

**Posthumanism: An Introduction**

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**Lecture 17**

**Lec 17 : Biopolitics and Biocapitalism in Contemporary Literature**

This is Pramod Nair of the Department of English at the University of Hyderabad. And today we will be looking at the theme of biocapitalism and biopolitics in contemporary literature. Themes that have invoked, worked with questions of biology, questions of biological material and matter being rendered into commodities, the way in which, say, the state or corporate organizations capitalize upon bodies, the way in which, say, incarceration, extermination, or monitoring hinges upon or is an attempt to manage not just individuals but entire populations.

These, as we have discussed in previous sessions, are contingent upon specific theories of race, ethnicity, and the way in which power is designed to operate upon large numbers of people. In other words, biopolitics and biocapitalism, which are two sides of the same coin, rely upon structures of power, processes of power that impinge upon bodies. Corporeal matter is rendered into commodities, into spectacles, into subject positions or victims, and a certain kind of power is asserted over them. So in the 18th century, for instance, the poor were put away into poorhouses where they were made to labor.

And poorhouses were, effectively speaking, a form of the prison system. They were put away because they should not be seen in public. They did not want the poor to be begging on the streets of the metropolis. And the poorhouses were a typical feature of England, if you know a little bit of your cultural history. And in all cases, the debate was divided into two.

Are poor houses good or bad? Is it morally or ethically right to transform these bodies, who are by virtue of being destitute and poor, starving, and are now being made to work? If you want to think of an extreme example of such biopolitics, you do know about the extermination and concentration camps, which began in the late 19th century in the Boer War, and of course, which Nazi Germany transformed into a very effective tool. So that's by way of background. So biopolitics gestures at technologies such as biotech,

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Critical posthumanism is alert to biological citizenship in which the material body is produced in and imbricated with technoscience and capitalist processes of exploitation of biopower.

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But it also shows how biotech is at the service of institutions that work on populations, on individuals, on the community. So biopolitics is the merger of biotechnology with institutionalized forms of power, and together they work upon individuals, populations, and communities. In most cases, like I said a few minutes ago, the targeting of populations for biopolitical purposes often rides on racialized discourse, often depending upon racial rhetoric. Now, biopolitics can be about

various things. It could be about organ trafficking; it could be about the surrogate booms, It could even be about the surveillance, medical surveillance of healthy or sick people. And we do know, after we have read our Foucault on medicine and madness, that the surveillance of the sick, the deviant, or what were then called the mentally ill became part of a normalized procedure of placing segments of the population into asylums and medical hospitals.

Biopolitics also involves legislative measures around quarantining specific ethnic groups. It is about the documentation of health and sickness. And we all know from the COVID era how this has been done. You have to download apps. You have to report your health status when you, for example, are traveling.

You have to sign declaration forms. You have, on your own, to take more insurance coverage and things like that. So, viability is a part of our lives now. It's more or less a normal system now. Then, of course, biopolitics also involves the category called biological citizenship, built around injury, injured bodies, and traumatized bodies.

Biopolitical themes can be organized into two sub-themes. One is precarious corporeality. In which the body or bodies are rendered into commodities for various purposes. This could be for translation, reproduction, and various other reasons. So, the biopolitical body

or the bio politicized body is one in which a group of the population has been rendered into

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Biotech and biocapitalism can be studied under three heads

- Biocapitalism and 'lively' matter
- The 'judicialization of life'
- Science, capitalism and kinship



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Precarious bodies where their corporeality has been rendered into something that could be under threat, could be injured, or is being injurable, and so on. The second is the judicialization of life, where bodies are subject to judicial processes. We see biopolitics playing out most in science fiction, and dystopian fiction. In dystopian fiction, for example, technology and the body come together in what you can think of as precarious posthumanism.

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Biocapitalism and 'lively' matter

Biocapitalism is the transformation of human bodies, from tissues to organs, into resources, commodities and disposable material.

Biocapitalism is the merger of late 20<sup>th</sup> century biotech with capitalism, and is a key aspect of contemporary *biopolitics* (defined as the state and/or corporate control over and management of populations and biological bodies).

It treats human bodies as suitable for and open to extraction, exactly like land, by companies.

It also means creating bodies and biological matter – such as animals for greater meat yield, clones as servants – exclusively for this purpose.

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[Biocapitalism is the] 'convergence of the life sciences with systems and regimes of capital ... the ways in which the life sciences are increasingly incorporated into market regimes' (Sunder Rajan)

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Technology is at the service of the state or the corporation, and it's directed at controlling human futures. In Margaret Atwood who will be one of my key authors here, along with Octavia Butler and Kazuo Ishiguro in Margaret Atwood, principally her classic work now, *The Handmaid's Tale*, this vision of the control of human futures is gendered. Because technology and the state come together to focus on and control the reproduction of women. It produces a certain reproductive enslavement of women to fulfill the needs of the state because the state's population is not increasing, as most people in the particular country are sterile. In Octavia Butler, there is, of course, an emphasis on reproduction, as we know from the *Xenogenesis Trilogy*, *Fledgling*, and several other texts.

But with a slight difference. The human race itself becomes the mate for the Oankali, the alien race. In Kazuo Ishiguro, more specifically his novel *Never Let Me Go*, the clones are created to serve the human race. You could think in terms of continuity here how biopolitics is the production of slaves. And you would be absolutely right.

The women are slaves in Atwood; the humans are reproductive slaves for the Onkari in Octavia Butler, and the clones are slaves in Ishiguro. So, in all cases, there is a slavery theme built around the question of biopolitics. Which means, effectively, we are revisiting all the traditions of slavery, where Black bodies were made into slaves to work on plantations, experienced immense hardship, were sold, tortured, beaten, killed, and exploited in one way for the larger good of the white race and the European world. A version of this is the biopolitical paradigm in what we can think of as neo-slavery novels.

Although that is a separate genre, and we can think of James Jones' *'The Known World'* and several other texts, that's not what I want to explore now. But what I'm trying to emphasize is that biopolitics has a very close link with the historical process of slavery,

and both biopolitics and slavery have to do with racism and a racialized economy, which we see happening in various forms. It could be about reproduction, as in the case of Butler, where the entire human race becomes very productive. Then, of course, there are the clones.

Let's move to the first thing: precarious corporeality. One of the two themes that I would like to explore today. In Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale,' an early 1980s text, the woman's anatomy, the woman's reproductive ability, and the woman's sexuality are all subject to control by the state, and whatever the state decides to do. The handmaids' Our bodies are controlled by the social order.

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In biocapitalism it is not just individuals but entire species, their identities and their biological material - whether human or nonhuman - are subject to control and appropriation by corporations, industrial laboratories and the state.

Biotech companies own and patent biological materials, from DNA to entire bodies.

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They are handed over to families. The impregnation process, which for various reasons is called a ceremony. They are kept in good health. They are periodically examined for medical conditions. But it's referred to as a business transaction.

This is the bio-economy of the future in Atwood's vision. And this bioeconomy depends upon, is predicated upon the woman's body and its reproductive function. It also means that the thus far private space of sex and reproduction has shifted into the public realm. And it's a matter for state regulation. The state's control

over the means of reproduction, over the fetus, and of course eventually the infant born, is total. There are other texts which play on a similar theme. The lives of Offred, the principal character through whose eyes we see the events in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, and the clones in *Never Let Me Go*, are essentially reduced to their organs. That

means their bodies and the functions of their bodies are determined by the state, and they are their bodies.

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Biocapitalism produces a biosurveillance, where organs, tissues, offspring, thoughts, and memories are all databased by the state or corporations, the second, capitalism, is the power held over life, and its constituents, from tissues to memories again, by corporate houses working with state laws and bioscience.

'What neoliberalism wants to capitalize is not simply the public sphere and its institutions, but more pertinently the life of the nation, social and biological reproduction as a national reserve and foundational value of the welfare state'.

Melinda Cooper

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There is no question of emotional or intellectual role or growth for these people. They are just bodies. This is why people refer to the clones in Ishiguro's novel as living cadavers. Because their sole purpose in life is to donate their organs so humans with terminal conditions can live and survive. Their bodies are alienated from their cells because they have no real agential control over them.

They are biological citizens but never full citizens because they don't own their bodies. This is corporeal precarity or precarious corporeality because they cannot assert control over the future of their bodies or what they want to do with them. Critics have noted this, and Linda Mercedius argues that the women in *The Handmaid's Tale* are merely reproductive slaves. No more, no less.

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There is now a clear link between intellectual property, capitalism, and the “ownership” of new and some old forms of life. The development of hybrid varieties—GMO, genetically modified organisms—has resulted in new regimes of knowledge-gathering, heavy financial investment, and tighter intellectual property laws.

Patent disputes over plants, seeds and other biological materials, so common to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, are an index of this link between

‘The mapping and sequencing of rice genomes provides an interesting set of cases for exploring the development of global governance through intellectual- property rights. The recent effort to map and sequence the rice genome not only illustrates the production of new scientific information, but also the simultaneous constitution of new intellectual- property regimes that do not (always) reflect current legal notions of property rights’.

Elta Smith

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The state needs labor, so it has these women. The state needs its citizenship to grow, and its citizens must reproduce, hence the women. These women... And the clones in *Never Let Me Go* are what Kaushik Sundararajan, Melinda Cooper, and others refer to as live capital. The official state investment in cloning technology, reparative technology, and the nurture of clones through surrogate wombs will eventually yield a return.

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When large corporations and their projects (some executed, like the HGP, in collaboration with the military), step into the arena of the life sciences, then biocapitalism determines the fate of the species. This is a specific feature of the neoliberal economy.



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In other words, the humans must be kept alive, the women must be kept alive, and kept alive in very good conditions. They must be given proper food, they must be protected, they should be subject to medical tests, so that eventually the human, that's the woman, will reproduce or donate their bodies and organs as happens in the case of *Never Let Me Go*. In other words, Biology is capital, which is why life capital, organic capital. In the case of all these rather disturbing and horrific visions, the humans will be kept alive only when we have slave bodies.

These could be the clowns in *Never Let Me Go*. These could be the handmaids in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Which means to say that humanity will continue only if it returns to the practices of slavery. And this is the biopolitical paradigm that we see emerging in most of these novels. Effectively, it means that the novelists envisage

the future of humanity depends upon different forms of ethnic and racial politics and both racial and ethnic politics that impinge, adversely of course, upon bodies. So the clones are created so that they can donate their organs. The women are kept in that way because they can become surrogate wombs. life capital, biological capital, or biology as capital. Biocapitalism actually transforms human bodies.

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The 'judicialization of life'

The health regimen that mandates the taking of pills and medication, the monitoring of health parameters (and their integration with health services where health records are databased), the forced quarantine procedures in contemporary culture, driven by, say, insurance policies or state-ordered measures constitutes a 'judicialization of life' (Nayar).

Carried far enough, with memories of eugenics of the modern era, the reproduction of *life* itself becomes corporatized and judicialized.

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No matter how the human body originates. It could be in the uterus, as in the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, or it could be in a laboratory, and they are pay-sensible. Which means to say, whether through a natural or artificial process that produces bodies, it doesn't really matter because the bodies are patentable. Bodies serve as organ warehouses, cadavers, life sources, or pure uteruses. They are just that and no more.

So the effect of biocapitalism is to equate naturally or artificially occurring bodies, whether, like I said, they are clones, artificial beings, or produced in the womb. That's one crucial effect. Another effect of biocapitalism is the alienation of humans from their own organs. So we know that the clones must donate their organs and that they will have no control over this; they cannot say, 'I will not donate my organs.'

Like in the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, there is no way they can say, 'I would like to keep my child.' They were designed, constructed, and classified as handmaidens precisely because they are pure wombs. And those wombs, which will produce the babies... are owned by the state, so they have no control over either their womb and its functions, and of course, they have no control over the product, which is the child. This is biopolitics playing out to the fullest possible extent. They are only carriers; they are only warehouses. The woman's body is not agential; it is violated, manipulated, and managed. And there's nothing you can do.

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Science, Capitalism and Kinship

Human Genome Project and the Human Genome Diversity Project (NatGeo, IBM, and others) and their search for origins, relations, and “genetic citizenship” constitute a new dimension to our understanding of human identity, belonging and kinship (Heath et al).

The National Geographic’s Genographic Project (launched 2005)

Stated aim: to employ ‘advanced DNA analysis’ to ‘help answer fundamental questions about where humans originated and how we came to populate the Earth’.

The Project locates genetic ancestry within geography.

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This is the precarity of the life form itself. Because there is no agency, there's no integrity, which is its own. You can only think in terms of biopolitical power here because the... The clones or the handmaids have no agency. They are subjects of the state.

They are subjects of the corporations, of the technology that determines their lives are designed for this. Nobody is asking any questions. So if you know, there are these throwaway lines saying, 'That's what we are meant for, aren't we?' The clones are discussing their futures. 'That's what we are meant for.'

Yeah, they are designed for it. Just as we have discussed this in passing when we spoke about cyborg soldiers and cyborg bodies we design soldiers' bodies, cyborgs, with a particular aim in mind. And they are not asked whether this is fine. So when we create the clone, when we create the handmaid though the handmaid is a human being, though the clone is a version of the human being they are not given rights. There are no human rights for them.

They are told, this is the purpose for which you have been created. You will fulfill those purposes. You might die in the process. That's fine. They're not asking you whether you want to do this or not.

And that's the crucial part, right? So it's important to keep in mind that human lives are rendered precarious. Our second point is the judicialization of life. In the case of Atwood's *The MaddAddam Trilogy*, Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl*, and several other novels of the early 21st century, everything is subject to property laws, even human bodies. All biological matter becomes the property of the state or any corporation that the state may hand the materials over to, which is what Kaushik Sunder Rajan refers to as life capital.

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The Genographic Project assumes relatedness through genetic unity in the face of historically organized social imaginaries of difference and cultural hierarchies.

Kinship based on genetic lines therefore might be a mode of undermining the tribe's self-definitions and self-recognition.

[The Genographic Project] 'implies that an individual's ancestry is defined through the very small portion of genetic material that is directly inherited, maternally and paternally' (Catherine Nash)



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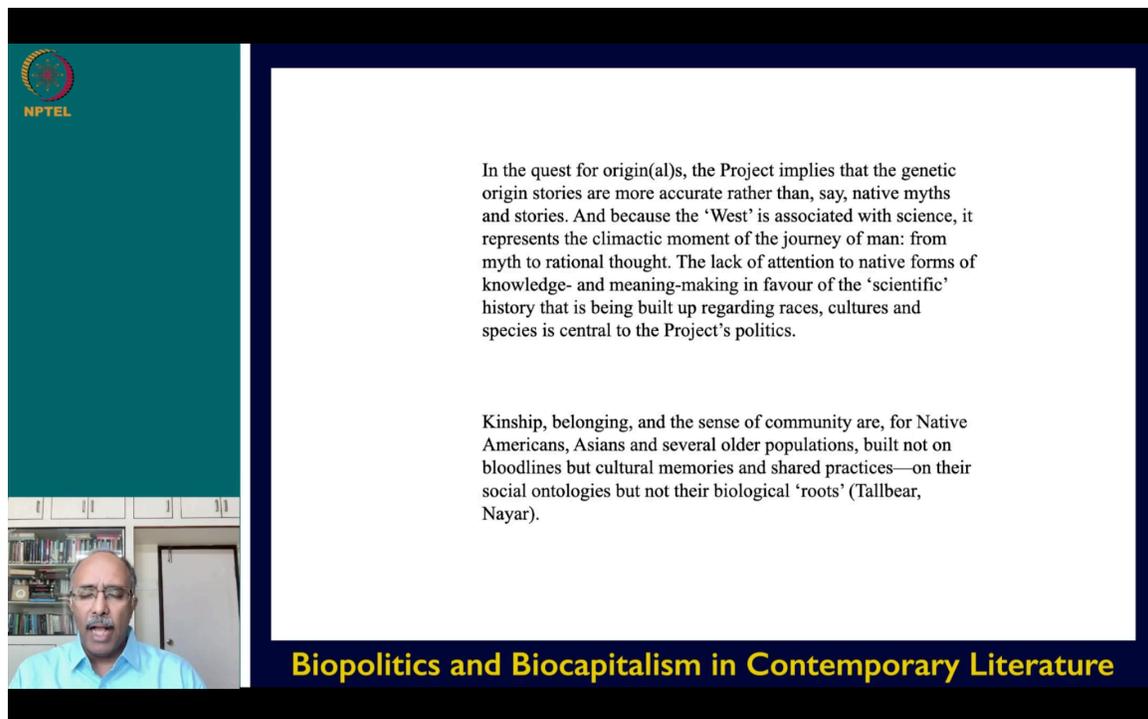
So, the reproduction of this life capital is corporatized and judicialized. As in, there are legal norms that now normalize the exploitation of biological matter. There are laws passed that hand over the power of control, the management of these bodies, to corporations. And you know, when we look at the *MaddAddam Trilogy* and *The Windup Girl*, part of Bacigalupi's novel, we see that we're now designing life forms. So you have

forms of life like chickens or vegetables that have been genetically engineered to have more, shall we say, meat on them, more nutrition in them, and so on and so forth.

Which means to say, biological capital can generate profits. Biological material is capitalism's key focus area now. It generates capital, it generates profits, it's about power. Which means, effectively, biological matter is also subject to questions of judicial control, corporate control, and state control.

The new intellectual property regimes we see in the MaddAddam trilogy or The Windup Girl, the new intellectual property regime is itself an example of the judicialization of life. There's no such thing as nature. Nature has been appropriated; natural products, people, animals, plants, even bacteria, have been appropriated and modified, and this produces a certain crisis in some of the eco-dystopian novels.

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In the quest for origin(al)s, the Project implies that the genetic origin stories are more accurate rather than, say, native myths and stories. And because the 'West' is associated with science, it represents the climactic moment of the journey of man: from myth to rational thought. The lack of attention to native forms of knowledge- and meaning-making in favour of the 'scientific' history that is being built up regarding races, cultures and species is central to the Project's politics.

Kinship, belonging, and the sense of community are, for Native Americans, Asians and several older populations, built not on bloodlines but cultural memories and shared practices—on their social ontologies but not their biological 'roots' (Tallbear, Nayar).

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So the judicialization of life leads to a massive ecological crisis in the case of the eco-dystopian novels, but that's not really the focus of what I want to say. So, in conclusion, we note that corporeality is rendered precarious, it's subject to judicial laws, so life itself becomes judicialized. When we use the term life capital, like Kaushik Sunder Rajan and several others writing on bio-capital, we discover that bodies, tissue, organs, whatever it might be, are all subject to laws, to profits, to control. But it also means that some subjects,

Are classified as commodities based on their racial or ethnic identity. So you have several layers. One, biology itself is subject to biocapitalism and bioeconomic exploitation. But the classification of which bodies are valuable, which biological matter is more valuable,

is both gendered and racialized. It's gendered, as we have seen in the case of Margaret Atwood and *The Handmaid's Tale*.

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It's based on the judicialization of life and technology, as we know in the case of *Never Let Me Go*. Which means to say, effectively, life is a source of revenue. Life has to be managed, has to be manipulated. Thank you.