

**Posthumanism: An Introduction**  
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**Lecture 22**  
**Lec 22 : Multispecies in Contemporary Literature**

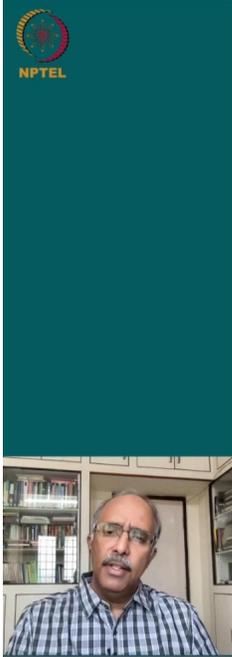
So, we have explored companion species in two sessions now, and we have noted the fact that in practically all life forms, you can see, you can discern a dependence on other life forms. You can see that we become with other life forms, and as we saw in the last session, other bodies, because they are injurable, because they are vulnerable, share vulnerabilities with other life forms. We also spoke of the fact that bodies which exist, which live way outside our so-called industrialized world, also suffer from the same kind of opaque, different kinds of toxic contamination. You cannot imagine how people like the Inuits or the Greenlanders suffer, or why they have so many toxins.

The answer is, as we have seen in our references to Marla Kohn's work, *Silent Snow*, and in the case of others, that the toxins moved from the industries in the United States and Europe into the water, the animals in the water, consume that water, and the people who eat those animals for survival get those toxins. We also noted the fact that environmental injustice and social injustice cannot be separated because in places where there has been a history of, for example, slavery, that kind of racialized and uneven distribution of, say, benefits or harm. Benefits or harm

are persistent even now. So, in our reference to Flowers' book, *Waste*, Sandra Steingraber's *Living Downstream*, we noted the fact that in certain parts of the world and in certain parts of the United States, toxic dumping is done in areas which have a high volume of, say, colored people and larger populations of colored people. There are also places which have histories of slavery. Toxic dumping which happens in the global south, exploitation of resources which take place from the global south, are race-based environmental injustice situations, and here environmental injustice is inseparable from social injustice, right? Having said that, we now move on to looking at literary texts in which multi-species belonging has been documented. In the last, say, 20 years or so, there have been numerous authors who have looked at questions of multi-species belonging, multi-species dependency, and, of course, like we said in the last lesson, multi-species vulnerability. We'll try and cover some of these points in today's talk, right?

We will first look at a small excerpt from Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*. Margaret Atwood's *The MaddAddam Trilogy* is now a modern classic occult text because it addresses all the points that environmentalists have been talking about. This is an excerpt. You can read it on your screen as well. Consider also his work on the earth.

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### Multispecies Belonging

Consider also His workers in the Earth! Without the Earthworms and Nematodes and Ants, and their endless tilling of the soil, without which it would harden into a cement-like mass, extinguishing all Life. Think of the antibiotic properties of the Maggots and of the various Moulds, and of the honey that our Bees make, and also of the Spider's web, so useful in the stopping of bloodflow from a wound. For every ill, God has provided a remedy in His great Medicine Cabinet of Nature! Through the work of the Carrion Beetles and the putrefying Bacteria, our fleshly habitations are broken down, and returned to their elements to enrich the lives of other Creatures.

*People aren't the apex species they think they are. Other creatures—bigger, smaller, slower, faster, older, younger, more powerful—call the shots, make the air, and eat sunlight. Without them, nothing*

Richard Powers, *The Overstory*

Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*

## Multispecies in Contemporary Literature

Without the earthworms and the microorganisms and ants and the endless tilling of the soil, without which it would harden into a cement-like mass, extinguishing our life. Think of the antibiotic properties of the maggots and the various molds and the honey that our bees make, and also the spider's web. So you see the stopping of black flow from the wound. For every ill, God has provided a remedy in this great medicine chest of nature.

Through the work of the carrion beetles and the putrefying bacteria, our fleshly habitations are broken down and returned to their elements to enrich the lives of other creatures. At first glance, this seems too biological and technical, which in one sense is true. But if you think carefully, Atwood is documenting the role of earthworms, maggots, spiders, and bees how these different species make the soil, make the air, make the human body. As she notes in the last section of that particular passage, which is up there for you, it is through the action of putrefying bacteria that

Their bodies are reduced to materials, and those materials then provide the source of further life. And if you recall, in one of the sessions on companion species, I mentioned, via Richard Torres's story, that trees that fall provide sustenance for other life forms as well. So you cannot think of any body, any body, as a stand-alone. And Atwood's passage, which you have just seen here, talks about the fact that the fertility of the soil, its value, depends on worms.

The spider web, the bee, all of these contribute. And what happens, or let's speculate, what would happen if the dead bodies of creatures do not dissolve. What would happen if dead bodies remained that way? The putrefaction, the decomposition of dead bodies, is central to the balance of life on Earth.

If our planet were covered with the dead bodies of creatures no longer with us, there wouldn't be space for the living, right? Which means the dead bodies are broken down. How are the dead bodies broken down?

Putrefaction, as it's called, is a messy process. I mean, we don't like talking about it, although several horror films are made about it. We don't want to address this. The bodies that are putrefy are reduced to their elements. The elements go back into the earth.

And that's where the sustenance for future life emerges. So death actually provides the source of life. Death becomes a means of the generation of life. So the dependency of all creatures on each other is magnified. Parallel to that is the exception, which, of course, is the overstory.

People aren't the apex species you think they are. Other creatures bigger, smaller, faster, older, younger, more powerful call the shots, make the air, and eat sunlight. Without them, nothing. It's a well-established fact that, but for the plants, there would be no life. Right?

We all know what plants do. Remember, plants are dependent on processes such as photosynthesis, which requires the presence of light. Their germination and spread require the presence of wind or water, which transmits their seeds across generations, spaces, etc. They depend on sustenance and nourishment from the soil. And humans think we are the apex species.

Humans believe That we are the crown of creation, right? As it's traditionally called. We're the crown of creation. Whereas, which of us is exceptional?

We definitely are not. There are smaller creatures than us. There are bigger creatures than us. All of those take the primary spot. They may not take the primary spot in the sense that they don't send a spacecraft to the moon, or they have not invented the atom bomb, and, of course, they have not created architectural marvels like the pyramids or the Taj Mahal.

Fair enough. Fair enough. But that does not mean they are lower in the hierarchy. You see, it's humans who decide who comes first, who is at the top of the hierarchy. But as Boris's passage shows, that's a very odd suggestion.

It's a very odd myth because we depend on these other species. We have lived because of them. We have evolved because of them. There are several of them. So when we say apex species, how exactly are we apex?

Because we have computers and buildings. Because we have spacecraft. On what grounds do we see ourselves as apex species? Okay, let's make it more complicated. When we say apex species, does it mean we are more moral and ethical?

I mean, if you are apex, then you should be apex at several levels, right? You should be more intelligent, more hardworking, more compassionate, and more empathetic than others. Are we that? Are humans more compassionate, more understanding, and more empathetic? In comparison with other life forms, remember the battle between humans

and animals as constructed within these stories, myths, criticism, and theory: humans kill for pleasure. They are the only life form that actually does this.

Does that mean we are morally also apex? Clearly not, isn't it? Clearly, we are not the apex creatures in moral and ethical terms. So there are other creatures. And the other creatures keep us going.

They make it possible for us to live. Alexis Smith, in the novel *Morrow Island*, notes the fact that mushrooms grow everywhere for miles. Mau Island is post-Fukushima, and it talks about how, post-Fukushima, the land is so polluted that it has to be revived and regenerated. What helps the regeneration is the mushroom. The mushroom will grow in sufficiently large quantities.

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The mushrooms...go on for miles just under the soil, taking up what's there – vegetation, animals, mineral – breaking it all down, leaving soil the plants can thrive in.  
Alexis Smith, *Morrow Island*

The crabs emerge at dawn and at dusk 'to salvage the rich haul of leaves and other debris left behind by the retreating tide'. They form a 'fantastically large proportion of the system's biomass' and constitute 'the keystone species of the entire ecosystem'. And, as lifeforms that keep 'the mangroves alive by removing their leaves and litter', they enable further life.  
Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*

This is how the trees speak with and care for each other. Their roots tangle together, dozens of trees with dozens more in a web that reaches on forever, and they whisper to each other through their roots. They warn of danger and they share sustenance.  
Charlotte McConaghy, *Once There Were Wolves*

### Multispecies in Contemporary Literature

Make sure that and that's the quote you see on screen they go for miles under the soil, taking up what's there. They break it down; they break it down: vegetation, animals, minerals. And that leaves the soil in which plants can flourish. So think about this. Fukushima: man-made tragedy, natural disaster we will not debate that. We will not go into that particular part of it. Although there is an argument that all natural tragedies, all natural disasters, also have a human component because the natural force has been unleashed due to what humans have done. That, in many ways, natural disasters also have human causal factors somewhere.

That's a different point. I do not want to dwell upon that, but keep that in mind. But Alexis Smith shows that the island's revival, the island's regeneration, is only possible when the mushrooms are allowed to do their work. So you plant the mushrooms; they grow all over the place, they break down the material, and in that sense, rejuvenate the

soil. A similar example can be found in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, where he speaks about the crabs that emerge at dawn.

And what do they do? They salvage the rich haul of leaves and other debris left behind. And life forms that keep the mangroves alive by removing the leaves and the tar. That's how they enable further life. Kush is speaking about them as more or less like scavengers, right?

They're natural scavengers. They remove the detritus, dead leaves, and what we think of as the waste output of various physiological processes. And they break them into small bits. The soil is cleaned up, the water is cleaned up, and you can build something with that there. So, in effect, they ensure that the purity of the soil is maintained.

That's a multi-species dependency. That's multi-species responsibility. Very important to note. So, what we are looking at here is that we have to see the landscape as spaces of cohabitation for multiple species. And we have to see entities such as the forest as one organism because it unites everything into itself: the plant, the leaves, and various parts of the plant, but also the bacterial, microbial, and fungal connections. Then there are the connections with the bees and the birds.

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Apprehending the landscape as spaces of cohabitation of species collectives, to see collectives such as the forest as *one* organism because it unites everything – multiple life forms, processes, output – into itself.

When Powers' Westerford believes that other species than humans *within* the forest have 'call[ed] the shots' by producing the air and the food on which all species depend, she has conflated the individual and the forest, pointing to the inevitable and mutually dependant cohabitation of companion species within it.

Ghosh, McConaghy, Smith point to how species help each other survive.

**Multispecies in Contemporary Literature**

It's one organism. When Richard Powers' character Patricia Rastafari argues that species other than humans have called the sharks that produce the air and the food on which all species depend, she has said that the individual is the forest and vice versa. Amitav Ghosh, Alexis Smith, whom I've cited before, and others point to the fact that species help each other survive. They support each other.

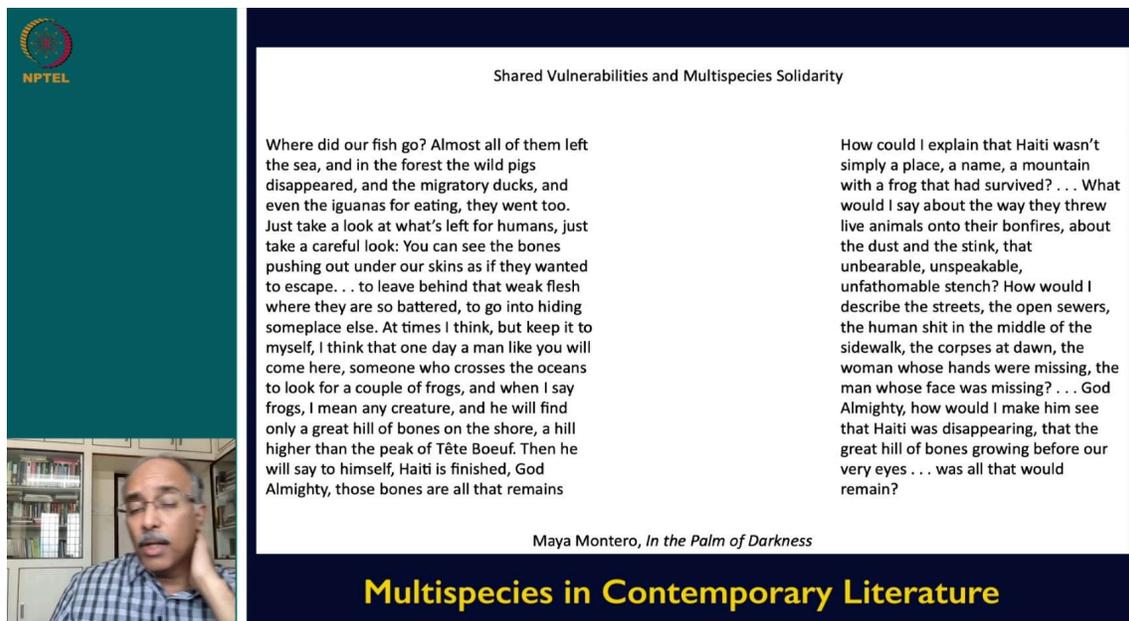
They enable sustenance. They ward off predators. They provide mutual support. So, you can see the landscape as a space of interconnected species, of cohabitation. Of very different kinds of species.

That's multi-species. So, these are novels, and you can see the examples that are put up there, which you can read. Perhaps you would not want to dip into the novels themselves, or else it's a very powerful text, of course. Sorry about the unintended pun. The forest breathes fresh air. It provides the necessary air for other species.

But the forest depends on other things. Worms in the soil, bugs to pollinate, bees, all sorts of things. So, are we the apex species? Highly doubtful, isn't it? It's not at all clear that we are an apex species.

In our last session, we spoke about shared vulnerability, right? That humans share vulnerability with other life forms because all life forms have a body, and the body is injurable, is vulnerable, right? So we noted that. Let's look at a couple of examples where this has been documented. And this is from Maya Montero's 'In the Palm of Darkness,' which is set in Haiti.

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Shared Vulnerabilities and Multispecies Solidarity

Where did our fish go? Almost all of them left the sea, and in the forest the wild pigs disappeared, and the migratory ducks, and even the iguanas for eating, they went too. Just take a look at what's left for humans, just take a careful look: You can see the bones pushing out under our skins as if they wanted to escape. . . to leave behind that weak flesh where they are so battered, to go into hiding someplace else. At times I think, but keep it to myself, I think that one day a man like you will come here, someone who crosses the oceans to look for a couple of frogs, and when I say frogs, I mean any creature, and he will find only a great hill of bones on the shore, a hill higher than the peak of Tête Boeuf. Then he will say to himself, Haiti is finished, God Almighty, those bones are all that remains

How could I explain that Haiti wasn't simply a place, a name, a mountain with a frog that had survived? . . . What would I say about the way they threw live animals onto their bonfires, about the dust and the stink, that unbearable, unspeakable, unfathomable stench? How would I describe the streets, the open sewers, the human shit in the middle of the sidewalk, the corpses at dawn, the woman whose hands were missing, the man whose face was missing? . . . God Almighty, how would I make him see that Haiti was disappearing, that the great hill of bones growing before our very eyes . . . was all that would remain?

Maya Montero, *In the Palm of Darkness*

**Multispecies in Contemporary Literature**

And if you look at the passage for a minute, you will see the fish have disappeared. The wild pigs have disappeared. The migratory ducks have disappeared. Even the iguanas are gone. And she says, 'Just take a look at what's left for humans.'

'Just take a careful look.' You can see the bones pushing out, and there are skins if they want to escape. To leave behind that weak flesh where they are so battered, to go into hiding someplace else. Then I say, 'Frogs, I'm in any creature, and we'll find only a great hill of bones on the shore.' And she says, 'The bones are all that remain.'

Everything else is gone. But what is interesting in Montoro's account is that she links species loss with human species loss. If you look at the second passage up on your screen, it speaks about the corpses at dawn: the man whose hands were missing, the man whose face was missing. And here too, she says Haiti was disappearing from the great hill of bones growing before our very eyes. If you look at the passage on this side, this heap is finished.

God Almighty, those bones are all that remain. Here, again, bones are all that remain. So, is it just a question of frogs dying? Clearly not, isn't it? It's more than one species dying.

Shared vulnerability. Right? Another famous text which talks about this is Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*. And she talks about the fact that the monarch butterflies have changed their seasonal routine because of the change in weather conditions. They're based on changes of

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Dellarobia was floored to think of these fragile creatures owning the span of a continent, from Canada to Mexico, moving back and forth across the wide face of a land. Each one was so little and sure to die, yet they constituted a force, like an ocean tide. She was relieved Bonnie hadn't suggested the butterflies had come straight here from Mexico. The thought of them running up here after the landslide and flood, displaced along with Josefina's family, was a worrisome possibility she did not want to entertain. It would give her family's mountain an air of doom. If these butterflies were refugees of a horrible misfortune, there could be no beauty in them.

Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behaviour*

Michoacán in Mexico heats up and destroys the Monarchs' overwintering habitat as oyamel fir trees, their habitat, are destroyed due to the high temperatures. The migration and flowering patterns of milkweed plants have changed

Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behaviour*

*Climate change has altered flight behavior of both humans and nonhuman, suggests much contemporary literature.*

## Multispecies in Contemporary Literature

All sorts of things which are explained to you, described for you in the second smaller passage except which hasn't been put up on your screen, that the air heats up and the overwintering habitat for a trace died due to high temperatures, and the migration and flowering patterns of the liquid plants have changed. So everything has changed, which is the reason why, interestingly, Marcus Atwood would say, 'Why do you call it climate change? We should call it everything changed.' This is true. It's not just the climate. Everything has changed. So if you look at multi-species, you see how in the previous excerpt from Maya Montero, she speaks about the pigs having disappeared, the birds having disappeared, this species having disappeared, all of them have disappeared, and humans have also disappeared.

Remember what I said: the environmental injustice team cannot be dealing with the social injustice team. In a place where the humans have been massacred, the plants and animal species are also disappearing. So here you see migration and flowering patterns of the nuclear plants have changed. So climate change has altered the flight behavior of both humans and non-humans. And that's something suggested by a lot of entrepreneurs.

So the question is, are we speaking about the extinction of one species, two species, maybe 300 species? For most of the people writing within environmental literature, extinction has to be called co-extinction. Look at the excerpt from Charlotte McConaughey's 'Migrations.' The animals are dying. 'Soon we will be alone here,' says McConaughey.

(Refer slide Time 21:20)



Co-extinction

'It's like the butterflies came here, and we might be next. Like they're a sign of something'  
Barbara Kingsolver, *Flight Behaviour*

'People can cry and fight all they want, but there will come a time when the bamboo will disappear, then the elephants, then us, and all will be as it was before we arrived'  
Tania James, *The Tusk that did the Damage*

'The animals are dying. Soon we will be alone here'  
Charlotte McConaghy, *Migrations*

[The thylacine] shovel[s] her pointed wolf-like face into the bloody remains of a wallaby... [M watches] with the same rapt attention he would devote to a film which told the story of his own life, past and future . . . he holds the animal in his sights, knowing that he is a killer, and that he, too, will be killed.  
Julia Leigh, *The Hunter*

*Multispecies solidarity involves seeing beyond species boundaries. Seeing species extinctions among the nonhuman enables humans to recognize the inevitability of their own demise in several novels.*

**Multispecies in Contemporary Literature**

And Barbara Kingsolver, who says it's like the butterflies came here and we might be next. Like they are a sign of something. Julia plays the hunter, which was a fairly successful Willem Dafoe film. The man shoots the last thylacine. And the thylacine dies.

Note the fact that you've killed me, and the description goes: he holds the animal in his sights, knowing that he is a killer and that he too will be killed. Multi-species solidarity involves seeing not just the death of one species. You have to expand it to look at the non-human as indexing what will happen to us. That once the animals go, what will happen to us? As McConaughey says, the animals are dying; soon we'll all be alone here. If one species disappears, what stops other species from disappearing?

What will happen to the humans as well? And people who have written on this, on extinction films, like Tom Wondouin and Deborah Bird Rose and others, have noted that once species start disappearing, they are sentinels. At some point, you will understand

that this disappearance will become part of the human process as well, that humans will disappear too. So, in novels like *The Overstory*, or Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*, or Shalmukandani's *Migrations*, species such as Douglas firs, monarch butterflies, draw people from all over the world. There are protests, and there are people saying we cannot allow trees to be cut down, and we know about our own Chipko movement.

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In *The Overstory* and *Flight Behavior*, species such as Douglas firs and Monarch butterflies respectively draw people from all parts of the continent to the specific sites of protest and action. That is, the sites of protest, centered around specific species, in these texts, are themselves synecdochic of multispecies alliances

We see a form of interspecies and multiracial solidarities in *Flight Behavior*, with the African American researcher/lepidopterist Ovid Byron making common cause with Dellarobia and becoming instrumental in inspiring her son, Pete, into becoming a scientist.

**Multispecies in Contemporary Literature**

which had people protesting against the removal of trees. Even now, you see those that mean to say that these are examples of multi-species alliances. These are inter-species and multi-racial, and we recognize that we understand what we are doing to the planet means that we are not just putting some species at risk. But at some point, species' death will come to humans as well. Now, I accept that this has a certain utilitarian sense that it is because we want to survive that the world should be preserved. Be that as it may, I do not wish to discuss the politics of environmentalism here. That's the subject for a different kind of course altogether.

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## Multispecies in Contemporary Literature

But in posthumanism, it's important to note this kind of trans-species solidarity, trans-species connections, because we recognize that the death of one species is a harbinger of something else. That at some point, these kinds of species' deaths will lead to the death of the humans as well. Thank you.