

## Posthumanism: An Introduction

Professor Pramod K. Nayar

Department of English

The University of Hyderabad

Lecture 11

### Lec 11 : Critical Posthumanism. Genealogies - 5: Disability Studies

So, as we continue exploring the various contexts and critical genealogies behind post-humanism, we now turn to disability studies, which has also been a very important literary and theoretical antecedent from which critical posthumanism has drawn and assimilated, shall we say, into its own thinking about normative forms, the state of the human body, the question and concern with relatedness, etc. Disability studies, as we know, is interested in the construction of normalcy, in what we mean by the normal human body and the construction of norms of difference, where some bodies are categorized as deviant, disabled, and therefore segregated from 'normal.' It's interested in the classificatory system through which a certain kind of racism is founded on the body's abilities,

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Disability studies traces the construction of norms of difference through which physical bodies are classified as deviant, disabled and dependent and therefore separate from 'normal' humans - foregrounding the classificatory regimes through which a form of racism is founded on the body's abilities, functions and shape.

'Disability' is not a uniform category: it involves a range of systems of classification, from the medical to the government's definitions.

Perceptions are mediated by public discourses and popular culture of the 'different' or disabled body.

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its form, how it looks, its functions, and its shape. Why is this important? Racism, as we know, was primarily to do with what Frantz Fanon famously called epidermalization by the color of the skin. People were excluded or included in the racial category depending on the color of their skin. Speciesism, as we have seen, hinges on systems of

classification whereby the human is placed at the top of the order, the other animals at the lower end of the scale, and those who occupy the top of the order have every right to instrumentalize, commodify, and exploit those at the lower levels.

We are here talking about systems of classification: what counts as human, what does not, what can be included in the category of the human, what is excluded from it. In fashion, disability studies is interested in classifications and classificatory systems that say this is the normal body and that is not, that this is part of the larger category 'human' and this is not. Systems of classification are not neutral. They are based on a set of values. They are based on a system of thinking which then determines what's included and what's not.

These are, of course, also politically motivated. They have political consequences, as we have recorded and spoken of several times in the last few sessions that when women are not classified as human or when Jews have not been classified as human, there have been political consequences for their exclusion. And this is why disability studies is interested in the category of the normal body. It is based on what the body's ability is like, what its function is, and what its shape and form are. Disability by itself is not a uniform category, as we know.

It involves a range of classification systems, from the medical to what the government proposes it should be classified as. And you will know that there are differences in classification. The kinds of disability and the degrees of disability vary. So you will have benchmark disability, for instance, which has a certain statistical requirement to demonstrate that this much means you have benchmark disability. How do these evolve?

Who invents them? For disability studies, this introduction of categories like benchmark disability. The quantification of disability is a very important social and political process. Because the people in power are the ones who make those decisions. It's the people in power who determine who is in and who is not.

So for disability studies, the modes of classification, the forms of authority that determine the classification, are crucial. There is, of course, also the fact that Perceptions of the body of a body which is labeled different, deviant, or disabled are determined by popular culture. Public discourses. So when we have instructions that this particular seat on the bus or the train is reserved for the disabled, when we have jokes about people with specific forms of difficulty, when we have public discourses expressing

what disability can mean and what the disabled body experiences, then our perceptions of it are determined by these. So it's not quite that oh, there is the filmic representation of this, or there is the public discourse in the newspaper about it, and that it's just fine. No. It's important to recognize that Our perception of it, our perceptions of the disabled body are shaped by public discourses, images about the disabled, about the difference.

Humans, as we know, have constantly introduced boundaries between the human and the non-human, between the living and the non-living. For example, monsters. Depicted as things that are beyond the human. Think of representations of what used to be called the madmen, or freaks, or mutants, even the very poor. These are outside the rubric of the human.

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Humans have constantly constructed boundaries between the human and non-human, living and non-living, segregating these categories. There are numerous such categories

Monsters, beggars, madmen, freaks, mutants, animals and the differently abled have all been culturally represented as the radical, evil, repulsive Other to the human - they exist on the other side of the border

There has always been a distinction between the 'normal' human and the 'deviant' or ab-normal human.

An impaired body is reduced to its impairment: impairment is the individual's primary identity. All social roles are determined by this view of the individual as a 'disabled' individual and nothing more...



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And they have all been represented, culturally speaking, in popular culture and public discourse as radical, as evil, as repulsive sometimes deserving of sympathy, sometimes deserving of our fear. These have existed, in other words, on the other side of the human border. So the humans are of this kind, and then there are the monsters, the mad, and, as we know, Foucault's work on madness and civilization, his work on medicine, has been constantly interested in probing the systems of classification through which the mad become a category of the human or the deviant becomes a category of the human. This means, very simply, that

There are political consequences. There are social consequences of this. And when you say, 'Oh, these are mad people,' or 'These are sick people,' or 'These are freaks,' those cultural representations are crucial because they create a distinction between the normal human and the deviant, or the subnormal, or the abnormal human. And we are told we should be afraid of the abnormal. So the monster,

We should be scared of the madman because, after all, the madman can be dangerous. We can feel, or we can be provoked to feel, sympathy for the animal or the disabled person. My use of the term 'we can be made to feel' is central. Cultural representations, as Sander Gilman noted in his early work on representations of disease, are crucial because they not only reflect a social reality they not only reflect a legal system which classified some people as normal and some as wrong they also determine the social reality, which is to say that they draw upon the social reality (as cultural representations draw upon the social reality), but they also determine it.

Very often, as we know, an impaired or disabled body is defined by its impairment. Impairment becomes the individual's primary identity, shall we say, that all social views of it, all social discussions of it are determined by oh, the person with a limp; oh, the person with a certain kind of disability. That person is disabled. The disability is the person. There is no more or no less than the condition of disability itself, than the condition of the impaired body itself.

Nothing else really matters. Nothing else really counts. Disability studies reject the medical idea of disability. Because for disability studies scholars, the medical sense of disability emphasizes the limitations on physical activity, physical function, and physical efficiency. For disability studies theorists,

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Disability studies rejects the purely medical sense of disability for its emphasis on limitations on physical activity and efficiency.

The subject-body is no more the 'damaged' or partial human. Disability is the unresponsive environment in which this subject-body finds it impossible to work or live to the full extent of its needs and aspirations.

Traditional humanist views of the disabled body

- ignore the mutual dependency of all human beings in which even self-care is contingent upon social structures, inter-human relations and environs in which one can take care of the self,
- construct the impaired body as dependent upon the state or organizations because, it is believed, the functional limitations of this body prevent it from fully caring for the self.

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the subject body is not just a damaged or partial human. Disability is the environment in which such a body finds it impossible to work. So it's not that the body is damaged, that the body is partial. It is that the body is embedded in a context which doesn't allow it to act, which doesn't allow it to function in certain efficient or expected ways. Remember what we have already said before: that cognition and consciousness are emergent conditions.

They emerge from our embodied nature that we have a body in a state of embodiment embedded in a system. Because we are part of a system. Because we are part of an environment. So whatever consciousness we possess arises in our mind because the body interacts with the environment. And you will remember our extensive discussion of the feedback loop, which takes information from the outside into the body.

It processes it and then produces something. In exactly the same way, the disabled body is a particular kind of body placed in an environment where it is unable to function. So disability arises as a result of the body being unable to function in a non-responsive environment. It is also an emergent condition the impairment, the damage, or breakage of the body cannot function because the environment does not permit it.

So for disability theorists, you cannot just call it a medical condition. It has a certain social angle to it. Traditional humanist views of the disabled body ignore the fact that there is a mutual dependency among all human beings. How we care for ourselves depends on social structures and our interactions with others.

That is our embedded nature. We are embedded in a system. in an environment, in a network that allows us to function in a certain way. Which means to say that we are actually dependent upon the environment for us to function. But traditional humanist views of the body do not consider this.

They also, as in the traditional humanists also, construct the impaired body as dependent upon the state. because it is believed that the functional limitation of the body, the very structure of the body, prevents it from caring for itself. Let's think about it in slightly different ways in terms of technology because that's where our interest in the intersection of disability and posthumanism comes from. And arguably one of the most significant works on the subject, *Situations in the Bibliography*, for you to take a perhaps closer look at, is a very detailed study of this intersection.

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Bodies working in conjunction with tools and devices are not always 'impaired'. Instead bodies augment themselves through technological devices into and with which they are, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century more or less consistently connected/embedded. Thus, it is not that there is a body and then there is the prosthesis, even for 'normal' bodies. Bodies are bodies+machines where the body evolves in conjunction with assorted tools. All 'natural' and 'normal' bodies are always bodies+machines. This means we need to see bodies as networked, hybrids or congeries in which the subjectivity of the individual is constituted through and within the network, or the connection s,/he has with machines and tools. 'Ability' for the 'normal' body is the consequence not of innate features of the body but of the normalized negotiations the body has with tools. Networks are in place for certain kinds of bodies to tap into and connect with - and this is what enables these bodies. In other words, disability studies shows how the 'able' body is one that has had a different kind of relation and evolution with socially constructed and facilitated networks and tools: ability is not immanent to the body.

*The disabled body is one for which no networks exist.*

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Now, bodies work along with tools, with devices, with gadgets. But are our Bodies always impaired? They are not, right? Bodies augment themselves through technological devices.

It could be my glasses. Which is also a device that helps me see better. Otherwise, for example, when I look into the screen, I can't see as clearly as I need to, so my glasses help. I wear a watch to tell me the time. I carry a pen to write.

I'm using a mic to record. Does it mean that I am impaired in this? Yes, I have an impairment in terms of my eyesight. But what I'm actually doing is augmenting my ability, my functionality through the device. That is, in the late 20th and 21st century, bodies are more or less consistently connected with devices, embedded in networks of devices.

So it's not like there is a body and then there is a process. Bodies have for a very long time been bodies plus machines. Where the body co-evolves in conjunction with machines. And remember, this is a crucial post-humanist insight that it's not like technology follows the human. No.

The technological device is what we humans have co-evolved with. And our body has been the first technological device. the use of the opposable thumb, the making of tools to go alongside it. We have co-evolved with technology. So it's not like there is the body plus the machine.

So-called natural and normal bodies are themselves bodies plus machines or bodies machines integrated. This means we need to see, we need to understand that bodies are networked. They are hybrids. The subjectivity of the individual, the identity of the individual is constituted through that network or the connection that we make, the body makes with machines and tools. Ability for the normal body is not the consequence of just the way body shape or the body's functionality, but how we have normalized a certain kind of relationship with devices that we have standardized networks of devices into which we have placed the bodies.

This could be simple things like, I said, the glasses that I wear, the door handles which you open. You evolve with them. Which means our normal functioning itself is the result of our being embedded in networks of devices. The difference is, for the disabled body, for the impaired body, for the body with a slightly different morphological structure, functional structure, such networks don't exist.

There are no networks for how and from which the impaired body can be placed, networked with and function. So this is an important understanding. Ability is not immanent to the body. Ability is the conjunction of the body with a network of devices and technologies. For the disabled body, for the impaired body, there is no such network.

So, suppose we see persons who have prostheses as cyborgs, where there is a merger of the body and technology. If we assume that all embodiment is complex, and all embodiment means the merger of bodies with technology, as the post-humanists argue, then the disabled body's merger with prosthesis is one more example of it. So if the quote-unquote normal body is also the result of the merger of the body with technology,

That is what the person with the crutch or the prosthetic foot or the blades on the feet. Remember Blade Runner, the athlete.

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Suppose we see persons with prostheses as cyborgs where there is a merger of the fleshly body and technology?

If we assume all embodiment is complex, involving the merger of bodies with technology, as posthumanists argue, then the disabled body's merger with prosthesis is also one more instance of a complex embodiment.

Disability studies critiques normative bodily models even as it argues for creative models of embodiment, just as posthumanism does.

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I am quote unquote normal with this. We have normalized the merger of the body with the technology, with the device. And we are saying this is an able body. So why is it different for the impaired body that uses a process, which uses an attachment of some kind? It's one more example of a complex embodiment, which means to say there is no embodiment which is not complex.

Our 'quote-unquote' normal bodies are also complexly embodied because they're embedded in a network of devices and processes. Disability studies critiques normative bodily models and asks that we recognize complex and creative models of embodiment, exactly as posthumanism does. Let's turn to some specific components now of disability studies and how it has helped us move into post-humanist thought or its intersections with post-humanist thought. Disability limitations within codes and transhumanism. Disabled bodies have always been those considered to be limited or to possess limitations.

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Disability, 'Limitations', Transhumanism

Disabled bodies have always been those considered to have 'limitations'.

Transhumanists too seek an 'overcoming' of the limitations of the human body/biology/form.



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Now, transhumanists, as we know, seek to overcome the limitations of the human body and form by claiming that we can evolve higher than what we are, better than how we are, through technology. Disability studies point out that subjects of different kinds and the 'normal' are exclusionary categories, and they deny different forms of the body. We have a certain sense of a normal body, and others are excluded. For disability studies, there is a wide range of bodies.

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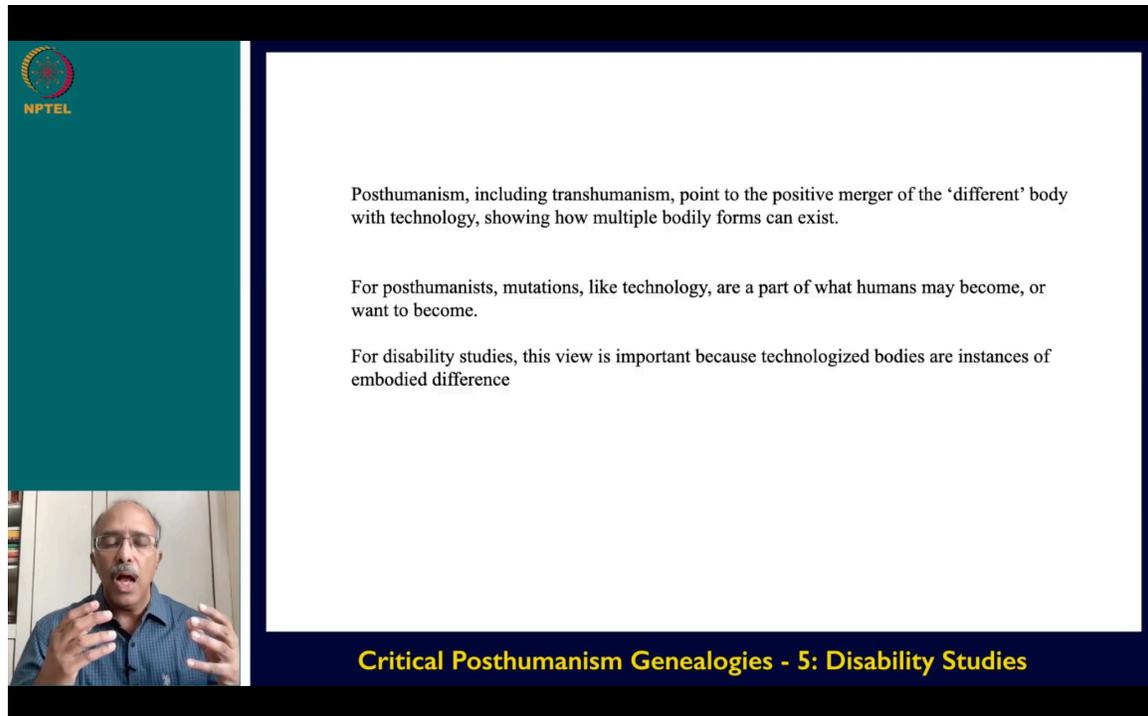
Disability studies points to the nonunitary subject, where subjects are of different kinds and the 'normal' is an exclusionary category that denies different forms of bodies.

Posthumanism's emphasis on nonunitary subjects shows how humans have co-become with technology and other lifeforms, and therefore no *body* is autonomous and self-contained.

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There are different forms of functioning bodies. The disabled is one kind of body. Now, this means that the subject is not a unitary subject. Post-humanism also believes that if we have co-evolved with technology and other life forms, nobody is autonomous. Post-humanism, including transhumanism, points to the positive merger of the different body with technology and shows how multiple bodily forms exist.

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Posthumanism, including transhumanism, point to the positive merger of the 'different' body with technology, showing how multiple bodily forms can exist.

For posthumanists, mutations, like technology, are a part of what humans may become, or want to become.

For disability studies, this view is important because technologized bodies are instances of embodied difference

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There is a range of bodies. There is not one normal standard body. For post-humanists, mutations or technology are part of what humans can become. We might evolve in some ways. We might become a different kind, a differently shaped human body.

How do we know? How do we know the path of evolution? Will we remain this way? So, for disability studies, this view is very important because technologized bodies are an instance of embodied difference. What is posthuman disability studies now?

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Posthuman Disability Studies

- unpacks and troubles dominant notions of what it means to be human;
- celebrates the disruptive potential of disability to trouble these dominant notions;
- acknowledges that being recognized as a regular normal human being is desirable, especially for those people who have been denied access to the category of the human;
- recognizes disability's intersectional relationship with other identities that have been considered less than human (associated with class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age);
- claims to develop theory, research, art and activism that push at the boundaries of what it means to be human and disabled;
- keeps in mind the pernicious and stifling impacts of ableism, which we define as a discriminatory processes that idealize a narrow version of humanness and reject more diverse forms of humanity;
- seeks to promote transdisciplinary forms of empirical and theoretical enquiry that breaks disciplinary orthodoxies, dominances and boundaries;
- foregrounds dis/ability as the complex for interrogating oppression and furthering a posthuman politics of affirmation.

('DisHuman studies', Dan Goodley et al)

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Post-human disability studies unsettles dominant notions of what it means to be human. It celebrates the disruptive potential of different bodies or disabled bodies that challenge such dominant notions. Basically, it says, 'Oh, what you think of as normal, right?' Well, here is a different kind of body. It acknowledges that to be recognized as a normal human being is, of course, socially desirable.

And that the disabled body has never been part of that. It's always seen as a freak, a mutant, a monster. But disability also intersects with several other forms of the body that have been deemed to be less than human. People of a lower class, people of a different gender, of a different sexual orientation, of a different race, even of a different age, have been seen as less than human. So the post-human disability study says this is also a different body.

The black body was seen as different and lower, on par with the animal, in racist systems. Women have been seen as a lower form of life. So is the disabled body. Disability studies, also in post-human terms, looks at how ableism, like speciesism, is the attempt to normalize a certain normative functioning system of the body, that there is a definition and range of abilities, and the rest is deemed to be unacceptable or lower than human. So it's a much narrower definition.

It foregrounds, as in posthuman disability studies, as a method of interrogating various forms of oppression and instead seeks a post-human affirmation that this also is a kind of body. This also is a kind of different body, and bodily differences must be accepted. So posthumanism intersects with disability studies in conclusion. Post-humanism intersects with disability studies, which seeks to address the ordinary, the everyday, the routine worlds in which such bodies are located. It examines the ways in which bodies co-become with technology.

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Posthumanism intersecting with disability studies needs to address

- the everyday and the ordinary rather than bright, glittering future worlds
- the different ways in which bodies live with technology, particularly in the Global South and its local specifics
- the cultural and popular imaginaries around different bodies, technological embodiment

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including but not restricted to people of different races, especially in the post-colonial context. And how local conditions determine how bodies live with technology. It's very interesting—the cultural and popular imaginations and imaginaries around different bodies. So the whole idea is that social and cultural categories that include and exclude, which are founded on certain ways of looking at the normal and the not normal or the abnormal, are crucial. And by focusing on complex embodiment, posthumanism draws upon disability studies, which also notes the fact that embodiment and embedding

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The genuine promise in posthumanist critical thinking here, whether evident in finding value in technological development or rethinking social and cultural categories that outline inclusion and agency, can be judged to be efficacious through the ways in which it impacts upon the lives of those with disabilities.

Stuart Murray



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with technology and within technology determine what's normal or not. The disabled body, which makes use of prostheses and other devices, is also embedded and embodied in particular networks. So, posthumanism has much to draw upon and has drawn upon disability studies, pointing to the fact that bodies are relational and that identities are

intersectional. It's not that there is an autonomous human form which attaches a device here. We co-evolve with it.

So the disability studies discourse also points to the fact that identity is relational and identity is based on networks that either disempower us or empower us. Thank you.