

POSTHUMAN FICTION: TECHNO-CENTRIC AND FUTURISTIC ORIENTATION OF HUMAN AND HUMANISM

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Abstract

Posthumanism has emerged as a burning interdisciplinary issue finding echo in the gamut of literature, literary theory and criticism, cybernetics, artificial intelligence, and genomics etc. during the concluding quarter of twentieth century. It has made tremendous impact on postmodern fiction. Thanks to publication of the Post-Human Manifesto in 1988 by Steve Nichols (Posthuman, 1), the term posthumanism gained momentum. The present paper seeks to hypothesize that the posthuman fiction is techno-centric and futuristic orientation of humanism. To corroborate the proposition, the paper seeks to deliberate upon techno-centric and futuristic orientation first of human and, then of humanism and finally establishes prevalence of humanism in the posthuman scenario.

To deliberate upon techno-centric and futuristic orientation of a human, it defines posthumanism and traces its presence in the postmodern fiction. To address the same, it dwells upon its definitional contours, key characteristics, characterization and themes. It further seeks to expatiate upon a difference between posthuman and human fiction. Likewise, to ruminate upon techno-centric and futuristic orientation of humanism, it mulls whether the posthuman fiction is techno-centric and futuristic orientation or obliteration of humanism and, ultimately, wraps up the issue arguing how it lends techno-centric and futuristic orientation to humanism.

Key Words: Posthumanism, humanism, cybernetics, artificial intelligence, technoculture, hybridity, virtuality, cybernetics and hyper reality

1. Introduction

Posthumanism in fiction is a crucial genre of the late twentieth century. It finds omnipresence in contemporary literature and literary studies. It marks a transition from a homo-centric literary panorama into a techno-centric literary palette. It is a repercussion of a technology's pervasive and penetrating presence. Evolved during concluding quarter of twentieth century, posthumanism in fiction has heralded an advent of techno-centric fiction conceived in a futuristic

setting. Of all literary genres, dystopian and science fiction writing seems best suited to explore posthuman (Pordzik, 2012). Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Doris Lessing's *Canopus in Argos*, and nearly all of Kurt Vonnegut's works.

The forthcoming sections of the paper would expatiate upon techno-centric and futuristic orientation first of human and, then of humanism and finally exposing fate of humanism in posthuman scenario.

2. Techno-futuristic orientation of human:

Having dwelled upon various facets of the posthuman, the forthcoming sections would deal with phenomenon of techno-futuristic orientation of a human. To zero on in this purpose, the paper would define posthumanism, trace its presence in the postmodern fiction, scrutinize its history, setting, characterization, themes and difference between posthuman and human fiction.

2.1 Definitional contours

The term posthuman fiction is synonymously used as posthumanism in fiction. Posthumanism in fiction is the blend of two words – posthumanism and fiction. The term posthumanism is a noun form of an adjective 'posthuman'. In critical theory, the posthuman is a speculative being that represents or seeks to re-conceive the human. (ibid) Donna Haraway defines it as a multilayered and heterogeneous entity capable of comprehending world from many angles at a same time which is impossible for a human. To borrow her wording:

The posthuman, for critical theorists of the subject, has an emergent ontology rather than a stable one; in other words, the posthuman is not a singular, defined individual, but rather one who can "become" or embody different identities and understand the world from multiple, heterogeneous perspectives. (Haraway, "Situated Knowledges" 1991).

Equating the word posthuman with the word cyborg (Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science...", 1991) and vesting him with mechanical, human and animalistic power, Donna Haraway further defines the term in the manner below:

A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction...Cyborgs are creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted. (Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto" 1991)

Lending the word posthuman a hi-tech halo, which essays to ebb away its humanistic turf to usher in posthumanism, it has been put:

The term generally refers to any attitude toward humanity or humanness in which former definitions or boundaries of the human are called into question. It is often used to connote an evolutionary stage, as if the human species were moving into a new form, largely through technological augmentation. (Posthumanism, 2010)

Encyclopedia of Science Fiction defines the term computationally in the manner given below:

Posthumans inhabiting recognizably human bodies tend to be mental Supermen (which see) with vastly enhanced Intelligence; this may be conferred by Computer interfacing... (SFE, para 3)

Rebecca Bishop defines the term computationally in the manner given below:

a number of scientists and writers variously used the term “posthuman”, “transhuman”, or “Human +” to describe an “advanced” humanity cognitively, physiologically and neurologically superior to the human in its current state. NBIC technologies (nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology and cognitive sciences), coupled with advances in genetic manipulation, robotics and artificial life, were heralded as the grounds for a form of technocultural *ubermensch* who would ultimately transcend the human itself. (Bishop, 2012)

On the basis of these definitions, it may be summed up, *inter alia*, that posthumanism is the phenomenon which heralds the advent of biotechnological protagonists powered by artificial intelligence, computing interface and technological argumentation setting it wholly apart from its human counterparts.

Having demarcated contours of posthumanism, the word ‘fiction’ needs to be elucidated. It may be defined as “ the form of any work that deals, in part or in whole, with information or events that are not real, but rather, imaginary and theoretical—that is, invented by the author. Although the term fiction refers in particular to novels and short stories, it may also refer to the theatre, including opera and ballet, film, television, poetry and song. Fiction contrasts with non-fiction, which deals exclusively with factual (or, at least, assumed factual) events, descriptions, observations, etc.” (Fiction, 1)

To sum it up, the phrase posthumanism in fiction refers to a fictional narrative in which speculative characters under techno-centric setting and with computational and technological underpinning deliver their performance within techno-futuristic unities of time, action and place and eclipse humanist values in pursuance of post-humanist ethos.

The above-delineated definitional contours of posthumanism in fiction flesh out its niceties as to erosion of humanistic ethos with the birth of a cyborg – a hybrid of machine and organism operating within techno-futuristic unities of time, action and place and, thus, bring to the fore the techno-centric and futuristic orientation of humanism.

2.2 Key characteristics of Posthumanism in fiction

The pentology of technoculture, hybridity, virtuality, cybernetics and hyper reality has conspicuously dominated the contemporary literary firmament during the twilight of the twentieth century and the first quarter of the twenty first century as major characteristics that have immensely impinged upon the contemporary posthuman literature. It has come to constitute part and parcel of posthuman fiction in the late capitalist era and, therefore, urges posthuman fiction wrights to glitz their fiction up with a kaleidoscopic manifestation of technoculture, hybridity, virtuality, cybernetics and hyper reality.

2.2.1 Technoculture

Technoculture explores the changing relationship between technologies, humans, and culture. Wikipedia defines *Technoculture* as "social reception and representation of technology in literature and popular culture from the Romantic era to the present" Joseph Dumit comprehensively defines it in the manner below: We can situate Technoculture then in a busy intersection of academic interests and note some special needs to which it points and which it begins to address: (1) building on the cultural studies subversion of the high/popular split, it expands studies of technology in society to everyday appropriations; (2) it pays attention to the

media's role in scientizing us as well as in selling science; (3) parts of it draw upon fieldwork and provide practical histories and analyses, pushing in the direction of applied cultural studies; and, (4) by refusing to posit monstrous enemies in control of technology (especially of communications technologies), it provides models for rethinking intellectual technophobia. (Dumit, 2003)

Thus, technoculture – the foremost characteristics of posthumanism – is the study of social reception and representation of technology in literature, i.e., how the technology is going to impinge upon society dismantling an age-old humanist culture which enshrines and espouses homo-centric values and replaces them with anti-sentimental values, usually, fueling technophobia.

2.2.2 Hybridity

Hybridity is the key attribute of a posthuman because it is the hybridity which makes him both a man and a machine simultaneously. Dr. Ajay Sareen broadly elucidates hybridity in the manner mentioned below:

Hybridity implies an amalgam of values of two different cultures (cultural hybridity), or of physical features of two different races...the result of interaction between two different cultures... The hybrid state is occupied by the one who has been 'de-territorialized'... There is another sort of hybridity termed as biological hybridity... arising from the mixed identity. (Sareen, 2009)

Hybridity, in the current context, connotes the mixed identity of the posthuman which makes him both a man and a machine simultaneously and accords him with corporeal and virtual mobility. He oscillates between human & virtual cultures.

2.2.3 Virtuality

Virtuality is the significant characteristic of a posthuman because it arms a posthuman with elasticity of switching between bodied and disembodied worlds. Hence, in this age of DNA, computers and artificial intelligence, information is becoming disembodied even as the "bodies" that once carried it vanish into virtuality (University of Chicago, 2013). Thus, composed of artificial environments, telepresence, and simulated experience, virtuality may be defined as a disembodied self that live as information patterns on vast super-fast computer networks. Virtuality is exquisitely expounded in the following lines:

The body itself may have become obsolete, and that humans might in the future become pure, disembodied subjectivity... jettison their bodies altogether and live as information patterns on vast super-fast computer networks, where they might employ different cognitive architectures or include new sensory modalities that enable greater participation in their virtual reality settings. (Bishop, 2012)

2.2.4 Cybernetics

Cybernetics is a process by which a biological organism enhances its abilities by the integration of technology (Cybernetics, 2014). Dr. T. Ravichandran comprehensively chalking out contour of cybernetics put:

Cybernetics is the scientific study of communication and control. It uses feedback as a method of controlling living organisms and machines and is applied to the regulatory function of computer controlled machines and organisations, automata and robots. It is an umbrella term that covers

other specialized subjects like adaptive systems, artificial intelligence, complex systems, control systems, information theory, simulation, and systems engineering. (Ravichandran, 2005)

Two different connotations of cybernetics delineated above need to be clubbed together to be fitted into our present analytical framework of cybernetics in a sense that on one hand, it is the process of technological transmutation of a biological organism to make him a posthuman. On the other hand, it is the method of controlling both humans and posthumans.

2.2.5 Hyper reality

Hyperreality is generally defined as a condition in which what is real and what is fiction are blended together so that there is no clear distinction between where one ends and the other begins (Hyperreality, Wisegeek 2014). It is further defined as “an image or simulation, or an aggregate of images and simulations, that either distorts the reality it purports to depict or does not in fact depict anything with a real existence at all, but which nonetheless comes to constitute reality (Hyperreality, *TheFreeDictionary* 2014).

To recapitulate, the pentology of posthumanistic characteristics pinpoints transgression and transcendence of humanistic agenda chalked out in and cherished since the dawn of Renaissance. Physio-psychological characteristics of a human have been metamorphosed into part human, part technological being having hybrid identities, cybernetic anchor and virtual-realspace mobility.

2.3 Setting of postmodern fiction with thrust on posthumanism

Unlike other fictions, postmodern fiction with thrust on posthumanism has future settings. Such fictions are set in futuristic science and technology locales, space travel, alien lands etc. Its setting can be categorized under two broad heads such as a time setting and a spatial setting. While a time setting is in the future, in alternative timelines, or in a historical past that contradicts known facts of history or the archaeological record, a spatial setting is or scenes are in outer space (e.g., spaceflight), on other worlds, or on subterranean earth. (Sterling, 2008)

2.4 Characterization

Unlike characters of a human fiction, characters in posthuman fiction are made up of mixture of a man and a machine. They are governed by techno-culture devoid of humanism. Characterization of posthuman fiction abides by the following rules:

- Characters of posthuman fiction pop out of future human evolution and include aliens, mutants, androids, or humanoid robots.
- They are equipped with “technology that is futuristic (e.g., ray guns, teleportation machines, humanoid computers).” (Card, 1990)
- Their action moves forth in accordance with scientific principles that are new or that contradicts known laws of nature, for example time travel, wormholes, or faster-than-light travel.
- They represent “new and different political or social systems (e.g. dystopia, post-scarcity, or a post-apocalyptic situation where organized society has collapsed).” (Hartwell, 1996)
- They possess paranormal abilities such as mind control, telepathy, telekinesis, and teleportation. (Science Fiction, 2014)
- As they are devoid of human culture, they do not espouse core humanistic values.

2.5 Thematization:

Thematic thrust of posthuman fiction is often philosophical in nature. It attempts to investigate the impact of technologies on human life. It seeks to scrutinize relation between the natural and artificial. The already-discussed pentalogy foregrounds a kaleidoscopic range of the burning themes which are found omnipresent in the contemporary cinematic posthuman fictions under discussion. These themes can be categorized in the following manner:

1. Technoculture is thematized by showing cultural changes popping out of the interfacing and commingling of humans and machines, creation of the new ties between man and machine and savvy technological transmogrifications of humans.
2. Hybridity is thematized through a focus upon pleasures and pangs of a switchover between a human and a non-human such as a threat to a human's selfsameness.
3. Pleasures and pangs of virtuality are thematized by showing how humans jettison their bodies altogether and live as information patterns on vast super-fast computer networks. Identity crisis and alienation perpetuated by hybridity is predominately addressed in the theme.
4. Mushrooming influence of cybernetics is thematized through a manifestation of robotized or technologized influence of machines on men or cybernetic control of a human brain.
5. Hyper reality is thematized through a projection of blurred boundaries between the realspace and the cyberspace occasioned by a posthuman's vanishing into a cyberspace and his visiting back to the realspace simultaneously.

To illustrate some popular cinematic posthuman fiction, be it Matrix's protagonist Neo, eXistenZ's protagonists Allegra Geller and Ted Pikul, Elysium's protagonist Max, Surrogates protagonist Tom Green, or for that matter, Avatar's protagonist, Jake Sully or, each of them undergo posthuman pentalogical transmogrification by embracing a technoculture, assuming a hybrid personality, walking in and out of virtuality, confronting cybernetic control and facing hyper reality.

2.6 Difference between Posthuman fiction and humanist Fiction:

Features, such as, focus of posthuman fiction on techno-centric social set-up, new dimension of humanism, technologically powered characters, futuristic orientation of three unities and themes are factored in to set posthuman fiction apart from the human/humanist fiction.

The following description pinpoints the essential difference that exists between a posthuman fiction and humanist fiction by stating that:

the basic building block and distinguishing feature of a posthuman fiction novel is the presence of the novum, a term Darko Suvin adapts from Ernst Bloch and defines as "a discrete piece of information recognizable as not-true, but also as not-unlike-true, not-flatly- (and in the current state of knowledge) impossible". (Posthuman, *Wikipedia* 2014)

Unlike its humanist counterpart, the posthuman fiction makes its characters extraordinary in terms of organic, neurological and computational capacity. In terms of bodily modification, the dividing line between human and posthuman is drawn in a manner mentioned below:

In terms of bodily modification, the dividing line between human and posthuman is not easily drawn. The quaddies of Lois McMaster Bujold's *Falling Free* (December 1987-February 1988 Analog; 1988), adapted for free fall with additional hands in place of feet, clearly remain human; so, at least in their suburban personalities, do

characters with bizarre fashion-prosthetics in John Sladek's Satire "The Last of the Whaleburgers" (in *The Lunatics of Terra*, coll 1984). More exotic posthuman changes, including Cyborg bodies equipped to operate in both free-fall and vacuum, are found in Dougal Dixon's extrapolative nonfiction *Man After Man: An Anthropology of the Future* (1990) and Justina Robson's *Natural History* (2003) – the latter including posthumans organically designed to be Spaceships, a step beyond the more traditional sf transfer of brains from human-born bodies into Cyborg ships as in Anne McCaffrey's *The Ship who Sang* (coll of linked stories 1969) or Kevin O'Donnell's *Mayflies* (1979). (SFE, para 3)

Besides bodily differences, a neuro-computational edge of posthumans over humans holds posthumans apart from the humans in the following manner:

Posthumans inhabiting recognizably human bodies tend to be mental Supermen (which see) with vastly enhanced Intelligence; this may be conferred by Computer interfacing, as in a wide range of stories from Joan D Vinge's "Fireship" (December 1978 *Analog*) to John Meaney's *To Hold Infinity* (1998) and beyond. The posthuman mind may be a many-bodied gestalt, as in Theodore Sturgeon's *More Than Human* (fixup 1953), Frederik Pohl's and C M Kornbluth's *Wolfbane* (October-November *Galaxy*; 1959), and various human-membered Hive Minds as in Stephen Baxter's Xeelee Sequence novels *Coalescent* (2003) and *Exultant* (2004). The titular posthumans of Walter Jon Williams's *Aristoi* (1992) – who oversee, not always benignly, a vast human galactic society – cultivate multiple personality aspects to share, as it were, the Posthuman Man's Burden. (SFE, para 4)

Moreover, artificial intelligence extends posthumans virtual mobility and hyper reality which a human counterpart is not equipped with. The distinction is well-specified in the following manner:

Since the 1980s the most popular route to posthumanity has been to free oneself from the limitations of flesh (the parallel with the tenets of many Religions is sufficiently obvious) by Upload into an electronic existence where humans can at last meet their AIs on more or less equal terms and even, after a fashion, interbreed. A biological analogue of such upload appears in Greg Bear's *Blood Music* (June 1983 *Analog*; 1985). Greg Egan's *Diaspora* (1997) opens with a bravura description of the "natural" birth in such an environment of a new intelligence, described in terms which challenge the accompanying epithet "artificial".

Posthumanity is generally assumed to prevail, though often with exceptions who provide comprehensible viewpoint characters, in the perhaps indescribable aftermath of the Singularity (which see). Sometimes unreconstructed humans are pitted against an enclave or cabal of posthumans, as in Ken MacLeod's *The Stone Canal* (1996) and *The Cassini Division* (1998), whose seemingly inimical posthuman "fast-folk" inhabit Jupiter; or in Shane Dix's and Sean Williams's *Geodesica* sequence opening with *Geodesica: Ascent* (2005). A relevant anthology is *Supermen: Tales of the Posthuman Future* (anth 2002) edited by Gardner Dozois. [DRL] (SFE, para 5-6)

Furthermore, Hayles (1999) differentiates humanist fiction from the posthuman fiction in terms of liberal humanism in the following manner:

Liberal humanism - which separates the mind from the body and thus portrays the body as a "shell" or vehicle for the mind - becomes increasingly complicated in the late 20th and 21st centuries because information technology put the human body in

question... We must be conscious of information technological advancements while understanding information as "disembodied," that is, something which cannot fundamentally replace the human body but can only be incorporated into it and human life practices.

Thus, a blend of organic, neurological and computational modifications welds a posthuman into a mechanized human. On the flip side, human counterpart of the posthuman is devoid of such features.

3. Techno-futuristic orientation or obliteration of humanism:

Having discussed techno-futuristic orientation of human, the core yet troubling question that confronts thinktank is whether there is techno-futuristic orientation or, for that matter, obliteration of humanism. Before coping with the core question, delineating humanism is necessary. To define humanism, it may be submitted:

The word "Humanism" is ultimately derived from the Latin concept *humanitas*, and, like most other words ending in -ism, entered English in the nineteenth century. However, historians agree that the concept predates the label invented to describe it, encompassing the various meanings ascribed to *humanitas*, which included both benevolence toward one's fellow humans and the values imparted by *bonae litterae* or humane learning (literally "good letters"). (Humanism, 2014)

Broaching afresh the acrimoniously argued issue of whether there is techno-futuristic orientation or, for that matter, obliteration of humanism, the think-tank seems to stratify itself into two segments. One segment of the think-tank condemns evolution of posthumanism arguing that the posthuman fiction is techno-centric and futuristic obliteration of humanism as it dismantles an age-old humanism which enshrines and espouses homo-centric values and replaces them with posthuman values and occasions existential eclipse of humanism – the much-cherished literary doctrine since the dawn of Renaissance. The segment sounding death knell of humanism cite cases of aliens, mutants, androids, or humanoid robots like Kaal and his Manvars of the *Krish 3*, Agent Smith, Agent Brown and Agent Jones¹ of the *Matrix* and ruthless robots policing the earth in the *Elysium*. These posthuman with their dystopian mindset represent techno-centric and futuristic obliteration of humanism.

On the flip side, the other segment of think-tank celebrates posthumanism as a techno-centric and a futuristic orientation of humanism which continue to churn out posthumans who exercise their exceptional powers to keep humanism alive. Taking a peep at contemporary cinematic posthuman fiction, the time-honoured and time-tested gospels of humanism, viz., benevolence toward one's fellow humans and the values imparted by *bonae litterae* or humane learning can be found inculcated in posthuman – be it the protagonist Neo of the *Matrix* (*Matrix*, 1999) who manages to free humans from the vexing virtuality, or the protagonist Max in the *Elysium* (*Elysium*, 2013) who ensures entry of the inhabitants of the earth in the *Elysium* or *Krish* of the *Krish 3* (*Krish 3*, 2013) who thwarts the evil efforts of Kaal and his Manvars to harm humanity for his vested interest.

Epitomizingly where posthuman fiction envisions obliteration of humanism at the hands of posthuman villains like Kaal and his Manvars, there it eclipse their evil designs by creating

¹ These are the sentient "Agents" program of the *Matrix* whose purpose is to destroy Zion and stop humans from getting out of the *Matrix*

posthumans like Neo, Max and Krish. The protagonists Neo, Max and Krish, not only, tilt the pendulum in favour of humanism but, neutralize nefarious designs hatched by the fallen posthumans like Kaal and his Manvars of the Krish 3, Agent Smith, Agent Brown and Agent Jones of the Matrix and ruthless robots policing the earth in the Elysium.

4. Conclusion

Science and technology has made a tremendous impact on every genre of post-modernist era. Be it poetry, drama, fiction or for that matter prose, every genre falls under its sway. However, it is said to have wielded colossal influence over the genre of fiction. The present paper traced, unveiled and scrutinized various dimensions of a posthuman fiction, such as, its definitional contours, history, setting, characterization, premises/themes, difference and stylistics to bear out the fact that post-human fiction contains a techno-centric and a futuristic orientation of humanism. It is techno-centric in a sense that its characters are aliens, mutants, androids, or humanoid robots equipped with futuristic technology, e.g., ray guns, teleportation machines, humanoid computers etc. It is a futuristic orientation of humanism in a sense that its action occurs in futuristic turfs, for example, time travel, wormholes, or faster-than-light travel. Besides it embodies neo-political or neo-social systems, e.g., dystopia, post-scarcity, or a post-apocalyptic situation where an organized society has collapsed. Post-human characters possess paranormal abilities such as mind control, telepathy, telekinesis, and teleportation. Thus, posthuman fiction - which is often celebrated as extension of the body, mechanically, computationally and biologically - ultimately establishes techno-centric and futuristic orientation of humanism. Nonetheless, one cannot afford to fiddle with the fact that posthumanity often comes up in relation to the idea of the *cyborg*. A cyborg is simply any biological organism that has an interdependent relationship with a mechanical system or machine. The boundary between biology and technology, between the “natural” and the artificial, is of key concern to celebrants or critics of posthumanism. So, while celebrating mankind’s triumphs over the limits of nature, a caution must be exercised so that core humanistic values are not eclipsed away and anti-humanistic values are egged on.

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