent and Crake as a scientist working for a company that manufactures both diseases and their cures, and Jimmy's eventual employment at Crake's lab, where he learns that Crake has secretly been genetically engineering human embryos to create "perfect" designer beings. It is while working together that Jimmy meets and falls for Crake's lover / the Crakers' teacher, Oryx, a former child porn star with an apparent connection to Jimmy and Crake's own youth. As the love triangle mixes with Crake's plans for a deadly contagion to cleanse the earth of humanity, Crake kills Oryx and Jimmy kills Crake, becoming the lone survivor of the plague to which he is immune. The post-plague chapters describe Snowman's lonely days after he loses his love (Oryx), his best friend (Crake), the stability of his ethically murky and genetically engineered world, and his privileged place as one of the elite human beings reigning over the rest of the 'natural' world. His time is spent telling stories to the Crakers who Oryx made him promise to look after and thinking back on his past as he struggles to survive.

Sawyer's *Frameshift* is a 'hard science fiction' text which follows the relationship of geneticist Pierre Tardivel and psychologist Molly Bond as they explore bioethical

questions in their encounters with inheritable diseases, the history of Nazi atrocities, and present-day injustices perpetrated by insurance companies. The novel uses a significant amount of genetic theory and jargon to tell a very educational and winding tale of science, mystery, and the history of what it means to be human. Pierre and Molly meet at UC Berkeley where she teaches, and he works on the Human Genome Project. Pierre stands a fifty percent chance of inheriting the Huntington's disease that killed his biological father, and his genetic testing of his own DNA reveals that he will indeed develop the disease. Molly has the supernatural ability to hear the thoughts of those around her, but Pierre's thoughts are in French because he is Quebecois, and Molly enjoys the freedom this gives her to have a normal relationship with him. Pierre becomes the only person that Molly ever tells about her abilities and together they try to determine a genetic reason for them, which greatly influences Pierre's academic research. Dr. Burian Klimus, Pierre's Nobel Prize-winning boss, in an apparent act of generosity, volunteers to be their sperm donor when they eventually decide to have children without the chance of passing on Pierre's Huntington's. Klimus' own dark intentions are revealed when it is eventually discovered that he used the opportunity to bring a clone of "Hapless Hannah" (the Neanderthal skeleton that he has been studying) to life. Moreover, the FBI Nazi hunter Avi Meyer believes that Klimus may really be "Ivan the Terrible", a twisted and ruthless Ukrainian guard from the Treblinka Nazi death camp. As his investigation continues and reveals a modern Nazi organisation that is acting out what appear to be eugenically motivated murders on California residents, a new suspect surfaces in the form of insurance mogul Abraham Danielson. Danielson is eventually revealed as the true Ivan, Molly reverse-blackmails Klimus into leaving her family alone and keeping quiet about her daughter Amanda's unique heritage, and Pierre vehemently campaigns against genetic discrimination by health insurance companies before being posthumously awarded a Nobel Prize for his lab's genetic research.

Since the science of genetics itself and the biocapitalist context in which this science is situated raise questions about the nature and status of the human in a rapidly changing world, this paper draws upon various strands of posthumanist thought to illuminate how each novel grapples with these questions. In particular, I assert that in both novels the characters exist in that which Rosi Braidotti terms an "analytical posthuman" world, but that the texts suggest that characters need to continuously work towards what Braidotti defines as a "critical posthuman" understanding that engages with the 'problem' of humanity's desire for their own enhancement or even perfection, with the hope of ultimately living in a world of what I am declaring as "comprehensive posthumanism". *Oryx and Crake* and *Frameshift* neither divide themselves by wholly deprivileging the human, nor do they fall into complete exaltation of genetic technology.

### **The Posthuman and Posthumanism**

As Rosi Braidotti notes, "Humanism's restricted notion of what counts as the human is one of the keys to understanding how we got to a post-human turn at all"

(2013, p. 16). This philosophical journey brings us to a posthuman which is further divided into notions of advancement by way of human enhancement and various liberal humanist or anti-humanist strains of posthumanist thought. Braidotti posits something called “The Posthuman Challenge”, which suggests that instead of widening the gap between humanism and anti-humanism, “Posthumanism is the historical moment that...traces a different discursive framework, looking more affirmatively towards new alternatives” (2013, p. 37). Essentially, Posthumanism uses the deprivileging of the human subject as a new way of conceptualising the human subject while also bridging the gap between ‘humanity’ and everything else. The human subject as it is known becomes much more of a subject, equal to all other things in the interconnected system, than a human which is distinct from other dissimilar things by its place in a collective of similar beings (the human species).

In the most basic sense, Posthumanism attributes agency to the human through the assumption that a human is a participant in the universe around them, but not a controlling force. The human is present in an interconnected world that is populated by nonhuman subjects (Wolfe, 2010, p. 47) where they are biologically, chemically, and physically tied to everything else. This connected environment affects the human in every way, such that every action and reason they undergo, or support, is the result of the world around them. Nothing is uniquely human but is instead completely defined by the interconnected and ever-changing universe that they are situated in. According to Cary Wolfe, “posthumanism means not the triumphal surpassing or unmasking of something but an increase in the vigilance, responsibility, and humility that accompany living in a world so newly, and differently, inhabited” (2010, p. 47). The human is not the standard by which to judge all other things or beings but is instead just a part of, and participant in, a very complexly connected environment. The human subject is its own very complex system within this larger system, which Wolfe acknowledges by applying posthumanist analysis to real spaces that demonstrate a compatibility with information systems theory. Through this, it is apparent that whatever action that the system creates will result in an equal change in its surroundings, which will then be channelled back into the system itself and must be adapted to. Choices that are made must consider all forms of life that exist within the system and all changes that occur affect all lifeforms to some extent.

A tension exists between the different strands of posthuman thought (analytic, transhuman, critical, extropian, comprehensive) that are discussed here according to whether they reinforce existing humanist ideas of individuals as being both separate from and in control of their larger community. The tension also exists between strands that take oppositional points regarding the deprivileging of the human subject and an acknowledgement and emphasis on the interconnected nature of their universe. Analytic posthumanism focusses only on the human subject and their self-affectment regarding technology and the humanist advancement that is the goal of Transhumanism and Extropian philosophy. According to the Transhumanist position, humans are superior changemakers in

their universe who exist to improve through the means of science. ‘Human nature’ however, is trumped by the encouragement for subjects to seek advancements through biotechnology. Analytical posthumanism does not consider the subjectivity of humans. Critical posthuman thought subscribes to the notion that human life is dependent on other outside forces rather than being a self-reliant force with superior status and control of everything around it. Critical posthumanism finds fault with the reductive nature of Humanism and rejects that human subjects operate in an individualist manner that separates them from their society and community. Here, ‘human nature’ is not just overruled by the demands of technologically driven changes in the world but is in fact completely denied. Comprehensive posthumanism mediates the concerns of both analytical and critical posthumanism by proposing a kind of posthumanism which acknowledges the validity of both human subjects needing freedom from collective or state control, as well as the validity of the interconnected, interdependent universe that they exist in. Comprehensive posthumanism is firmly anti-humanist and anti-transhumanist but appreciates some elements of both analytic and critical posthumanism. Comprehensive posthumanism acknowledges that there is something distinct which qualifies humanity, without being anthropocentric.

When we consider the posthuman in relation to genetic science it is essential to remember that, in Nikolas Rose’s words, “Existence is being lived according to new coordinates, a new game of life is now being played.” (2001, p. 16). Now, we must deal with questions like “What does it mean to have a body, to be a body, to genome databases?” (Thacker, 2003, p. 73) and must keep in mind “how notions of “the human” diversify, self-transform, and mutate as rapidly as do new technologies” (2003, p. 73). Rose writes that “the individualized humanism of bioethicists and medical philosophers emerged alongside the 19th-century individualization of the living body within clinical medicine” (2001, p. 20), but this kind of humanism now deals with a human existence that is being altered and redefined by biotechnology. By entering what Rose deems “the age of vital politics, of biological ethics and genetic responsibility” (2001, p. 22) humankind’s ontological state of being is being redetermined. Humanism is meeting the undeniable forces of change that stem from the interconnected system posited in posthumanist thought.

As examples of these forces, Rose lists “the decisions of entrepreneurs as to where to invest their capital and which lines of biomedical research and development to pursue”; “geneticists taking all those small decisions about which family lineages to investigate, which markers to choose, which genes to hunt by which methods”; “clinicians working in alliance with their own patients to test out and explore the new potentials of gene therapy or reproductive technology”; and “subjects at risk of illness or early death, consumers governing ourselves through diets, selves reshaping ourselves by sculpting our bodies, potential parents deliberating over screening and genetic counselling, [and] gay couples using artificial reproduction to have children” (2001, p. 20). This is how we arrive at Transhumanism or extropian thought, which considers how human ontologies are advanced through technology.

Technological or scientific progress is thus indicative of human progress. Thacker claims that “just as the human will be transformed through these technologies, it will also maintain, assumedly, something essential of itself. It is in this tension between identity and radical change, between visions of software minds and the realities of biological bodies, that extropianism reveals the inner tensions of posthumanist thinking” (2003, p. 75). The question of who we are as humans gains even more complexity. Accordingly, extropianism becomes an extension of European humanism (and its privileging of the individual human subject) with a bias for technology, which is regarded as both a part of and not a part of the self and is utilised in a manner that tends to apply ideas about the life sciences to social and political problems. The concept of nature as something that is separate from and meant to be dominated by man is brought together with the perception of a human society that is based on market relations, and this combination is responsible for the understanding of an individual as separate from the wider community.

Sherryl Vint points out that the idea of “the subject as owning himself and owing nothing to society for this self or its capacities is evidence of a profound individualism that marks many versions of the posthuman” (2007, p. 13). Interestingly, it is this kind of individualism that a critical posthumanism is eager to lose. Thacker claims that the extropian approach can allow for the posthuman to be considered a kind of humanism which “moves beyond the control over the natural environment encapsulated by Western industrialism” and instead towards a “wholesale transformation not only of the environment but of the human controllers of that environment” (2003, p. 76). This does not, however, take into consideration the other subjects within the system or the influence from technology when divorced from human interference. Technology is therefore a tool in extropian posthumanism that is, “both transparent and value-neutral, and thus abstracted from any socio historical contingencies” (2003, p. 77). In the interconnected system, theories of science can “transform politics ... and reveal the limitations of the ideologies” that they contain (2003, p. 79). Accordingly, technology is fully capable of effecting change within the interconnected system, but in critically posthumanist terms it does so with an effect equal to that of any other participant of the system.

Keeping this in mind, my notion of ‘comprehensive posthumanism’ directly addresses the issue of Individualism. It differs from critical posthumanism because it is not as forceful in its rejection of individualism; it rejects the humanist “me first” style of unchecked, selfish enterprise where the good of the individual is held above anything else, but it also acknowledges that subjects should rightfully experience a certain measure of freedom from collective or state control. Essentially, Crake’s endless supply of exploitative biotechnology or the indiscriminate greed of the Condor insurance company do not comply with a comprehensive posthumanism, but neither does the totalitarian control of the Compounds and CorpSeCorps. Similarly, in *Frameshift*, the eugenic determinism of the Millennial Reich violates the appreciation for basic human freedom from controlling groups that comprehensive posthumanism expresses. Before turning to my detailed

discussion of the ways in which both novels advance a comprehensive posthumanism critique of the exploitation of biotechnology, I must first introduce the concept of biocapitalism.

### **Biocapitalism and Posthumanism**

Biocapitalism exists for many of the same reasons that posthumanism is conceptualised. In the simplest manner, both rely on the presence of technology and the significant impact that it has on human society and subjects. The posthuman is the new context for understanding the human subject in the universe that they inhabit, especially considering technological and scientific breakthroughs. Once the subjects have been removed from the privileged place awarded to them by humanism, Posthumanism functions as a means of adapting to the changes that come with both this position and the technological developments around them. This is because they are envisioned in a completely interconnected system, in which technology and science affect them just as much as they affect it. Consequently, the biocapitalism that arises from the self-renewing cycle of technologies being created, technologies being demanded, and economic wealth flowing into and out of the loop either way, is also an adaptation to change within the system.

Biological material gains new economic worth and eventually the question pervading posthumanism of what qualifies as human can also be applied to biocapitalism. Worth or biovalue is attributed depending on different concepts, like the human body as the sum of its biological material and potential, or the human body measured by standards of human versus other. Humanity itself is classified as a measurable and intrinsic characteristic (analytical posthumanism), a false concept (critical posthumanism), or somewhere in between (comprehensive posthumanism) depending on the area of posthumanism that you consult.

### **Biocapitalism and The Posthuman in *Oryx and Crake* and *Frameshift***

While *Oryx and Crake* often feature characters or events that exhibit humanist and extropian leanings within the plot, the entirety of the text seems to have a more posthuman message. The following examples from the text that have humanist and individualist characteristics are thus a means of demonstrating to readers what not to do or support in their own lives. Similarly, the same can be said for *Frameshift*, just with a greater allowance for the affective sentimentality that stems from the idea of a collective human nature and history. When Jimmy's father claims that, "There was too much hardware around...Too much hardware, too much software, too many hostile bioforms, too many weapons of every kind. And too much envy and fanaticism and bad faith" (Atwood, 2009, p. 28), it calls attention to the dangers of too many rival companies and competitive technologies jockeying for economic dominance. It also implies a fault in humanity that is responsible for the envy, fanaticism, and bad faith. The Compounds seem predestined to compete, lie, cheat, and steal simply because these failings are inherent to humanity.



Alternatively, the human achievements or, “Artworks, scientific breakthroughs, stellar works of architecture, [and] helpful inventions” that are described as “Monuments to the soul’s magnificence” (2009, p. 78) in the Blood and Roses game are testament to the superior consciousness that humanity believes they possess. These achievements are the very evidence that a subject would use to distinguish themselves from the surrounding nature or organisms that (according to posthumanism) they share the universe with. As Jimmy muses that “Toast cannot be explained by any rational means. Toast is me. I am toast” (2009, p. 98) he implies a kind of unknowability that the essence of humanity possesses. Humankind in all its wonder and mystery can never be strictly defined, positioning it in a glorified place of unfathomable power. When he goes on to hypothesise that the reason that he does not find the Craker women arousing is because they are technically ‘perfect’, and it was the human imperfections of women that used to move him (2009, p. 100) humanity’s flaws are acknowledged (although in such a way that they are still not explicitly made equivalent to all other participants within the system) while a commonality for human women is established. Human women, extrapolated to humanity as a whole, are believed to share an intrinsic imperfection that connects us all and can be used to help define us as a species.

As Crake explains the finer workings of the BlyssPluss Pill to Jimmy, he remarks that it is “prophylactic in nature, and the logic behind it was simple: eliminate the external causes of death and you were halfway there” (2009, p. 293). When Jimmy questions these external causes he replies with, “War, which is to say misplaced sexual energy, which we consider to be a larger factor than the economic, racial, and religious causes often cited” (2009, p. 293) and the simplification of circumstances seems oddly elegant. Reminiscent of the *Generation Kill* TV character Ray pontificating about the correlation between a lack of sexual availability for those living in the Middle East and the American war in Iraq – “It’s lack of pussy that fucks countries up. Lack of pussy is the root fucking cause of all global instability” (“Get Some”) – Crake’s analysis seems to chalk the inevitable end of human life up to our natural predilection for intercourse rather than our physiological limitations. All humans are made equivalent, even as everything else in the posthumanist system is ignored.

The opulence of Crake’s university startles Jimmy when he first visits, and he asks Crake “What pays for all this?”. When Crake replies “Grief in the face of inevitable death ... The wish to stop time. The human condition” (2009, p. 292), it reveals yet another instance of humanity being represented as collective with a shared history and an inevitably common future. The wish for immortality or eternal youth becomes a precondition for being human. Following this same theme, the BlyssPluss pill’s purpose of steering a set of givens like “the nature of human nature” in a “beneficial direction” (2009, p. 293), or Crake’s assertion that “*Homo sapiens sapiens* was not hard-wired to individuate other people in numbers above two hundred” (2009, p. 343) but was hardwired for dreams and singing (2009, p. 352) all points to a distinct and exclusive ideation of what makes humans human.

The anthropocentric conception of humans as the ultimate being, with the added hierarchy of humans who approach that desirable level of 'perfection', is highlighted by Crake's efforts in genetic engineering. His desire to enhance humanity to the point that it no longer actually qualifies as such results in the devaluation of the human subject, presenting a posthumanist reality that acknowledges the inherent spirit or characteristics of the species even as they are destroyed.

Similarly, in *Frameshift* Pierre balks at Klimus' desire for perfection, instead adhering to the belief that "the whole point of the Human Genome Project is to find out what makes us human, and humans sometimes make mistakes" (2012, p. 12). When Pierre later compares himself to the *Les Misérables* character Jean Valjean by aligning Valjean's record marked by stealing with his own record marked by his deadly genetic disease (2012, p. 38) it implies that what we are, (physically, biologically, genetically) just as much as what we do, is what defines us. Even the opening epigraph for Book Two of the novel hints at humanity's shared history and track record in the Winston Churchill (1953 Nobel laureate in Literature) quote which states: "The farther back you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see" (2012, p. 129). In much the same way, Klimus' adamant insistence that "Something made [Molly and Pierre] realise that the infant specimen was not *Homo sapiens sapiens*" (2012, p. 241) underlines the belief that humanity's very nature is encoded into our DNA. Consequently, Amanda's Neanderthal DNA must make her non-human in some perceivable way. The parent's considerable outrage at Klimus' individualist dismissal of their daughter's humanity and his reduction of her being to that of an experimental specimen denotes the critically posthuman mindset that Molly and Pierre have, but also the distance between this critical posthumanism and the more comprehensive posthumanism that the text appears to be leading readers to. The parents reject the notion that their daughter is only worth something in terms of scientific study and Klimus' insinuation that she is inferior to humans because of her imperfect nature, thus critiquing (just like critical posthumanism) some of the assumptions that contribute so significantly to a posthuman, biocapitalist system. Their acceptance of the idea of a shared human history or inherent humanness throughout the species, however, is much more in line with the structure of comprehensive posthumanism.

At the very end of *Frameshift*, Molly speaks at the event that celebrates the passing of the federal law which bans insurance companies throughout America from discriminating against the born and unborn based on genetic profiles. When she says "By passing this law which makes us look beyond our genes...that great dream of a nation in which all its people truly are considered to be created equal has come another step closer to reality" (2012, p. 347), she invokes the freedom from oppressive groups or corporations that is essential to comprehensive posthumanism, but also the appreciation for shared human history and cultural memory that is also a part of the comprehensive strand. Molly refers to Pierre's admiration of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech, which is something that draws humanity together (through memory, through pride, through

understanding, etc.) in a way that is fully compatible with the anti-individualist rhetoric of comprehensive posthumanism.

Atwood addresses the issue of what it is to be human in her essay “Of the Madness of Mad Scientists: Jonathan Swift’s Grand Academy” in *Other Worlds*. In it, she suggests that the ability to write a book that takes up this question is “itself a part of the answer” because “We are not only what we do, we are also what we imagine”. She continues by proposing that “Perhaps, by imagining mad scientists and then letting them do their worst within the boundaries of our fictions, we hope to keep the real ones sane” (2011, p. 211). If that is the case for her efforts in *Oryx and Crake* it seems reasonable to argue that it performs the same actions as *Frameshift* to provide readers and the public with a way of reaching a more comprehensive posthumanism, especially as it relates to genetic science.

*Oryx and Crake* show a world in which biovalue is so powerful it dominates everything else. Marinette Grimbeek claims that “Commercial interests trump everything else in the world of *Oryx and Crake*. Intellectual endeavour tends to be concentrated on profitable fields of inquiry, such as bioengineering. The only place afforded “word people” like Jimmy is in the marketing of pharmaceutical miracle products to gullible or desperate customers (2009, p. 90). Biocapitalism demands that an individual’s biological energy be applied to the process of selling biological material. The corporations/Compounds like OrganInc Farms, NooSkins, and RejoovenEssence all stake their business in the trade of “genetic material and modifications, viruses, vaccines, tissues, and organs” (Defalco, 2017, p. 451). Genetically engineered creatures like pigeons are distinct from other commodities because they are a hybrid form of biological lifeform and technology, human and non-human, and tool and lifeform. This hybridity unnerves Jimmy and some of the other characters, indicating the caution with which Atwood warns readers to approach genetic technology in the context of biocapitalism. This caution is repeated in most of the unique coinages that pervade the novel because as Grimbeek observes:

a single name can have euphemistic and dysphemistic connotations, with the names of fertility agencies like Infantade and Foertility being good examples. Said out loud, Infantade appears to describe “infant-aid,” likely referring to “conception assistance,” but its spelling is suggestive of intifada, used to denote a legitimate uprising against authority (Arabic: “shaking off”). In addition, the –ade ending of the name echoes those of registered trademarks like Lucozade®, Gatorade®, or Powerade®, all denoting energy drinks, thereby perhaps implying that conceiving is as easy as buying a consumable product off a supermarket shelf (2009, p. 92).

Even as the very names of the companies, services, and products available satirically advertise exactly why the consumer should stay away, the pull of biocapitalism is too much.

The world of *Frameshift* is similarly dominated by the principles of biocapitalism, wherein the relative value of the characters is determined by commercial interests. Pierre, Molly, Amanda and many other characters all possess atypical genetic makeups that cause their biovalues to differ greatly from one another and from the general population. Pierre possesses what you could consider a lower biovalue

because his DNA encodes for a terminal disease, but this also makes him technically more expensive to his insurance company. Molly's telepathic abilities stemming from her odd genetic makeup might add to her biovalue on the terms that it enhances her somehow, but the strangeness of this genetic blip on her thirteenth chromosome compared to the 'normal' population makes this biovalue somewhat unstable. Amanda's uniqueness means the influence of exclusivity on her biovalue, but the sheer oddness of her genetic makeup and its implied evolutionary inferiority complicates her supposed worth. When Tiffany the insurance saleswoman informs Pierre that her company offers a financial incentive to undergo genetic testing (Sawyer, 2012, p. 77) the biovalue that he is ascribed is very clear. The company finds more worth in possessing his genetic data than in the greater amount of money that he would be paying them if he does not take the incentive. In this way, the biological information can be just as valuable, if not more, than a biological object or monetary amount.

Defalco writes that, "treating biology and, by implication, bodies as information threatens to institute hierarchies that privilege the quantifiable and devalue the incalculable. If biology is understood as technology, as informational codes, an easy slippage can produce life as exclusively informatic" (2017, p. 450). The notion of life becomes a coded string of letters that can be written, read, altered, transported, and sold. As biocapitalism takes over biological material, life and human identity become confused and anything that is designated as non-informatic becomes worthless. Pierre's discomfort concerning Condor's policies that state their customers can have fetuses that possess genetic indications of disease or impairments aborted for free further enlightens readers about the negative impact that biocapitalism can have in a society. Pierre tells Molly that "it just seems a form of economically forced eugenics. If the baby isn't perfect, you can have it aborted for free" (Atwood, 2009, p. 120), and he is not wrong. The potential ethical concerns that arise from this kind of pervasive biocapitalism are quite clear.

When he later speaks at a shareholders meeting, he informs the crowd that companies who sell insurance requiring extensive genetic information from patients in order to deny them health insurance are wrong. Pierre explains that although there is only a small number of things that can be genetically tested for, in the near future we will be capable of determining "who will become obese, who will develop high cholesterol, who will get colon cancer. Then, if it weren't for laws like Senator Johnston's, it could be you or your already-born children or grandchildren who would have the safety net pulled out from beneath them, all in the name of profit" (2009, p. 277). This addresses the fact that in addition to extreme effects of biocapitalism like Crake's development of the Crakers or the BlyssPluss pills, everyday essential things that readers are more familiar with, like health insurance, will be affected as well.

Biovalue can also be attributed in less obvious ways. Pierre's research on codon synonyms in genetic language does not call to mind the same extreme level of biocapitalism that most of the marketed products and procedures in *Oryx* and *Crake* do, but it does offer a small hint of what could arise in the future. It is

explained that “The coding based on synonyms moved the cursor, but the timing of when frameshifts would be invoked was governed ... in the junk DNA... Indeed, the computer simulation suggested promising lines of research into manipulating genetic timers – research that ultimately might cure Huntington’s and related ailments.” (2009, pp. 332-333). The potential for further research on genetic timers to offer cures for diseases offers a lot of hope, but historically, where a cure may exist a company can also make money. As it goes, a company can make a lot of money when they operate exploitatively. Given the situation in *Oryx and Crake* it is easy to imagine a future where Pierre and his colleagues’ work is used by large corporations to make a significant profit off the victims of disease that they claim to want to help. This potential for the research to do or make something, rather than just saying something about genetics means that a significant value of money could be invested in furthering it, and it could also result in a significant biovalue if successful. Whereas the research itself feels like an honest attempt to help humanity as well as an acknowledgement of the reliance that humans have on their own genetic makeup, the possibility for it to result in profit more than healing can make the research appear much more analytically posthuman or transhumanist. As such, the entire situation in the novel takes on a distinctly comprehensive posthumanist nature.

Not unlike the cheap value that Pierre’s insurance company assigns to himself and many others, the sexual exploitation of Oryx and other poor children like her also indicates a darkness associated with the commodification of biological material (in this case juvenile human beings). The text reveals that the children sold off to strangers by their desperate families “had a money value: they represented a cash profit to others. They must have sensed that – sensed they were worth something” (Atwood, 2009, p. 126). In place of love and affection the children cling to the knowledge that they (or at least their bodies) have a measurable value, indicated by the money that they were learning to earn. Similarly, the ability to purchase sex using the Student Services at Crake’s university and have them simply “deduct the price from your scholarship, same as room and board” (2009, p. 208) indicates that this worth according to the sex trade does not extend beyond the biovalue of a human’s physical body. No regard for the individual’s other attributes is present and a human being is reduced to being a chunk of biological material.

With this disregard for the immeasurable value that a human being possesses in mind, it is easy to see how biocapitalism facilitates the jump to biovalue in regard to biotechnology and molecularly engineered bioforms. Crake’s “floor model” Crakers are described as representing the “art of the possible”, which indicates just how far people may push science and the ethics thereof. He tells Jimmy that, “We can list the individual features for prospective buyers, then we can customize. Not everyone will want all the bells and whistles ... Though you’d be surprised how many people would like a very beautiful, smart baby that eats nothing but grass. The vegans are highly interested in that little item. We’ve done our market research”, to which Jimmy thinks: “Oh good... Your baby can double as a lawn mower” (2009, p. 305). The babies in question would seem to be worth only

as much as the satisfaction of their buyers says they are. Crake is responsible for engineering and marketing biology so that it is functionally just a commodified material.

Crake admits to his role in this commodification when he observes the Pleeblands shopping district, taking in the elaborate displays advertising “Blue Genes Day? ... Try SnipNFix! Herediseases Removed. Why Be Short? Go Goliath! Dreamkidlets. Heal Your Helix. Cribfillers Ltd. Weenie Weenie? Longfellow’s the Fellow!” and then states, “So this is where our stuff turns to gold,” (2009, p. 288). His complicity and active involvement with this process of biocapitalism is also shown when he reveals the selling points and marketing strategy of the BlyssPluss pills to Jimmy, informing him that the attraction of the pills is as follows:

- a) [They] would protect the user against all known sexually transmitted diseases, fatal, inconvenient, or merely unsightly;
- b) would provide an unlimited supply of libido and sexual prowess, coupled with a generalised sense of energy and well-being, thus reducing the frustration and blocked testosterone that led to jealousy and violence, and eliminating feelings of low self-worth;
- c) would prolong youth.

These three capabilities would be the selling points, said Crake; but there would be a fourth, which would not be advertised. The BlyssPluss Pill would also act as a sure-fire one-time-does-it-all birth-control pill, for male and female alike, thus automatically lowering the population level (2009, p. 294).

Here Crake exhibits both the mind of a businessman and of a narcissistic creator, deciding what is best for the world around him based on the latest “market whims” (Atwood, 2009, pp. 133: 2011) and his own secret agenda. These actions, and the abrasive way Crake describes them, fully expose the ethically worrisome consequences of a biocapitalist system within a posthuman world. Crake creates and then proceeds to sell a very particular narrative to the public. It is fitting then that narrative is also the tool that enables a comprehensive posthumanist critique of the biocapitalist system that he participates in and greatly contributes to.

## Conclusion

The fictional texts *Oryx and Crake* and *Frameshift* are ultimately texts that both embody and reject the cautionary form when addressing modern genetic science. While they both offer representations that can influence a reader’s understanding of and anxieties about the science of genetics and individuals involved in the field, they can also satisfy or stimulate a reader’s curiosity about the abilities and limitations of contemporary genetics. The language of the texts and ways in which they inhabit one posthuman space while expressing and advocating for another kind of posthuman space suggests a greater purpose than to simply scare readers with the potential pitfalls of genetic science. In their presentation of biocapitalism, and their systematic breakdown of its negative consequences through the commodification of human life, the texts both go beyond simply showing readers

what genetic science can create. Instead, they address a much larger socio-economic structure that humans operate within on a global scale. The recognition of the effect that biocapitalism is responsible for within the texts opens an avenue to further explore the ontological ramifications of genetic science as it relates to the economics of modern life. Operating under a critical posthumanism that fully rejects individualism but still attempts to describe a single subject who is inherently ensconced within a much greater whole, it becomes clear that Atwood and Sawyer's texts are preoccupied with approaching a kind of expanded or 'comprehensive posthumanism'. In this way, the texts both directly question the issue of individualism but suggest an approach that also acknowledges human subjects should rightfully experience a certain measure of freedom from collective or state control. Atwood and Sawyer's writing represents genetic science in such a way that readers are given the opportunity and incentive to learn more about genetics as well as themselves.

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# ***Frankenstein and Poor Things:* The Humanising Journey of the Sentient Posthuman Creature**

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**Abstract:** This essay conducts a comparative analysis of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*, examining each novel's engagement with posthumanist studies. The study begins by contextualising posthumanism through the reference of key authors such as Pramod Nayar and Rosi Braidotti. Concurrently, it distinguishes this concept from another branch within the same area, transhumanism. A critical reading of the two works reveals contrasts in their respective representations of posthuman issues, particularly in their portrayals of sentient, posthuman creatures and the consequent implications their existences have on their creators and the society that surrounds them. In both novels, the scientists, Victor Frankenstein and Godwin Baxter, create a being that challenges existing notions of identity and agency, yet their journeys of integration in society raise differing responses and philosophical issues. Through close readings, the essay highlights how *Frankenstein* reflects a serious, often pessimistic approach to the consequences of human innovation unchecked by ethical foresight, while *Poor Things* utilises irony and progressive commentary to reimagine similar themes, reflecting contemporary posthumanist concerns. The study argues that Gray's *Poor Things* not only pays homage to *Frankenstein* but also reinterprets its narrative, addressing themes like the impact of gender and identity politics on posthumanist discourse.

**Keywords:** posthumanism, sentience, gender studies, transhumanism.

## **Introduction**

This essay will focus on the works *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley and *Poor Things* by Alasdair Gray, analysing them from a posthumanist perspective. To achieve this, it is first necessary to define the concept of posthumanism, drawing

on authors such as Rosi Braidotti and Pramod Nayar. It is also important to distinguish between transhumanism and posthumanism. In the critical reading of the works, I will first analyse the 1818 version of *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley: this will involve a detailed summary of the novel, supported by references to key episodes and quotes. The subsequent analysis of Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*, published in 1992, will begin by discussing its unusual structure and narrative, which allows for two distinct interpretations of the text. The modernity of *Poor Things* is highlighted by its introduction of a female perspective on the sentient creature; nevertheless, I conclude that *Poor Things* demonstrates influences from Mary Shelley's original text, which will be analysed in detail in unit 4, during a comparative reading of the literary corpus.

The comparative reading of these two works will focus primarily on the portrayal of the sentient creature. In this regard, it is important first to examine the scientists, Victor Frankenstein and Godwin Baxter, in both narratives and how they perceive the act of creating their resulting creature. Additionally, I will explore the way in which the posthuman sentient creature adapts to life in society and learns to simulate human behaviour, with particular emphasis on the reinforced gender roles and performance in *Poor Things*. The essay concludes that a comparative reading of these works reveals two distinct perspectives on posthumanist thought: Mary Shelley's text is highly innovative and influential on Alasdair Gray's work, which stands out as a contemporary reimagining of *Frankenstein* in every respect, highlighting their contrast through Gray's generally optimistic, at times transhumanist, approach to the progress of human knowledge and the rejection of a speciesist mentality.

### **1. Understanding Posthumanism**

Before embarking on a critical reading of the selected works, it is important to understand the concept of posthumanism and the themes this area of study encompasses.

Following the works of authors such as Pramod Nayar, posthumanism is understood as "(...) the radical decentring of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines." (Nayar, 2014, p.11). One of the main reasons behind the emergence of posthumanist thought is the development of technology and its impact on society. Thus, posthumanist studies have focused on examining humanity's relationship with the "machine" and drawing comparisons with humanity's relationship with nature and/or animals. One of the major concerns identified by posthumanist authors is the persistence, over the centuries, of a speciesist mentality, in which humans are viewed as superior and owners of other species, deemed inferior due to their physiological differences. This idea is explored by Rosi Braidotti (2013) in *The Posthuman*:

“The oedipal relationship between humans and animals is unequal and framed by the dominant human and structurally masculine habit of taking for granted free access to and the consumption of the bodies of others, animals included. (...) It is also a token of the human subject’s sense of supreme ontological entitlement.” (p.68).

However, this mentality of superiority based on physiological characteristics simultaneously leads to the subjugation of other human lives that do not fit into what is considered “normal,” as Braidotti elaborates:

“All other modes of embodiment are cast out of the subject position and they include anthropomorphic others: non-white, non-masculine, non-normal, non-young, non-healthy, disabled, malformed or enhanced peoples. (...) All these ‘others’ are rendered as pejoration, pathologized and cast out of normality, on the side of anomaly, deviance, monstrosity and bestiality.” (p.68).

As a result, linked to posthumanism – but not to be confused with the same concept – emerges the idea of transhumanism, which seeks to use technology to overcome the limits imposed on humans: whether it be the attempt to surpass natural limits that affect all individuals, such as the quest for immortality, or the attempt to overcome limits seen as inferior traits, such as certain disabilities. This concept is also explored by Isabel Capeloa Gil in “Considerações Intempestivas sobre o Pós-humano ou Memórias do Humano”, in which the author explains the emergence of “(...) narratives that, without postulating the replacement of the species, announce the mechanical as a possibility of compensating for physical deficiencies, caused by accident or correcting an innate incapacity” (Gil, 2007, pp.73-74).

## **2.1. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein: The Ambition of Knowledge***

*Frankenstein*; or, *The Modern Prometheus* is a gothic novel written in 1818, by Mary Shelley. *Frankenstein*’s story is divided into three narratives and/or perspectives: Captain Robert Walton’s, the scientist Victor Frankenstein’s, and the creatures. The book begins with the correspondence between Captain Robert Walton and his sister, Margaret Saville. Robert, on a journey to the North Pole in search of scientific knowledge, narrates the events of his journey through letters to his sister. When his ship becomes temporarily trapped in ice during the journey, the captain and his crew briefly observe a strange creature driving a sledge: “(...) a being which had the shape of a man, but apparently of gigantic stature (...)” (Shelley, 2018, p.20). The following morning, after the ice breaks and releases the ship, the crew spots another sledge, this time driven by a man in poor physical condition. The captain takes him aboard and cares for him until he is lucid enough to explain the reason for his whereabouts. The man, whose name we later discover to be Victor Frankenstein, declares that he had been searching for the giant creature previously sighted by the captain and his crew. Speaking to Robert, and sensing his desire for scientific knowledge, Victor warns the captain that his own pursuit of

wisdom had brought him to this point, and thus, he decides to tell him his story, hoping it would make him aware of the dangers of blind ambition.

It is through this flashback that Victor Frankenstein's narrative begins. The scientist recounts his fortunate childhood, emphasising how knowledge was encouraged for its inherent satisfaction and purpose, rather than out of feelings of rivalry: "It was by this method, and not by emulation, that we were urged to application." (p.30). Among his childhood companions, two characters stand out: his cousin Elizabeth and his friend and colleague Henry Clerval. From an early age, Victor develops a notable interest in alchemy, though his father and, later, professors at the University of Ingolstadt discourage him, claiming it to be an outdated field. Nevertheless, at university, Victor immerses himself in his studies and excels in areas such as chemistry and natural philosophy. Subsequently, the protagonist becomes obsessed with uncovering the secret to the creation of life and embarks on a laborious process, isolating himself from society and dedicating all his time to creating a creature by combining parts of other deceased bodies.

## **2.2. The Consequences of (re)Creating the Human**

One night, after nearly two years of work, Victor brings his creation to life, but when he sees the creature's yellow skin – which reveals the muscles and arteries beneath – as well as his watery eyes, the scientist is horrified by his "monster" and eventually flees his apartment:

"I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room (...)" (pp.50-51).  
"(...) I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster whom I had created. (...) Oh! no mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch." (p.51).

After escaping, Victor meets his childhood friend Henry Clerval and discovers that he had come to study at the same university. When he returns to the apartment with Henry, the protagonist is relieved to find no trace of the creature; however, the implications of his actions weigh heavily on his conscience, causing him to fall into a feverish, incoherent state for weeks. After recovering with Henry's help, Victor prepares to return home to Geneva; however, before his return, he receives news of the murder of his younger brother, William. In Geneva, while investigating William's death, Victor once again encounters his creation and becomes convinced that the creature was responsible for William's murder: "What did he there? Could he be (I shuddered at the conception) the murderer of my brother? No sooner did that idea cross my imagination, than I became convinced of its truth (...)" (p.70).

Without revealing the creature's existence or his suspicions to anyone else, a young girl, who had been taken in by Victor's family and worked as William's governess, is wrongfully convicted and executed for the murder. Distraught by the

consequences of his creation, Victor continues to decline mentally and decides to travel with his family, attempting to distance himself from the guilt that consumes him. One day, while walking alone, Victor is approached by the creature, who blames his creator's abandonment for turning him into a malicious being:

“Remember, that I am thy creature: I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.” (pp.93-94).

This dialogue introduces a third perspective/narrative, that of the creature. He recounts his journey from his earliest days of life up to the present confrontation with his creator. The process of acquiring sentience accompanied the creature's journey, as he developed his intellectual abilities while searching for Victor. Although this journey was essential to his evolution, the creature also emphasises the loneliness and cruelty he endured in society. Whenever he attempted to reveal himself to other humans, hoping for the emotional connection denied by his creator, he was met with the same aversion Victor had shown, due to his monstrous physical characteristics. Thus, the culmination of his narrative concludes with a proposal: that the scientist create a female companion, so the creature will not wander the world alone, ostracised by society. However, this proposal is accompanied by the threat that the creature's revenge will continue if Victor refuses to comply with this request:

“Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind. If you will comply with my conditions, I will leave them and you at peace; but if you refuse, I will glut the maw of death, until it be satiated with the blood of your remaining friends.” (p.93).

Although Victor initially hesitates, considering the damage his original creation had already caused, the creature eventually persuades him, and the reader once again follows Victor's perspective as he travels to England, accompanied by Henry, to gather the necessary elements to create a second creature. Victor later separates from Henry and dedicates himself to the new creation, as he had done years before, isolating himself from society. However, now aware of the implications his acts might leave on the world, guilt consumes Victor; above all, the scientist is concerned about the possibility that the two creatures might reproduce and create a new species that would seek revenge on humanity. Questioning the morality of his actions, Victor decides to destroy the new model of his creation; as a result, the creature, observing his progress, vows revenge for breaking his promise, even if it means the “monster's” own death: “(...) but revenge remains—revenge, henceforth dearer than light or food! I may die; but first you, my tyrant and tormentor, shall curse the sun that gazes on your misery. Beware; for I am fearless, and therefore powerful.” (p.163).

This warning officially begins the cycle of vengeance between creator and creation. In the following months, the creature kills Henry Clerval, indirectly

incriminating Victor. Later, when the protagonist is found innocent and released, he finally decides to marry Elizabeth. On the wedding night, convinced that the creature will try to kill him, Victor is distracted and does not arrive in time to save his bride when she is strangled by the “monster.” Victor’s father also dies a few days later, a consequence of the news of Elizabeth’s death. With most of his loved ones dead and isolated from society (much like his creature after being abandoned), Victor decides to pursue his creation to try to kill him and put an end to the suffering he has caused the world.

The protagonist then finishes recounting his story, bringing the narrative back to the present as he explains that he had spent the last few months chasing the creature, nearly catching him, but without success, and was on the verge of succumbing to exhaustion when he was found by Captain Robert Walton. Although Victor intends to continue the pursuit, emphasising the need to destroy the creature, he dies shortly after finishing his story, due to his poor physical state. However, before his death, Victor advises Walton: “Seek happiness in tranquillity, and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries.” (pp.210-211). The book ends with the creature appearing on Walton’s ship, gazing at Victor’s corpse and lamenting the cycle of vengeance and violence in which both characters had been involved. Consumed by guilt and finding no further purpose in his own existence, the creature tells Walton of his plan to commit suicide, leaving the ship and disappearing into the distance.

### **3.1. *Poor Things*: The Unreliable Narrator**

*Poor Things*: Episodes from the Early Life of Archibald McCandless M.D., Scottish Public Health Officer is a 1992 novel written by Alasdair Gray. *Poor Things* stands out as a kind of comic novel, filled with irony and social critique. The book begins with an introduction written by a fictionalized version of Alasdair Gray, who informs us that the work we are about to read is a book written by Dr. Archibald McCandless. Thus, Alasdair Gray assumes the role of a fictional editor, preserving the “original text” and adding only a brief introduction and notes, accompanied by engravings at the end of the book to provide context. The use of illustrations throughout the book not only marks it as unusual and unique, but also helps to immerse the reader in this narrative, setting the tone as though it were truly written by a doctor/scientist, resembling an encyclopaedia.

Gray’s introduction is followed by the manuscript supposedly written by Archibald McCandless; however, after the book’s end, the reader is confronted with a letter from Victoria McCandless – the “true” name of the story’s protagonist and wife of the author – discrediting the plot written by her husband, claiming it does not correspond to the reality of their lives and is merely a Victorian fantasy:

“My second husband’s story positively stinks of all that was morbid in that most morbid of centuries, the nineteenth. He has made a sufficiently strange story stranger still by stirring into its episodes and phrases to be found in Hogg’s *Suicide’s Grave*

with additional ghouleries from the works of Mary Shelley and Edgar Allan Poe. What morbid Victorian fantasy has he NOT filched from?” (Gray, 2014, pp.240-241). As a result, the reader finishes the book unsure of which version of Bella Baxter’s story is true, leaving it to personal choice and interpretation between the true account of the creation and evolution of a posthuman creature or an exaggerated Victorian gothic novel with elements of science fiction.

### **3.2. Alasdair Gray’s *Poor Things*: The Posthuman Scientist**

*Poor Things* takes place in the 19th century, beginning by narrating the life of Archibald McCandless, a medical student who becomes friends with his colleague and scientist Godwin Baxter. Godwin, the son of a famous and respected doctor, is described as a shy person with an unusual physical appearance:

“(…) his big face, stout body and thick limbs gave him a dwarfish look. (...) as he passed other people you saw he was a whole head taller than most, but he kept as far from others as possible, being desperately shy. Despite the ogreish body, he had the wide hopeful eyes, snub nose and mournful mouth of an anxious infant, with a brow corrugated by three deep permanent wrinkles.” (p.27).

The author notes that despite his eccentric physique making it difficult for him to relate to others, Godwin was an excellent student: “He was a brilliant student apart from hospital work, where his strange appearance and voice frightened patients and offended the staff, so he did not graduate but continued as a research assistant.” (p.29). The friendship between Archibald and Godwin initially appears superficial, as though Archibald was greatly enthusiastic about Godwin’s ideas and intelligence, he interacted with him mostly in empty spaces, trying to avoid the curious stares that Baxter and any of his acquaintances were subjected to: “We both shrank from being stared at by others, and any companion of Baxter also became an object of curiosity.” (p. 31); additionally, although he enjoyed his company, McCandless felt a certain revulsion at his voice and, at times, his appearance: “We were often quiet together as I could not help wincing sometimes at the sound of his voice. (...) His voice was repulsive but his words highly interesting.” (p.31).

As they grow closer, Godwin invites McCandless to his home to show him one of his projects – two rabbits that had been cut in half and recombined, so that they displayed two colours evenly divided and genitalia that did not correspond to the rest of their bodies: “One had male genitals with female nipples, one had female genitals with almost imperceptible nipples.” (p.36). Deeply impressed by Baxter’s abilities, Archibald encourages him to use his knowledge ambitiously, to increase his merit, status, and fortune as a surgeon. Baxter, offended by this greedy and self-serving vision, expels him from his home, attributing his passion and affection as motivation for continuing his experiments. Lastly, he insults McCandless, stating that although he might acquire all the wealth he desires, he does not stand out as a notable and innovative surgeon.



Months after their argument, Godwin invites Archibald back to his home to show him his new “invention.” It is here that McCandless meets Bella Baxter, a woman who, despite her limited speech abilities, appears like any other human. However, Godwin confesses that Bella’s body belonged to a pregnant woman who had committed suicide and was later found by Baxter; upon finding her body, the scientist decided to replace the woman’s brain with that of her foetus, resurrecting her in the process and thus creating a creature with an infant’s brain, whom he names Bella Baxter. Her adult appearance combined with a childish expression and behaviour is described by McCandless:

“Her tall, beautiful, full-bodied figure seemed between twenty and thirty years, her facial expression looked far, far less. She gazed with the wide-open eyes and mouth which suggest alarm in an adult but in her suggested pure alert delight with an expectation of more.” (p.42).

Additionally, we see her difficulty in expressing her thoughts when she introduces herself, separating each syllable as though it were a single word: “Hell low God win, hell low new man.” (p.42).

After presenting her and determining that Bella – despite her mental development lagging behind her physical appearance – could pass as a “normal” human among others, Godwin decides to travel the world with his creation for fifteen months, exposing her to different cultures and people, thereby encouraging her personal development. Archibald, captivated by Bella after their first meeting, waits for their return to begin courting her, hoping to eventually marry her. When they meet again, the reader immediately notices the success of Godwin’s mission, as Bella is now described as having a mental age between twelve and thirteen years (pp.60-61), and her oral communication shows significant improvement. Although Bella agrees to marry McCandless, she tells him that during her travels, she had sexual relationships with both men and women, speaking about the matter lightly and rationally, without any emotional attachment; thus, the reader understands that, as a posthuman creature without preconceived notions, Bella does not comprehend the significance of certain ideas and societal rules, such as the simple concept of a monogamous relationship or the expected behaviour of a woman in society, especially in the Victorian era.

This observation becomes even more striking when, after announcing to Godwin her engagement to Archibald, Bella plans to run away with a promiscuous lawyer named Duncan Wedderburn. When McCandless learns the news through Godwin, he confronts Bella, saying “You will NOT go off and marry this man! You will NOT carry his bairns!”, to which Bella responds “I know! (...) I am engaged to you” (p.73). Thus, with no understanding of the rules of human interpersonal relationships, Bella flees with Duncan, promising to send letters recounting her journey and eventually return to marry Archibald. If her initial journey with Godwin had contributed positively to her mental development, this second trip with Duncan accelerates her complete transformation and exposes Bella to true human behaviour – this time, unprotected by Godwin’s sheltering.

Through this second journey around the world, Bella gains increasing autonomy over both her body and mind, eventually learning feelings such as empathy. Her change is documented in her letters to Godwin, and as her mind becomes more developed, the creature begins to suspect and question her past:

“I had a baby once. God, is that true? If it is true what has become of her? For I am somehow sure she is a girl. This is a thought too big for Bell to think. I must grow into it slowly. God, do you read the change there is in me? I am not quite as selfish as I was. I felt for Candle though he is not here and tried to comfort him. I start to fear the feeling that will grow if I think much about the little daughter I have lost.” (p.111).

Simultaneously, Bella is introduced to concepts like gambling addiction, as Duncan bets all his money and consequently loses it, leading him to a nervous breakdown, which, combined with Bella’s emotional detachment, results in him abandoning her. Additionally, Bella meets other characters who expose her to the extreme poverty of others, shattering her optimistic worldview and making her reconsider all the knowledge Godwin had instilled in her, even asking in one of her letters: “Why did you not teach me politics, God?” (p.137). The most crucial moment of her discovery unfolds, however, when, in Alexandria, two of Bella’s travel companions introduce her to the economic reality of the lower classes. Until then, Bella, due to the utopian illusion and privileged life that Godwin had imparted to her, had maintained an overly positive view of the world. Now, she finds herself surrounded by beggars and children separated from their parents, learning that this is a structural problem caused by the exploitation of the lower classes by individuals from higher social standings. Deeply disturbed by the rupture of her worldview and increasingly haunted by her uncertain past, the creature undergoes a brief mental regression in the letter she sends to Baxter, reverting to her previous state, writing illegibly and omitting vowels in her words. Although the experience is profoundly traumatising for Bella, it also marks an accelerated mental progression, as it prompts her to read and learn more about the state of the world, consequently absorbing political concepts and ideologies. In this sense, compared to Frankenstein, Bella Baxter stands out as an enhanced, and therefore, more evolved, version of the creature in Shelley’s work.

#### **4. The corpus in dialogue**

In this section, I will examine possible contrasts between the portrayal of the sentient creature, the perception of the creation by Victor Frankenstein versus Godwin Baxter, and how the creature adapts to society. It is equally relevant to observe how the feminine perspective in *Poor Things* introduces other identity questions absent in Frankenstein.

##### **4.1. Frankenstein and Godwin: Pessimism versus posthumanist enthusiasm**

We can immediately notice a prominent difference in how Victor and Godwin approach the act of creation, as well as the resulting creature. To do so, it is first important to highlight the differences between the two protagonists. Victor

describes his childhood as happy, marked by a harmonious family environment, in which the pursuit of knowledge driven by personal satisfaction and passion was encouraged. Thus, when the protagonist embarks on the creation process, motivated by his studies and obsession with discovering the secret of life, he aspires to transcend human knowledge. However, to achieve his goals, he isolates himself from others, particularly his family, for months, obsessively focusing on his work. Ironically, by isolating himself and, in a way, losing his humanity, Victor is able to create a specimen resembling a human. This contrast between the knowledge linked to a childlike passion and the knowledge driven by adult ambition may be one of the major factors that leads Victor to feel an extreme aversion to his creation: essentially, the creature represents the rejection of family values and a reminder of human nature's corruption. In this way, the act of creation is seen as a solitary and individual process, guided by extreme ambition.

At the same time, the selfish ambition that guides Frankenstein is evident in his disregard for the implications that creating the creature might have on the world around him, with the scientist only becoming aware of the weight of his actions after the creature comes to life, and especially when it starts killing people. However, Victor's selfishness is not only reflected in his lack of awareness of the consequences of his actions but also in his decision to abandon the creature he brought to life. Although Frankenstein is essentially a cautionary tale about human ambition and the attempt to play God, I argue, based on the posthumanist ideas already explored in this essay, that the act of creation need not inherently be interpreted in a negative light. It is Victor's speciesist attitude, when he first observes his creature and rejects it due to its "monstrous" appearance, that illustrates human cruelty and prompts us to question our conceptions of "normal" versus "abnormal" and "human" versus "inhuman."

In contrast, Godwin stands out from the beginning as a tragic character. Growing up without a mother or siblings, he was primarily raised by a father famous for his innovations in medicine, but also known for his eccentric personality and the experiments he performed on his son. It is hinted that Godwin has a damaged, "monstrous" appearance due to these experiments. Therefore, I propose that we interpret Godwin as a posthuman creature himself: throughout the narrative, his differences from other humans – particularly his height, voice, and features – are constantly emphasised, along with his subsequent ostracisation from the rest of society due to his "strangeness." This portrayal of Godwin is reminiscent of how Victor's creature was treated by society, and, therefore, if we consider Godwin as a representation of that same creature (with his father representing Victor, who, in this case, did not abandon his creature but still maintained a power dynamic between creator and creation), we might interpret *Poor Things* as a kind of sequel to Mary Shelley's work.

It is this characterisation of Godwin as the "other" that influences his relationship with his own creation. His motivations differ immediately from Victor's: while the creation/resuscitation of Bella represents for Godwin a continuation of his father's scientific legacy, as well as his own merit and individual genius, the protagonist explains to Archibald that he does not seek the glory and prosperity he could gain

from his inventions. Indeed, Godwin admits to McCandless that the absence of a maternal figure – and, therefore, a platonic, feminine one – in his life encouraged the creation of Bella Baxter. Godwin reflects on the selfish nature of his motives; however, while Victor’s selfishness stems from a desire to transcend human limitations, Godwin’s comes from a lack of human companionship and affection – a consequence, once again, of his condition as “other”, or, in other words, a posthuman creature.

This difference is evident in how Godwin adopts Bella, not hesitating to give her his family name and assuming a paternal and nurturing role, trying to protect her from the dangers of the outside world while simultaneously educating her so that she can participate in and be accepted by it, avoiding the fate of being marginalised like her creator. Even when Bella develops her independence and sets off to travel alone with Wedderburn, Godwin expresses fascination rather than resentment and reveals a rejection of a speciesist attitude and, simultaneously, the rejection of an unequal dynamic between creator and creation when he confesses to Archibald:

“It is wonderful for a creator to see the offspring live, feel and act independently. I read Genesis three years ago and could not understand God’s displeasure when Eve and Adam chose to know good and evil–chose to be Godlike. That should have been his proudest hour.” (p.104). We can then conclude that the role and perspective of the creator towards their creation differ in *Frankenstein* and *Poor Things*. Victor adopts an outdated, speciesist view of his creation, and this affects his relationship with and passion for science; in contrast, Godwin, who is marginalised and is reminiscent of a posthuman creature himself, establishes a bond of similarity with his creation and maintains his enthusiasm for the possibilities his knowledge grants him. Accordingly, Victor reveals a technophobic attitude and a fear of the future and the “other”, while Godwin displays some traits of transhumanist ideology, believing that science can expand humanity’s potential.

#### **4.2. The posthuman sentient creature and its humanising journey**

One of the greatest differences between *Frankenstein* and *Poor Things* is, perhaps, how the posthuman sentient creature is portrayed, as well as the resulting journey. As previously mentioned, in *Frankenstein*, there is initially no detailed focus on the sentient creature, aside from his monstrous physical appearance, which immediately repels his creator. Consequently, the creature is abandoned, with no regard for his welfare or future. As the narrative mainly follows Victor Frankenstein’s perspective, the reader receives little insight into the creature’s mental state until the moment of his encounter with Victor. At this point, the creature details how, initially, he did not have the mental capacity to even distinguish between the various sensations he was experiencing: “I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew, and could distinguish, nothing (...) No distinct ideas occupied my mind; all was confused.” (Shelley, 2018, pp.96-97). The creature’s description of his evolution resembles human evolution: beginning with the discovery of fire, due to the light

and heat it provides; the gathering and searching for food; and the development of his oral communication.

The creature's development in *Frankenstein* demonstrates his high intelligence, breaking down barriers between human and non-human, and proving the possibility of coexistence of the posthuman in society, especially on an intellectual level. Although the creature exhibits rapid mental development and acquires the ability to feel "human" emotions like empathy, this is only possible through observing and subsequently mimicking human behaviour. Victor's creature, hiding in the forest, spends his days studying the interactions of a neighbouring family, even developing a certain emotional attachment. However, when the creature believes he has learned enough to try and communicate with his neighbours, seeking the affection denied by Victor, he is rejected once more due to his abnormal physical appearance. The repetition of the original rejection leads to the creature's resentment and thoughts of revenge: "There was none among the myriads of men that existed who would pity or assist me; and should I feel kindness towards my enemies? No: from that moment I declared everlasting war against the species (...)" (Shelley, 2018, p.130). Multiple other attempts are made by the creature to achieve peaceful coexistence and combat the loneliness that his existence as "other" brings, with none of them being successful. The repeated effort to find harmony with a different species, despite all the suffering endured, immediately contrasts with Victor, who despises the creature without assuming responsibility as his creator; thus, throughout the work, a speciesist perspective is highlighted, linking the prejudice the creature faces to the ideas explored by Braidotti, as previously mentioned.

In contrast, in *Poor Things*, the fact that Bella Baxter's body possesses standard human proportions and that her "otherness" is not physically apparent within society, enables her social acceptance. One could also argue that since she is not exactly a "creation," but rather the result of an organ mutation and subsequent resurrection, the creature never fully embodies the state of "other" seen in Frankenstein's creature. Additionally, Bella's adoption by Godwin without hesitation, coupled with the portrayal of her creation as something other than a negative challenge to nature, ultimately influences her posthuman journey. Indeed, as noted in previous chapters, one of the principal critiques in *Frankenstein* is the excessive human ambition, and while *Poor Things* introduces similar critiques through characters like Archibald McCandless, it simultaneously upholds a far more optimistic and, I argue, transhumanist vision. Bella Baxter's existence and perseverance are celebrated as an accomplishment, and her life trajectory lacks the same tragic nature seen in Frankenstein's creature.

As a result, Bella's humanising journey, though similar to that of Frankenstein's creature in the learning of simulated human behaviour, is characterised by a celebration of posthuman identity. In truth, the difficulties and prejudices Bella Baxter encounters along the way stem not from her nature as a sentient posthuman creature, but rather

from her femininity. Indeed, the narrative highlights that Bella's intelligence and resilience surpass those of men who attempt to deceive and manipulate her during her travels, underscoring the intellect of the posthuman mind, which is untainted by human prejudices and flaws. Bella can then be seen as the embodiment and ambition of a perfect specimen, by linking this idea to the concept of the "posthuman dream as a Faustian expression" (p.75) explored by Isabel Capelo Gil (2007). In conclusion, the depiction of the sentient creature in *Frankenstein* and *Poor Things* presents similarities in the portrayal of the posthuman mind's evolution through the observation and replication of human behaviours; however, at its core, *Frankenstein* emerges as a technophobic narrative, critical of what *Poor Things* celebrate: the transcendence of human limitations through the creation of a sentient posthuman being.

### Final Considerations

In this essay, I conducted a critical reading of *Frankenstein* (1818) and *Poor Things* (1992) to examine how they align with posthumanist studies. For this interpretation, it was first necessary to define the concept of "posthumanism" through authors such as Braidotti and Nayar. Additionally, it was equally relevant to establish the distinction between posthumanism and transhumanism, to then observe if both narratives display elements of these ideologies or if one prevails over the other. While analysing *Frankenstein*, I provided a detailed account of the narrative, recounting essential episodes and characters. I then critically read Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*, noting its unique structure and narrative, as well as its comic and ironic tone, in contrast to *Frankenstein*. I conducted a joint reading of the two works, examining how each depicts the sentient creature and the scientists' perception of the act of creation. In comparing the inclusion of the posthuman creature in society within each work, it was relevant to consider how the gender of the creature in *Poor Things* influenced her journey. Finally, I concluded that *Frankenstein* presents a pessimistic and technophobic narrative regarding posthumanism, in contrast with *Poor Things* and its implicit transhumanism, which can be linked to the concepts explored by Isabel Capelo Gil.

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# The Post-Human Paradox: An Exploration of Cloned Existence in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

A . Ashmi

**Abstract:** and technology advance, the “post-human,” an unavoidable tendency of the times, will arrive at some point. As a result, numerous artistic creations about human cloning have been released. The quest for “posthuman” qualities has existed for as long as humanity. Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go* explores a futuristic civilization in which biotechnology empowers one segment of society while forcing the other to succumb to technological advances. The book contains graphic depictions of many different locales. The realms, locations, and landscapes—human, cloned, political, corporate, medical, prosthetic, biotechnological, institutional, ecological, etc.—are all blended in *Never Let Me Go*. The narrative clarifies how all post-humanist organizations work to ensure the privileged people's existence. Humans and clones seem to be reliant on one another to survive. The article entitled *The Post Human Paradox: An Exploration of Cloned Existence in Kazuo Ishiguro's Never Let Me Go*, appropriately and accurately captures the idea of posthumanism, which transcends the universal question of “who we are?” *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro depicts several meticulously created posthuman environments. The book focuses on technological developments that negatively impact humans, the environment, and the life-death cycle. To create a better future society, cloning is an important theme in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel. However, the cloned “individuals” are solely intended to serve as organ donors for humans who require specific organs to survive.

**Keywords:** post-humanism, cloning, technology, humanity.

## Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's sixth novel, *Never Let Me Go*, describes the recollections of human cloning as a donor of human organs and reflects on the meaning of his



existence. It was published in 2005. The novel received the American Book Review Association Awards and Booker Award. People in Kazuo Ishiguro's fictional place of civilization suffer from illnesses brought on by a polluted atmosphere. Still, they also live longer due to the organ transplantation made feasible by genetic engineering and cloning. The story is set in Hailsham, where most of the activities in the novel occur. The place is populated by both people and cloned bodies. Organ harvesting is done to prolong the lives of socioeconomically wealthy individuals in a location that resembles a boarding school in the late 20th century, where the story is set.

The main focus of *Never Let Me Go* is what will happen to human clones in the age of genetic engineering's explosive advancement. In recent years, cloning technology has advanced so that it can now be used to clone humans. However, because biotechnology tends to undermine human moral and ethical ideals if misused, it has invariably encompassed the contentious issue of how to define the boundaries between science and bioethics clearly. Ishiguro's novels offer keen insight into the use of language style and structure and take the reader away on a different level because of his bicultural status.

Ishiguro, known as the Nobel laureate for his unique literary style, tells tales influenced by memory, identity, and the inexplicable unplanned events of life. Another dystopian film set in the future, "Never Let Me Go," depicts our society's fear of moral ambiguities, quandaries, and other uncontrollable uncertainties. The book, which takes place in a parallel England, follows the lives of three young people who attend Hailsham School and live in seclusion in the countryside: Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth.

### **Cloned Existence in *Never Let Me Go*:**

The novel *Never Let Me Go* is set in England during the 1990s. It tells the story of three friends, Tommy, Ruth, and Kathy, who grew up together at a specific institution called Hailsham, a boarding institution. Kathy H, a thirty-one-year-old female protagonist who works as a carer, narrates the story. The school where the pupils are raised is a particular school rather than a regular one. There, the children grew up facing a frightening and bleak future. There are three sections to the book. The early school years are covered in Part I. When kids reach adolescence, they move into cottages, which is the subject of Part II. Kathy's time as a carer is shown in Part III when she reunites with Ruth and Tommy.

The teachers, called boarding school instructors and guardians, teach their students about the value of artistic expression and physical well-being. Since they are clones, they must offer their organs to someone in need so that their health can be adequately cared for. The clones are explicitly made to donate their essential organs once they become human, but they pass away when they do so for the third or fourth time, which is considered complete.

Though the novel focuses on the certainty of loss and death, it also depicts the idea that no matter how a human being is created, every person has desires,

feelings, lust, fear, jealousy, love, pain, realization, and dreams, just like everyone else inside and outside Hailsham. However, pupils at Hailsham and other comparable schools have been constructed and created as clones, and they are being raised to become living organ donors. The people who nurture and raise them, known as “guardians,” strive to provide them with a happy life, as evidenced by the text and a thorough examination of the personalities of some guardians. Guardians like Miss Emily, Madame, and Miss Lucy try to convince other people that the clones are like real human beings, like real children, and deserve to be treated humanely.

Madame, also known as Marie-Claude, is an elegant woman who selects the finest artwork from the students at Hailsham and displays them in her art gallery. Using their abilities in art as evidence, she attempts to demonstrate to others that the students possess souls and deserve to be treated with equal respect. Miss Emily goes out of her way to ensure the children have enjoyable, deserving, and purposeful lives, viewing them as individuals with thoughts and emotions rather than experiments. With Madame by her side, she endeavours to persuade the individuals at Hailsham that the kids have souls and are human while secretly lobbying for her beliefs. In contrast, Lucy, a youthful, athletic, and honest individual, expresses her emotions to Tommy, advising him that he does not need to be artistic. She says to Tommy,

Your lives are set out for you. You’ll become adults, then before you’re old before you’re even middle-aged, you’ll start to donate your vital organs. That’s what each of you was created to do. You’re not like the actors you watch in your videos or even like me. You were brought into this world for a purpose, and your futures, all of them have been decided. So, you are not to talk that way anymore. You will be leaving Hailsham before long, and it’s not so far off, the day you’ll be preparing for your first donations. You need to remember that. If you are to have decent lives, you have to know who you are and what lies ahead of you, every one of you.” (Ishiguro, 2006, p. 80)

In the end, she exposes the reason for the children being at Hailsham and explains how their lives are carefully controlled to supply organs to others until they either “complete” or die from donating them. Another instance of their seeming human-like characteristics is their response to knowing those nearby are afraid of them. When they attempt to evaluate those around them, situations unfold to be anticipated. When people approach Madame to test if she will retreat, they observe the depth of her fear and disgust. Kathy always feels that, eventually, she will learn how repulsive other people find clones like her, she says. Nonetheless, when it becomes evident to her and the rest of the students during that day with Madame, it brings some of them to tears, a moment that Kathy will never forget. The emotions the “clones” feel is just as exceptional and individual as each person feels. These emotions are profound, contemplative, and genuine.

In *Never Let Me Go*, the clone never decided to flee from an inevitable destiny but instead quietly acknowledged the situation. All clones were instructed from an early age about the significance of donating organs before passing away. Despite their lack of understanding, young clones are heavily influenced to believe that

donating their organs until death is an inherent duty and fate through forced indoctrination. This belief is said to be inevitable and mandatory for all clones. They feel ashamed that the initial donation resulted in their deaths, but they are proud to have survived until the fourth donation. Even though they understand that the fourth donation is the most difficult, they frequently seek solace in finding their model to glimpse what lies ahead despite being aware of the lack of a future. Their greatest aspiration is for the commencement of organ donation to be delayed for a few years. Lies such as “only true love can postpone donation” constantly vanish and reappear. This unique characteristic of the “silent victim” is a notable aspect of Kazuo Ishiguro’s novels, with his attention on the concepts of accountability and destiny setting him apart. This narrative portrays the act of donating organs until death as a tragic and unacceptable practice. Yet, it remains the sole purpose for clones coming into existence - their inherent duty and inevitable destiny. Clones continue to perform benevolent acts despite lacking the authority or capability. Clones are puzzled by the stark difference between their lives and those of the people they were created to save. They don’t anticipate becoming a genuine human or dreaming of immortality but simply aspire for their brief existence to bring some enrichment and allow them to appreciate the beauty of this world.

### **Post-human Paradox**

*Never Let Me Go* focuses on the destiny of human clones during drastic advancements in genetic engineering. When discussing genetic engineering triggers and reignites numerous discussions regarding the matters of cloning animals and cloning humans. Certainly, cloning technology has progressed to the phase of human cloning in recent years. Yet, it has inevitably sparked a contentious debate on establishing a clear line between science and bioethics, as biotechnology can threaten human moral and ethical values if misused. From a different perspective, the novel suggests that humans are concerned about the boundaries of their biological existence and their future life within the framework of posthumanism.

In *Never Let Me Go*, every clone residing in Hailsham is portrayed as a human, endowed with emotions and self-awareness, and nurtured with educational and artistic creative skills. A clone’s body is the same as a human’s. They possess sensitivity and intelligence like regular humans do. Human clones are created for the benefit of humans (in the novel, they are designed to provide essential organs for people). Yet, they are regarded as slaves and subjected to exploitation. They dedicate themselves entirely and make sacrifices for the welfare of humanity. This certainly breaches the principles of bioethics.

In *Never Let Me Go*, clones are confined to Hailsham, forbidden to leave the school premises, required to wear a health monitor, have an electronic ID bracelet, and indoctrinated with their inherent duty to donate organs. In Hailsham, teachers constantly act as “guardians” for clones, monitoring their behaviour and health status. Miss Lucy, the teacher, candidly reveals to the class that all students at

Hailsham are clones made to be identical to humans and bred to supply organs, with a lifespan allowing for three or four donations. From a bioethical standpoint, this constitutes a significant breach of the “Principle of Respect for Autonomy,” as human clones cannot possess rights of choice. In one regard, the personal liberty of clones is limited and denied. No clones can leave the school until they “graduate” from Hailsham. However, post-graduation, they are allocated to a specific region and wait to receive notice about the commencement of donations. From the instant of being cloned and brought into existence, their bodies and lives can no longer be their own. Their sole reason for existence is to supply organs for humans. In another regard, passive and unrequested organ donations can be detrimental and deadly to their lives, breaching the “Principle of Non-maleficence” in bioethical principles. Learning of Tommy’s approaching fourth donation alert, Kathy becomes emotional and says:

How maybe, after the fourth donation, even if you’ve technically completed it, you’re still conscious in some sort of way; how then you find there are more donations, plenty of them, on the other side of that line; how there are no more recovery centres, no carers, no friends; how there’s nothing to do except watch your remaining donations until they switch you off. It’s horror movie stuff, and most of the time people don’t want to think about it. (Ishiguro, 2006, p. 279)

The posthumans in *Never Let Me Go* can be broadly classified into two groups based on their views on human cloning: those who regard human cloning simply as suppliers of organs devoid of souls and those who attempt to recognize and investigate the souls of the clones. The former refers to the majority of Posthuman individuals who are used to embracing the existence of human clones. Concurrently, this latter group consists of a few individuals who stand out in this era, embodying a minor aspect of human nature and the guilt experienced by humanity, which holds particular significance in this novel. Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth grew up together in Hailsham. As one of the few schools for developing cloned humans, Hailsham provides various educational and artistic programs to enhance clone students’ creative and communication skills.

Miss Emily, Madam, and other caretakers worked hard to improve clone students’ living conditions. Hailsham offers numerous activities, including “selling,” a crucial aspect of human cloning as it allows individuals to acquire items from the exterior, engage with outside individuals, and gather information from the outside world. Along with this activity, Hailsham provides various courses to enhance students’ talents and abilities, including painting, sketching, pottery, prose, and poetry.

Clone students study art through these courses and fully express their creativity. Often, the way children are perceived, along with their popularity and respect in Hailsham, is linked to their achievements in creativity. Suppose a clone student produces exceptional work showcasing their talent and creativity. In that case, it might be chosen by the Madam for display in the gallery for human evaluation to determine if the clone possesses a soul akin to that of humans. As clones reach

adulthood, they depart from Hailsham, which provides an exchange program designed to prepare them for the future by simulating real-life settings like coffee shops, enabling cloning students to practice conversations.

The teaching approaches of “sales,” “communication,” and “art education” provided by Hailsham have motivated the development and value perception of clone students, helped them understand the significance of creativity, and fostered a sense of group identity. What they have discovered drives them to pursue truth and strive for self-recognition. Nevertheless, when Madam acquired the skill of human cloning as proof that human cloning possessed a soul, she felt fear towards them. Similar to the sponsors of these movements beyond Hailsham, who viewed cloning as more than merely a mechanism for supplying organs, they initiated a campaign to demonstrate their perspective. After Hailsham’s success demonstrated that clones nurtured in humane and cultured surroundings are likely to develop as sensitive and intelligent as regular humans, the human apprehension regarding clone consciousness led to the plan’s ending

The closure of Hailsham signifies the community’s total abandonment of the issue of human cloning; since that time, human cloning has transformed into a commodity and a tangible “organ source.” Humans recognized that cloning was not merely for organ supply but that utilizing it as a tool or mechanism was unethical. However, in a society conditioned to believe “cancer can be cured,” this awareness diminishes. When people’s children, loved ones, or families face cancer, the desperate hope for quick organ transplants to save lives overshadows everything else, and concerns for the clones that provide organs are forgotten. No one contemplates whether a clone holds the same value as their life. When cloning technology reaches maturity, people also fear that clones may become more intelligent and superior, potentially taking the place of humans in society. Humans not only clone, but they also harm lower-class individuals for beneficial purposes. They view human clones and those of lower status as tools that serve their interests. After *Never Let Me Go*, the writer employs Madam’s remarks to express emotions and concerns regarding the posthuman era:

I witnessed the swift emergence of a new world. More research-oriented, more impactful. There are additional therapies for previous illnesses... “It’s an extremely harsh and brutal world.”

### **Conclusion**

In *Never Let Me Go*, the clones were educated early on about their duties in life: their purpose was to donate organs to those in the outside world, and after multiple donations, they grew weaker and ultimately died with dignity. Similarly, individuals in actual society are being instructed that the worth of our lives relies on how much we contribute and donate to this community. In a particular society, individuals appear to have discovered no alternative means of achieving their self-worth except by adhering to the values established by that society. Ishiguro’s story, by neither rejecting nor fully obliterating the difference between ‘human’ and non-

human, illustrates a moral stance that recognizes a posthuman ethics cannot exist apart from humanism. Ishiguro proposes that we must initially recognize that any ethical reaction is inherently shaped by our natural, truly human inclination to favour specific interpretations of 'human.' What should be highlighted is not our connection with others but rather our intrinsic human inclination to dominate, suppress, and eventually (and violently) eliminate difference. We can genuinely acknowledge our unique responsibilities in opposing injustice only after we grasp the challenges of sustaining compassion despite differences.

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# Suffering in Unison: A Critical Posthuman and Material Ecocritical Analysis of Ambikasuthan Mangad's *Enmakaje*

*Dakshina S.*

**Abstract:** This paper examines the novel *Enmakaje*, translated as *Swarga*, by Ambikasuthan Mangad, in light of critical posthumanism and material ecocriticism to understand the ecological and sociopolitical impacts of the tragedy caused by Endosulfan in Kasargod, Kerala. When industrial activities loom large, the intertwined sufferings of human and non-human entities in Mangad's narrative assume the spotlight. Capitalism is a layered presence in this novel. Textual analysis of the novel shows that the toxic landscape is not, in simple terms, the background for the characters' struggle. The vivid imagery and temporality of the narration strengthen the trauma that lingers in the affected communities and ecosystems. The novel highlights the role of oppressed communities whose lives become inextricably bound to the poisoned environment, almost placing their plight in a greater struggle for social and ecological justice. Thus, *Enmakaje* offers a powerful intervention into the impacts of industrial exploitation, producing a powerful portrait of resilience amidst the devastation. As such, this paper argues that Mangad's work conjures much more than the story of suffering to become an appeal for activism toward a just world and sustainability that calls for readers to deliberate their relationships with nature and other life forms that share the same space.

**Keywords:** Endosulfan, material ecocriticism, critical posthumanism, ecological consciousness, industrialization, environmental justice, biopolitics, becoming-earth, cyborg.

## Introduction

The Malayalam novel *Enmakaje* (2009) by Ambikasuthan Mangad and translated as *Swarga* in English by J. Devika, is a powerful narrative about the Endosulfan disaster in Kasargod, Kerala. Although the characters are fictional, the story is



based on the real-life incidents that occurred in Kasargod due to the overuse of the pesticide Endosulfan. This environmental tragedy brings to light the dangers of using such toxic pesticides that can last over decades within the soil and ecosystems, causing damage to future generations as well. Ambikasuthan Mangad is a prominent Malayalam author and professor at Nehru Arts and Science College in Kanhangad, Kerala. Spanning over his 40 works comprising of short stories, essays, and novels, most of which focus on social and environmental justice, *Enmakaje* or *Swarga* is one of his acclaimed works, which is representative of his active protest against the usage of the pesticide Endosulfan within the plantations in Kerala and the lack of response from the government to respond to the grievances of the people who suffered from this toxic chemical agent. Endosulfan was widely used on cashews, tea, cotton, paddy, fruits, and other plantations until 2011 when the Supreme Court banned it from being used. There are many side effects of using the chemical, as humans suffer from neurotoxicity, physical deformities, poisoning, later sexual maturity, early menstruation in females, and much more; animals and plants also face effects in the form of death, mutations, and extinction. Newborns are often seen facing deformities due to their parents' exposure to the chemical.

Mangad, through his narrative, brings out the sufferings of the many people whose lives were permanently devastated, even for future generations and families. The victims of this disaster still suffer from the side effects, and the government's stance is still unclear on the issue as limited monetary compensation was only given to the victims. Although banned, the victims have lifelong deformities and other difficulties. Thus, the novel brings attention to the political, social, ecological, environmental, physical, and psychological aspects of the consequences of this tragedy. Serious industrial malpractice and lack of control are evident when prioritising monetary and corporate gain over individual lives and a sustainable environment.

This paper approaches the novel *Enmakaje* through a critical posthumanism and material ecocriticism framework to analyse how the novel combines human and non-human suffering. Both frameworks depart from the anthropocentric perspective of human suffering alone, where human and non-human lives suffer in unison as an interconnected system. Critical posthumanism merges posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism as it challenges the human-centric view of 'man' as a universal standard. It proposes the philosophical approach of neomaterialism as inherent intelligence, self-organisation, and interconnection matters, highlighting the importance of non-human entities and rejecting human exceptionalism (Braidotti, 2017). This theoretical lens thus emphasises that non-human lives like plants, animals, and inorganic elements can have agency and intrinsic value. Complementing this theory, the material ecocriticism framework, which Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann theorised, examines the 'agency of matter' where value and agency are attributed to non-human entities, as they suffer from ecological and material consequences of human interventions. Nature is not a passive backdrop to anything happening; landscapes, bodies, and inorganic matter are

actively involved in the metamorphosis of life. These elements can be seen in landscapes, deformed or mutated bodies, damaged ecosystems, and inorganic matter, which collectively critiques the anthropocentric worldview and showcases the suffering in unison of all life forms due to industrial exploitation.

The novel *Enmakaje*, by Ambikasuthan Mangad, portrays elements of critical posthumanism through the interconnectedness of human and non-human suffering, especially concerning the Endosulfan tragedy. This narrative emphasises such event's ecological and socio-political consequences, challenging the conventional divide between humans and nature. Through the perspective of material ecocriticism, *Enmakaje* powerfully depicts non-human entities—like plants, animals, and landscapes—as active players in environmental crises. This paper aims to investigate the themes of critical posthumanism and material ecocriticism, looking at how human and non-human suffering are intertwined within the industrial and socio-political frameworks that drive environmental damage. Ultimately, it seeks to highlight the agency of non-human entities during these pivotal moments, emphasising their importance in the ongoing conversation about ecological crises.

### **Literature Review**

Posthumanism critiques traditional humanism by questioning the boundaries between species, advocating for the ethical consideration of non-human entities, and extending moral concern beyond humans to include animals, plants, machines, and other life forms (Miah, 2007). This perspective challenges the concept of humans as autonomous beings, particularly as biological organisms become intertwined with informational circuits and as technologies like nanotechnology, robotics, and genetic engineering facilitate this interconnection. The term “post” in posthumanism holds a dual meaning, where one sense marks it as a phase following humanism, while another critiques human centrality, emphasising the ongoing interaction between humanist and posthumanist ideas (Ahluwalia, 2016). Spiritual elements also contribute to posthumanism, which values non-dualistic self-awareness and post-anthropocentrism, aligning it with practices from Advaita, Yoga, and spiritual traditions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Tantrism, and Jainism (Ferrando, 2016). Indigenous knowledge and feminist perspectives within posthumanism encourage sensitivity to non-human entities, helping us engage with and care for other-than-human nature; in turn, such posthumanist perspectives can enrich social work and education (Santha, 2024). Nietzsche's concept of the ‘Übermensch’ or ‘overhuman’ suggests that humans serve as a transition, a transformative bridge; human experience, shaped by technology and cosmic influences, resembles a hypertext or hieroglyph, pointing to the fluid nature of human identity (Mellamphy, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic has further reshaped human identity by merging organic and digital realms, leading us to reconsider human relationships with other organisms, challenging human supremacy, and promoting a more egalitarian, non-hierarchical view of existence, thereby underscoring human fragility (Nair, 2023).

Critical posthumanism emphasises balancing human experience between physical reality and virtual existence, reshaping the understanding of consciousness and the body through the interplay of biological and digital paradigms, which challenge and redefine traditional human identity. Humans possess a uniquely harmful ecological impact, and therefore, the notion of human flourishing beyond consumerist desires deserves scrutiny (Botz-Bornstein, 2012). Posthumanist fiction often presents a techno-centric and futuristic perspective on humanity, integrating entities like aliens, machines, mutants, and robots to showcase how technological influence permeates modern narratives. This shift erodes traditional humanistic values, favouring an ethos moulded by technological innovation and futuristic contemplation. Steve Nichols' *Posthuman Manifesto* (1988) encouraged the development of posthumanism as an academic and cultural lens to explore humanity's evolution in response to technology (Singh, 2015).

Traditional ecocriticism tends to focus on how humans portray nature, often viewing it through a lens of human experience. In contrast, material ecocriticism takes a different approach by highlighting the agency of the material world around us. This perspective challenges the idea that nature is a backdrop to our lives; instead, it places significant value on non-human entities like plants, animals, ecosystems, and even inorganic materials. Key figures in this field, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, advocate for recognizing the interconnectedness of these elements. They define material ecocriticism as exploring how different forms of matter interact, including everything from toxic substances to living organisms and landscapes. Within this dynamic, humans create stories and meanings that help us understand our relationship with the world (Clark, 2019). This approach invites us to see the world as a setting for human action and a vibrant tapestry of life and matter, all deserving attention and respect. Considering ecological impact is crucial to fostering a meaningful connection with the environment and other species. Humans must recognize their role in environmental damage and commit to sustainable practices, integrating elements of humanism into posthumanist thinking to build an ethics of coexistence (Soper, 2012). Ambikasuthan Mangad's novel *Enmakaje* (or *Swarga* in English translation) captures the "slow violence" and extensive toxicity unleashed by the Endosulfan disaster. The novel illustrates the suppression of information and the subsequent denial and resistance led by affected communities, reflecting an eco-populist movement through its central characters' struggle against ecological harm. It critiques how industrial capitalism exacerbates environmental destruction, social chaos, economic strife, discrimination, and marginalisation across living and non-living species (Ali, 2023).

Mangad critiques human interventions that disrupt the natural equilibrium, advocating an eco-centric worldview in which humans and nature are inseparably connected. The novel underscores the importance of education and adopting sustainable practices as alternatives to harmful chemicals (Maheshwary et al., 2021). In response to toxic exposure, children within the novel face transgenic mutations manifesting as cognitive delays, deformities, and premature

menstruation, showing how normalcy becomes a luxury under such environmental conditions. These children deserve education and the right to a healthy life, with the novel framing itself as a “cultural apparatus” that underscores the discourse on human rights related to environmental catastrophe, such as the right to a clean environment and safe coexistence. The disabled bodies within the narrative serve as visceral evidence of ecological imbalance and emphasise the interconnectedness of body and environment. The concept of “eco-ability” addresses the notions of ability and disability, challenging them within an environmental framework (Dilipkumar and Rangarajan, 2020). Detailed analysis of *Enmakaje* reveals its intersection with environmental justice, toxicity, and green criminology themes, suggesting that fiction can powerfully highlight “crimes” against the environment and serve as an advocacy tool for justice (Jana and CV, 2023). Through its rich narrative, the novel portrays the lasting damage of industrial abuse and calls for awareness and action to counter environmental injustices.

While much of the scholarship on *Enmakaje* by Ambikasuthan Mangad focuses on implications of human identity, human sufferings, green criminology, and ecological justice, this paper addresses the novel through material ecocriticism and critical posthumanism. The paper will focus on providing an in-depth analysis of the implications of these frameworks, which have not been explored so far, and highlight the unity in human and non-human suffering during ecological disasters like the Endosulfan tragedy. The narrative is projected as a tool for environmental justice, portraying the importance of providing for marginalised and non-human entities. The critical posthumanism framework will explore human and non-human sufferings, and material ecocriticism will focus on the agency of the material world within the narrative, further deepening the understanding of ecological justice.

### **Methodology**

This paper uses textual analysis, a qualitative methodology, to examine the novel *Enmakaje* by Ambikasuthan Mangad. The research questions and objectives focus on the interconnectedness between human and non-human sufferings during the Endosulfan disaster, challenging human-nature binaries. This method allows an in-depth examination of the text while obtaining an adequate understanding of the novel’s themes, characters, and narrative structure. This requires close reading of the novel to understand the embedded meanings and implications. This method will explore the relevant critical posthumanism elements and material ecocriticism themes more within the narrative. The language, imagery, characters, and their interactions are deeply examined to reveal how Mangad portrays the novel’s complex ecological and socio-political relationships. The portrayal of human and non-human entities and their roles and interactions will be analysed to understand the interconnectedness of their sufferings. The depiction of marginalized communities within the novel will also be examined, highlighting their dependence on non-human entities affected by the disaster, intertwining their fates.

The symbolic representation of nature within the novel and the depiction of industrialization can reflect on the ecological degradation and suffering caused by the Endosulfan disaster. This can be reflected in how Mangad critiques capitalism and its implications on ecosystems and the environment. The flow and organisation of the narrative can bring to light how it reveals the major themes within the narrative. The shifts in temporal structure within the novel emphasise the plight, environmental harm, and resistance from marginalized communities. Textual analysis helps to engage deeply with the texts, exploring the deeper meanings of the text. This also facilitates the contextual understanding of the text, as in the novel, the environmental and socio-political aspects can be overlooked in understanding the novel within the broader context of the real-life incident of the Endosulfan tragedy. This also blends literary analysis with ecological theory on how literature can be a call for abolishing industrial exploitation and striving towards a sustainable future. It reflects on the environmental and social justice that must be pursued. Also, with the critical engagement with the text, textual analysis offers scope for new interpretations and insights on the conventional narratives surrounding environmental crisis and human agency, adding to the critical posthumanism framework. Thus, the methodology relevant to analysing the novel *Enmakaje* by Ambikasuthan Mangad is to understand the complex interplay between human and non-human entities in the force of ecological and environmental disasters.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

The English translation of *Enmakaje* is named *Swarga*, which means 'heaven' in Malayalam. The town of Enmakaje used to be heaven, a land of hills, exotic practices, prosperity, truth, and fertility, where people, animals, plants, and the environment coexisted in peace and harmony. But Endosulfan cast a black veil upon them. The novel begins with the mention of a 'man' and a 'woman,' with the woman bringing a child to their humble abode amidst the forest near the hills. The man keeps mumbling about not living as a 'human' and asks the woman why she brought the child home when they both agreed to leave behind their past, be it their names or being a human. They did not address each other by name, were not married to each other by law, shared bodies and comfort, and lived every day as they saw fit. The man wanted nothing to do with the word 'human.' This brings out the question of 'who is human.' Only later in the novel do we know the names of the characters, Neelakantan and Devayani, who are both trying to escape from their traumatic past and a society that ostracised them? Neelakantan admits to having lived as nameless creatures for six years, not even upon coming to Enmakaje. Through the child's illness, whom they adopted and named Parikshith, and their realisation of the tragic incidents in the village, they realise the importance of being 'human' and being there for other 'humans.'

Neelakantan realises that he has never seen a crow cry, never seen frogs or fish in the water bodies, or seen other animals in the village and the forests. Once a land of tigers, there were no tigers anymore. He realises that the chemical Endosulfan

is the cause of all issues in the village. Endosulfan was aerially sprayed on the cashew plantations, seeping into the soil and water bodies of land. This created complications for humans, plants, animals, and the soil. The environment violently transformed into the source of suffering along with the living and non-living entities that have existed with it for over 25 years. This aligns with Donna Haraway's concept of 'naturecultures,' where nature, too, suffers under capitalist exploitation, dissolving the human-nature binary. Mangad's depiction of suffering elevates from the level of the individual to broader ecological degradation, where a capitalistic world rules human and non-human lives. The water bodies are poisonous and have stopped supporting the once prosperous ecosystems. Be it bee farming or the famous 'kaavu' with many snakes and a 'snake god' who protected the village and the forest. The government promotes pesticide use by stating that Endosulfan is a medicine that kills fruit flies. However, the truth is that the government unanimously wants to increase state revenue despite the pesticides being banned in other countries. The villain in the story is the government.

Human and environmental suffering are inseparable, both vulnerable due to industrial pollution and being susceptible to capitalist exploitation, as humans and the environment are poisoned. This is the 'becoming-earth' process where the landscape, humans, animals, and plants are part of the same fate (Braidotti, 2018). It also reflects our deeper awareness on an ecological level that our actions, lives, and vulnerabilities are intertwined. This is part of the 'posthuman subjectivity' that sees humans as part of the environment and ecosystem rather than separate entities, where all their lives and fate are under toxic forces of control. The government of Kerala, supported by the Ministry of Agriculture, refuses to listen to the people's pleas and continues to use pesticides.

The sight of the mutated bodies, with deformed limbs, big heads, thin and tiny legs, enlarged bellies, bodies covered in wounds, children with mental retardations, and other problems, raises the question of who exactly is human. From thinking that the sufferings of the villagers are due to the curse cast upon them by their indigenous god for trapping him on a hill, the villagers came out of their superstitions and started to address the reality. The deformed bodies of the children and their mental and psychological issues align with Donna Haraway's 'cyborg,' as industrialization imposed the human identity to be reshaped by blurring the boundaries of what is natural and artificial. The lives of these children, altered by their poisonous surroundings, are representative of their blending of industrial influence with biological vulnerabilities, affecting both form and life. Human bodies thus become the enduring symbols of environmental harm. With the government itself set towards harming the people of the village, the question of 'who is human' resurfaces again.

Similarly, Neelakantan is traumatised by the newborn calves of his neighbour, who have three legs, are weak, and die too soon. Every other household in Enmakaje and the nearby towns has more than one patient at residence. The plants are also seen to have deformities, lack of vigour, and no flowers, hence the absence of

honey bees. The entire forest's last monkey is named 'Sugreevan' by Neelakantan. It is depressing to see how even the human body is not free of Endosulfan; everything has been polluted, even the breast milk. Through this and from the mother's body, the children of the area will continue to suffer from problems and will pass them on to future generations.

The governmental systems overseeing Endosulfan's overuse represent the 'biopolitical systems,' derived from Micheal Foucault's 'biopolitics,' which exploit human and non-human agencies (Wolfe, 2013). Government negligence and corporate profit are executed at the expense of vulnerable communities and ecosystems. Through the suffering of the village Enmakaje, Mangad portrays the biopolitical power that causes death and suffering to the lives of communities, plants, animals, and landscapes, considering them dispensable. There is no use even when the villagers organize rallies, conduct campaigns, and plead the political leaders. Neelakantan and Devyani have to face the consequences in the form of death threats from the political leader himself. He advocates for using Endosulfan and rejects the sufferings of the people, telling them he will provide monetary benefit for their illnesses. Towards the end of the novel, this unnamed leader and his gang kill the environment activist Jayarajan and kidnap both Neelakantan and Devyani, tying them up in trees upside down in the forest. There, the leader suffers a snakebite from the same 'golden cobra' the couple had seen a few times. It had not harmed them in any way but aided in their escape. This also aligns with Achille Mbembe's theme of 'necropolitics,' where the governmental power structures determine who lives and who dies within the society (Mbembe, 2003).

Through the framework of material ecocriticism, the novel brings in the voices and experiences of the broader ecological and political landscape. Apart from the plight of the human voices that are heard, the lives of animals and other life forms are also narrated. This can be seen in portraying the 'black crab,' which had undergone mutations and survived in the toxic environment, or the 'divine donkey' inside the cave, which is the reincarnation of Mahabali. The voice of the landscape or the environment is brought to life as talking caves inside the forest. Upon escaping from the captivity of the leader and his gang, Neelakantan and Devayani enter the cave. The cave instructs that humans cannot enter; however, leaving their clothes behind, they can enter as shame is the only element that categorises a human as 'human.' They take off their clothes and accept the life of just another living form in the environment. They are astonished to find several other animals inside the cave, surviving the poisonous atmosphere. Also, the cave tells them that these animals take shelter inside this cave to escape the 'poisonous rain' of Enmakaje.

The environment suffers, too, as it rains so hard with extreme thunderstorms and lightning up in the hills. Nature, too, is trying to shake away the toxicity that has captured it. The novel weaves a collective narrative of despair, suffering, and endurance through the stories, perspectives, and experiences of living and non-living alike. This highlights how all forms of life try to resist and endure the



Endosulfan tragedy, which is degrading daily. This combined perspective aligns with the material ecocriticism which was proposed by Serenello Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, emphasizing that all the elements of nature, be it humans, bodies, plants, animals, landscapes, organic and inorganic substances, participate in creating an interconnected story of vulnerability, endurance, and survival. Like in the novel, human and non-human entities coexist, equally bearing the scars of industrial pollution and capitalist exploitation. Nature is not a passive backdrop to the novel's setting but an active participant, equally suffering the abuse and trying to endure in its way. The land is part of the villagers' identity, a physical space with culture and memory. Enmakaje is the 'land of tigers, hills, springs' and rich traditions. The poisoned landscape, toxic bodies reflecting environmental contamination, the mutations in flora and fauna, and the slow violence of Endosulfan and its toxic persistence over the years, affecting the environments, ecosystems, and humans alike, aligns with the material ecocriticism perspective.

Environmental destruction does not affect individuals in isolation and transcends the boundaries of species. As the commodification of nature equally affects human and animal lives, the Endosulfan tragedy brings to light how tragic industrial exploitation can be in all forms of life. The portrayal of the devastated landscape, equally resonating with the devastated characters, makes *Enmakaje* a masterpiece for advocating for ecological and social justice. The environmental violence is highlighted in detail, which degrades human lives and ecosystems, which asserts the posthumanist perspective that humanity is not separated from nature and cannot stand on its own as superior.

### Conclusion

The paper reveals profound evidence of how *Enmakaje* or *Swarga* by Ambikasuthan Mangad critiques industrial and capitalist exploitation and environmental injustice through a critical posthuman and material ecocriticism lens. Through the Endosulfan disaster in Kerala, Mangad engages the readers by portraying the devastating consequences of the tragedy, the lifelong effects of viewing nature as a commodity, and showcasing how industry overexploits and pursues capitalist profit rather than ecological and human well-being. *Enmakaje* and its inhabitants, along with the neighbouring towns depicted in the novel, faced sufferings and hardships for no fault; even the land they inhabit faced the consequences, showing the interconnectedness between human and non-human agencies. When the human bodies and ecological systems are intertwined in a web of vulnerability, they are forced out of control by toxic forces, depicting the concept of 'becoming earth' (Braidotti, 2018). The agency and value of human and non-human entities and the socio-ecological crisis they share are portrayed, where nature is not just a backdrop to events occurring within human lives.

The sufferings of the community, from the deformed bodies of the children to the soil of the village tainted with poison, project the extent to which *Enmakaje* has come where no one can drink, eat, or breathe without thinking about the amount of

Endosulfan that might be in whatever they consume. They are aware that pesticides are everywhere, surrounding them and eating them up inch by inch, a slow violence that they can do nothing about. The novel speaks for the global reality in which human and non-human existence is defined by capitalism, industry, and technology. Mangad brings the systemic powers that bring about ecological injustice to light through critical posthumanism and material ecocriticism. This is a call for action. The degraded landscapes, toxic environment, and endless suffering are potent symbols of endurance and resistance, which further highlight the interdependence of human and non-human life, portraying an ethical and compassionate framework to promote ecological justice.

This paper can contribute to the literature on critical posthumanism and material ecocriticism by showing how literature can promote social justice and ecological consciousness. In addition, this paper opens a new scope for exploration to address environmental and socio-political issues through the ecocritical lens. A deeper analysis compared with other works of the same genre within the Indian context and different cultures can provide more insights and explore how each community grapples with environmental tragedies in its own manner. The ethical frameworks within the posthumanist thought that addresses ecological philosophy can be another area of further exploration. *Enmakje*, thus, is a powerful example of how literature can bring out an ecological consciousness and cry for justice, criticizing social hierarchies and addressing the environmental crises to make society think and reflect on how to execute an inclusive and equitable coexistence of peace and harmony among all forms of life.

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# Entangled Temporalities and Ecological Identity: Posthuman and Ecocritical Perspectives in Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire*

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the entwined themes of temporal fluidity and ecological identity in Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire* (*Aag Ka Darya*), analysing the novel through posthuman and ecocritical frameworks. Spanning over two millennia, *River of Fire* reveals an intricate tapestry of human, cultural, and environmental entanglements that challenge linear conceptions of history and underscore the shifting boundaries between human and non-human identities. Through its portrayal of recurring landscapes and natural elements across different eras, the novel destabilises anthropocentric notions of time and place, suggesting a continuity that binds human history to the larger ecological rhythms of the Indian subcontinent. This study argues that Hyder's work promotes an ecological identity that transcends individual and cultural confines, urging readers to consider a posthuman perspective where human existence is inseparable from the land's ecological memory and environmental transformations. By analysing *River of Fire* through these lenses, this paper illuminates how the novel contributes to a broader understanding of interspecies ethics, cultural continuity, and environmental stewardship in Indian literature.

**Keywords:** Temporal fluidity in literature, Ecological identity, Posthumanism in Indian literature, Anthropocentrism and cultural continuity, Interspecies ethics, Environmental memory

## Introduction

The convergence of posthumanism and ecocriticism has become an influential framework for rethinking human identity, ethics, and the environment in literature. Posthumanism combats the human-centred, or anthropocentric, worldview by

emphasising the interconnectivity of humans, non-human beings, and ecological forces. It problematizes the characterization of ‘the human’ as a special category instead placing humans as part of a complex interactive system. Ecocriticism, likewise, considers such relationships and their reflection in literature concerning human beings and nature and how these stories critique and can change our views about nature. Both frameworks underscore the concept of ecological identity—the notion that identity is inherently shaped by interactions with nature and influenced by the ecological context in which it exists. These methods provide a perspective on understanding the literature about which the authors aim to evolve such a conception that the presence of a human among other beings is not an isolated incident but rather a part of the ecosystem.

In the hands of an eminent writer, Qurratulain Hyder, *River of Fire* or *Aag Ka Darya* (1959) examining over two thousand years of history, makes a profound inquiry into the relation of the human sphere and the non-human sphere. The novel is set within the context of time on the Indian subcontinent and brings diverse historical periods into contact through the connection of personal stories, cultural transformations and environmental patterns. Hyder portrays the landscape itself as an enduring presence, more permanent than the people who inhabit it, and reflects on the ecological continuity of the land through the ages. As one character muses, “The river flows, unchanging, while kings come and go” (p. 93), reinforcing the theme of temporal fluidity and highlighting how the river embodies both historical memory and environmental resilience.

Hyder’s use of recurring natural symbols, particularly the river, emphasises the persistence of the natural world in the face of human transience. The river serves a purpose greater than that of a mere geographical feature; rather, it serves as a type of monument to the memories of the land, and in that setting, it witnessed several centuries of human activities. Another character remarks, “In the depths of its waters, the river holds secrets of empires long lost” (p. 154), suggesting that nature serves as a repository of memory, even when human records fade. With such descriptions, Hyder seems to subvert the anthropocentric conception of history on the premise that human events are the key features in the past, and instead, argues that the use of the environment does not solely define human identity. The novel’s depiction of recurring landscapes and ecosystems across different eras invite readers to view history through a posthuman and ecocritical lens. In one passage, a character reflects on the forested terrain that “seems to breathe and watch, as if it too were alive, bearing witness to the folly of men” (p. 218), imbuing the landscape with agency and an almost sentient presence. This depiction questions the long-held stereotype of nature that has been regarded as the backdrop of human activities, it instead asserts nature to be the driving force behind human experiences and identities.

By suggesting that “the earth remembers what men have forgotten” (p. 315), Hyder underscores a continuity that transcends individual lives and human accomplishments, urging a reconsideration of how humanity fits within a larger, ecologically interconnected world. By focusing on *River of Fire* for posthuman and

ecocritical discourse, this paper puts forwards the claims that the novel is a man-centred society's condemnation, owing to the massiveness of the scope and focus of its story lines and natural features. Hyder's portrayal of nature as a continuous force reflects a posthuman perspective, where humans are but one part of a vast ecological network. This interconnectedness is apparent in passages where characters perceive themselves as "merely travellers through the ancient landscape, while the earth remains steadfast and eternal" (p. 202). By employing the river, forest, and other landscapes, Hyder helps readers visualise the idea where human past can best be understood as human-composed history that cannot be divorced from human identity and culture, which actively incorporates the environment. The paper explores how Hyder's *River of Fire* calls for a rethinking of human-nature relationships, suggesting that a true understanding of identity must embrace the environment's role in shaping human history and culture. In examining *River of Fire* through posthuman and ecocritical lenses, this study aims to illuminate the novel's unique approach to depicting human existence as part of an ecological continuum. By exploring temporal fluidity, ecological identity, and the ethical implications of interspecies relationships, this paper highlights the ways in which Hyder's work contributes to broader discussions of environmental stewardship and interdependence. Ultimately, *River of Fire* presents a compelling narrative that encourages readers to see human identity not as isolated or exceptional, but as one thread within the complex tapestry of ecological history.

The fields of posthumanism and ecocriticism have become powerful and respectable lenses in literary criticism as they oppose the standard anthropocentric ideologies and allow for the redefinition of the human as a being that is in relation with non-humans and the environment. Scholars such as Donna Haraway (1991) and Rosi Braidotti (2013) have also contributed to the discourse of posthumanism by perceiving humanity as part of a larger interconnected network of other beings, machines and the ecosystem. In her works, Haraway introduces the construct of the 'cyborg' which effectively dismantles the absolute notions of otherness between man and non-man, thereby urging the reconceptualization of ecology and 'the human' in conjunction with one another. In the same vein, Braidotti's concept of 'becoming' also practically involves 'being', but in the context of the displacement of 'the human' from 'the human' becoming thoroughly intertwined with its surroundings or the state of the world where it ultimately dwells.

Ecocriticism, on the other hand, has provided an additional approach with principal theorists such as Lawrence Buell (1995) and Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) scrutinising how literature contests or constructs our conception of nature as well. In Buell's *The Environmental Imagination*, it is argued that literature has a capacity to be used for environmental defence and condemnation of abusive relations towards the land while raising the ecological consciousness. This article places emphasis on the notion of "toxic discourse" so endemic to Buell and which encompasses the effects of mankind on the environment in what he refers to as "toxic discourse". He also seems to expand on Glotfelty's assertion who has tagged "all ecological



relationships as dynamic processes” (Glottfelty, 1996) in the sense that she portrays landscape as both the product and the contributor to the history of mankind.

The application of ecocriticism to the Indian literary space is an emerging area of research focusing on the sociocultural contexts behind the images created about the environment. Ecocritics like Vandana Shiva (1993) and Amitav Ghosh (2016) have argued that Indian writing has a different eco-centric outlook that emphasises interrelation and respect for the land. So, in the case of Shiva’s *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (1988), the author’s overarching theme in the book is to present the traditional Indian worldview that portrays nature as sacred and part of human survival and therefore rejects western models of nature as exploitative. From this, it is similar to Ghosh’s concerns featured in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), where he states that climate change and other aspects that affect nature are thinly presented in the narratives and seeks a new way of storytelling that endorses environmental aspects within the Indian context.

There is, however, a noticeable pattern among the ecocriticism scholarship and this was to focus on contemporary Indian literature that focuses on the challenges of globalisation and the threat of environmental degradation. Authors like Sukanta Chaudhuri (2008) and Esha Dey (2020) argue that the way Indian literature treats environmental issues is not only a cultural phenomenon but also a historical one in which the natural environment plays a central role in the formation of both personal and social identities. However, while much of this scholarship has focused on modern Indian writings, less attention has been paid to historical fictions like *River of Fire* that tackle centuries-old stories and the ways in which the ecology of the region moulded the cultures and the people within it over a long period. My research paper addresses this gap by examining how *River of Fire* uses natural elements, particularly the river, as symbols of cultural and ecological continuity. This literature review reveals a growing scholarly interest in posthumanism and ecocriticism within literary studies, particularly in Indian literature. However, it also highlights gaps in current research, particularly regarding the intersection of these themes in historical Indian novels like *River of Fire*. While scholars have examined *River of Fire*’s portrayal of Indian history and cultural continuity, less attention has been given to its ecological dimensions and posthuman themes. By analysing *River of Fire* through a combined posthuman and ecocritical lens, this paper aims to contribute to these ongoing discussions, emphasising how Hyder’s work challenges anthropocentric views and promotes a vision of human identity that is deeply entwined with ecological continuity and environmental memory.

### **Posthumanism in *River of Fire***

The posthumanism perspective shifts the focus from allowing humanity to bear the brunt of all issues to the alternative civilizational orders that have a close conception of humanity and non-human entities like animals, plants, technology, and the environment. Humanity as a concept does not hold the mantle of supremacy over

other forms of life, rather, all life is interdependent and there are varying degrees of intermingling between species, techno-logical forms and ecosystems. Particularly, the posthumanist approach seems largely, if not entirely, dismissive of the idea of Human Supremacy, focusing on the idea that the identity of a human, their consciousness, or even their sense of agency, is contingent upon their association with the non-human. Such a viewpoint is in accordance with the idea that the complete understanding of human beings cannot be presented without contextualising the ecological, cultural, and technological systems that surround them.

### ***Human and Non-Human Interactions***

Hyder's *River of Fire* makes us think about the relation that the characters in the novel have with the environment, depicting the landscapes not merely as a backdrop but as living organisms that play a part in shaping the existential experiences of the people. During the storyline, many natural features such as rivers, forests, and even the seasons are incorporated and serve as a reminder of the connection and evolution of life. A case in point is the river which is always shown as being primitive and immortal no different from people and the times they live in. One character reflects, "The river flows, unchanging, while kings come and go" (p. 93), indicating that the river's existence is not defined by the human cycle of birth and death but instead embodies a continuity that outlasts individual human experiences. This perspective regarding the river that connects every single one of us is time focused as it single handedly dictates the history because of the characters this river has.

In several instances, the river and other natural elements are portrayed as forces that guide, protect, or even challenge the characters' actions, further highlighting the interconnectedness between human and non-human realms. For instance, when a character finds themselves lost in the wilderness, they describe the forest as "alive with the spirits of past lives, watching, waiting" (p. 145), suggesting that the environment has an agency beyond human perception. The forest is not simply a setting for the character's struggle; it embodies the history of the land, alive with the memories of past human and non-human encounters. This representation aligns with the posthuman view that humans are not separate from nature, but rather part of an ongoing ecological process, where the landscape itself holds memories and agency.

Another example is found in the recurring motif of the seasons, which symbolise the cyclical nature of life and death. As one character observes, "The seasons change, yet they always return, as if nature is locked in an eternal embrace with time" (p. 178). This viewpoint regards time span in a conventional manner, that is, as a landscape in which humans are just another component alongside flora and fauna, and geography throughout. Such changes in *River of Fire* are the indicators of politics, indicating the fact that the identity of people, just as that of landscape, is the product of ever larger factors than the abilities of a single individual. The participants in the socio-political processes featured in this work have both social and psychological backgrounds and their identities draw their meaning from nature.

The novel also gives insights on how the characters' identities are influenced by lands and the history that is associated with the lands. The river, as a recurring symbol, is described as "holding the memory of empires lost, the lives of those who walked beside it" (p. 210). From this, it can be inferred that the river is not just a geographical feature; rather it is a metaphor for the vision of ecological awareness, the ever-existing power that encompasses the past of everyone and everything that once had existed along its shores. This enables the readers to appreciate Hyder's characters as people who exist in a culture that is in symbiosis with its surroundings, all aspects of their lives being influenced by natural phenomena, and the people's psyche being formed by the ecological history of the place.

Great Rivers and Civilization brings forth criticism on the greatly pervasive anthropocentric account about civilization wherein a relationship of interdependence with nature is distilled. Rather Hyder's book articulates the idea of ecological depth where one's identity formation and expression are a process that is in parallel with the surrounding environment and other life forces. In this way, the novel can be conceptualised as a posthuman work, characterised by blurry boundaries between human and non-human and the environment also actively constructs identity and history. In conclusion, *River of Fire* is determined to go beyond its depiction of human and non-human relations to take a stand against the anthropocentric bias of classical narratives. Asserting that nature is in its own right a powerful and active factor in human experience throughout history, Hyder's novel also emphasises yet another posthumanist argument of ecological identity; an ecological identity that is fluid or ever-changing and is woven into and across greater ecosystems and across time. By the constant interaction of the human characters and the landscape in which they are set, the novel forces us to look beyond nature as a mere backdrop but as an agent in the course of altering history and identity of the people.

### ***Temporal Fluidity and Cultural Continuity***

"Temporal fluidity" in literature refers to the dissolution of rigid chronological frameworks, allowing for a more fluid and interconnected portrayal of time. This concept allows for a narrative structure that stretches across historical periods, enabling events from different times to overlap or coexist, thus offering a more complex understanding of history. Temporal fluidity is a concept that contradicts the linear idea of time and so time has either a cyclical or non-linear relation with past, present, and future. They hint that time cannot be perceived as a straight line in which different historical events or periods are separated by strict demarcation. Instead of depicting time in a linear directional format which progresses from one primary point to the other, the focus shifts towards the major points in time or events that have taken place. A narrative set in the *River of Fire* brings out the aspect of time that is less hetrolinear as Qurratulain Hyder uses multiple epochs which range from ancient history to even more recent events.

The novel starts with the invasion of India by Alexander and ends in the modern world and spans over two thousand one hundred and fifty years while portraying

the places human beings have lived in and the cultivation of ideologies that took place. The spatiotemporal structure exhibits leeway through a non-linear storytelling context which revolves around and sometimes returns to the same place and theme throughout diverse timelines in the novel. For example, Ivor Armstrong's River, which is the core concept in the story, remains the same, of course, with differences in usage and description of who does what with it throughout other centuries. The river is perceived to contain time in its current state as it constantly flows forward but baits in the substrate of history. A clear case of this is the variability of the river's depiction in different historical contexts. The river and rivers, in more complex nature, are reminiscent of a never-ending cycle of a civilization as it flows through the course of time while sitting through countless civilizations.

As one character reflects, "The river does not belong to any one era; it has watched the births and deaths of empires, the ebb and flow of time itself" (p. 112). This observation encapsulates the idea of temporal fluidity: while human history is marked by the fleeting presence of empires, the river remains, unchanging and enduring. Its very existence challenges the linear progression of time, suggesting instead an ecological permanence that transcends individual human histories. Moreover, Hyder uses temporal shifts to underscore the continuity of landscapes and ecosystems, emphasising that the natural world is not merely a backdrop to human history but an active participant in shaping cultural and historical trajectories. The river, forests, and even the seasons in *River of Fire* are not static elements; they are integral to the unfolding of history. By depicting the same natural elements as unchanged, Hyder implicitly suggests that the stability of natural and geographical features is older than human civilizations and empires. These recurring landscapes unchanging yet interacting with human lives reinforce the idea of ecological continuity, positioning the land as both witness and participant in the human experience.

### ***Non-linear Time and Ecological Identity***

A posthuman perspective embeds itself through the non-human-centred linearity of time in the cyclical and non-linear structure of *River of Fire*. The text is organised into a series of waypoints which interrupts the chronological flow which is portrayed by Hyder as progressing in circles constantly folding into one another. This perspective of time outlines a complete disregard of a linear timeline that has a beginning and an end which the author pursues. The human's context is placed in this case outside and in between the other two regions to maintain a sense of correlation in regards to their evolution throughout the novel. Such a perspective draws into question the essence of human exceptionalism and gives way to a posthuman approach that portrays the human experience as devoid of separation from the lived reality of nature. What's more, the river becomes an illustration of such transitions as the regaining of forces as well as these times being perpetuated and changing things in life.

While the river appears as the most powerful force throughout history, the meaning it carries shifts with the passing of history. In one section, the river is described as "a

mirror reflecting the grandeur of kings and warriors; in another, it is the silent witness to suffering and decay” (p. 187). In these descriptions, the river provides the temporal tautology with a twist, as it signifies both the rise and fall of humanity’s achievements, while, in its essence, stays the same. The persistent imagery of time as a river flowing across epochs goes beyond a history that is focused on humanity, which regards the deeds of people and their societies as the principles around which time is structured. Instead, Hyder offers us a time ecology in which the aspects of nature and its cycles continue to be more important than the double life spans of people.

Hyder adds the component of the inverse understanding of time in the context of the connection between a person and the ecosystem. By linking individual characters across historical periods through shared locations and symbols, she demonstrates how identities, both human and ecological, transcend the boundaries of time. For instance, the city of Takshashila, which appears in various forms throughout the novel, is described as “the pulse of civilization” in one period and as a “forgotten ruin” in another (p. 156). If, however, the man population changed throughout history, the land where a city that these people occupied remains. This suggests that the sense of identity of the inhabitants of a city is embedded in the ecological ‘sameness’ of the region. The cyclical conception of time in *River of Fire* is also congruent with the posthuman notion that identities either of human or non-human beings are most affected by the environment and the connections between it and the forms, and not by individuals or cultural heritage.

Another ecological identity is present in the characterization of the forest, which has and continually acts as a symbol of nature. In one scene, a character walking through the forest remarks, “I can feel the earth beneath my feet—this is not just soil, but the memory of every life that has walked this land” (p. 210). This statement expresses the belief that the ecological identity is also concerned with the memories and the history that are imprinted in the land, and not only the geography of the land. The geographies bear the historical experience of all its past inhabitants, and this historical experience is eco-identity. It is the record of continuity and change in the identity of people across different time periods. Different times or periods of existence combine and coexist. The narrative shifts, closing the boundaries with the present and expanding the past. The riverside region has undergone much transformation, but it still remains integrated with a profound part of human identity. The hypothesised new representation of time in *River of Fire* provides evidence that identity, history, and human’s eco-niche are interrelated notions, instead of looking at humans as passive recipients untouched by changes in the eco-niche or times.

### **Ecocritical Perspectives: The River as a Symbol of Continuity**

Ecocriticism, a field of literary theory that examines the relationship between literature and the natural environment, emphasises the interconnectedness between humans and nature, encouraging a rethinking of human-nature interactions. It critiques the anthropocentric worldview that positions humans at the centre of the universe, instead advocating for a more holistic view in which the natural world is seen as an

active participant in shaping human experience and identity. With respect to Indian literature, ecocriticism examines how these cultures have constructed meaning and systems of beliefs, philosophies, and even social aspects through various environmental features such as landscapes, flora, fauna, and climate. Nature (past and present) has, for many Indian writers, not simply been a background upon which humans interact, but rather, an active and integral part of humanity, life, and spirituality.

In this way, ecocriticism within Indian literature interacts with the indigenous perception of nature as the provider of life, energy, and inspiration which derives knowledge from cultural and ecological contexts. Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire* is a remarkable achievement of the writer, which has ecocritical elements showing nature not only as the background but also as the constituent of the plot. The way the novel portrays nature or the river, in particular, transforms the entire story from an anthropocentric to an ecology-centred approach where geography and its components actively shape the lives of the characters. Hyder, by walking across the centuries in the history of the river, demolishes the concept of nature as a passive and peripheral concept but rather introduces it as an alive and active one which controls the fate of humanity and constructs cultural and historical events.

#### ***The River as a Posthuman and Ecological Force***

The stream in *River of Fire* is one of the core symbols that represents the environmental aspect and the non-human conception of selfhood. The river is described as being intermediate between human and nonhuman things, as an omnipresent spectator that sees the rise and fall of human civilizations but does not change. Such a river which has been there for various centuries remarkably enables several civilizations to have transcended individual lives and specific historical periods, thus granting posthumanism – nature and the life of humans are always woven together as a uniform ecological existence. The depiction of several lakes in the novel, particularly their power in the destiny of human beings, graphs intensely dealing with the ramifications of natural water bodies.

In one scene, a character reflects, "The river is not just water; it is the soul of the land, carrying with it the blood of all those who have lived and died by its shores" (p. 134). This statement expresses the sense of the importance the river has and how it relates to people; it indicates that the river indeed has the memory of communities and societies. The River is an Actor. As claimed above, the river does not just watch the events of history but takes part in the making of history by linking the lives of past and present generations through its constant movement. The river also warns humanity about the futility of their efforts. In one passage, Hyder describes how the river "continues to flow through the ruins of civilizations, undeterred by the rise and fall of kings" (p. 178). Such imagery appears to suggest the concept of ecological succession, nations may rise and decline, but the river's form does not alter on account of the ephemeral occupation of mankind. In this way, the river becomes

posthuman, that is, beyond oneself and beyond the historical frame of time bound by humans.

An example of nature's regenerative ability is provided by the river which serves not only to remind us that nature is not a product of human history but a force that has its maturity and operates regardless of all the problems and successes of mankind. Moreover, the river is a recurring motif in the novel, appearing in various forms across different temporal layers, which reinforces the idea of non-linear time and ecological continuity. The river "does not age", one character muses, "it carries with it the wisdom of centuries, the knowledge of what has come before" (p. 220). The conception of the river stands in stark contrast to human beings as well as to the human past which is so banal and feeble. The river, on the other hand, serves to represent an ecological aspect that entirely goes beyond humanity.

The link between the river and ecological continuity reinforces the posthumanist claim that no person can be separated from the land and the ecosystems. As an ecological force, the river does not only determine the terrain and the people who live by it, but it also establishes the culture, history, and identity of these people. The effect of the river on humans is one more example which validates the fact that there are forces other than humans which have an impact on the course of human events. The characters in *River of Fire* are repeatedly drawn to the river for sustenance, solace, or even spiritual renewal. In one passage, a character observes, "We are all but the river's children, bound by its currents, seeking to find our place in its flow" (p. 245). Based on this perspective, the narration seeks to underscore the interaction between the river and the characters claiming that human purpose is rooted in the environment and that both self and group existence manufacturer's this existence of togetherness.

As an eco-posthuman force, the river is one of the powerful instruments through which the natural world exercises its control over the physical, symbolic, and historical aspects of the human experience. Hyder's portrayal of the river as an entity also questions the human tendency to try and subjugate or exploit nature. The characters' attempts to alter the course of the river or harness its power are met with failure, reinforcing the idea that nature, represented by the river, operates according to its own logic and will. As one character learns, "You cannot tame the river; it flows where it chooses, indifferent to the will of men" (p. 198). Such logic demonstrates the posthuman stance against anthropocentrism arguing the false paradigm that the human imagination and actions can govern the natural system. In *River of Fire*, there is an emphasis that nature is a force that needs to be understood in the human experience, rather than something that can be overpowered.

To summarise, the river within *River of Fire* holds a meaningful dualism of posthuman identity as well as eco-systemic resilience. There is always the river which brings to the fore the concept that humans and their lives and life patterns cannot exist without a strong integration with nature. The river reminds us that humans are merely a footnote of a much greater ecological story and that identity, be it human or otherwise, is part of a greater web. With such a depiction, the novel has



a rich ecocritical and posthuman perspective in that it seeks to address the issues and concerns that surround the architecture of humanity and nature and calls on the readers to intervene and correlate with the environment not as a subtle stage but rather, a prominent movement within the evolution of all life forms and history itself.

### ***Interspecies Ethics and Environmental Memory***

Interspecies ethics, a concept emerging from environmental philosophy and posthuman thought, is concerned with the moral and ethical considerations extended to non-human entities, including animals, plants, and the larger ecological world. This notion is quite revolutionary as it counters anthropocentrism or anthropocentrism – a human-oriented view that has always sought to protect human interest above all – by postulating that all life forms and their relations have a purpose in this universe. Interspecies ethics delineates the role of mankind within an ecosphere and focuses on the duties of mankind. The *inter alia* encompasses the rights of non-human beings as well.

*River of Fire* offers a deep understanding of interspecies ethics by showcasing the ‘environment’ and ‘animals’ as aspects of human life experience. The novel’s stance is that nature has a purpose as well in the human-centric view; rather, it propounds that the existence, development, and even styles of whole human populations are closely intertwined with nature’s well-being. For Hyder, nature is not something to be harvested for its resources; It is a cohabitant of human beings and other species. Throughout the novel, there are no non-actors, be it the land, animals, or even the natural forces, rather they are all actors in the story, all actors that provide for the “fundamentals” of the narrative. In one scene, a character contemplates the destruction of the natural world caused by human intervention: “What have we done to this earth? We’ve laid waste to the forests, driven the beasts from their homes, and the land cries out in pain” (p. 312). This commentary suggests some concerns about environmental concerns and the moral implications of environmental issues. It also makes clear the human responsibility towards the restoration and the protection of nature. It has been noted that at the national level *River of Fire* appears to advocate an ethical perspective in which all forms of life, human, and otherwise, are connected and interdependently dispels the notion that humanity has the sole authority to do what it wants with God’s creation.

Hyder’s depiction of interspecies ethics asks the reader to redefine the narrative of human supremacy on the natural world and all of its beings. Rather, the relationships between the characters and the animals and the land occupy places of empathy, mutualism, and regard; as opposed to the owner and where the animals are domesticated. In one memorable passage, a character who encounters a wounded animal reflects, “It is not merely the flesh that suffers, but the entire balance of the world. We are bound to this creature by forces beyond our understanding” (p. 175). This line emphasises the interconnectedness of all species and suggests that human actions toward animals and the environment have far-reaching consequences, both for humans and non-humans alike. Through such moments, *River of Fire* advocates

for an ethical perspective that extends beyond human concerns and embraces the well-being of the broader ecological community.

### ***Environmental Memory and Cultural Identity***

Defined in broader terms, “environmental memory” encompasses all the records that mankind or humanity interacts with while living, their global history, civilization and culture, etc. Just as people remember stories about their ancestors and certain important events, so does nature have a story of its own, and that story is about ancient cultures that lived on earth. *Rivers of Fire* understands this as well, while for all witnesses these landscapes of rivers, sea gulfs, and lake waters are without life, interpreting them for authors as more than static existential backgrounds which are constantly renewing memories accumulated in them. Hyder succeeds in doing this and lands these landscapes in history through the eyes of humans where both era and civilization changes form the lives of the characters contributing to history.

The river, in particular, is presented as an “everlasting onlooker” of historical trends, and is said to carry the history of the older generations and keep on influencing the lives of the coming ones. One of the characters points out, “The river remembers everything. It holds the stories of kings and beggars, of joy and despair, of life and death” (p. 122). A river is said to have traces of human civilization; its disturbances and its victories are echoed in the summoned splendours of the land; this, in turn, proves that the lands are ecologically linked, but can indeed maintain a broader form of recollection untouched by human experience. This memory is both a source of identity for the land and a reminder of the interrelatedness of all beings.

Hyder’s story seems to suggest an ecological self that challenges the limits of individuals or cultures. By the use of the theme of environmental memory, the novel puts forward the argument that there is no human history that is free from an ecosystem, therefore, the history of humanity is integrated with the history of geography and time. When the characters traverse the terrain, they see the history that is folded within the geography, which is also an image of themselves. It can be noted that a character speaks of the land in the following terms, “Every grain of earth here carries the memory of our ancestors, their struggles, their dreams, their blood” (p.198). This statement captures the essence of cultural identity as being rooted in the people’s environment—a continuum between man and nature across the ages. Similarly, the American portrayal of landscapes and their people’s places is not only a geographical feature but a past civilization and culture. In essence, the cities, rivers and forests, in the novel, are not just physical places but are embedded in the cultural matrix of the characters. Thus, the protection of nature is also a protection of culture because the land remembers the people who have existed on it and helps to define the future generations. This historical information on the environment is vital in answering why Hyder addresses the reorganisation of the interaction between society and nature, revealing that society is not the only creator of culture and identities, but also the environment.

Hyder also addresses how environmental memory is socially erased in colonial and postcolonial times, with the loss of nature resulting in the loss of culture. As one of the characters says, “With each tree felled and river diverted, a piece of our history is lost forever” (p. 242). Such statements of the character still bring memories of the 18th-century persecution when truth made a less significant impact than industrialization or deforestation on shaping culture and identity. It is in this sense that Hyder expands the scope of environmental issues to non-ecological ones where loss of land means loss of culture.

*River of Fire* combines both the aspects of interspecies ethics and environmental memory to appeal to readers that humankind is part of the ecosystem. The insurgency by Hyder is of strong moral paradigm that such non-human sections must be given respect and the planet holds its prerogative over the land. Hyder comes across as thoroughly concerned about the future of the environment and calls for action that is genuine in protecting the planet because humankind and other species exist because the planet is well-rounded. In this way, *River of Fire* not only reflects an ecological identity that transcends individual and cultural confines but also promotes a deeper understanding of the ethical and memory-driven relationship between humans and the environment.

### Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored how *River of Fire* by Qurratulain Hyder offers a compelling posthuman and ecocritical perspective by intricately weaving together human and non-human identities across temporal and cultural boundaries. The representation of landscapes, nature, and non-human elements in the narrative as central to the human condition also negates the anthropocentric notion and necessitates a more humane and ethical understanding of humanity about the environment. Hyder’s portrayal of time in the novel is fluid and non-linear which implies that the landscapes and the ecosystems are persistent so that this world is characterised by an ecological memory which contains both human and non-human narrations. Such material and cultural geographies, then, have endured and altered human and non-human perceptions and experiences of time and space while maintaining a stronger bond with the land. It is in this interconnectedness that the river emerges as the metaphor of the ideal unity since it is an ecological and posthuman force that goes beyond human civilizations and cultural distinctions.

Indian literature has the in-built potential not only to explore the nature of God but also to bring out the regional framework alongside the global context. Posthumanism and ecocriticism theory stand extremely well in an Indian context whenever the deeper relationship between mankind and nature is envisaged and the Anthropocene epoch is well understood with all its stamping. *River of Fire* further enhances the narrative. The ‘Anthropocene’, a term first used by Nobel Prize-winning chemist Paul Crutzen, portrays the modern era in which human activities have significantly impacted the natural surroundings, to the extent that Earth’s geology and ecosystems now suffocate under the weight of humanity. The threat posed by

the ever-widening spheres of human intervention can no longer be addressed by adopting perspectives rooted solely in anthropocentrism. It is no longer adequate for literature to treat omens in every pre-societal setting exclusively as disembodied symbols or tropes. Instead, their meanings must be sought in their performance within various beneficial or harmful symbiotic relations in both human and non-human worlds.

*River of Fire* elucidates several aspects of ontological inseparability in great detail that ultimately converge into an inseparable ecological whole and can aid the comprehension of the synergetic approach to literature. Literature's relevance in an intersocietal terror-driven world of the Anthropocene cannot be overstated, especially since the risk of rendering it irrelevant is what ultimately renders it consequential. To conclude, *River of Fire* is a strong reminder of how all living things are interrelated and how a broader, more ecologically sensitive conception of mankind is required. Based on the analysis of the novel in the posthuman and ecocritical frameworks, this paper demonstrated how Hyder's work participates in the event of literature's role in the formation of ecological consciousness and ethics in the particular socio-cultural and ecological context of India.

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# Climate Change and Posthumanist Praxis in Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*

*Nabanita Karanjai*

**Abstract:** The rise of average global temperature, environmental disasters and climate change has forced us to reconsider our sense of subjectivity and self by taking into consideration the self-regulating abiotic forces that form 'nature'. The classical Humanist concept of 'culture' as existing separately from its natural environment has to give way to an alternative way of thinking that regards subjectivity as an assemblage of individual will in conjunction with the non-human Other. Published in 2016, Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and The Unthinkable* is an active engagement with the question of climate change, showing that there has to be a radical shift in critical imagination, history and politics to accommodate climate change in culture. He espouses the posthumanist stance of not regarding the environment as the 'Other', but to take cognizance of the abiotic factors that have been hitherto used only as the means to secure humanist, anthropocentric ends. In my paper, I shall focus on this particular aspect of Ghosh's writing, where he advocates the espousal of the environmental "improbability" with our sense of the 'world', not just in literary imagination but also in the bigger picture of history and the performance of politics that will enact the multiplicity of assemblage that makes us human.

**Keywords:** climate, environment, subjectivity, posthuman, climate

Literary depictions of subjectivity have always relegated nature and the environment the role of holding a mirror up to human behaviour. The rhetorical device of pathetic fallacy, for instance, signifies the attribution to natural objects of human capacities and feelings (Abrams). Coined by John Ruskin in 1856, the term was regarded as originally

derogatory because it represented “the extraordinary or false appearances, when we are under the influence of emotion, or contemplative fancy” (Ruskin).

Similarly, T.S. Eliot’s concept of objective correlative, “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion” (Abrams), treats the environment as a reflector for inner subjectivity. Further, C.P. Snow’s “two cultures” claim that the “natural sciences” presented “rather positive attributes important for progress” whereas “the humanities remain an old-fashioned discipline mainly interested in the past” for him (Mehnert). The ‘anthropos’ has always been privileged over ‘zoe’, the abiotic factors that constitute life on the planet. Therefore, there is a need for an alternate perspective that would address climate change as well as provide the way to a sustainable culture despite its apparent unpredictability.

The humanist conception of man as an autonomous and rational being capable of individual perfection has been debunked since the 1960s as propagating a monolithic image of man as white, male, straight, able-bodied and of European origin (Braidotti). Rather than constructing the category ‘Man’ through juxtaposition and differentiation with the non-human Other, posthumanism regards subjectivity as an amalgam (Hayles) of both human and non-human intelligence, a distributed cognition that does not undertake affirmation of the self at the expense of negating the equally subjective selfhood of the Other, in this case, the planetary mechanisms that form global climate. Anthropocentric humanism, a variant of Judaeo-Christian theism, hides its reliance upon a human life while claiming to speak for the ‘good’ of human beings (Dillard-Wright). Amitav Ghosh in his *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and The Unthinkable* presents a trajectory of the construction of literary imagination since the nineteenth century as a signifier of teleological progress championed by the Enlightenment. He connects the proliferation of subjectivity to the rise of the use of fossil fuels and the growth of the “carbon economy” (Ghosh, p. 14). He also shows the need for a radical re-shaping of textual (literary and non-literary) subjectivity that would translate to corresponding praxis of not just combating climate change, but also ensuring sustainable futures in the cultural imagination. In doing so, he includes questions about empire, colonialism and ecological imperialism in the contemporary discussion of the Anthropocene. Global warming (or ‘geo-morphism’ as it is called (Braidotti)) profoundly unsettles the binary divide between nature and culture (Mehnert, p. 9). Ghosh begins by affirming the shock value of the animation of the inanimate, “Who can forget those moments when something that seems inanimate turns out to be vitally, even dangerously alive?” (Ghosh, p. 8)

Defining the human through interaction with the non-human is a defining characteristic of Ghosh’s fiction. The digitization of memory and archives along with alternative models of knowledge in *The Calcutta Chromosome* as well as the establishment of humanity through “ethical universals” (Roy) in *Sea of Poppies* are proof of Ghosh’s creative methodology. In *The Great Derangement* Ghosh tackles the issue of climate change through precisely this method. By giving the environment, the function of being a mirror to humanist subjectivity, the narrative of climate change has

been predominantly understood through “emission scenarios, diagrams and other lifeless modes of description” (Mehnert, p. 3). However, climate change as a geological phenomenon is easily discernible through the natural calamities that wreak havoc across the planet. Hence, Ghosh attributes climate change as “recognition” of “an already existing awareness” (Ghosh, p. 9) of the abiotic forces that control our existence. This awareness of the “lost other” as being a part of cultural subjectivity is what makes Ghosh’s thesis posthumanist.

According to Ghosh, the very way of looking at climate change is determined by anthropocentric activities that privilege humanist subjectivity at the expense of the effacement of the non-human Other. He presents the idea of re-structuring habitat according to imaginative ideals as the urge to control nature and make it submit to anthropocentric domination as Eurocentric. The environment in Ghosh’s book is inextricably intertwined with capitalism and empire. The Eurocentric conception of nature is that of a non-living entity that can be tamed and one that is mediated through advertising and the literary imagination, “When we see an advertisement that links a picture of a tropical island to the word paradise, the longings that are kindled in us have a chain of transmission that stretches back to Daniel Defoe and Jean-Jacques Rousseau” (Ghosh, p. 15).

The function of nature, according to Ghosh, is that of the “filler” in most nineteenth-century fiction. The depiction of nature in the literature of this period belongs to the Holocene, the geological era marked by a stable climate, to which Rousseau harks back in his definition of the “noble savage”. This representation of nature as ordered and enabling humanist subjectivity highlights the “complacency and confidence of the emergent bourgeois order” (Ghosh, p. 25). On the other hand, genre-specific fiction such as fantasy, Gothic and science fiction have always put the environmental presence at the forefront of the narrative. These narratives place man at the receiving end of nature, whereas narratives dealing with interiority and subjectivity completely suppress any and every environmental presence unless it is to highlight the individuated subjectivity that is the focus of that fiction. Ghosh writes, “...the weather events[...] are not easily accommodated in the deliberately prosaic world of prose fiction” (Ghosh, p. 29).

He attributes our current inability to see, represent and understand the environmental crisis to a “probabilistic worldview” (Balkan) that made no room for extraordinary, unusual weather phenomena such as freak tornadoes. Thus, the environment has taken the position of the Freudian uncanny in cultural imagination. Freud defines the uncanny as “...that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (Freud).

The environment is seen as the “Unthinkable” that can disrupt historical, teleological progress that has consistently undermined the immanence of the planetary mechanisms that existed before the Anthropocene. This lack of foresight and “predatory hubris” which is proving to be self-annihilating is what Ghosh calls “The Great Derangement,” an imaginative as well as an epistemological crisis being implied in the model of progress espoused by the Enlightenment and materialised by the Industrial Revolution.



The first industrial revolution with the transition to steam began the carbon-intensive lifestyle, leading to the present crisis. The second industrial revolution, with the transition to oil and internal combustion engines after World War II, has made the burning of fossil fuels a prerequisite for nearly every form of economic activity (Dillard-Wright). Ghosh alludes to James Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis, the idea that many interlocking systems- hydrology, biology and geology among them- work together to create conditions favourable to life and that living entities actively reshape their environments in ways that prove advantageous to them. These are myriad tiny agencies working chaotically and non-teleologically, to sustain the biosphere (Dillard-Wright). While not possessing sentience in the image of human beings, these systems are subject to idiosyncratic mechanisms that counter the humanist advance of "industrial civilization" (Chakrabarty) and if thwarted pose a serious threat to anthropocentric foundations. The era of climate change, brought to the fore through incessant anthropocentric activities by the use of fossil fuels, has "revise[d] those habits of thought that are based on the Cartesian dualism that arrogates all intelligence and agency to the human while denying them to every other kind of being" (Ghosh, p. 33).

Ghosh then proceeds to trace the trajectory of climate change by attributing it to "capitalism and empire" (Ghosh, p. 196). He notes that the "old Asian ports" of Cochin, Surat, Tamluk, Dhaka, Mrauk-U, Guangzhou, Hangzhou and Malacca (Ghosh, p. 39) were built further inland, while the coastal cities of Bombay, Madras, New York, Singapore and Hong Kong founded by the British to facilitate convenient trade and naval control, face the threats of rise in sea level and submergence. Thus, the process of colonization and economic progress realized through globalization is responsible for climate change.

Ghosh further notes that the trajectory of progress, signified in the building of urban settlements on reclaimed land in Mumbai and New York, will fall prey to the rise in sea levels and marine disasters. What is common between the colonial method of settlement and the indigenous is "a habit of mind that proceeded by creating discontinuities" (Ghosh, p. 75); the landscape is a reflection of this very habit. Such a mindset is also visible in the settings of the nineteenth-century novel (Ghosh, p. 79), which in turn was emulated in the creation of colonial cities. This continual effacement of the "non-human" in the "mainstream" novels has been banished to the "outhouses of science fiction and fantasy" (Ghosh, p. 88).

In the part II of his book titled "History" Ghosh traces the historical origins of the oil industry in Myanmar, while referring to his novel *The Glass Palace*. He notes that the monarch of the misrepresented Burmese people, King Minodon, was the pioneer in the oil industry in South Asia (Ghosh, p. 137) and the industry grew due to the combined efforts of the Burmese and the British. Similarly, the Hooghly River provided the stage for the development of steam-powered vessels (Ghosh, p. 139) under the entrepreneurship of Indian businessmen, one of whom was none other than the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore (Ghosh, p. 144). Therefore, though imperial power tried to root out the development of indigenous industry through the exercise of unchecked domination, the establishment of industry with fossil fuels as the energy source would have started in South Asia without the intervention of colonial domination. Later in the

book Ghosh notes the use of petroleum as the major energy fuel is what provided the catalyst to climate change. He also notes that the exploration of interiority in fiction in the 1980s coincided with the 'Great Acceleration' (Chakrabarty) that saw the decolonization of the colonies. Ghosh regards this proliferation of subjectivity in fiction as a signifier of the increase in the consumption of fossil fuels. As the decolonized nations 'lagged' in achieving the standards of growth as set down by their Western counterparts, Ghosh speculates that Asia has inadvertently slowed down or "retarded" (Ghosh, p. 148) the process of climate change, for which "sacrifice" Asia deserves "recognition" (Ghosh, p. 153). Ghosh therefore proposes that

Anthropogenic climate change [...] is the unintended consequence of the very existence of human beings as a species. Although different groups of people have contributed to it in vastly different measures, global warming is ultimately the product of the totality of human actions over time. (Ghosh, p. 154-55)

In the final section of his book titled "Politics" he discusses the politics behind the framing of environmental treaties and agreements. He compares the Paris Agreement of 2015 with Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* subtitled "On Care for Our Common Home", published in the same year as the Paris Agreement. The Paris Agreement proposes the application of technology to clear the air of greenhouse gases (Ghosh, p. 206) and addresses political leaders, billionaire entrepreneurs and the like. Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* on the other hand strives to bring about a change in the psychic paradigm that causes and perpetuates the kind of progress that brings about climate change. It criticizes the practice of hyper-growth and appeals to the humanitarian impulse to address poverty and fatal alterations in the environment. With the example of Pope Francis in his mind, Ghosh believes that perhaps religious leaders will be successful in bringing about positive change in fighting climate change, because "...those with religious affiliations possess the ability to mobilize people in far greater numbers than any others....[it] is intimately related to the idea of the sacred, however, one may wish to conceive it" (Ghosh, p. 215).

Thus, Ghosh calls for a shift in perspectives that determine the relation of the 'anthropos' with 'zoe' signified by the environment. He calls for a praxis that would ensure cooperation among all nations, and be cognizant of the impact of anthropocentric actions on the environment. He calls for a change in cultural subjectivity and political praxis that would take note of the interplanetary mechanisms through appropriate policy-making and literary imaginations. Ghosh advocates a re-framing of subjectivity that is in conjunction with the subjectivity of the ecological Other. By acknowledging the "intelligence" in geological planetary mechanisms, he takes the posthumanist stand.

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# Haunting Entities and Fuzzy Concepts: Understanding ‘Ghosts’ of Bengali Literature

*Sk Md Ispihan*

**Abstract:** Ghosts or *Bhuut* in Bengali literature open up a contested ground for the immutable dualities of ‘modernist’ ontologies. As ghost or spirits denoting an ethereal essence, an intangible entity with its endowed capacity to possess and ‘entrap’ a body or a tangible entity becomes a metaphor for the very interconnectedness between the human and the non-human, the free-play around the rigid Western dichotomies of Man/Nature, Culture/Nature, echoing the relational or the emergent nature of ontology. And this free-play around the integrity of the human and the other-than-human entity, of the natural and the alienable enables a posthumanist ‘reading’. Consequently, by utilising such a reading, the article aims to showcase how the ghostly ‘bodies’ are embodiments of the human anxiety and desire, this posthuman ‘other’ understood as threat or a promise, are a product or an attempt to preserve the integrity of ‘human essence’.

**Keywords:** on-technological post-humanism, colonialism, post-colonialism, human/non-human dichotomy, *bhuut*.

Scholar Elaine Graham introduces her book *Representations of the Post/Human* as a book about what it means to be human, or more precisely, as an examination of the impact of the 21st century technologies-digital, cybernetic and biomedical-upon our very own understanding of what it means to be human. This question of what it means to be human becomes a central question surrounding the idea we call posthumanism. Cary Wolfe’s *What Is Posthumanism?* or Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus’s article titled “What Is a Posthumanist Reading?”, are examples of such instances where the centrality of the question of ‘what is human’ to posthumanism becomes vividly apparent as well as showcasing how the technological innovations of 21st century, has made it necessary, rather paved the path where such assumptions concerning the figure of

'Human' or 'Humanism' has come under scrutiny, or as some may argue, initiated the very process of 'posthumanisation' - a demythologisation of the myth of 'Human', the deconstruction of the discourse which constructs what it entails or means 'to-be-human'. Donna Harroway's 'Cyborg Manifesto' is such an important instance in this context.

Therefore, this question of 'what is a human' or 'humanity' is also an important parameter in the paradigm of Posthumanism. An idea echoed by Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus in their essay "What Is a Posthumanist Reading?", where they argue that a posthumanist reading can be enabled through the very questioning one imposes upon the catalogue of assumptions and values a text might have about "what it means to be human" Although they also caution that "not all texts are equally amenable to such a (posthumanist) reading." In this paper, borrowing from such posited notions and parameters of posthumanist reading, I would like to argue how 'ghost stories' are such texts amenable to such a reading which also demands special attention in such an endeavour of posthumanism and try to locate a "posthumanism without technology" in the context of Bengali Ghost Stories, or a posthumanism which resists the technological determinism and posthuman teleology associated with the technoculture of our contemporary times.

Ghost or the ghostly, i.e. spirits denoting an ethereal essence, an intangible entity with an endowed capacity to possess and 'entrap' a body or a tangible entity becomes a metaphor for the very interconnectedness between the human and the non-human, the free-play around the rigid dichotomies of Man/Nature, Culture/Nature, echoing the relational or the emergent nature of ontology. And it is this emergent nature - a continuous, dynamic process, a free-play around the integrity of these categorial binaries extends towards the very concept of presence and absence, living and dead, malevolence and benevolence, the ideas of good and bad itself, rendering these entities their fluidity. As associated, conjuring of ghosts does not imply a pure, if it is to be assumed that there exists such a state of presence but does not denote an absence altogether but rather a liminality, a fluidity- perhaps an in-betweenness state, which is not transitory in nature as there is no possibility for the Undead to be alive, but although a promise of 'freedom' from this confined state of haunting is there, as the 5th AD Christian priest Constantius of Lyon recorded an instance of the recurring theme of the improperly buried dead who come back to haunt the living, and who can only cease their haunting when their bones have been discovered and properly reburied. Such concepts of proper burial or final rites for the resting in peace of the dead is a belief held by many cultures and communities.

Probably, the reasons for such practices remains in the beliefs as observed by scholars Nicolas Abraham and Nicholas Rand, that "The belief that the spirits of the dead can return to haunt the living exists either as a tenet or as a marginal conviction in all civilizations, whether ancient or modern." And this "pervasive fascination to map diachronic deformity extends to language", as noted by scholar Runa Das Chaudhuri- "Bangla literature too is one favourite haunt of a myriad of spirits enriching the ghostliness of its literary landscape".

But before going into Bengali Ghost Stories or *Bhooter Golpo*, it is to be noted that the critical interest in the spectral - the spectral obsession has its own long historical background in the context of Europe going back to Homer's *Odyssey* where spirits of the dead appear. But the Golden Age of the Ghost Stories, in English, as noted by historian Jack Sullivan, is inaugurated by Edgar Allan Poe, often cited as a prominent contributor to the genre of science-fiction and detective stories and Sheridan Le Fanu, the creator of the character of the famous occult detective Dr. Martin Hesselius. And it is this 'Golden Period' that marks the birth of the figure of the occult detective. Under the presence of whom the ghostly body becomes a site of production of terror and intrigue, a transgression which needs to be captured, detected and corrected in order to maintain the normative. Thus, the ghostly body is transformed into an object, an object capable of annihilating the very human subject, which is 'tamed' through the uber-human figure of the occult detective. It is in-between these acts of 'haunting' and cessation of the haunting, the presence of the other-than-human entity which creates a 'posthuman' moment as it is the very presence of the ghostly body that strategically breaches the 'essential purity' of the categories, incurring a 'contamination' of their 'vital' differences, the oppositions between the human and the non-human at work in the literary text. In the Bengali Literary Tradition, this English occult detective figure gets transformed into figures of the ghost such as Sharodindu Bandopadhyay's ghost-aficionado and 'finder' *Borda*, Premendra Mitra's ghost-hunter *Mejokorta*, and the famous ghost specialist and Tantric of Bibhutibhushon and Taradas Bandopadhyay's *Taranath Tantrik*.

But the Bengali word for ghost *Bhuut*, as Suchitra Samanta points out, has very little in its similarity with Western image of the ghost. As Sukumar Sen in his 'Golper Bhuut' defines the word *bhuut* to have two meanings, one denoting the fundamental elements of the material world and the other denoting an entity which has been lost but its form has not ceased to exist or a dead person's undead form. And it is this undead form, the hollow figure of the ghost which becomes repositories of meanings, depositories of what is no longer, what is not yet, what may never be but such meanings imbued on the figure of the ghost in Bengali stories is ever-changing unlike its stagnant absent-presence granting 'it' its fuzziness.

Sukumar Sen, traces the concept of *Bhuut* in the Indian context to the widespread acceptance of the concept of birth and rebirth, belief in lives even after death in ancient India, ancient in terms of Antiquity. The concept of Birth and Rebirth entails the concept of appearance-disappearance-reappearance, almost similar to the Freudian Fort - Da game. By projecting death as a traumatic event, the births and rebirths can be read as the repetition compulsion, a fort-da game which gets reflected rather condensed and imbued in the figure of the ghost which although dead still continues to exist, the embodiment of the anxiety pertaining to an inability to attain moksha, a state of liminality.

This imposed fort-da framing on the ghostly figure becomes the most apparent in literary creations such as *Vetala Panchavimshati*, working as a motif through Ghost stories in general, where the 'da' part of the game becomes the titillating point, as it is the appearance of the ghost which seems to be intrigue. Also from the *Vetala*

*Panchavimshati*, where the ghostly body, Vetala himself becomes a source of wisdom one can infer the ghostly body as a reflectionary mode capable of providing insights into the knowledge and beliefs of one or of one's epoch as the very knowledge provided by these ghostly bodies, their situs, can provide spaces to gain insights into the very power structures shaping them, reflective of their epoch and a mapping a trajectory of these ghostly bodies provides us insights into such shifts associated with the shifting epochs, and its definition of the ghostly body in turn may help us to situate and gain insights into the question of 'what is human' by projecting the ghostly entity in relation to the human body.

To illustrate the point with one such example, if we take a look at the 'modern' and the 'pre-modern', which I would like to identify as the ghostly entities of the colonial and pre-colonial period, as mentioned by scholar Ian Almond, is its location—if the traditional Bengali ghost-spirit resided in trees and ponds, the modern Bengali ghost is very much a creature of the house- which marks the creation of the myth of 'Hanabari'. The reason may be due to the influence of the Victorian Gothic, as one critic suggests or a consequence of the rapid urbanisation of Bengal after Permanent Settlement (1793). But this linking of the spectral with some form of property possession becomes a prevalent motif in Bengali Ghost stories, Rabindranath Thakur's (1861-1941) 'Manihara' is one such example. The idea of a subject becoming alienated from itself—becoming a ghost of itself—through the modern act of property accumulation is an idea that becomes especially relevant to the Bhibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay's (1894-1950) short story '*Maaya*'.

The protagonist, a poor Brahmin, finds a job in an old house of Nibarun Chakrobarty who visits that old house once a month as his sons work in Kolkata, Shyambazar and doesn't want to visit the old house due to fear of Malaria - an instance from the story which can be directly linked to Permanent Settlement (1793) and its consequence. The story as it evolves ends on an ambiguous note where the protagonist himself becomes a ghost interwoven into the ghostly landscape. This division of space- the non-ghostly and ghostly is revived along with the coexistence of two times: the 'real' time of the protagonist outside the house, and the 'haunted' time of the poor man as he stays inside the building, waiting for Mr Chakrabarti to return as in the end of the story a shopkeeper mentions to the protagonist about the *Maya* concerning the house as 'First the person becomes strangely attached to the place so he won't move from it; then he loses interest in eating and he refuses to go anywhere else', the same thing happening with the protagonist. In this story the instance of a person becoming a ghost is denoted by its attachment to a place where one loses interest in the very act of eating. The process of becoming a ghost is interwoven with the word *Maya*, where a person is unable to achieve *Moksha* and eating becomes synonymous to being human.

In another story titled 'Ashariri' of Bhibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, we find Sharat Chakrobarty telling a story which he doesn't label as ghostly but rather asks his audience to label as whatever they want, the story revolves around in his voyage to Dooars due to some work where again, we find a brahmin servant, named Digambar Paanre but the story's pivotal angst centres around the fear of black-water fever where



the 'da' part of the story consists of a benevolent ghost of a girl who takes care of a near to death Chakrobarty suffering from illness.

In the above two mentioned stories, the way the narrative is framed although using the fort-da game, the narrator and the story-teller being two different beings, the very form of the story is disrupted, as the truth-claims become much more ambiguous the beliefs in ghostly beings gets displaced where they no longer remains figures of horror or terror -but object of suspicion, an anxiety causing entities, belief in whom becomes irrational opposed to the 'Enlightenment' values of Humanism of the coloniser and its associated definitions of development and modernity. A sentiment which gets echoed in Bankim Chandra Chattyopadhyay's unfinished '*Nishith Rakshashir Kahini*'.

The ghostly figure associated with 'darkness' becomes synonymous with the colonised as Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay defines the creation of ghost not as entities which are Undead but rather creatures made of darkness as ice is made with water, calling upon the English to create a machinery for the mass-production of such ghosts of darkness, which is put into an ambivalent location or even at times in opposition with respect to 'light' of the enlightened colonisers. Such ambivalent positions of the ghostly figures become much more pronounced in the stories of Shirsendu Mukhopadhyay(1935- present). In whose stories we can observe a change, a shift. The translocation from the urban to rural we find in most ghost stories of Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay gets transfigured into an internal movement from foreign countries to own countries, where the ghostly figure is juxtaposed as an alternative to the Rationalist thought or the technological development or 'takeover'. '*Bhuut o Bigyan*' or '*Bhuuter Bhabishyat*' are prominent examples in such a context.

As the imposed Enlightenment values get eschewed away, in our post-Partition society, the transitory development vision of history itself comes under scrutiny giving rise to a complicated, nuanced and ambiguous state. Thus, this shift, these eschewal of assumed assumptions regarding objectivity and empirical tradition inherited from 'Europe' due to colonialism. Science or Natural Sciences being the most prominent inheritance of such a tradition is put against the alternative modes of knowledge systems by Shirshendu through the ghostly bodies in his literary creation, but these alternative systems are not embedded into the myth of the 'glorious past', and limited to the pre-colonial knowledge-system only. For instance, in his short-story titled 'Telephone', the telephone itself becomes a ghost. But Shirsendu's ghosts are not a site of horror or terror but benevolent creatures akin to Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay, or Leela Majumdar's created ghostly entities. But Shirshendu's ghostly figures, contemporary to us in sense of time or technological developments, not only express the anxieties of technological innovations but also the perils of homogenisation of Globalization.

Therefore, from such an 'understanding' or trajectory of the literary ghostly or ghost stories in context of Bengali literature as one pronounced in this paper, which albeit takes a rather brief glance at various nuances and complications related to the literary ghostly body and had to leave out a substantial portion of Bengali 'Bhooter' literature owing to the limited scope of the paper, may help us to understand the

pluralistic and different usages of the figure of the ghost in Bengali literary tradition. But in order to cultivate a non-technological post-humanist understanding in the context of Bengal it becomes impervious to cultivate an understanding of the ‘human’ in-relation-to *bhuut* which also in turn necessitates an understanding of the pluralist nature of the *Bhuut* and to trace a history of the literary *Bhuut*. I am here arguing for ‘understanding’ as opposed to ‘knowing’, borrowing the idea of ‘understanding’ and ‘knowing’ from philosopher Syed Sayeed’s where ‘understanding’ is posited as a phenomenon interwoven with ‘relationality’ itself. But also, such an understanding of the literary *bhuut* necessitates a comparative approach and practice of Comparative Literature. As in context of Bengal, with its ‘Ghost’ literature, understanding of the *bhuut* and its history cannot be formulated by not taking into considerations the wide-ranging influences of tantra and tantric practices, the localised beliefs in the ‘supernatural’, the beliefs in caste-system to wide ranging societal practices which may have impacted the beliefs and definitions of ghost.

Hence the project of tracing such a history which has its genesis and growth in such culturally diverse arenas calls for the development of a new methodology that is created to accommodate it in all its richness. Hence, Comparative Literature as a discipline plays a crucial role in allowing the space for a posthuman reading of the *bhuut* and formulating a paradigm for it, owing to the non-static, evolving nature of its methodology as the discipline itself has not grown on the basis of adherence to the canon or a fixed methodology but rather has gone through continuous evolution to accommodate culturally diverse texts in-within a paradigm created specifically for them, as delineated by Amiya Dev in his essay ‘Comparative Literature from Below’. Thus, it is Comparative Literature as a discipline which helps in exorcising the human from the Ghosts of Bengali literature, to pronounce and understand its fuzzy concepts and haunting entities.

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## Book Review

**Sinha, Suvadip. *Entangled Fictions: Nonhuman Animals in an Indian World*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2022. ISBN No - 978-1-003-29802-1, £39.99. Number of Pages - 170**

**Reviewers : Surbhi Payal & Tufan De**

We are, as a species, addicted to story. Even when the body goes to sleep, the mind stays up all night, telling itself stories.” – Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (xiv)

With the advent of the posthumanism, scholastic approaches have marched forward with their attempts to decenter the dominant essence of the anthropocentric ontology, by focusing on the demarginalisation of non-human animals, and tended to re-examine as well as reconfigure the complex and entangled relationship between human and non-human animals, within a posthuman network. The present book *Entangled Fictions: Nonhuman Animals in an Indian World* by Suvadip Sinha that runs parallel with this paradigm shift within the theoretical domain, is essentially an “attempt at understanding the politics of precarity and vulnerability that binds human and nonhuman animals in tangible and intangible entanglements” (p.26) and advocates for a “journey toward the horizon of a new non-anthropocentric genre” (p.26). The book begins with an Introduction, stimulating a gradual shift from pragmatic experiences to theoretical discourses, through an engaging personal anecdote, embedded within Sinha’s own encounters with non-human animals in his childhood. The narrative clearly charts out the major aims and objectives of the book. With his expertise in comprehensive literature review, Suvadip Sinha not

only explores the limited scholarships in the field of posthuman discipline, but also succeeds in making a significant contribution to a major cause that reaches beyond the anthropocentric boundaries. In the Introduction, Sinha succinctly summarises the development and growth of posthuman discourse as a discipline which has hitherto been dominated by colonial hegemony, and ventures into the journey of formulating new/alternative framework(s) that hinges upon a fictional vernacular space which, according to him, “alert[s] us about the limitation of postcolonial humanism when it comes to comprehending the cultural ontologies” (p.7).

Structurally, the book is divided into four chapters and ends with an epilogue. The first chapter, entitled, *Theoretical Possibilities and Provocations*, starts by referring to two news reports, both of which showcase how human beings not only engender “unfathomable cruelty” (p.18) to non-human animals, but also remain insensitive to that. This is what creates a suitable backdrop, against which Sinha raises a plethora of thought-provoking questions regarding the hostile relationship between human and non-human animals. The main aim of Sinha is to “understand[ing] what lies underneath this non-companionable mode of being in this world” (18). What the chapter further offers is an illustrious discussion on how Animal Studies, as a discipline, undergoes constant evolution and mutations at the hands of various scholars like Sabina Magliocco, Kathy Rudy, Sylvia Wyater and Neel Ahuja, only to name a few. Adhering to the theoretical frameworks of scholars like Donna Haraway, Jean-Luc Nancy and Mick Smith, Sinha further chisels and whittles his own arguments in favour of fictional creative worlds, made up of stories, and suggests how relying on literature could be the most “de-subjectivating and disanthropocentric act” (p.21). The discussion concludes with a utopian wish which seeks for a reconstruction of the world to be peacefully cohabited by both human and non-human animals.

Unlike chapter one, the following chapter, titled, *Companionable Fiction Unbecoming Human*, at the outset, introduces two fictional scenes which depict pictures of harmonious bond between human and non-human animals, gilded by love, care and affection. A significant part of the chapter delves into an organised and well-crafted discussion on the animal world, as presented in the literary oeuvre of Premchand, which is “entirely non-fetishistic, non-allegorical, nonmetaphorical” (p.57). Sinha argues how, instead of treating the non-human animals as mere metaphorical representations of the human world, Premchand has attributed subjectivity to them so that they can decide their own fate, rather than emerging as passive objects. What Premchand creates through his narratives is essentially a challenge to the “anthropo-supremacist notion of affect and emotion” (p.57). To unmask the language-politics that exists between human and non-human animals, Sinha devices the theory of “speculative ventriloquism” (p.59), by undertaking a close analysis of three of Premchand’s short stories, to re-assess the linguistic relationality between human and nonhumans in a fictional world. The last section of the chapter contains plentiful and well-researched data which opens up a discussion on “materialist, symbolic, textual, and historical” (p.64) significance of

goats and its articulation in the social and literary spheres, primarily in India. Sinha refers to two novels, namely *Goat Days*, a Malayalam novel by Benyamin and *Poonachi* by Perumal Murugan, where he explicates the literary/cultural representations of goats in particular and non-human animals as a whole, within the sphere of South Indian Literature. The chapter also establishes a connection between authorial psyche and instinctual energy of non-human animals. Sinha marshals well-structured arguments regarding how mode of narration changes unknowingly, depending on the nature of the non-human characters. The main agenda of Sinha is to showcase how the writing style of an author naturally gets influenced by the energy of the non-human animal(s), s/he is dealing with or commenting upon.

With his anecdotal style of beginning every consecutive part of the narration, in the third chapter, *Becoming More Than Human: Poetic Metamorphoses*, Sinha has made references to the mystical elements of several visual literatures including the Bollywood movie, *Hathi mere sathi*, highlighting an immense affection of the male protagonist towards his animals, jeopardising his anthropocentric existence. The movie ends with what the author calls “the bullet-ridden corpse of the beast” (p.80), a mere dead entity proven enough for making human relationships fulfilling again. The narrative produces a discursive ensemble which brings us face to face with the “wholly other” (p.81), and offers an absolute freedom in order to look beyond a traditional scholarly set up of social orders of man. While criticising the lack of in-depth study of non-human species and lyrical qualities in the present culture, Sinha points out the poetic reminiscences of Jibanananda Das and develops a native connection with and emotional attachment to his vernacular style of poetry, welcoming a cohabitation of non-human and natural habitats into the lyrical landscape. Likewise, Sukumar Ray’s literary creations of an exquisite utopian world of hybrid animals tends to break the shackles of categorising non-human species through his nonsensical artistic inventions. Sinha has gone as native as he could while bringing back the street culture of *Behrupiyas*, the performance of human beings undergoing multi-level disguise in attempting to become something more than human; it is through the character of Ghunuram from Buddhadev Dasgupta’s film *Bagh Bahadur*, the chapter highlights a strange dualism of reality. Ghunuram, being a labourer, undertakes a journey of oppression; however, painting his body as leopard and imitating something he is not, brings him recognition and interrogates the authenticity of spectators’ gaze; thus, an interpretation of the painted figure reflects the process of becoming something humanly unfamiliar or what Kafka calls “to cross a threshold” (p.86). Ghunuram’s coated body as a local artist, fighting against the hustling metropolitan entertainment, has depicted the capitalised domination on the native livelihood. At the same time, the sight of his lifeless body produces the multiplicity of truths before the spectators and thus, the author remains more fascinated by inauthenticity of the statement which, for a moment, draws the audience into the state of denial. The final scene puts Ghunuram’s corpse into the light producing bewildering multiplicity of perceptions. Sinha ends

this part of the narrative with a convincing fact that both Sukumar and Jibanananda's literary masterpieces have created a sustainable environment long before the gradual realisation of ecological degradation. Their purpose was far away from the geo-political tensions of those times. And unlike popular interpretations of these texts, Sinha is more focused on the "zoopolitical textuality" (p.113) and continuous evolution enhancing the limited space of becoming.

The final chapter *Toward a Stray Manifesto* begins with a note of realisation about the endangered lives we often tend to have an ignorant approach about in a never-ending era of capitalist modernity. The technology and its role in bestowing hazardous conditions for birds has never been resisted by revenue-oriented structures. In his familiar style, Sinha takes note from the Indian epic *Mahabharata*, particularly "Mahaprasthanika Parva". Yudhisthira, being the epitome of Dharma, refuses to abandon his canine companion for his abode to heaven. This particular illustration emerges as an opportunity to engross within the transcendental understanding of selfless attachment, moving beyond the shackles of familiarity, and makes the readers question the "strayness" (p.143) of unfamiliar non-humans and its alienated state, lying somewhere in-between known and unknown. Examples are included explicitly in the chapter, one of them being Haraway's notion of cross-species companionship in *The Companion Species Manifesto* where she proposes how there is a degradation of animality of animals through the sentiments of the owners who pet them, since human sentiments always overpower their individuality. Likewise, Sinha quotes Colin Dayan who also observes that the conception of dogs as their private property has done very little to advance their position, they thus become mere subject to human centred repression. Sinha finally refers to Derrida's contention in his canonical chapter, *And Say that Animal Responded?* which describes this state through an idea suggested by Lacan that the human subject occupies a position of "masterful superiority" (p.129) over its animals, however the 'stray' upends this whole notion of dominance. Suvadip Sinha also brings up examples from Tagore's mature writings fascinated by the figures of domesticated stray animals to demonstrate how he was consciously or unconsciously touching upon their ways in his works. The chapter also stirs the reminiscence of Levinas' days in Nazi camp when the dog who kept waiting for the Jews during their morning prayers, recognised them as humans in the times when their own species did not.

Epilogue: *Spectral Animality or, How to Be Haunted by the Dead Nonhuman?* is a call to acknowledge the non-human spirits who have lost their lives either naturally or forcefully; the section suggests the necessity to remember the nonhuman ghosts as much as we do of deceased humans, not just on the grounds of human grief but on the prior's individual terms. It is a call for awareness about the countless number of births of non-human ghosts in the humanly created planetary environment dominated by animal labour, commercial meat industry, capitalist exploitation and killing outside the legal discourse. While works on human ghosts are touching the momentum of commercial success now-a-days,



the scholarly concerns around non-human disciplines marks an end with the demise of these animals. The epilogue further tries to link Derrida's notion of 'spectator' to a haunting entity of these dead animals who were the gifts of "ecological destruction and planetary ruin" (p.149). Textual reference to Bibek Debroy and his work on dogs in Indian mythology associating them with divine creatures, plays an important role in reimagining the stature of non-human animals, since it clearly contrasts with their putative status in an anthropocentric habitat. Thus, in countless ways, *Entangled Fiction* tries to expose our complicated ontologies that are ever-so haunted by the world of non-human species, calling upon us to trace their existence.

The book is esoteric in nature; having a sophisticated touch and scholarly scripted sentences, it could appear as a setback for diversified spaces of readership. The narratives are scarcely interconnected and the chapters delve into different topics of debate; its limitlessness and capacity of covering miscellaneous genres (short stories, epic, poetry, novel and even filmic representations) makes it a rich document of literary research. It also skillfully blends theoretical discourses with pragmatic experiences and relies upon the meticulous analysis of textual codes, both visual and verbal.

The novelty of *Entangled Fiction* lies in its ability to attempt to indigenize and nativize the intellectual academic scholarship on posthumanism that investigates the entangled relationship of human and non-human animals in the fictional world. Sinha chooses to discuss various printed as well as visual narratives which essentially carry a cultural consciousness, tinged with the sense of Indianness. However, the narratives, to which Sinha hints at, are pan-Indian in their appeal, and are not fenced by spatiotemporal boundaries. Instead of expressing any spatial biases, Sinha incorporates writers from various regional literatures including Hindi (Premchand), Bengali (Jibanananda Das, Sukumar Ray) as well as Tamil Literature (Perumal Murugan) and knits them together for having similar thematic and critical concerns.

Sinha's commentary on institutionalisation of creative art raises the question of vanishing local heritage and traditional ways of livelihood. Through the mythological and poetic association to the realistic state of both living and dead non-humans, Sinha invites new interpretations on the significance of posthuman in art and poetry, exemplifying Bengali poets' utopian vision of ecological habitat. However, with the emergence of AI and massive industrial intakes happening all around the world, the questions of posthuman sustainability become debatable amidst the growing capitalist dominance, yet scholarly works like *Entangled Fictions* makes remarkable attempts to wipe out the human/non-human binary which invariably prioritises the first term over the later in an Anthropocene.

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