

**Posthumanism: An Introduction**  
**Professor Pramod K. Nayar**  
**Department of English**  
**The University of Hyderabad**  
**Lecture 02**  
**Lec 02: Contexts II: Humanism and its Critiques**

As we continue our exploration of post-humanism, let us recap a little bit. We have already looked at the context in which post-humanism emerges as a critical school, and we were talking about in the first lesson of this particular week the role that certain technologies have played and how that set of technologies, from artificial intelligence to cloning and genetic engineering, have been influential in re-conceptualizing and rethinking our notions of the human. We also came up with a provisional definition of the post-human as one who co-becomes with not only other life forms but also with the non-living. We also made the argument that, for post-humanists, our sense of being

our sense of who we are can also have the potential of being modified when, say, our physiological, anatomical, but also moral and emotional abilities are modified, so that, theoretically speaking, we might produce better humans with more empathy and altruistic features, who are more compassionate and less prone to violence. Much of critical post-humanist thought actually originates in the critique of conventional or traditional humanism. And this is the intellectual background from which post-humanism emerged in the 1990s.

The human is traditionally taken as a self-aware subject, conscious of the fact of being. This self-aware subject is marked by traditional thinking, intelligence, someone who's capable of defining a plot of action depending on (quote-unquote) 'his' and we will have reasons to put 'his' within quotes. So, defining a plot of action depending on his needs, desires, and wishes and abilities, and executes this plot.

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What is Humanism?

The human is traditionally taken to be a self-aware subject marked by rational thinking/intelligence, who is capable of defining a plot of action depending on 'his' needs, desires and wishes, and executes this plot, and thus produces history.

The human has traditionally been treated as *male* and *universal*.

It is always treated in the singular as *the* human and as a set of features or conditions: rationality authority, autonomy and agency.

*Humanism posits this human as the centre of the world.*



**Contexts II: Humanism and its Critiques**

So not only does the traditional version of the human have a set of desires and ambitions, but it also has the ability to put those into practice, which is what I mean by saying it executes this plot. In this process, humans produce history. This is one of the key intellectual, cultural developments of the modern world. And what I just described is the traditional view of the human as defined by humanism as a school of thought, as a philosophical position, and as an ideology.

The human is the self-aware subject, a rational subject who plans a plot of action for his life, emphasizing on the 'his' based on needs, desires, abilities, and potential, and then sets out to execute this plot. The point is, the human has traditionally been assumed as male and universal. This traditional humanist position, humanist value, or valorization of the male as the universal human is the first point at which traditional humanism is critiqued.

So our second set of contexts for the study of the rise of post-humanism as a critical school is the criticism, the critique of traditional humanism and the humanistic values. As I just said, the traditional human has been assumed to be male and universal. This male and universal human is treated as being singular. It is human. We always refer to it as the human.

We don't say humans. We say the human. And this human has a set of features. What are those features? rationality, autonomy, and agency.

Rationality because since the Enlightenment, that is roughly the last decades, the last half of the 18th century in Europe, this rationality, which is supposedly the trademark of the human, positions the human above all other life forms because rational thinking reason with a capital R is believed to be the characteristic the virtue the quality of only the human form then there is autonomy so there are three key features rationality autonomy and agency rationality like i just said is about the human assumed to be, believed to be a creature of reason with a capital R and whose entire life is driven by reason and is therefore something that sets the human above other life forms because the other life forms are not as rational as if they are rational at all. The second, like I said, is autonomy. By autonomy, we mean the human who is self-contained, not dependent, has a body, has a physiological mechanism or set of mechanisms, has a rational mind, which gives him, emphasis again on him, autonomy, which also means the human is separated from the world, being autonomous.

Finally, the human has agency. Remember the early definition of humanism and the human. The human is marked as taken to be as a self-aware subject who can plan a plot, define a plot of action and eventually execute this plot. The ability to execute his desires, his ambitions is agency. Agency is the ability to put into practice what has hitherto been just a set of dreams, ideals, ambitions and desires.

Humanism posits and theorizes this human as the center of the world, that this creature who is rational, who has autonomy and who possesses agency, is the center of the world. This is a troubling philosophical position for posthumanism. And the critiques of such a

position, such a humanism, question three principal features. Is the human really the center of the universe?

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Critiques of humanism question:

- the notion of the human as the center of the universe;
- the so-called 'autonomous' nature of the human mind;
- the agency of the individual that supposedly proceeds from the autonomy

The universal human is constructed

- through a process of exclusion whereby some of these ethnic and religious groups or races are categorized as less-than-human,
- By ranking the human above the animal, and ensuring that the animal (like all 'nature') exists to serve the male/human.

Further, traditional Eurocentric humanism

- historically positioned homosexuals, madmen, slaves, Jews, women as being outside the category of the human, just as it has treated animal life as less important than that of the human,
- was always linked to Europe's 'imperial destinies' of exclusion, exploitation and conquest.

**Contexts II: Humanism and its Critiques**



Is the so-called autonomous human mind really autonomous? Does the agency to perform tasks and fulfill ambitions and desires really come from this autonomy? So the three principal questions: the notion of the human as the center of the universe is that so? Does the human mind really possess autonomy?

And is the agency of the individual proceeding from this autonomy? The universal human, as the critics suggest, has been constructed by excluding several classes, people, and groups from the category of the human itself. Traditional European humanism excluded Jews, slaves, homosexuals, and women as not quite human. So the universal human, the supposedly human figure that stands for the entire universe of humanity, actually did not include all races, all ethnic groups, and all different identities.

Homosexuals, the mad, the Sikh, the slaves, the Jews, and of course women, were positioned outside the category of the woman. Outside the category of the human. Because it's only by excluding those can you define what the pure human is. So you position the woman, the madman, the Jew, the slave as not human. So how do you define yourself?

You say, I am human because I am not like them. I am human because I am not a woman. I am not a Jew. I am not a slave. Those are treated as less than human.

Then crucially, you rank the human as above the animal. Where animal is the same as nature within quotes and nature like the animal exists only to serve. the male human.

Remember what we said at the earlier lesson that humanism has a certain instrumental view of the world and this is it. You treat the other humans, the quote-unquote less than human, you treat the animal as existing to serve the human who is a male.

The traditional humanisms of European origin were linked to Europe's imperial domination of the world. So there is a very close link between the way in which Europe marched across the world, took continents, governed them, and exterminated the natives—all in the name of something else, which we know is often called the civilizational mission, etc. But the location of humanism is to be seen within the context of imperial rule, imperial domination, because once you reached the colony, you were able to transform the native into workers or slaves by claiming they were not human or not human enough.

That is why humanism has been critiqued. There are very serious and severe problems with how humanism views not just the human, but also those classified as not human, those excluded from the category itself. And there are some very crucial critiques, and we'll look at a couple of them. We will not be covering the entire range of anti-humanist thought. Let's take the most powerful of these critiques of humanism, and that would be feminisms. Feminisms and their critiques of humanism more or less argue along three lines.

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### Feminist Critiques of Humanism

These argue that

- Gender identities are not 'natural' because categories and concepts such as 'Masculine man' and 'feminine woman' are acts of naming which construct these identities,
- Therefore, when we view a body as male or female, we are *seeing* it from within a set of discourses that have determined a set of natures to be male or female – we simply assume these are fixed and natural categories instead of socially constructed,
- The relations between the genders are based on power distribution in the social order.

Humanism assumes that 'man' [is] the origin and source of meaning, of action, and of history'.

Catherine Belsey





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## Contexts II: Humanism and its Critiques

Remember what we said: the human is a category constructed by excluding several other people as not quite human. The feminist critics argue that gender identities are not natural because categories such as the masculine man or the feminine woman are acts of social naming. They are social acts that construct those identities, which means when we see a

body as male or female, we are viewing it through a prism, through a mediating mechanism where we already have preconceived notions of what a female or male body ought to be. We already have some idea, already classified in our heads, that a male body will be like this, a female body will be like this.

So there are preconceived notions, preconceived frames. That is what feminists argue: when we see a body as male or female, we are seeing it from within this framework. And we assume they are fixed or natural categories. They are not. They are not natural categories.

They have been made to look natural. They have been made to be seen as natural, though they are not. It is only by creating the category of the non-human that the human emerges. Right? It's only by constructing the category of the non-human

homosexuals, Jews, or slaves that you can construct the pure white man as the universal human. So what we are looking at here is a clear creation of binaries, right? Of binaries where some fall on this side, some on the other. For feminists, these are not fixed or natural categories. They are socially constructed categories.

The relationships between the genders are actually based on a certain power distribution. Who has the upper hand? Who has more power? Who is more dominant? The male, obviously, right?

Because the social construction of females as weak or powerless is a way of making people believe that they are weak and powerless. In critical theory parlance, it's called discourse. Discourse is language in operation. And when you construct a frame through which we view these bodies, you will see them as male or female because that is how we are trained to see. That is the lens through which we see.

And that's the crucial part: the lens, the framework. Catherine Belsey argued that in humanism, man is the origin and source of meaning. Man is where it all begins. So, for feminist critiques of humanism, the very idea of identity is not of a solitary, self-contained, autonomous identity. For feminists, identity is multiple, fractured.

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Further

Identity in the feminist critiques of humanism is multiple, fractured, relational, enacted within discourse, and enmeshed in power structures,

It rejects the modern divide of nonhuman and human, nature and culture, instead seeing the nonhuman and human as leading entangled, mutually dependent lives,

It rejects the insistence on rationality/reason alone as the measure of the human,

Rejects the dominance of techno-science, which is rooted in traditional humanism.

Feminist perspectives on posthumanism emphasize

- lived relationality,
- Multitudes
- Multidirectionality (rhizomatic) rather than linearity
- 'natureculture' and
- differential but not disconnected modes of belonging

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More importantly, identity is embedded in power structures. It's not a free-floating thing. It's embedded in power structures, which we can broadly call social relations. So whether it is the greater amount of wage given to the male laborer versus the lesser money given to the female laborer as wage or any of those, We exist in a system of power relations which depend upon but also determine the nature of our perception of genders.

Feminists also have a serious problem with the division of non-human and human or human culture versus nature. The reason is, for many feminists, the non-human and human cannot be separated. They cannot be leading completely autonomous, separate spheres of existence because our lives are entangled. Remember the word I used in the first lesson.

It's a keyword because much of post-humanism uses the term 'entangled.' So we cannot say that, oh, the human is autonomous, coherent, and independent because Humanity has co-evolved with other non-human creatures, and we lead mutually dependent lives. Further, posthumanism rejects that rationality alone is the measure of the human. First, that all humans are rational and rational in the same way, of course, and that rationality marks

the, shall we say, apotheosis, the climactic moment of human evolution. The post-humanists are troubled by this, especially the feminist variety, because are we saying we are creatures only of rational thought? Are we saying that the mind, which is supposedly the seat of reason, is the only important thing, the only important organ in the human form, in the human body? The answer is clearly no. which is not the sole organ in the human body because several other organs exist which take care of what we do.

So we cannot, according to the feminists, insist that rationality is the sole measure of the human. Not the sole measure. It can be one of the measures but it's not the only way of measuring the human. For example, Isn't emotion a part of the human?

All of us know yes. Why do we then give primacy to rationality? Finally, feminist critics reject the dominance of technoscience, which for them brings back capitalism and patriarchy in another way, where the machine and the man, and here it is clearly man, the machine and the man are part of an assemblage, and that assemblage exploits the woman laborer, the woman whatever it might be. In short, technoscience is the merger of patriarchy with capitalism and technology. And for feminists, this is a serious problem.

So to summarize, feminist perspectives on posthumanism emphasize lived relationality, by which I mean that you live because you are related to other life forms, because you are part of other life forms. They emphasize multitudes, not groups. Not solo soul creatures, but the multitudes. They believe in multi-directionality rather than linearity. Life doesn't work like this along a straight line.

It's all tangled up; it all comes from many different directions. Instead of having a binary called nature versus culture, they following the work of Donna Haraway (by 'they,' I mean the feminist critiques) use the term 'natureculture' as one word, indicating they are part of one continuum. And there are differential modes of belonging, They are not similar.

The next critique we are going to look at is critical race studies, which is also connected to several concerns in postcolonialism. Critical race studies note that not only was the black man in the colonial age not a citizen, he was not even deemed to be human. The black woman was just a body for labor and reproduction. So critical race studies note the fact that, quote-unquote, the universal human of European Enlightenment never included the black man or the black woman. Remember what we said: the human is a construct.

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## Critical Race Studies (CRS) and Postcolonialism



CRS notes that

- Not only is the black man in the colonial age not a citizen, he is not even human, and the black woman of course is merely a body for labour and reproduction,
- Biological theories of race enabled the description and treatment of the black races as animals, abhuman – the native is presented in a state of frozen stasis,
- In the age of humanism there is an undeniable link between Enlightenment humanism, racism and capitalist modernity dating back to the early modern period's great slaving voyages, whereby members of particular races or ethnic groups were denied their citizenship, rights and dignity.

He [the colonizer] speaks of the yellow man's reptilian motions, of the stink of the native quarter, of breeding swarms, of foulness, of spawn, of gesticulations

Frantz Fanon.

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Then it notes the fact that biological theories of race, race theory emerged from the late 18th and through the 19th century. It enabled the treatment of the black races as animals, not quite human. In the age of humanism, there is a link, as I already mentioned, between Enlightenment humanism and the rise of colonial empires, of European empires all over the world, which means there is a link between how we viewed the black man, the rise of the slave economy, the plantations, the great colonial expeditions to what they called the new world and the assumption that there is only one universal human, and that human goes out to conquer, to rule, to dominate. So for the critical race theorists, there is a problem with this.

And now, of course, in the age of artificial beings and robots, we have a new set of beings to address. Should we create non-living machines? Following from that, should we create non-human life forms which somehow seem to reproduce, to replicate the master-slave relationship? Should we create artificial beings to take care of us?

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With the making of Artificial Beings and 'robot sapiens' (Robertson), Critical Race Theory has to address questions of the place of the human which is inextricably linked with the place of the nonhuman Other, and this location of the Other within the human social order as members of the family (as seen in Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*) or as robot-servants and carers.

The question for CRS is:

Is the contemporary creation of the nonhuman life forms reproducing the master-slave relation from humanity's history?

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Should we create a new servant class of beings that will take care of us, that will be our servants? Remember, that's how the black race was treated. The blacks, the Negroes, as they were called for a very long time, over centuries, were shipped from Africa to serve on the plantations, to serve the masters who were white Europeans and who had set up plantations, and the working classes, the laborers, would come from the other races. What is their purpose in life? To serve us.

So in the age of artificial beings, and you have texts like *Machines Like Me*, Ian McEwan's novel, or Kazuo Ishiguro's *Clara and the Sun*, and its earlier version not an earlier version, but an earlier novel like *Never Let Me Go* you have to start thinking about whether the non-human, by which we mean non-human animal or non-human robot, Should they be created as our servants? Should they be created as meant to serve us? So, post-humanism argues that the 'human,' in quotes, emerges as a result of the environment. We are a set of possibilities.

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### Posthumanism

- Argues that the human emerges as a result of interaction with the environment. In other words, the human is a set of processes that works in a field of possibilities, a field that includes machines and animals. The idea of the bounded self is no more valid within the posthuman.
- Asks: what is human in the age of biotech, the connected/hybrid organism, the distributed self, but *also in* the age of genocide and human rights violations?
- Studies the expulsions-exclusions of the human especially in an age where (i) particular bodies continue to be consigned to the “outside” (immigrants, queers, women, minorities) and (ii) bodies are “monstrous” in their hybridized cyborg natures
- Calls for a relational view of humans, whose lives are entangled with nonhumans but also with the nonliving



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There is no bounded, limited, autonomous self. There is no sovereign self. Post-humanism asks: What is human in the age of biotech? In the age of genocide. It studies how particular bodies remain placed outside.

Immigrants, women, minorities. Some bodies are monsters. Post-humanism, as you can see, calls for a relational view of humans. We shall see more in subsequent lessons.