POSTHUMAN TURN

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Abstract : This paper examines the critical transition from classical humanism to posthumanism, focusing on how traditional notions of the human—as rational, autonomous, and universally male—are being radically redefined. Drawing on post-structuralism, feminist and queer theory, critical race theory, and disability studies, it interrogates how humanism has historically excluded non-normative bodies and identities. Critical posthumanism challenges the centrality of the human by highlighting our entanglement with technology, environment, and other life forms. It proposes a new ethical and ontological framework that emphasizes shared vulnerability over individual agency, destabilizing the boundaries between human, non-human, and machine.

Keywords: - Humanism, Posthumanism, Subjectivity, Rationality, Critical Theory
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1.0 Introduction and Major Arguments of the Turn

Before understanding the term 'posthumanism', one needs to understand 'humanism'. Even before defining humanism, it is essential to comprehend the term 'human'. Traditionally, the human is considered a subject as male and universal who is well equipped with rationality, intelligence and a sense of self-consciousness, capable to chart his course of action according to his wish. The defining features of a human are rationality, authority, autonomy and agency and humanism studies human with all his specific set of characteristics. Humanism considers the human subject as the centre of the world, free to exercise his freedom of choice. It is a belief in leading an ethical and satisfied life with the help of reason and humanity. The basic nature of the human locates in the rational power of the mind or soul –which is completely different from the body. Hence, alteration and reform are considered to be possible through the rationality of mind - his ability to deliberate about himself, be certain of himself – that separates him from all other forms of life and extra-terrestrials too.

Throughout the human history, there have been people who have believed in scientific thinking, evidence, and the capacity to reason to find out truths about the universe and kept human welfare and happiness at the centre of their decision making. Today, those who believe in these values are known as humanists and their attitude of looking at the world is called humanism. Humanism centres the white male as the universal human and all other genders, differently formed bodies and ethnic types are treated as variants of this 'standard' model and also forms/models that lack something. Critical humanism treats humanism as a politically significant philosophy because it enabled Europeans, upper classes, professionals (like medical doctors or psychiatrists) to categorize some individuals as inhuman or sub-human and confine them or deny them rights. Animals and some ethnic groups have been the victims of this form of classificatory paradigm in which the universal Man was defined. The deconstruction of humanism in the twentieth century has come from multiple sources. Of the major critiques of humanism examined here – post structuralism, feminism and queer theory, techno science studies and critical race studies – most focused on the following domains within humanism: subject/subjectivity, the body, the idea of the rational human.

Michel Foucault traces the emergence of the human, as we know it now, to the set of ideas and concepts that evolved during the European Enlightenment. Toward the end of *The Order of Things*, Foucault would famously write, "man is an invention of recent date" (387). It is a broad worldview that believes and follows the scientific method to understand the working of the universe and rejects the idea of any supernatural agency. The capacity to reason, empathy and a concern for the welfare of human beings and other sensible animals make their decisions ethical, meaningful, happy and helpful to others.

Posthumanism mainly has its focus on the construction of such normal humans who have specific biological characteristics and capabilities, sex and different functions accordingly. The distinguishing features which are considered as the indicators of normalcy come as a specific physical disposition, anatomy and intellectual

capabilities. The essential humanity of the human is questioned by catching attention to the constructed nature of the human 'person'. Posthumanism abolishes the dimensions of body, identities (gender, race, species) and even level of consciousness too in which segregating the 'human' factor from a human like machine model, cyborg, corpse or any other life form is not possible. In philosophic terms, critical posthumanism is the radical decentring of this traditional human subject's authority, rationality and autonomy in order to display how the human not only evolves with several forms of life and machines but also constituted by and constitutive of those.

Since Renaissance, literature which is said to have invented the human has shown us the way of human's behaviour, reaction and interaction so far has begun showing us that human is human because it includes the non-human. Posthumanism in its critical version presents the concept of human in a new light. It studies discourses cultural representations and power relations that have so far placed the human above other forms of life and of course, in their restraint. In a complete revision of humanism, critical posthumanism seeks to move beyond the conventional humanist ways of thinking about the self-governing, determined individual agent in order to treat the human itself as a group, co-developing with other life forms, entangled with the environment and technology. It discards the idea of human as extraordinary, distinguished from other life forms and usually dominating over these other forms.

Critical posthumanism also shuns the 'ableism' associated with conventional humanism to assimilate different other bodies like the differently abled. By focussing less on capability, freedom to choose and agency and focussing on shared vulnerability, posthumanism requires a drastic rethink of species uniqueness and definiteness of the human. Disability studies, animal studies, cybernetics and consciousness studies all pitch in to posthumanism because these reformulate the bounds of the human and question the hierarchies of human/non-human, human/machine and human/inhuman. Thus posthumanism is not only about a human having artificial limbs that increase human qualities and abilities for performing any action. This is the popular view of posthumanism and is more in consonance with the ontological basis of the term. On the other hand, critical posthumanism considers the exceptional human abilities, qualities, consciousness and characteristics as developing in connection with other life forms, technology and ecosystems. This simply indicates that critical posthumanism does not consider the human as the centre of all things: it sees the human as a manifestation of a network of connections, exchanges, associations and crossings with all life forms.

Posthumanism signifies both the ontological condition and a vision of the human. Today, it has two apparent elements, emanating from very distinct views of the human. The first is the pop posthumanism of cinema and pop culture (Terminator, The Matrix, cyberpunk fiction). This element, more in favour of technical alterations of the human, asserts that technological and biological modifications will surely better the 'human'. This implies that there is a distinguishable entity identifiable as the 'human', a human 'self' or 'person' which can perform with some sort of modification or alteration. This element of posthumanism does not accept the human as a construct entangled with other forms of life and takes technology as a medium of 'adding' to already existing human features and of filling the want in the human. This version of posthumanism is usually known as 'transhumanism'.

Cary Wolfe precisely describes transhumanism as "an intensification of humanism" (xv). Transhumanists believe in the perfectibility of the human, taking into account the restrictions of the human body (biology) as something that might be overcome through technology so that quicker, healthier, more intelligent, long-living human bodies might one day exist on Earth. Nick Bostrom, a leading philosopher of the transhumanist condition, defines it thus: "It [transhumanism] holds that current human nature is improvable through the use of applied science and other rational methods, which may make it possible to increase human health-span, extend our intellectual and physical capacities, and give us increased control over our own mental states and moods" (202–3).

Transhumanists view existing forms of the human as a middle stage before the arrival of the enhanced human form in which bodies and their intellectuality might be improved upon for greater use and cause. According to Transhumanism, human rationality is a key sign of 'personhood' and individual identity, and it finds the body as confining the scope of the mind. While previous transhumanists rarely addressed the moral issue, more recent transhumanist philosophers like Ingmar Persson and Julian Savalescu, James Hughes and others discuss the

issue of a righteously improved human with increased faculties of empathy, selflessness and ethical responsibility, for whom the improvement of abilities without a moral enhancement (as Persson and Savalescu see it) would mean that a cognitively accentuated but morally backward minority could cause greater hurt.

Further, transhumanism believes in the Enlightenment ideals of the human/animal categorisation. It treats humanity as a species distinct and independent. In transhumanism, and especially in its well-known instantiation in science-fiction, there is an overlapping focus on the mechanization of humans and the humanization of machines. The near-obsessive examination of super smart computers that threaten to overcome the humans and the robotic implants that rearrange and derange the human in popular culture takes the posthuman as an enhanced human, an aggregation of human and machine.

Katherine Hayles': "[The posthuman] implies not only a coupling with intelligent machines but a coupling so intense and multifaceted that it is no longer possible to distinguish meaningfully between the biological organism and the informational circuits in which the organism is enmeshed" (35).

W. J. Mitchell, another hagiographer of this form of posthumanism that believes in advanced humanity, characterizes the posthuman as "Me++', [where humans] routinely exist in the condition ... [of] man–computer symbiosis, [and where they] now interact with sensate, intelligent, interconnected devices scattered throughout [the] environment" (7).

This strand of posthumanism is determined by technology and techno-utopian in its belief in technology's ability to provide a certain kind of future. This idea of the future of mankind in transhumanism gives birth to the criticism that it is a kind of another 'white mythology' because it brings back the myth of the white man's technological superiority and advancement. Popular posthumanism does not view the human as only another construct. It preserves the key characteristics of the human – thrill, emotion and rationality– but believes that these attributes might be developed through technology. This means conventional views of the human persist in popular posthumanism: it just looks for an improvement of the human. It is this belief in the ingrained, necessary qualities of the human that critical posthumanism contests by showing how the human is an aggregation and human attributes or characteristics have co-existed with other forms of life.

The second strand or element of posthumanism can be called 'critical posthumanism'. Defining this strand of posthumanist thought in two parts, one can say with Maureen McNeil that it rejects both human exceptionalism (the idea that humans are unique creatures) and human instrumentalism (that humans have a right to control the natural world).
This strand is more critical of the traditional humanism and treats
   (i)   the human as co-developing, partaking ecosystems, life processes, genetic matter, with animals and other life forms; and
   (ii)   technology not only a prosthesis to human identity but as significant to it.

Critical posthumanism draws attention to the methods in which the machine and the organic body and the human and other life forms are flawlessly expressed inter dependent and co-developing. It critiques the humanist and transhumanist view of centrality of logic and rationality and suggests a more comprehensive and ethical understanding of life. In the place of the cardinal subject, critical posthumanism proposes the non-unitary subject.

Posthumanism, philosophically approaching, includes a rethinking of the idea of subjectivity because it sees human subjectivity as an assembly, co-developing with machines and animals. It also requires a more elaborate definition of life and a greater moral–ethical reaction and responsibility to non-human or animal life forms in the age of blurring and mixing of species. Posthumanism in this way has a certain politics in that it questions the hierarchic arrangement – and ensuing exploitation and even obliteration – of life forms. Normative subjectivity, which explained and classified life forms into 'animal', 'plant' and 'human' is now under examination for its exclusivism and it is this that more than anything else defines critical posthumanism. Critical posthumanism establishes associations not just between traditional humanism's exclusionary system and women, races or ethnic groups but also animals, being kept out as slaves, monsters or providers of meat, entertainment or work. It is in the exclusionary definition of the human that the origins of sexism, racism and other exclusionary

practices can be found.

Unlike the transhumanists who seek to overwhelm the human form, critical posthumanism does not wish to shun the embodiment. Critical posthumanism views embodiment as integral to the formation of the environment. But it should not be forgotten that this embodiment is embedded, in which the human body is placed in an environment that is made of plants, animals and machines. Systems, including human ones, are in an emerging state rather than in a state of being when the system is continuously crossed by information flows from the environment. When biological sciences inform us that bacteria exist in what we consider to be the self-contained human body, or that many of the evolutionary features of the human were reactions to other organic forms on Earth, then critical posthumanism come in to recontextulize the human system as having 'become-with' other life forms. Critical posthumanism considers the human as an aggregation, whose sources of origin are multispecies and whose very existence is based on mutual relations with multiple forms of life on earth. Critical posthumanism therefore favours co-existence, interdependence, feedback and responses as determining factors rather than independence, contestation and self-contained separation of the human. It views human experience, modes of perception and even affective states as essentially extracted from, affected and constituted by the sensory apparatus of multi-fold other living beings first and then becoming autopoietic later.

Human biological processes are, as the work of Lynn Margulis has demonstrated, enabled through the absorption of bacteria and organelles into the human body from the environment over centuries of evolution. Therefore the concept of uniquely human is the result of hybridization and mutual exchange of material and immaterial data, like in the genetic code – across species, skin and action of animals, plants and humans. The human in this critical posthumanist perspective is a 'dynamic hybrid' of 'ontologically different elements' (572).

Under the impact of second-order cybernetic theory (or neocybernetics), critical posthumanism is less concerned with the great human subject than in the human itself as (i) a system located in an environment, and (ii) an expression of networks of information (say DNA, but also memories) and material (say bacteria or viral forms) exchanges between systems and environments. If humanism postulates a self-sufficient, exclusive and defined human, critical posthumanism recontextualizes the human into its setting (both organic and inorganic) and situates the human's structure, actions and form as the consequence of a co-evolution with other forms of life.

Therefore critical posthumanism poses the ethical question: Since our origins, histories and evolutionary trajectories are all merged and when we share mortality and vulnerability with animals, how do we live with other life forms? Critical posthumanism shifts its position from the moral transhumanism very significantly. Moral transhumanism believes that human qualities can be accentuated and developed (such as compassion for others) for the benefit of life on earth – but with this it preserves a very clear idea of the essential qualities of the human. The human still occupies the centre of all things required, essential and aspirational. Critical posthumanism treats the 'essential' features of the human as already overlapping with other life forms, where the 'core' human attributes, whether physiology, anatomy or consciousness are supposed to have co-evolved with other species. When moral transhumanism looks for enhancing the inborn human characteristics and features, critical posthumanism discards the very notion of innateness to the human. It argues instead for a disarrayed aggregations of qualities enhanced over very long period involving human's interactions with the environment (which includes non-organic tools and organic life).

2.0 Theorizing Posthuman – Major Arguments

Post Humanism needs no theorising as it has already made its formidable presence all around. Now if at this stage, cultural critics strive to come up with a theory on post humanism, it would be of no use. As we are face to face with 'post humanism' now, the question arises where has Man gone? Steve Beard views that actually man needs no theorising because the intersection of consumerism and techno culture has already done the job. This can be explained with the help of an example: a South African runner Oscar Pistorius, who is actually a double amputee runs world class races like Paralympics and Olympics too. He is a man's body from head to knees, fixed atop with curved carbon blades or artificial limbs. His nick name is "the Blade Runner". So, in a way it seems that the exponential and unprecedented growth in technology and consumerism has theorized the man away and its place has been taken by post humanism.

But Neil Badmington in his essay *Theorising Poshumanism* reinstates the need of theory of post humanism. He

is of the view that the untimely celebration of the absolute end of ''Man'' needs to be reconsidered and rethought. Man has not met his absolute end yet, then it's too premature and totally untimely.

German Philosopher and critic, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche pointed out that it is remarkably difficult to cut off human (ist) head through which we continue to 'behold all things'. Though Badmington is in no mood to espouse humanism or keep it intact but he can neither overlook humanism's capacity for regeneration and recapitulation. In this regard, Jacques Derrida's 'apocalyptic tone' which discards humanism absolutely needs to be softened a little. The writer has given the example of Hans Moarvec's *Mind Children: the Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* wherein he comes up with an argument that it will soon be possible to download human consciousness into a computer. But here the question arises, if mind can be separated from body or if human consciousness has no connection with human body?

But Moravec's this argument does not end up doing away with humanism rather it helps expanding the idea in the realm of post humanism as the seemingly posthumanist desire to download human consciousness into a machine or computer arises from the humanistic matrix of Cartesian dualism. Descartes' a 17th century French philosopher and Mathematician gave the idea of Mind-body dualism.

It theorises that mind and body are distinct kinds of substances or natures, they are completely different kinds of entities. His theory considers mind as an immaterial, non-extended substance that can think rationally, imagine, feel and will whereas body (human) is causally affected by human mind and which causally produces certain mental events. For instance, willing the arm to be raised causes it to be raised whereas being hit by a hammer on the finger causes the mind to feel pain. This part of Descartes' dualistic theory is known as interactionism.

So, what concerns the author is that posthumanism is constantly haunted or tainted by the shadow of Humanism, and if it is so, what needs to be done? In the second section of the essay, the writer brings his point home by illustrating through an image from the cover of Time magazine wherein "Man of the Year" award has been given to a machine: the computer. Sadly, humans had failed to leave their mark. 'Man of the Year' made way for 'Machine of the Year'. How machines have started claiming the roles, positions and honours of human beings and relegated them to oblivion. This incident received both positive and negative responses from the readers. One of them went to the extent of saying that 'The Man of the year has no soul'. Although there was a human figure too in the picture, though relegated to the background, with computer at the centre of the magazine cover, it still raises a very relevant question about the position of man, if he is at the centre or a machine has taken his place relegating him to margins.

Derrida's approach also affirms the notion of Humanism's prevalence in the age of post humanism. According to him, each thought bears some trace of the tradition in which it takes place and it can't exist in isolation from that tradition, this view of Derrida also helps in humanism's continual and undeniable impact on post humanism. He does not espouse anti- humanism rather goes with the post- humanism as an extension of humanism. Derrida, in a way questions humanism from within humanism and not from a post humanistic position and his philosophy helps in theorizing post humanism for the writer.

Descartes' holds that both beasts/animals and machines as inhuman because they don't have the rational mind to think. Even if, a machine simulates humans we can easily detect the difference because they could never use words, gestures or expressions the way humans do to communicate and even if they do, to some extent, or partially and not in all the unpredictable situation, Secondly, they might excel in certain activities but fail in others as they don't do so through understanding but only because of a particular kind of disposition of their organs.

In this regard, Jean Francois Lyotard's contribution can also be looked into as his views are quite helpful in comprehending the term 'post'. It is an extension or continuity of the same to which it is attached i.e. humanism. Freud's concept of 'working through' also sheds a good amount of light on the meaning of 'post'. His therapy or approach of working through the repressed emotions, feelings, ideas, impulses etc. of the patient can finally lead him to his absolute cure in restoring his normal healthy mind.

Posthumanism is a new way to comprehend the human subject in relation to the environment where

posthumanistic theory offers a new epistemology that is not anthropocentric. The traditional boundaries between the human, the animal and the machine get mitigated. In a way, it is a rejection of traditional Western humanism.

Donna J. Haraway in her essay *A Cyborg Manifesto* writes a critique of traditional feminism. Apart from this, she demolishes the association between human and animal, and human and machine. She brings out her "cyborg theory", which offers a wise hybridization of humans and machines with the means of grammar and political language.

She vehemently criticizes almost every perspective of Western culture holding it responsible for the miserable state of its society. Haraway unfailingly takes cyborgs as the only ray of hope in this bleak scenario for establishing a better future promising equality, keeping aside the fact that these are the products of militarism and a masculinist culture. Unlike common people who have their own biases, divisions, complexes and so on and are governed mostly by their stereotypical attitudes, cyborgs are absolutely away from these. They neither understand any religion nor do they nourish any fears or insecurities like ordinary people do. In a way, they are not confined beings in any respect. More importantly, Cyborgs are supposedly designed to put an end to human domination so that the last dividing lines between humans, animals, and machines can be abolished. Moreover, it is also hoped that they will certainly be able to destroy the divisions between people too.

Haraway, through her essay suggests that it is only a step forward to the materialisation of a better world. According to her, the concept of the best world could be the one where there will be no distinction amongst man, woman, race, and of course, religion. Equality will prevail. She calls it post-gender world. However, the writer doesn't proclaim this to be the only one appropriate path for us to follow. This essay of hers is a vision about a better liveable society.

3.0 Key Terms Of The Turn

- **Humanism:** Study of autonomous, rational, ethical and conscious human. It was anthropocentric in nature placing man (not God) at the centre of its literary and philosophical pursuits.
- **Posthumanism:** It is a term that comes 'after' the human and it believes that we have witnessed the end of humanism. Human has basically changed in reaction to technological advancements.
- **Self-Regulation:** Posthumanism can regulate itself without taking any help of external bodies. It is capable of maintaining homeostasis on its own.
- **Homeostasis :** It is an ability of living beings to maintain steady-states using feedback loops.
- **Cybernetics:** Cybernetics is an aggregation of control, communication and information theories that signal the novel amalgamation of the organic and the mechanical.
- **Autopoiesis/Self Making:** It indicates that the world which is a set of informationally closed systems can reproduce and maintain itself well.
- **Mind-Body dualism/ Cartesian dualism:** It is a view that mind and body are two separate entities but mind has an upper hand over the body which makes us human. The significant Cartesian tradition of dualism emphasised on the fact that the essence of the human lies in his cognitive power and animals were just machines having no mind of their own.
- **Cyborg:** Cyborg is a kind of cybernetic organism, a mix of machine and organism. It is a creature of social reality as we all as a creature of fiction. Donna J. Haraway has been instrumental in examining the porous disposition of these boundaries on human-machine and animal. She brought out the idea of cyborg to grab the ambivalence of the contemporary human beings who can be physically modified with technological intervention. The metaphor of cyborg not only evokes the fantasies of science fiction where bodily lacks can be cured by drugs and prostheses but also makes the characters stronger, more intelligent and quick. Haraway's cyborg is both transhuman as well as posthuman as it shuns and reforms the values of the traditional humanist subject.

3.1 Examples: An example can be taken of a post gender world in Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, where one enjoys the freedom of choosing to be man or woman when facing heat. Le Guin makes the supposed differentiating factor of the 'normal' human race complicated by showing the genders being interchangeable.

In Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, neurotransmitters have been implanted in 'troublesome' patients of the mental asylum. This theme has been inspired by a real-life incident in which, in the 1960s, the staff at Atascadero and Vacaville (California) prisons for the criminally insane administered the drug succinylcholine to improve their patients' behaviour. It was required to help the doctors to control patient behaviour, mainly by turning them inactive and sluggish. Though inmates still remain human but without multiple cognitive, emotive and intellectual abilities that are attributed to the 'normal' human.

In Octavia Butler's *Fledgling*, Shori is a genetically improved vampire who can bear sunlight and cohabit easily with humans. Shori has been depicted as a hybrid race, both human and vampire.

In Stephenie Meyer's now-cult *Twilight* series, Vampires become vegetarian and cease devouring humans. Even more, they start thinking of adopting a life where they can easily mix into the human race through the process of reproduction.

Anne Rice also writes vampire fiction where her vampire characters inhabit covens and thus in a way emulate family structures of humans.

In *Gattaca*, an individual's fate is almost fully governed by her/his genetic structures. Those whose DNA is acceptable are proclaimed the upper classes ('valids') and those whose genetic codes are not favourable become the 'in-valids'.

Arnold Schwarzenegger is an alien cyborg which surprisingly develops emotional affiliations in the later *Terminator* films.

Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go* writes about cloned individuals who form a significant section of the future society. The cloned 'individuals' are required to donate the organs to the humans who require specific organs in order to sustain.

Individuals having extraordinary power (mutants) have to wage a war for rights and esteem against humans in the *X-Men*.

Animals in fables across the world unfailingly display anthropomorphic tendencies, whereas humans habitually change themselves into werewolves in horror movies and fiction.

Another example can be taken of Yrr, a sentient life form. These are single-celled organisms that have successfully developed hive intelligence which can further be used to empower multiple underwater life forms so that these underwater beings can attack human civilization in Frank Schwatzing's *The Swarm* for having annihilated their marine habitat.

Michael Chorost in his autobiography, *Rebuilt: How Becoming Part Computer Made Me More Human,* states clearly that he has a computer chip in his head-a cochlear implant that enables him to hear. It makes him a cyborg, a Homo faber, but it also helps him becoming more human.

In Wendy Mass' novel *A Mango-shaped Space*, the protagonist, a synesthetic is addressed as 'freak', because she has the ability to see music and numbers in terms of colours. From a separate field, the Tissue Culture and Art project makes sculptures out of lab-prepared organic materials, where life and its matter are changed into a work of art in order to demonstrate how the vibrancy of life makes its way through humans, animals and things.

In Katherine Dunn's controversial novel, *Geek Love*, mutant babies do away with the   differences in sex as well as animal–human. Dunn politically criticises the very notion of the 'person' in a world where individuality and 'personhood' are considered, in the case of disabled persons, only in terms of their 'impairedness' or distinction from the 'normal' human anatomy or physiology.

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