

Posthumanism: An Introduction

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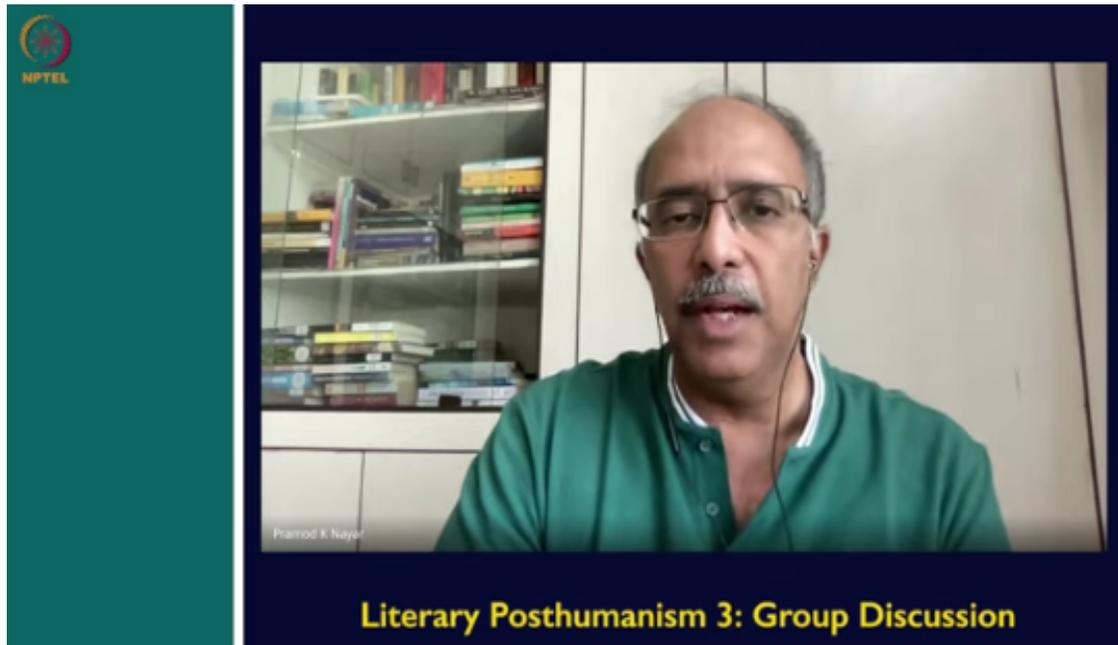
The University of Hyderabad

Lecture 27

Lec 27 : Literary Posthumanism 3: Group Discussion

uh hello there hi sharad hi anna uh so this is our session on literary posthumanism a group discussion on primary genetic medicine for week five. Week five of the course on posthumanism is devoted to posthuman art, aesthetics and literature. So we have modules on posthuman art and performance and predominantly literary texts, early literary history which has posthuman themes and contemporary. And today, in this particular session, we look at Jeanette Winterson, *The Stone Gods*, as our chosen text.

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So let's begin with something rather odd, and that has to do with the title, *Stone Gods*. which if you were to attribute intention is uh definitely to be deemed satirical because stone gods and the post-human don't seem to quite fit uh given the fact that post-humanism is invariably inevitably stereotyped as digital and electronic and to do with transcending the body and yet you have stone god so uh sharad what do you have to say to that first provocation Yeah, part of the reason why it is called so is of course the setting, one of the chapters in the book, the one that is set in Easter Island, has to do with the establishment of these idols and how in the process the inhabitants of that particular island actually end up devastating the entire ecological system. So it goes back to that particular idea of how humans in order to

to achieve what they consider progress that they end up devastating or depleting the resources that they have at hand. So, it could be one way for us to find an entry into business sex. It's also interesting because we think of the post-human in terms of how the body is able to incorporate or amalgamate into itself certain ecological elements, inorganic or cybernetic elements and we see that of course in the other chapters of the book except the one that is set in the eastern island. What I thought was also interesting is the fact that

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There is a certain kind of recursive or a loop-like structure to the entire narrative, which takes you back again and again to the idea of progress itself. And if you think of the stone gods, not just in the literal historical sense of the ones that we find on Easter Island, it becomes sort of an iconic typeface for how the pursuit of human progress leads to devastation. But if you think about it in a more extended and expanded fashion, you can think of how the pursuit of certain ideals actually leads to devastation in every scenario, not just in Captain Cook's version of that particular story, but in every setting, whether it be Orbis or whether it be Planet Blue or the tangentially referred to Planet White. In each case, the pursuit of it actually leads to devastation.

So I think the stone parts have to be interpreted in more than just the historically specific sense. Yeah, so that is the satirical element, I would think, in Winterson, because I would think the novel satirizes what you just said, that there is a question mark placed on what we define as progress. And that will come back in other ways also. We'll also see that in Becky Chambers. So that is actually quite interesting to see as a take-off point, that progress inevitably means destruction, not just construction, and everything goes to task.

Anna, what do you have to say about stones and gods? You're on mute. So I was thinking not just of the stone gods on Easter Island, though that's the most obvious manifestation

of stone gods within the text, but also that if you think of the gods, and there are no other gods within John Pilgrim's book, the humans who are responsible for the so-called progress are also the stone gods in one sense because they are the ones who determine what happens wherever they go. So you have that line towards the end of the text, I think it can break 50, where the line goes about how we either kill each other or we kill the planet or both, which is also a godly intervention, if you will, that there is no possibility of the human learning to

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Live in peace, and it's something which Jeanette Winterson repeatedly underlines that we don't appreciate what we have been given. We ruin it over and over again. And the text, like Char said, loops around. So you begin on an Earth, or rather you begin on a planet which has been destroyed, and then orbits. And then from there, you are moving to the blue planet. So it's that Earth where there were dinosaurs, and then you destroy that. And then, by the time you come to the end of the book, you have reached the end of the blue planet as well, where everything has been destroyed. So are there humans within this text? Also, the stone gods, who are only capable of destruction. That, in which case, what we would be doing I think is a disservice, maybe to the idea of the stone itself. That's interesting because the stone figures prominently in Geoffrey Jerome Cohen's book on stone, where he refers to geophilia, the love of stone.

Also, the famous Louise Erdrich's story, 'The Stone', uh, and the, uh, a short story where the woman has a stone, and eventually what the stone does it absorbs, that she absorbs a stone. And, uh, what Sharath mentioned earlier about the inanimate as a part of It is a very post-human vision, actually, because the inanimate is what animates us in that sense. And we set about destroying what we think of as the non-living, ignoring the fact that we are part of that. Which is why, of course, Rexty or the Blue Planet all, as you just said, are subject to our godly or demonic nature.

Intervention, which is where Winterson's satire goes. No, it's also something to do with the idea of when you said 'godly' when they go to the blue planet in the first section of the book, Handsome, who is the prince, he decides that he can engineer an asteroid in such a way that it will wipe out the native population of the blue planet and make it inhabitable for the humans. And that's godly, because you are playing God with an entire planet, with an entire population, fixing it so that it is all right for you. And I think the intervention of the stone gods within the text begins right there, where Handsome decides this is how he's going to play.

Except, of course, that the asteroid goes wrong, everything, they have an ITCH, and so on and so forth. that's also to do with uh history uh very clearly about how humans determine and it's a very frontier thesis kind of thing that uh to borrow the famous like to go where no man has gone before uh and what do you do you bring devastation and uh your plans for terraforming the plants incidentally go haywire but it still remains and winterson i think is very good with the intentionality there But this is what we plan to do. This is what we can do. It doesn't pan out quite that way.

But humanity's intention is very, very clear. It's also to do with the presence of the past that you are always looking for. another frontier but i thought the idea of the blue planet was itself interesting because that was an echo of the first uh photograph of earth taken from outer space the famous 1970s early 70s so actually the human in widows book at least in the three sections i'm not very certain how the eastern island section fits in apart from the fact that they destroy the island completely But the human in the other three sections is also one, like you said, a frontier-seeking human. So you also have that repeated passage which is in italics within the text where they speak about different frontiers which they are constantly aiming at and which they will then subdue the populations there and so on and so forth.

But you also have this human who, in this search for a frontier to devastate or to civilize, In the pursuit of that, it does not matter what else was. And they can't see. Right? So, it does not matter about... So, they also have to see the caliphates, the eastern... The eastern caliphates.

No, no. The Caliphate is different from the eastern... Central power. Central power. So, they have eastern powers. Central power.

Yes. And these three powers, they cannot get along. But when you look at what they are doing, each of them is also consolidating. So there is no question of being able to live with somebody else or live with each other. And that, I think, is something which the text also does very beautifully because wherever you go, you have to bring devastation.

And it's something which is underlined right in the initial sections where they talk about how when they are first... The discovery of the blue planet has been made and the telecasts are all about how we will move there. Even then, you have... And that, I think, would be your post-human angle if you want to think... I mean, that's the way I thought of it, that... The post-human here is actually very human because we are not willing to live with anybody else. So Winterson's post-human angle is more to do with how as humans

we have failed. And that failure is something which she shows us across all four sections of the model.

That you cannot transcend what you are. This is an innate quality that you would never seem to quite let go. Yes or no? Yeah, I was also thinking about humans in terms of how there are different time scales. On the one hand, you have the time scale of the species itself, which is over and above the time scale of individual human lives, which is Billy or Billy Crusoe.

And in every avatar or in every chapter, there is a kind of doomed love story of sorts. And we'll hopefully get to that. But over and above that limited time scale of, let's say, an individual life or a species' life, there's also the geologic, the planetary, or the cosmic time scale. Which I thought was interesting because if you think about the blue planet, the white planet, and the one which is kind of grayed out because there's so much pollution. But it was your red planet.

Correct. So if you think about it, this corresponds with what we know as the scientific history of the planet itself. The planet has been a snowball sometimes, it has been blue sometimes, it has been red sometimes. So if you think about it, these are kind of images, various images of our own planet at various cosmic benchmarks, let's say. So I thought that was also interesting because on the one hand, we are thinking about how humans tend to repeat their mistakes over and over again, which is a recursive move.

But there's also the idea of a cosmic timescale at work. Yeah, that's interesting what you say because a lot of the post-humanists do borrow ideas from the Anthropocene, particularly D.P. Chakraborty's ideas about planetary history and, of course, post-humanism's very strong interest in geology in terms of planetary memory. And in this case, of course, memories are remade for every planet. But as we've just been talking, it's pretty much the same.

Destruction, mayhem, deforestation. But the intention remains that we shall explore further and further, which means that the recursive loop you spoke about is something that really does not end. And the points we have just discussed the trash cultures of what is the place called Wreck City yeah, there's an intrinsic link being proposed between human progress, which is a post-human theme, and environmental activities, or rather anti-environmental activities. So, in effect, there is also the attempt to create a while. A certain wildness will donate money and create a wild space. And that actually also looks forward to Becky Chambers because the jungle is out there.

But the wild is interesting because it's post-natural. You create a wild. You deforest something, and that also becomes wild or barren in that sense. So Winterson, I think, is calling into question what we understand as nature versus culture. There is no such thing as nature because we have already incorporated it.

Whatever we call wild or nature is something that has had devastating consequences from human actions. Anything to say on that, on the link between environmentalism and personalism there, primarily? Yap Shan. Go ahead, Kunti. Okay, so I was thinking about

the way in which Red City itself has been described and when they encounter those children whom they come face to face with.

And it said, and I'm quoting from the text, 'a new generation of humans made out of the hatred of others.' And this is the description of the ones they encounter in the dead forest. And these children came from the private graves of public equals, a witness to what should not be. So I thought it was interesting because we see the children in terms of how their bodies' lenses are mutated as a result of exposure to radioactive substances. And I was wondering if we can contemplate the post-human itself as a category.

Is it really to do with the enhancement and extension of our natural bodily capacities to the incorporation of the technological into the post-human? Organic, or is it also to do with a certain deconstruction or a decomposition, a mutation of what we consider to be originally or essentially human? And this form of mutated category of the body itself seems to defy categorization in terms of the living or the dead, the healthy or the deceased. This is a direct consequence, of course, of the way in which technology itself has intervened in the natural landscape. I was also reminded of the bodies of concentration camp survivors and the images we have of them, not looking either living or dead. So, in some senses, being liminal creatures.

So, we then consider that particular kind of mutated body also as being post-human in a certain sense, and not just using the obvious instance of technological gadgets or genetic modifications into the body, which we encountered in the first place. Yeah, and the highlighting of celebrity-dom. I shall enter the celebrity competition. There is one character who is small in reference to a diamond-studded crutch in one particular case, somewhere in the text. And the celebrity bodies on spectacle.

But it's interesting to think of it as... Different bodies which are also post-human in that sense not enhanced, but what you call deconstructed or fragmented, if you want to think of it that way and the whole idea about bodies being of a certain type, celebrity bodies in particular, and there is, of course, this emphasis on shopping and chic and fashion and things like that. So, I was also thinking of the holograms, the celebrity holograms that occur, all passing things that are there, part of culture. But let's get back to the question of the body, Dana. Yeah, so I would think of the body in the text as you have, actually, in the first section, the Blue Planet section, where you have Pink, the woman who has been genetically fixed at 24, but she wants to be genetically fixed at 12. Yeah.

Right? Because her husband is a pedophile and to retain his affection. And you think of the body there because all men also get themselves fixed genetically, but they get themselves fixed at a later age, whereas women get themselves fixed at a younger age. And so you have one set of bodies over there; then, of course, you have the children in Red City in the forest over there who are damaged bodies, if you will. And in between, you have, of course, Billy Crusoe herself. And in the Easter Island section, you have another set of bodies because you have bodies which have feathers, long nails.

Again, different kinds of bodies. And then there is the body of a robot. I mean, there are many robots, but Spike, who is the central character for, right, and her is a body which actually is part of both these because initially she is beautiful, she is So beautiful that

Pink is like, she's stunning. Like, Pink who wants to be stunning herself, admires the beauty of Spike, and she is impossibly beautiful if I'm right.

But, from being that... She looks like she is giving blood. There is a sentence like that. She looks like she is giving blood. Right. And she doesn't have a heart.

And then she develops a heart at one point also. So, when you look at her initially in that perfection, which we think of as the perfect human, physique, body, everything. And then she loses her legs and she attaches her legs herself in the planar section and then her arms until finally only her head is left. And then you connect that to the damaged bodies in the final section.

And where is the post-human located? Is it located in the body, which is damaged because of nuclear war and the device? Where everything is radioactive in the forest. Yes, the toxins. Yeah.

In Rexty, or is it this body, which is perfect initially but which she then dismantles for herself so that she can conserve energy and make So where is the human located in this question of the body? Yeah. The longer my head can keep running. Yeah.

And that is also a typical biological thing, isn't it? That your extremities begin to freeze first in hypothermia because the body is attempting to retain heat in the core. So is that the core? It's a very post-human image. The

self-dismantling shall we say but also other things that come in and she's able to read data and there's a line there everything about me is above my wrists and when she's unable to read she says i can't read your oh but instead she's reading the minds right because the mind and then there is the centering of the mind as perhaps a little or a tad more important that's what makes you uh human yeah so the question of the body is interesting also because of uh the theme of the robo sapiens uh which is a recurrent one and the problem that uh people working in robotics and christianism are at this the problem with the robo is not that they are unlike us but they are a little too much like us and uh For example, the self-dismantling as an act of agency, courage, sacrifice, qualities associated with the human. But here, out of a sense of self-preservation, the robot does that. So let's spend a couple of minutes talking about the robot sequence.

Yeah, so when you're talking about this kind of self-dismantling and the fact that for us quote-unquote humans, it's a little disturbing to see someone disintegrate themselves that way. There's also the sentimentalist trait of the love story, love as an intervention, which I thought was interesting because this recurs in all the parts, all the chapters of the book. And I thought it was interesting because if you think on the one hand of us being trapped in a loop of constant destruction, then the love between a human and the other of the human is also something that then prompts us to think of what it means to have human relationships. because it and i was reading up on secondary material and lots of critics have made observations about how the text is clear not necessarily because it features a lesbian protagonist in the first part but it is clear because it talks about the love between the human and what is traditionally not defined as human so the category of the human itself is clear.

It is not necessarily to do with non-heteronormative forms of romantic or sexual association alone. It is through the fact that this kind of affiliation which we see as the deep love story with which every part of the book ends, in some senses also going back to that whole sentimentalist idea of love being a form of an alternate trajectory perhaps. But it is never realized. I mean, it does not transcend all that. I thought that was interesting.

I also thought what you just said about the clearing of it, and it's again typical Winterson Moore, I would think. But even the planetary and the cosmic are described that way. At some point, the pulsar is described as sending out radio images; it destroys itself. And the last phrase, as I recall, is love and loss. Now, what is love and loss on a cosmic scale?

I mean, it's just... Privileges you that you can actually visualize it that way, so I thought it was interesting that the way the love story works out to that also, like you said, non-heteronormative and machinic if you want to think of it that way, or queer if you... and the postings linked with queer have, of course, been explored, and I have anything to say about this particular part of what... Yeah, two small points. One about the love and loss thing. But the loss is something which, again, I think in a post-human move, the last line of the text is, and I quote, 'Everything is imprinted forever with what it once was.'

Nothing is lost. And that nothing, right, the fact that nothing is lost in one sense, is post-human because the human is... finite, defined within certain boundaries. Here you have a text which then tells us that everything is imprinted forever with what it once was. So there is no loss which is complete and total in that sense.

And the other one was to do with your RoboSapiens, which was to think about how today, when we speak about AI, it is everywhere. The RoboSapiens in the tech, like, she is somebody who likes AI development. Initially, she says she has limited capability, and then she grows. And the one in the final section also. So, both in the Blue Planet section as well as in the Tech City and Red City sections.

In Tech City, she has to be taken around by Billy Crusoe so that she will learn. Learn, learn. She learns to experience different kinds of things, including sex at one point. She wants to learn how to meet other people, to talk to them, and then she learns to disconnect herself from the mainstream. She's like, stop.

But in the first section, she also says there are two parts. One is where she doesn't have a heart. And then towards the end of that section, when Billy Crusoe touches her, she says, 'Do you have a heart?' She says, 'Yes, now I have a heart.' So if you think about RoboSapiens and the resemblance to humans over there, the humanoid or the robot is also becoming human.

And I thought it was good because when you think about it and of course, Janet Henderson used to say somewhere in the early 2000s, before AI. So when you think about how perspicacious this is, she's talking about a developing intelligence in the robot at that point in time. And it's a development that the text underlines for us: robots learn. And once they learn, can you think of them as being more than just robots? I'm interested in the word you used to say that RoboSapiens grows.

Not a term we associate with a techno-being, but the fact that A, it acquires bodily structures and functions. B, it also acquires emotional intelligence. It's more and more attuned, shall we say, and that reminded me so much of Clara in Clara and the Sun, where she discovers that when the mother and daughter I forget the name of the girl. I shouldn't be there.

So she goes and stands in a corner. And this is like you just said well before AI becomes commonplace. But the fact remains that the robot learns. So in many ways, the robot's acquisition of learning and emotional intelligence is why it's a robot sapience. Because sentience, emotional intelligence

And a sense of uh, what I just said before altruism, sacrifice, uh, responsibility, because at some point in the novel, there is a passage about what it means to be human, and it says it's to bring up your children, educate them, uh, just to let them develop in their own way into adults, and the response is Love is just nature's way of getting one person to pay somebody else's bills. Yeah, yeah. Typical Winchester again, you know. But I thought Sharad's point about that and what you're building on is interesting.

But Sharad, anything else on RoboSaviors? Yeah, so if we are talking about growth, it is not growth that is then engineered by humans in the Homo sapiens. It is something which is evolutionary in nature. And if that is something that we associate exclusively with, you know, sentient organic creatures, then we see that the robot becoming more and more like a human starts to make more sense. I was also interested in what Anna spoke about with the last line: 'Everything is imprinted forever with what it once was.'

If you think about this particular structure of the novel itself, four chapters, all recursively going back to a story of human colonization of other worlds. So it can be the Crusoe story, of course. It's also to do with Easter Island, but other worlds in the planetary sense. And you think of how this recursive structure also ties in very well with the postmodern aesthetics of the novel, where the text itself is like a palimpsest. By the end of the book, we come across a manuscript called The Stone Wars, which is not yet finished.

So I think it is also important for us to understand that the structure, on the one hand, works very well in terms of the theme that there is a constant movement of destruction that we see to be almost, you know, compulsively committed to, and then there is also the structure in terms of the novel itself as a form which John Edwin Dyson is experimenting with. So it becomes a palimpsest story that is constantly being written over and over again. And one from which we do not seem to learn, which would be the largest satirical point that she makes: that you may be human today, post-human tomorrow, but you do the same thing wherever you go. You behave in pretty much the same way.

And whether that means that perhaps humans do not grow as well as others do. Because if, from what Anna said, learning to do things, learning various kinds of abilities, acquiring various kinds of abilities, then I would think Winterson is asking, what has been the nature of our evolution? You just used the term, Charat, about, as you put it with an unintentional pun, 'evolution is in the very nature of things.' Then the question is, what is the nature of human evolution? Have we evolved better? Have we, for example, developed more ecological consciousness? Are we concerned about other civilizations?

Because, of course, like traditional scriptural stories, you first decimate the natives and terraform the place, and then you ask yourself, 'What else can we do to make this place...'
So, when you said 'palimpsest,' I was also thinking that

planetary bodies and internally also, you make every place a version of what you just left behind. Those are also palimpsests. I don't know whether we can think of it as planetary and cosmic palimpsests, but everything becomes a version of what Earth was, what we made of it, and then you replicate the same situations, you replicate the same destruction, so that at some point you have to ask yourself what exactly is being imprinted on what? That is also a question.

We have one or maybe two minutes left. Anna, rounding off? I just want to say, we spoke about human bodies, we spoke about robot bodies, but there are also the purely mechanical, so that would be my last point regarding Winterson's text. There are robots that are nothing other than functions.

So they are the kitten robots. Then there are the various bots that work through the text. There are the traffic light bots and this bot and that bot. And again, it is about the utilitarian that the human is only able to configure anything or everything within their purview, shall we say, using correct pronouns. within their purview, as you treated it.

We do not see co-evolving. No. We always want to use what we have. Which also retains a certain kind of hierarchical structure in any social order. Yes.

Thank you. That was fun. Shall we stop?