Posthumanism: An Introduction
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Lecture 25
Lec 25 : Literary Posthumanisms 1

Hello there, this is Pramod Nair of the Department of English at the University of Hyderabad, and today's session will be the first of several on literary post-humanisms. Many critics now trace a genealogy of post-humanist thought, and this has meant returning to texts, right from European medieval literature to the present, in which they find an abundance of monsters, the alien, the mechanic, and other, shall we say, non-normative humans. To them, this indicates a long-standing interest in other forms of the human, the human's interactions with the environment, and the role of the non-human. Literary texts, from the famous Beowulf to contemporary fiction about clones and genetically modified creatures,

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More critics now trace a genealogy of posthumanist thought. Examining literary texts from the European medieval to the present, they find the presence of monsters, the misshapen, the alien, the machinic and other non-normative humans as indicating an interest in other forms of the human, human's interactions with the environment and the role of the nonhuman.

Literary texts from Beowulf to the contemporary are therefore examined for their interrogation of the boundaries of the human, the hybridization of the human, and the idea of 'Nature' itself.

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are examined for their interrogation of the boundaries of the human and the non-human, the hybridization of the human, the chimerical creatures that emerge as a result of this hybridization, and the prosthetic and other modifications to the human that we now see. But as these critics point out, there has been a long-standing tradition of such creatures where the boundaries of the human have been explored. Campana and Mezzano have noted that Milton, Rabelais, and other European writers were very conscious in rejecting their anthropocentrism, and they celebrated the animal-human hybrid as they celebrated the non-human. They have discovered and unpacked

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Milton, Rabelais and other European writers rejected anthropocentrism, celebrated animal-human hybrids and the nonhuman.

This early expression of posthumanism is also seen in the visual arts, notably Titian's works.

Campana and Maisano

Many authors in the medieval and Early Modern (European) period were also interested in the non-normative human form expressed in themes of

- Disability
- Monstrosity (hybrids)

Eg. Grendel (*Beowulf*)

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this anti-anthropocentric perhaps you can think of as a preliminary post-humanist stance in several traditions of the visual arts. And many authors in the medieval and early modern, that is, the European early modern period, were interested in themes of disability, as in differently formed bodies, and monstrosity, again, differently formed bodies. For example, Grendel in Beowulf. People have noted that the traditional figure of the perfectly proportioned human has been inverted. It humanizes the animal and animalizes the human in paintings like Titian's Flaying of Marsyas, where such a human

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is no longer normative. Then, of course, you have the famous Beowulf, the medieval monster, which, in conjunction with contemporary ideas of disability, seems to show that the non-human and different bodies might represent other ways of inhabiting the world. and that the hero and the monster are equivalent in their, shall we say, more-than-human virility. The hero must be more than human to combat the monster, as people have argued in readings of medieval literature. A.S.

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Monstroso argues that the monster actually serves the cultural function of allowing humans to carve the very notion of civilization from a landscape perceived as corrupt or evil, which Monstroso characterizes as a humanist project. What are we looking at here? We are looking at the fact that literary traditions, particularly in the medieval period of European history, have been interested in calling into question what we understand as the normal human. So hybrids, disabled people and forms prosthetic, chimerical, all sorts of forms that have peopled and populated these texts

were often also texts that critique the idea of the monstrous or the freak. So what we tend to dismiss as abnormal, as deviant, or as weird, freak, etc., are actually forms of social critique that ask how we have constructed the idea of the normal, which is why the monstrous are, quote, 'Are there other ways of inhabiting the world?' What are those ways? These texts point to this particular question or raise this particular question. Stephen Herb Rector and Ivan Kallis, two of the most significant post-humanist thinkers writing now, especially about literature and literary texts, note the fact that Shakespeare's humanism is marked by the unpacking of the figure of the human.

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Shakespeare's humanism and unravelling of the figure of the human was accompanied by an attention to nonhuman others.
Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus

'The villany you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction'
The Merchant of Venice

'The projected inhumanity, the repressed self-hatred returns'
Herbrechter in Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus

In plays like *Pericles* and *Timon of Athens*, Timon and Pericles turn themselves into 'aliens' and 'disappointed' humanists. Their misanthropy unsettles the foundations of humanist sociality
Rainer Emig in Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus

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that Shakespeare's humanism questions the figure of the human. And as Herb Rector and Ivan Callus note, this is accompanied by an attention to the non-human. And there are quotations that they have accepted. 'The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard, but I will better the instruction' from The Merchant of Venice. The projected inhumanity, the repressed, the self-hatred which returns, as Herbert points out in his essay in the same volume.

And Rainer Emig notes that in plays like Pericles and Timon of Athens, Timon and Pericles turn themselves into aliens and disappointed humans, which, according to Rainer Emig, is misanthropic, and this misanthropy unsettles the foundations of humanist sociality, which means to say that in these texts, when Shakespeare is very busy

dismantling the human, Shakespeare is also giving space, giving some credibility to different forms of the human. You might think of it as the ab-human, you might think of it as the inhuman, So the point I wish to emphasize here is that there is a tradition in literature where the human has not been an automatic, automatically accepted form or creature. When the human has very often been questioned, how did the human come into being?

What constitutes the structure, the constitution, the personality of the human has not been automatic. It has come into being through certain historical projects, through certain historical epistemes, the word that Foucault uses. And Foucault will note the fact that the human was invented during the Renaissance, which is to say that we found ways of talking about the human. We had anatomy, we had physiology, we had the law, we had medicine, we had, of course, theology. Then, of course, we have literature.

So, to adapt the title from Harold Bloom, Shakespeare's invention of the human is also a questioning of the human and the figure of the alien, the outsider. This is central, as we know, in Shakespeare's thinking because, at some point, the arrival of the alien, the arrival of something that doesn't fit the category of the human, is a form of interrogation of the social construction of the human. So, Shakespeare blurs the human-non-human boundary. Caliban, as a half-fish, half-human, is a hybrid, right?

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And Prospero and Miranda refuse Caliban's enlistment in the ranks of humanity. Caliban must remain a villain, a poisonous slave , full of malice, and at some point is referred to simply as 'the Thing.' Some of you will know that the making of a creature who is supposed to be like a human in Mary Shelley's novel is always referred to as 'a creature.' No name is given. Is this a human, or is it not?

We do know that humans have names. So, what if you invent something which doesn't have a name, which, for instance, may simply have just a number? So, it's important to understand what Shakespeare is doing here. In the creation of Caliban as a human-animal hybrid, you are asking questions as to how a human is defined, how we characterize the human, and who is included in the category of the human. Then, of course, in Emma Summer Knight's dream, as Karen Graber has pointed out, the artisan performers are the rude mechanicals, where the term 'rude' is not about bad ways of speaking or manner lessness, which is how we interpret it now.

But at that point in time, in Shakespeare's time, 'rude' indicated not only stupidity but also a lack of reasoning. The lack of a rational mind, which, as we know, has always been linked to animals. Bottom in A Midsummer Night's Dream embodies the human-animal distinction, but Bottom also crosses the human-fairy boundary. Then there are other hidden hybrids where characters are touched with the impurities of nature. So,

As Karen Raber puts it, the fragmented or disabled human forms in Shakespeare allow us to imagine the dominance of the Enlightenment body-self dyad. Body self, which is neither natural nor inevitable. What do we mean by this? What we mean is that our sense, our notions, our ideas that there is a body and there is a self, are themselves a social construction.

It's not natural. It is how we have come to define ourselves. And Karen Raber is pointing to that. Karen Raber's essay also looks at Troilus and Cressida, whose Ajax is not merely one brute but is a conglomeration. At one point, Alexander describes him in this way.

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Troilus and Cressida's Ajax is not merely one brute, but many rolled into one: Alexander describes him as 'valiant as the lion, churlish as the bear, slow as the elephant' (1.2.20–1)
Lecherous Saturninus in Titus Andronicus partakes through the various possible echoes of his name not merely of beastly passions and an astrologically based churlishness, but of the specific sexual excesses of the satyr, man-goat hybrid. Beatrice is a harpy in Much Ado, and Ariel received as one in The Tempest.
-- Karen Raber

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Valiant as the lion, churlish as the bear, Slow as the elephant. Think of this description. Valiant as the lion, churlish as the bear, slow as the elephant. What is this Ajax?

Is Ajax one creature or many? Does Ajax have the qualities of one specific species or many? For people reading Shakespeare through this posthumanist lens, as these examples show, Shakespeare is not convinced about a normal or normative human and is probing. What do we mean by this?

Shakespeare is, of course, writing well before the present day, where prostheses, genetic manipulation, and different forms of chimerical hybridization have become easier. Not cheaper, but definitely easier and possible. But Shakespeare is not looking at the kind of creatures we see in AI, transcendence, or any one of those sci-fi films. Shakespeare is calling into question the kind of normative human that existed at this time. And, of course, myths and stories in which there are these hybrid creatures anyway.

Remember, hybrid creatures, chimeras, and shapeshifters have been intrinsic and integral to cultures all over the world. They are not unique to any particular culture. They have different forms. So, in Titus Andronicus, the character Saturninus is, of course, beastly and full of passion but has the specific sexual predilections of the satyr. The man-goat hybrid.

Beatrice is a harpy in Much Ado About Nothing. And Ariel is perceived as a harpy in The Tempest. Now, what are all these images doing? What are all these characterizations doing? All these characterizations show that Shakespeare is probing the boundary between the human and the non-human.

This is important because we cannot think of posthumanism as only a 21st-century invention. People have been concerned with how the human has been defined and what has been excluded from the human. You will remember that in Shakespeare's England, and pretty much all of Europe, at some point, Catholics were excluded from the category of the human.

The Gypsies were excluded from the category of the human. Women were excluded. The working classes were excluded. And of course, the other races, the black and the brown races who were being discovered during that time, were all deemed to be less than human. So it's not
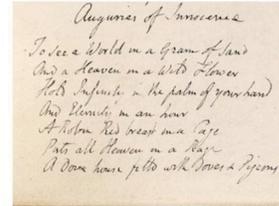
a 20th-century invention; there is a history of post-humanist thought that we should be aware of. We move a few centuries ahead, and this is William Blake in 'Auguries of Innocence.' 'To see a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower, hold infinity in the palm of your hand and eternity in an hour.' It's a well-known verse.

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It's often seen as a precursor to the Romanticism movement in English literature. But these lines also capture the entanglements of space, time, and matter. Right? To see the world in a grain of sand, a heaven in a wild flower, infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour it's a very entangled image. Space, time, and matter are all coming together, and that's a post-humanist vision. But the most famous one, arguably, is Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein,' and you must remember that Frankenstein is the name of the scientist, not the creature.

Actually, it does not have a name, as I mentioned a few minutes ago. Victor Frankenstein is a scientist who creates this life form. So, let's turn quickly now to Frankenstein. Frankenstein is actually interesting because the offspring arrives without a maternal body, without a womb. So, in many ways, it's a radical rupture in the politics of reproduction because it's Victor Frankenstein who gives birth in a manner of speaking, not literally but produces an offspring.

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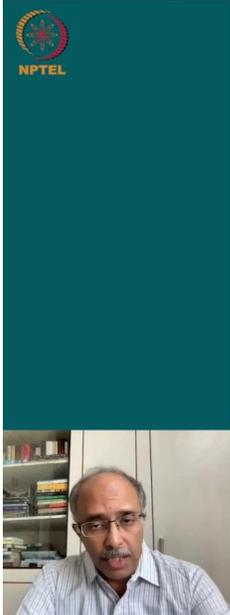
Frankenstein offers a view of male birth (with Victor Frankenstein giving birth, as it were, to his Creation), it enables us to see a posthuman reproduction as separable from the maternal body

The Creature's body itself as a posthuman body has been another fruitful angle, a body that situates itself along the liminal zone between species, and between human and nonhuman communities.

Elizabeth Effinger in *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism*

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And the laboratory where Victor Frankenstein works is actually the womb, right? And this is a post-humanist approach to reproduction because there is no maternal body, right? The creature's body is post-human because it is between species. It is between human and non-human communities. It is made up of several, as we know, parts as in Victor Frankenstein's time put together from various bodies and then creates the creature, right?

So, we do know that. So, the post-human body, in one sense, is an amalgamation. Right? It's a body that situates itself somewhere between species. Neither here nor there.

Both here and there. Is it this or that? So remember that the creature, the monster, as it's called in the novel Mary Shelley's novel, is made up of body parts from dead bodies. Dead bodies. So, in many ways, it's a post-humanist vision where organic matter comes from other organic matter, that at some point there's a cyclical nature of life forms and the chemicals that make life forms.

People like Sandy Burnley have also noted that Alice in Wonderland could qualify as a text about posthumanism. For example, the caterpillar has a particularly unique post-humanist identity, where the human gardeners try to eradicate the species, but it survives. They're misidentified, but the caterpillar survives. For people like Sandy Burnley, who has written a lovely essay on Lewis Carroll's classic text, The point she makes is that you cannot think of Wonderland, as in Lewis Carroll's Wonderland, as a homogeneous place or nation of sympathetic humanoids. I'm quoting here: it demonstrates that humans often have a very

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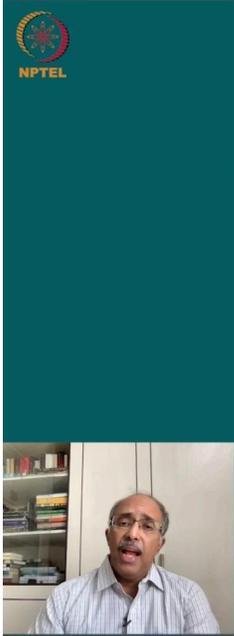
'Wonderland underscores the caterpillar's unique and posthumanist identity, signals gardeners' attempts at eradicating this species because of misidentification, and admonishes readers against transforming Wonderland into a homogenous nation of sympathetic humanoids'

Carroll's text is posthumanist in that it demonstrates 'an inchoate awareness of the human's impact on other species'
Sandy Burnley

Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Imp of the Perverse' is a critique of anthropocentrism through its decentring of human identity in its three essential coordinates—species, space and time
Quan Wang

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dangerous impact on other species. And this we know because we have already looked at environmentalism and its intersections with post-humanism that humans tend to have very adverse, very dangerous effects on other species. But there's also, of course, a post-humanist vision of environmentalism or You might think of it in reverse: environmentalist posthumanism, which calls for attention to other life forms and the interactions between the human and the non-human, be that as it may. Quan Wong, writing on Edgar Allan Poe's The Imp of the Perverse, criticizes anthropocentrism as Poe does because it decenters human identity through its three essential coordinates: species, space, and time.

Then, of course, we come to the 20th century. The 20th century marks the rise of several genres within science fiction that take us right into the heart of posthumanism. You can think of cyberpunk fiction by Philip Dick, Philip K. Dick, and William Gibson.

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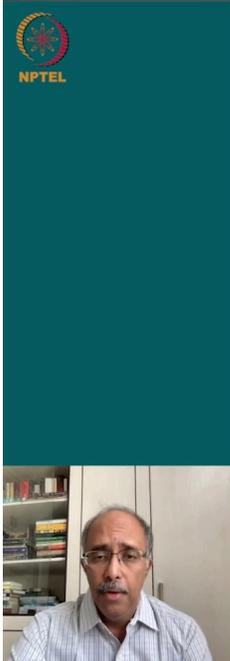
Antecedents to Posthuman Fiction: Cyberpunk

There has been a posthumanist vision in several 20th century text even before the advent of the term.

The antecedents of posthumanist fiction lie in the genres of sci-fi especially **cyberpunk** by

Philip K Dick
William Gibson
Bruce Sterling
Neal Stephenson
Rudy Rucker
David Brin

The anxieties over AI and computers taking over mankind and the world were made popular in Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) which also coined the term 'cyberspace':

'Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphic representation of data abstracted from banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding...'

Gibson, *Neuromancer*

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William Gibson, of course, is the person who coined the term 'cyberspace.' In 1984, when he wrote Neuromancer, he also created the first set of anxieties about artificial intelligence and computers taking over the world. You have the science fiction cyberpunk of Bruce Sterling, Rudy Rucker, David Brin, and Neal Stephenson. Cyberpunk is important because it inaugurates several modes of thinking about the post-human and the post-human's intersection with other sci-fi genres.

So post-humanist science fiction and cyberpunk are actually generic mergers, if you want to think about it like that, right? Then we have, of course, in the early 20th century, Isaac Asimov, whose fiction did much to popularize and question the new science of robotics. At that point, the new science of robotics. Contemporary science fiction and speculative fiction have several themes. The role of multiple characters.

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Isaac Asimov's fiction did much to popularize and question the then new science of robotics, which eventually becomes the mainstay of much 21st century popular cinema and fiction.

Cyberpunk showed the merger of machines and humans but also demonstrated the hegemony of techno-capitalism where capital makes use of technology to dominate governments and societies and control individuals.

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Fluid identities, artificial beings, transhumanism, artificial reproductive technologies, and, of course, the Anthropocene. In many cases, sci-fi and not quite sci-fi but coming close to it in its posthuman interests would be novels like Dave Eggers' The Circle and Tom McCarthy's Satin Island, where there is a dystopian view about the loss of humanity in worlds dominated by technology. Then, of course, we come to novels like Kazuo Ishiguro's Clara and the Sun, which are about artificial beings. We have transhumanist fiction in novels like Don DeLillo's Zero K, where there is the possibility of a future where one can be brought back after death to enjoy a new life.

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Contemporary sci-fi and speculative fiction's posthuman themes include:
- The role of multiple and fluid identities (cyborgs, hybrids)
- Artificial Beings
- Transhumanism
- Dehumanization and rehumanization of the human *with* technology
- Posthuman Care
- Artificial Reproductive Technologies and reconfigurations of gender (esp in feminist sci-fi)
- The Anthropocene/Post-natural

Etc

Much sci-fi and speculative fiction is dystopian in nature.

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Artificial Beings

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* examines posthuman forms of care.

Also raises several key questions:
- What should be human ethics towards Artificial Beings?
- Are they to be treated as substitute humans?
- Is it ethical to create Artificial Beings to serve us, thereby creating a new slavery?
- When Artificial Beings perform the same tasks and have the same qualities as human persons, is it ethical to deny them personhood?

Klara's love is 'generous, open and benevolent' and Ishiguro contrasts this with the Mother's love which is 'anxious, selfish, and over-protective'
Lanlan Du

So is posthuman care by a care-robot or an Artificial Being better than care by humans?

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The bodies collapse, can be reinvented, stored, etc. What we have looked at here, in a very compressed form, is a history of posthumanism, right from the medieval to the present. Posthumanism in literature shall we clarify that? but also philosophically. So, the normative questions of the human have been addressed in certain ways and various configurations: the human-animal hybrid, the human-machine hybrid, the disabled body, quasi-divine, quasi-mystical bodies are all part of this.

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So, while we have monsters in one sense in the early modern period in texts like Beowulf, we have the creature constituted by dead body parts or body parts from the dead in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. We have the cyberpunk of the 20th century, where humans are implanted with chips, prosthetic limbs, and things like that. We have novels like Larissa Lai's Salt Fish Girl, where, again, the human-animal hybrid sets the stage. All of these are attempts to question what the human is. So, posthumanism in literature has a very long lineage, and in all cases,

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It points to the artificially constructed nature of the human. Thank you.