

## Post Humanism in Contemporary World Fiction

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### Abstract

This paper explores a brief history of the term, “Humanism”, so as to situate posthumanism within a historical framework or a greater philosophical context. Humanism holds that man is a wholly natural creature whose well-being rests on his own efforts. It emphasizes on the importance of human reason and freedom of will in artistic, ethical and intellectual considerations. Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Louis Althusser are critical of humanism. They assert that in order to understand the universality of human nature, human should be free of all historical and religious contexts. In Indian philosophy as expressed in its literature, assimilation between animals and humans is expressive of an understanding of fluid and temporary identities of all living beings. Posthumanism incorporates a new way of understanding the human subject in relationship to the natural world. Posthumanism provides a space for looking back and thinking through elements of humanism which are responsible for our perceived superiority and dominion over all other things on the planet. This paper will explore the social consequences of body modifications by technologies as genetic engineering and cybernetic implants. It will explore the depiction of transhumans and posthumans in *Never Let Me Go*, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* and *Neuromancer*. Contemporary fiction thrives on the effects of genetic engineering and the nature of posthuman societies.

**Key Words:** Posthuman, Transhuman, Cyborg, Android, Clones, Cyberspace

In order to situate posthumanism within a historical framework or a greater philosophical context, we need to explore a brief history of this term, “Humanism”. We know that Humanism is a shifting concept and also that Human evolution centers on life history of humanity. In western philosophy, the earliest humanists were sophists, who worked on the problems of Man and his conduct and thus proclaimed the intrinsic importance of Man. They did not talk much about the ontological or cosmological issues. Socrates believed in human personality as the fundamental reality

whereas all social and political institutions were, according to him, just aids to human development. Plato advocated the establishment of proper balance between reason, spirit, and desire in humans. Aristotle held Reason to be man’s highest attribute. Middle ages conceived of human beings as composites of two substances, body and soul, of which the soul was considered too superior to the body. Regarding Renaissance, B.A.G. Fuller says:

“It was that Western Europe awoke to the possibilities latent in the natural man and that the individual

became actually self-conscious and engrossed with his own particular temperament and capacities and with the problem and means of expressing them to the utmost. For this reason, the epoch is known as the Renaissance, or the period of rebirth and its pre-occupation with the development of human self-realisation here and now, in this world, within the limits set by birth and death, has given to its spirit the name of humanism". (Fuller,1)

Descartes (1596–1650) regarded as “Father of Modern Philosophy” is one of the most important figures in Western intellectual history. He placed human at the centre of the universe. He separated an individual from the rest of the world. Thus, began an age of individualism. For him human is “A thing that doubts, understands affirms, denies ... willing, ...unwilling ... also imagines and has sensory perceptions.” (Descartes, 19)

Bertrand Russell encourages humans to be united with the bond of a common good and strive for the rebuilding of our social institutions with an intention to end human suffering and inequality. R.W. Sellers believes that Nature is a stage for creative action. Irving Babbitt (1865-1933) emphasized the importance of human reason and freedom of will in artistic, ethical and intellectual considerations. For Julian Huxley, the mind and body are not irreconcilably different. Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Louis Althusser are critical of humanism, specifically the humanism of the Enlightenment, the era they believe to have cemented humanism’s core beliefs. They all

question humanism’s centrality. They emphasized that in order to understand the universality of human nature, human should be free of all historical and religious contexts.

Foucault describes how the enlightenment is a series of events which includes elements of social transformation. The nature of power structures, suggest that politics generates difference and imbalance. This exclusionary form of politics is directly opposed to the central tenets of humanism, freedom and rights for all humans. This division leads Foucault to conclude that humanism and the enlightenment are at odds, and the bond between the two movements is an illusion. Foucault says, he is “inclined to see Enlightenment and humanism in a state of tension rather than identity” (44)

In Indian philosophy as expressed in its literature, assimilation between animals and humans is expressive of an understanding of fluid and temporary identities of all living beings. Each being here is a variation on a single common condition. A cosmology of rebirth creates a sensibility of awareness to the aliveness of things. Here, animals too desire happiness as humans do. *Panchtantra*, *Jataka kathas*, *Hitopdesha* stories are all examples for this.

Posthumanism incorporates a new way of understanding the human subject in relationship to the natural world, in general. The perception of the elements that constitute human nature has shifted in 21st century. Technology has changed the way in which human beings interact with the environment. The human body may not be entirely biological at all. Human consciousness characterizes us as humans. It

is now claimed that human consciousness is expanding through the power of technology. There is a non-physical space -the cyber world- where we now exchange conversations, feelings, opinions and information. In an entirely new way, these physical and mental relations to technology are influencing, how humans identify themselves in relation to the world they experience. Humans are supposed to be able to 'evolve' through the application of new technologies. Scientists believe that brain processes may be enhanced to unimagined possibilities. These advancements are mirrored as well as imagined in works of Si-fi literature and films.

Foucault questions humanism. Foucauldian sense is integral in the shift to a posthumanist understanding of the world. Posthumanism does not signal a distinct rupture from humanism, but rather provides a space for looking back and thinking through elements of humanism which are responsible for our perceived superiority and dominion over all other things on the planet. Posthumanists see human beings and technological objects as not wholly separate, but as merged into a cyborg/ android subject. The new society is being formed by the revolutionary convergence of disparate trends pulled from technology, behavioral and societal changes, and medical advances. This messy and complex transformation will blur our identities into "transhumanism."

Posthumanism as a literary theory attempts to decenter a trend of supremacism that promotes speciesism and leads to ecological degradation. Posthumanism subverts humanism, and deconstructs humanism's centralization in social, political, economic,

cultural, and environmental avenues. Humanism involves human-centered views, interests, and conceptions, posthumanism involves exploration beyond human interests. Posthumanism insists that we are a species of animal and thereby share a finitude with other animals. By "finitude of life" is meant that, like other animal species, we suffer, feel pain, and eventually will die (Wolfe, 570). Wolfe though agrees with humanists' "values and aspirations" of treating people "with respect and equality".

Contemporary fiction thrives on the effects of genetic engineering and the nature of posthuman societies. *Never Let Me Go* and *Neuromancer* are stories that warn about the way the notion of humanity may blur one's moral compass in the territory of posthumanism. *Never Let Me Go* shows a group of human clones living in an alternative 20th century England. They are unspecified social and political mechanisms, who are bred and brought up with the single purpose to become donors of their vital organs around the time they reach their late twenties. The narrative consists of temporally layered reminiscences by a clone named Kathy H., who is brought up and educated with other such clones in a remote boarding school. They are supposedly treated just like regular children, but continuously conditioned to accept the fact that not before long they will become "donors" and eventually "complete". Here complete means death. The social conditioning has determined the status of the clones as secondary citizens. The society determines that clones are of no ethical importance.

Kathy's teacher tells why the exhibition of the drawings by these children is organized. Efforts are made by some activists that the treatment of clones is immoral because they too possess a fully developed human nature. Hopes, fantasies and aspirations of clones are being stimulated on one hand and they themselves are dehumanized in the eyes of the society on the other hand. Here, the bodies of the clones become a mere set of signifiers: a signifier of body parts, of a biotechnological function, of health and rejuvenation for humans. The hierarchical nature of the social and political power structure is very obvious. In Judith Butler's terminology their space is 'a domain of abjection'.

Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) deals with how humanity can insist on rigid boundaries and categories that divide humans from non-humans when this distinction becomes increasingly smudged. It criticizes the perceived dissimilarity between humans and machines, and the idea of empathy as exclusive to human nature. Here, the body of the posthuman android, or replicant, challenges the fixity of human nature and thus threatens a sense of human superiority and distinctiveness based on that notion of fixity. Humans have developed replicants for the sole purpose of serving humans on the colonized planets as slaves. They are refused human attributes such as empathy as a way of self-preservation by the human characters.

The novel presents a near-future, post-apocalyptic world where almost all of nature has been destroyed by World War Terminus. Most people from the earth have moved to

other colonized planets such as Mars. Some have been forced to remain on earth. Rick Deckard, the protagonist, is assigned task of hunting down and 'retiring' the replicants. Deckard finds out that the replicants have become ever more refined and to distinguish them from humans is now next to impossible. The novel raises the question: what does it mean to be human?

William Gibson's *Neuromancer* is packed with cyborgs, artificial intelligence machines and hackers. The society is dystopian with megacorporations taking control of everything. People are living in cyberspaces and criminal organizations are flourishing. In this cyborgian civilization, the cyberspace is a virtual reality that is accessed through direct neural connection, through head plugs. Case is the main character in *Neuromancer*. He is the human protagonist who is famed, highly skilled computer hacker. Wintermute, is a super-computer and the non-human protagonist, an AI construct, with intelligence more than humans'. Wintermute, the AI intends to free itself from the Turing locks, preprogrammed limits to prevent AIs to develop beyond human control, and merge with another AI called Neuromancer. This fusion would create an extremely powerful AI, which was forbidden under the Turing Law Code. Turing Police is the enforcer of the Turing Registry, an international organization created to stop any AI to evolve beyond human control.

In these novels, the characters free themselves from their bodies and live their "real" posthuman lives in virtual communities. In these narratives, the empowerment of the self is at the cost of

embodiment. This is based on a mis/conception of posthumanism that correlates agency with freedom from the body's apparent limitations. The cultural theorist, Francis Fukuyama opines that such biotechnological revolution, especially the kinds like, genetic alterations of people could have disastrous social consequences. With increase in technologization of society, theorists as well as fictionists raise alarm of its derogatory future impact on human lives. Though there are writers who dispel such fear with their own conceptualization of posthumanism. Wolfe aims to fully comprehend what amounts to a new reality

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and redefines humanity's place in the world, he writes:

The human occupies a new place in the universe, a universe now populated by what I am prepared to call nonhuman subjects. And this is why, to me, 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. (Wolfe, 47)