

Posthumanism: An Introduction
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Lecture 10

Lec 10 : Critical Posthumanism. Genealogies - 4: Feminist Epistemologies, Ethics & Posthumanism

This is Pramod Nair of the Department of English at the University of Hyderabad, and in the last couple of sessions, we have been exploring the critical genealogies that have been instrumental in shaping post-humanist thought in specific ways. Today, we shall be exploring feminist epistemologies, ethics informed by feminism, and the links between these two, or the influence of these two upon post-humanism. Several of these we have already touched upon in passing, some in little detail and some in greater detail, over the last few sessions, and you will see intersections and overlaps across, say, the critique of liberal humanism and the critical race theory approaches to traditional humanist quote-unquote values and what humanism proposes in turn.

So today, as I said, we turn to feminist approaches to posthumanism or what we can think of as feminist posthumanities, a term that people like Rosi Braidotti, Cecilia Åsberg, and others have popularized over the last few years. Feminist approaches to posthumanism call for a re-evaluation of several different kinds of relationships. What do we mean by this? They want, as in the feminist approaches to posthumanism and feminist posthumanities in Cecilia Åsberg, Rosi Braidotti, and others, to rethink the relationship between

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Feminist approaches to posthumanism (which we can call feminist posthumanities) call for a rethinking of the relationships between

- political animals (humans) and the other-than and more-than-human kind,
- bodies,
- technologies and
- environments

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political animals, that is, the human, and the other-than or more-than-human. The relationship between political creatures like humans and the other-than or more-than-human. What is the relationship between them? We will recall that in the previous session, we discussed the ideological stance or prejudice, if you want to be more particular and perhaps not really polite, called speciesism.

Humanity sets itself much higher than other animals. So, you have a hierarchy of life forms where humanity comes at the top and all others are way lower. And speciesism is what enables humans to say, given the fact that we are superior, given the fact that we are better, we have the right to dominate the lower-level or lower forms of life. And speciesism is something that feminist epistemologists and feminist posthumanism are also worried about because they note the fact that this hierarchy enables exploitation.

Feminist posthumanities also call for a rethinking of the relationship between different kinds of bodies. Male versus female, human versus non-human, normal bodies versus the non-normal, sub-normal, or abnormal bodies. Bodies with prostheses, aging bodies, bodies with various different kinds of disabilities, but we'll come to disability in a separate unit altogether. So, what is the relationship between different kinds of bodies? Think, for example, of the prejudice in favor of fair-skinned people, of a certain kind of body mass index, slim figures in feminine bodies, female bodies, musculature of a certain kind in male bodies or sporting bodies, etc.

So, what is the relationship between these? How have norms about these bodies emerged? And what do those norms produce as consequences for those who don't fit the norm? Feminists or feminist posthumanities are also interested in the relationship between different kinds of technologies. So, for example, what kind of value do we place on intellectual activity and technologies?

Say, coding and computer science or nuclear technology and other forms. Finally, they are also interested in the relationships between different environments. So home as an environment, as an ecosystem, versus, say, the office, the school, professions, which means, say, nursing as a profession or doing science as a profession. Or if you want to become a zookeeper, what does that mean?

So what are the different environments? But that is one way of thinking about it. But we are also interested in different ecosystems and different environments where, for example, forms of life are, as I said several times before, and I would like to reiterate, hierarchically placed. Who is in charge of that kind of environment? What are the systems of governance for environments like that?

And of course, the problem we face now is the climate crisis and climate change. What kinds of environments are left to us? Are they available to us? What kinds of environments are available to other forms of life? What have we done to retain, heal, and sustain forms of environments that make it possible for different forms of life to have a fairly moderate we cannot say equal, but acceptable level of living?

So we're interested in those kinds of environments as well. And feminist ecocriticism, as you know, is very high on the rhetoric of pollution and things like that. So feminist

critiques begin by rejecting the Eurocentric and the normative humanist ideal of the man. feminist post-humanities, feminist critiques, feminist epistemologies begin with this, what is the notion of this thing called man, this entity called man? And just to revisit a point we have made before, who is included in the category of man and who is excluded from it?

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Feminist critiques rejected the Eurocentric and normative humanist ideal of 'Man' and feminist posthumanities begins from this point.

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What are the normative conditions under which some people become acceptable in this category of man and what are the conditions under which people are excluded. And we have mentioned this in passing on several occasions in the past that, for example, in a state moving towards genocide, you begin to see signs where some forms of life are deemed to be unacceptable. The example would be the Holocaust or any genocidal state, including Sarajevo, Rwanda and others, where people of a specific ethnic group, people of a specific community are deemed to be less than human. So for the feminists and for feminist legal scholars, feminist philosophers, the category of man was never universal.

The category of man was an exclusionary mode of organizing the world. So feminist post-humanities de-center the man. The man here is written preferably with an uppercase M. So feminists argue that the idea that humans are exceptional must end and that man as in the male at the center of humanity must also cease to be at the center. What do we mean by this?

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Feminist posthumanities dethrone the 'Man' at the centre.
Human exceptionalism, in other words, needs to end.

Hence their endorsement of:

- Plant studies
- Disability studies
- Animal studies

as a part of Humanities

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Remember, we spoke about this that speciesism is about seeing ourselves as positioned at a higher level and that we are exceptional. We are the only rational creatures. We are the only creatures who are modern, who have language, etc., etc. Human exceptionalism, as this is called, needs to end, and so does the idea that man is at the center. Therefore, you see that the

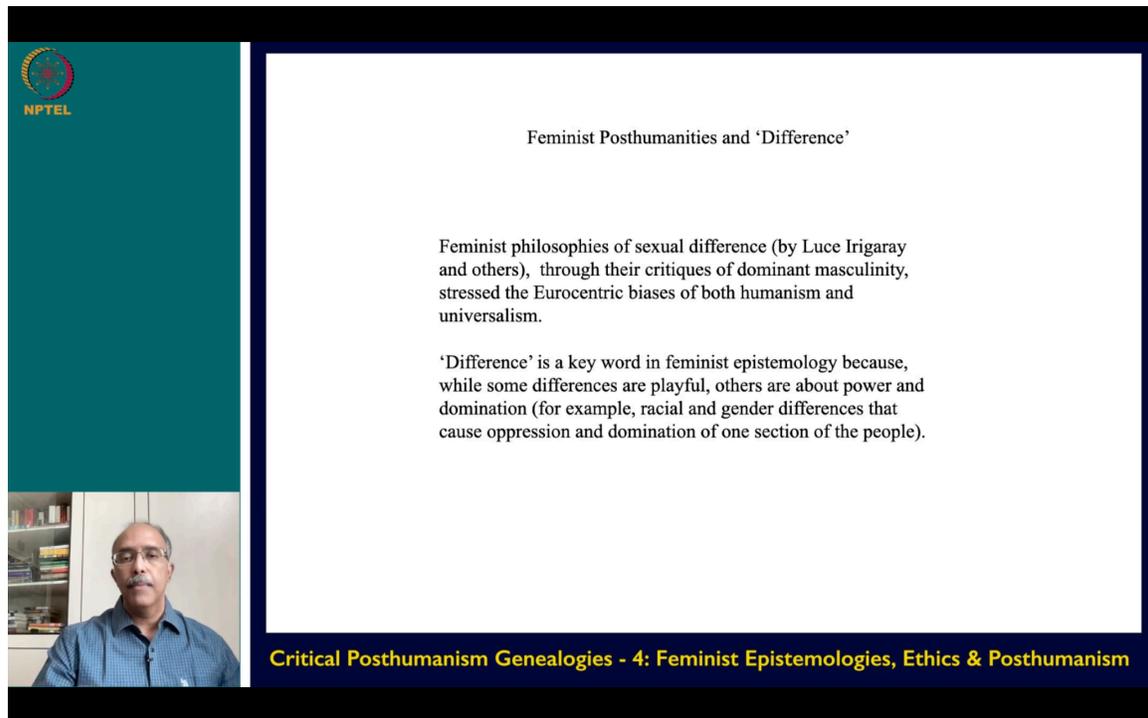
feminist epistemological critics, the feminist legal scholars, the feminist philosophers, and feminist critics, of course, pay particular attention to domains that have emerged, say, in the last 20 years that would be animal studies, about which we have already spoken, but also plant studies and disability studies. And they see these as part of the humanities. So, the humanities cannot be about human exceptionalism. They cannot be about centering just the man. The humanities need to have a much larger mandate to look at different forms of life, to look at different configurations of life.

Remember, in the previous session, we spoke about the fact that all forms of life have anima. They are animated by a vital force. So the question is: if plants and animals, if humans and lizards have the same vital force, then how can we organize them in a hierarchical system? That these are superior, the others are inferior. Why is it that we have this hierarchy of life forms when all life forms have the same animating force?

So, for the feminist epistemological critics, feminist philosophers, de-centering the human, rejecting human universalism and human exceptionalism, followed by de-centering the man as the center, are all interrelated. You first need to make sure that the human is not exceptional, the human is not the center of the world, and man is not at the center of the world. So there is an insistence that we also look at, say, plants and animals, animal life forms, and disabled bodies as part of how we come to an understanding of the form of life itself.

So, feminist post-humanities and the idea of difference. Initiated first by post-structuralist thinkers adapting the work of Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, and others, critics like Luce Irigaray, and there is a tradition from Luce Irigaray to Rosi Braidotti and others. They all looked at each other as well. So feminist philosophies of sexual difference have critiqued dominant masculinity and have said that humanism and its so-called universalism are both built around

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Feminist Posthumanities and 'Difference'

Feminist philosophies of sexual difference (by Luce Irigaray and others), through their critiques of dominant masculinity, stressed the Eurocentric biases of both humanism and universalism.

'Difference' is a key word in feminist epistemology because, while some differences are playful, others are about power and domination (for example, racial and gender differences that cause oppression and domination of one section of the people).

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Eurocentric ideas, that the white race and the white male are at the center. So for people working with feminist ideas of sexual difference, like Luce Irigaray and others that I mentioned, the idea of the universal human is itself a Eurocentric one. It centers the European white male as the origin of all, shall we say, social order and forms of thinking. Difference is therefore a key word in feminist epistemology because difference is about power. For example, racial difference or gender difference produces unequal wages, unequal human rights, unequal everything.

So the question of difference is actually for feminist critics. A question of power. Who has power? How do they acquire power? How do they retain power?

These become important precisely because difference determines life. When we say you are different, what do we mean by this? For feminists, The very idea of difference is crucial because it is structured around binary opposites. Those who have power, those who don't.

So that's the first move. The second one, more relevant to post-human studies and post-humanist thought, is the feminist interest in techno-science. Basically, technology and science are put together. So, techno-science. Feminist critiques

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Feminist Posthumanities and Technoscience

Feminist critiques see technoscience as reinforcing historical gender inequalities and power relations, and as encoding an instrumental view of women, animals/nonhuman and the planet itself.

Feminist critiques opt for relationality and sharing, mutuality and co-becoming over the hierarchic and unequal (gendered) structures of technoscience and capitalism.

Feminist philosophies of technology reject the view that devices designed, constructed, and used by humans are neutral and have no influence on human behaviour. (Edwards and Palermos)

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See technoscience as simply one more field, one more instrument of perpetuating gender inequality. Which is to say that feminist critics of technology and critics of technoscience note that gender inequalities are exacerbated and amplified via technology and science. They further see technoscience as possessing and determined by an instrumental view of women. And if you recall what we said about speciesism, for feminists, the instrumental view of women extends to plants, animals, and the earth too.

So there is a continuum of oppression according to feminist critiques of technoscience that Technoscience, by instrumentalizing women, also instrumentalized plants, animals, and the earth itself. Women, plants, animals, and the earth are all subordinated to man. Essentially, feminist critiques of technoscience are speaking about power, and how science or technoscience, to be more accurate encodes, reinforces, amplifies, and in some cases even magnifies power relations across genders, but also across species.

So for feminist critiques, especially in the writings after Rossi, Bredalchi, Catherine Hales, and others names I mentioned before, like Cecilia Asberg and others they argue that we need to think of relationality and sharing, mutuality and co-becoming, the phrase that becomes very popular with Donna Haraway and others, about how we become with, or as Haraway puts it, 'becoming with.' We become with other creatures. We don't become on our own. We become with other creatures.

So, feminist argue in favor of relationality and sharing, mutuality and co-becoming, rather than hierarchies. So they are opting for a horizontal set of connections. The network, when we spoke about cybernetics, we mentioned the fact that consciousness is also now, because we are embodied and embedded. The point I'm trying to emphasize is, for feminist critics of technoscience,

Relationality and network and horizontal connections are a response to and an overturning of power relations which are top-down, which are hierarchic and vertical. So they are suggesting that perhaps it's time to think in terms of relationalities, not in terms of verticals, of unequal and unfair power structures. Feminist philosophers also note the fact that technologies are not neutral. Technologies are created out of a particular worldview, out of a sense that this is what we want to do and the technology is invented so that it enables you to do what you want to do. In other words, what we are looking at here is the fact that eco-science

serves a specific instrumental purpose for humans. And this purpose is about dealing with or governing other creatures. So, technology has its influence, has its role to play in human behavior, how human behavior works. Next is feminist post-humanities and situated knowledge. A term which became very popular again after the writings of Donna Haraway, arguably one of the most significant influences on post-humanist thought in the last decade and a half or so.

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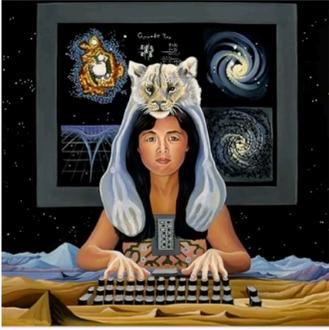
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Feminist Posthumanities and 'Situated Knowledges'

In the place of universalizing and uneven modes of speaking of 'Man' or knowledge, feminist posthumanism draws on 'situated knowledges' (Haraway)

Haraway and later critics argued that knowledge is localized and embedded in specific contexts. The claims to universalism, neutrality and objectivity (even in science) in fact *hides* what is local: male, heterosexual and white.

By hiding these specifics, science undertakes a 'god trick' (Haraway) of universalization, hiding the power relations within it.



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Haraway makes the point that instead of a universalizing idea of knowledge, we need to think in terms of situated knowledge. What do we mean by this? Haraway and later

critics noted that knowledge is not a bird's-eye or a god trick. The god trick term comes from Haraway, where we look down and see everything. Knowledge is localized.

It's embedded in specific contexts. All claims to neutrality, objectivity, universalism, actually evade the fact that science has been governed by policies, devices, and funding that are predominantly male, heterosexual, and white. So, We don't see science as determined by power or power relations to be more accurate, power relations.

Haraway says knowledge is produced out of this structure, but actually, knowledge has to be focused on in terms of its local origins. What has now come to be called situated knowledge. So instead of knowledge coming from the top, there has to be knowledge that comes from local places, from small pockets. And an awareness that this knowledge comes out of a system of power relations. It's not random, generated, and universal.

Next, feminist post-humanities and transhumanism. Transhumanism, as you know, is the belief that we can overcome the limitations of the human form by using technology. But feminist post-humanities oppose transhumanism because it simply says we can transcend the body through science. But it retains the mind-body binary.

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The body has to be reinvented, reinvigorated, and improved. But it retains the mind-body binary. But the mind, as you know from the lesson on cognition and consciousness studies and their influence on posthumanism, is that Cognition and consciousness emerge; they are emergent conditions that come from our being embedded, from being part of a network, from being linked to others. So feminist post-humanities note the fact

that the transcendence of the body means you are simply valorizing a certain kind of body, a certain attitude toward the body.

By rejecting the masculine, Eurocentric idea that the mind is superior and we spoke about this at length when discussing cognition and consciousness, feminist post-humanities highlights matter and materialism. That bodily matter, embodiment, our connections with other bodies are central. You can't wish it away. It does not approve of the idea of perfectibility that the human body can go on being improved and perfected.

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Feminist Posthumanities and Environmentalist Thought

In feminist posthumanities founded on an ethical approach to difference and diversity, ecological thought is a key element:

- ecofeminist and environmental movements and politics, in particular, assert the need for both bio- and anthropodiversity, where species, gender and racial differences are accounted for and this diversity is seen as integral to the very category of the human,
- 'Man' as a universal category has been at the centre of violence, its instrument, directed at other genders, races and species,
- 'Man's' focus on extraction of resources (bioprospecting), utilization/exploitation of other races/species has resulted in large-scale dispossession of other life forms and races but also the overuse of the planet.

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Finally, we will look at feminist post-humanities and environmental thought. Ecofeminism is something all of you are perhaps familiar with in some way or another. But feminist post-humanities focuses on, as we have already seen, an ethical approach to difference. And here, for them, ecological thought is central. We need both anthropo- and biodiversity.

Species, gender, and racial differences have to be accounted for. There is no question of universalizing these. Man as a universal category can no longer be universal. Placed at the center of things. And they argue that it is because of man and please note man with an uppercase M man's focus on seeking more resources, utilizing resources, and exploiting other species and races has resulted in the overuse and abuse of the planet.

So for feminists within the post-humanities, Part of the reason, part of the cause for the state of the earth now is because man has been in charge, man has had power. So man has pursued the over-utilization of natural resources like oil, but it has also meant that man has controlled and exploited other forms of life, including women. Including other ethnic

racism. And please recall we spoke in our contextualization of this in terms of plantations and slavery as well.

So for feminists, it's important to recognize that men being in charge has resulted in a certain degradation of the earth. Men being in charge has also resulted in degradation, control, and oppression of other ethnic groups, women, plants, and animals. So, if you take just one example, Astrid Neimanis's famous feminist posthumanism argument notes the fact that human bodies are 70% water. So is the planet. And therefore, Neimanis proposes what she calls the hydrocommons, which links all forms of life.

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And she says, let's think in terms of the relationality defined via liquids. We link corporeal materiality, which is our body, to the environment. And she says, the neglect of this relationality, the neglect of this embedding, is the reason for our planetary crisis. What does she mean by this? What she is saying is, we don't recognize the material nature of our bodies.

Because we have always, following the European Enlightenment, focused on the brain. That the mind is superior. The mind is the governing principle. The mind has power. The mind should be in control.

But we are who we are because of our bodies. And even our consciousness, even our mind, emerges from being embedded and embodied in bodies. And if our bodies are 70% water, like the planets, then there is a relationality of materials. So this is just one

example of this, and this is Astrid Neimanis' brilliant work on the hydrocommons. What the feminist environmentalists are speaking of within the school of post-humanism is that (Refer slide Time 26:00)



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We have neglected the material in favor of something else. And we have given the charge of this material to man. And the result is this. So, as you can see, feminist epistemology, feminist philosophy, and feminist ecocriticism are central to rethinking the relationship of humans with the world. Thank you.