

Posthumanism: An Introduction
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Lecture 03

Lec 03: Contexts III: the Environment and the Anthropocene

This is Pramod K. Nair of the Department of English, University of Hyderabad, and here we continue our lessons on posthumanism with one specific contextual topic for today as part of our third lesson, which will be the environment and the Anthropocene. Now, at first glance, clearly, you might wonder what the connection is between something like the environment or environmental disaster and the Anthropocene with posthumanism, which is a school of thought, as we have discussed, that looks primarily at the future of humans, the role of technology in human lives, and so on and so forth. But there is, as we shall see, a very close connection between the environment, environmentalism, and the idea of the Anthropocene. Now, the point that I want to emphasize is that posthumanism as a school of thought arises at the turn of the 20th century, which is also the period of serious, if not severe, environmental crisis, which includes global warming, species death across multiple species, of course pollution, desertification, ozone layer depletion, and several others.

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Climate change - Climate change refers to long-term shifts in temperatures and...

Posthumanism arises at the time of a clear environmental crisis, of global warming, species death, pollution, desertification, ozone layer depletion, among others.

'Posthumanism emerged from extended debates within philosophy, discourse studies, and other disciplines about the limits of humanism for thinking through urgent concerns, including planetary changes wrought by the Anthropocene'

Hird et al

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It is the period of great industrial disasters and rising sea levels, among others. So what we need to keep in mind is that while posthumanism emerged through the extended

debates in philosophy, in literary studies, discourse, and cultural studies, wherein, as we have already noted in our early lessons, we have explored, as in posthumanism, the limits of humanism. But most importantly, as people have argued, what is the nature of humanism? What is the limit of humanism when we think in terms of planetary changes, planetary disaster, which is the mark of the Anthropocene? In other words, what we are aware of is that posthumanism is a school of thought that may focus on human futures, but not exclusively on human futures, principally because its roots, its intellectual heritage, has

gathered its strength from an analysis of how humans have lived, how humans have intervened in the history of the Earth, of the planet, in the history of various species. Which means to say that the posthumanist school of thought is inextricably linked to the consciousness that humans have altered the Earth in multiple ways, perhaps irreversibly, and almost certainly not for the good. So there is a connection, like I said, and I would like to repeat, between the environment, environmentalism or environmental thought, and the concept of the Anthropocene, which is the notional age where or from when humans have intervened directly in the planet's history. Those of you who are people who follow the newspaper debates about this, the International Union of Stratigraphers has refused to accept this term as of last month, that is March 2023.

In terms of its connotations and in terms of its applicability and validity. However, the point to be noted is that the term has found cultural currency in literature, cultural discourse, philosophy, environmentalist studies, and environmentalist activism. Whether or not the scientific working group has accepted the concept. So, this is a caveat that I would like to file. Now, let's go step by step in our study of the environmental crisis and post-humanism.

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Climate change - Climate change refers to long-term shifts in temperatures and...

With the environmental crisis, attention was drawn to

- The human roots of the crisis – particularly the 'sixth extinction',
- The exploitation of animals through an instrumental use of them,
- The duties towards the nonhuman form and the environment.



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So first, the environmental crisis. Everybody talks about it. We all recognize it. It's almost a self-evident thing, although the exact nature of the crisis is perhaps not very visible. We do know that temperatures are rising.

We do know that there is an acute water shortage, that there is a lack of rainfall, and that a large number of species disappear on a regular basis, birds, animals, plants species that die. So, with the environmental crisis, Attention was primarily focused on the human roots of the crisis, particularly what is called the sixth extinction, which means that the environmental crisis is not seen as a 'natural event.' It is seen principally as triggered by human activity, human action in a historical perspective right from the time of the invention of agriculture, as some argue. Some argue that it began with colonization and plantation cultures, which include the discovery of the New World, slavery, etc.

Others argue that this human intervention in the planet's history took place with the Industrial Revolution, the invention of steam. And some others believe it is primarily due to the nuclear age, which began in the 20th century. Be that as it may, the human roots of the crisis involve the exploitation of animals through humans' instrumental use of them and the lack of attention to human duties toward the non-human and the non-living. So there are three central core areas in which attention is being drawn:

The human roots of the crisis, The exploitation of non-human forms, which include animals and plants, through an instrumental use of them by which we mean that the non-human is treated as something we can exploit, consume, or destroy because they exist only for us to utilize, for us to make use of. This is what is called an instrumental use of other life forms. Then, of course, there is the neglect of our duties as humans toward non-human forms and the environment. As the term made its first appearance from scientists Paul Crutzen and Schwagerl, it asks us to think about it like this.

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Climate change • Climate change refers to long-term shifts in temperatures and...

Imagine our descendants in the year 2200 or 2500. They might liken us to aliens who treated the Earth as if it were a mere stopover for refuelling, or even worse, characterize us as barbarians who would ransack their own home. Living up to the Anthropocene means building a culture that grows with Earth's biological wealth instead of depleting it. Remember, in this new era, nature is us.

---Crutzen and Schwägerl, cited in Herbrechter



The image shows a hand holding the Earth, symbolizing human stewardship or the Anthropocene. The background is a yellow field with small black star-like symbols.

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A small video feed of a speaker in the bottom right corner of the slide.

And I'm quoting here. Imagine our descendants in the year 2200 or 2500. They might liken us to aliens who treated the Earth as if it were a mere stopover for refueling. Or even worse, characterize us as barbarians who ransacked their own home. Living up to the Anthropocene means building a culture that grows with Earth's biological wealth instead of depleting it.

Remember, in this new era, nature is us. It's a very interesting and crucial quote because it says, as you can see, that we as humanity need to build a culture that does not see the Earth as something meant exclusively for exploitation or utilization. Like I said, the instrumental use. But when we grow with the world's culture, with the planetary culture, rather than just focusing on utilization, maximum utilization, and so on and so forth. Because here we can no longer say that there is nature out there and then there is us.

There is nature which is distinct from human culture. As the quote indicates, nature is us. We are nature. This is a very post-human thought, a post-human idea that we are embedded in nature. Nature is what we are.

We are not distinct from nature. By 'we', it means humanity, human culture, human-made culture, and cultural practices. So this is the Anthropocene in a nutshell. Now, Paul Crutzen coined the term Anthropocene to indicate that the previous period of the Holocene, as the geological timescale is referred to, has been followed by an age where

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Paul Crutzen coined the term 'Anthropocene' to suggest that the twelve millennia of the Holocene is followed up by the accelerated version of human impact on the planet – to the latter's detriment.

The Anthropocene as a concept has more or less worked alongside the posthumanist school of thought because, for posthumanists, the human impact on the planet has produced unequal life chances for many species.

The Anthropocene intersects with the posthumanist attention to human dealings with the earth in the form of

- Agriculture
- Fossil fuel use
- Technologies (nuclear)

As well as political-economic-social systems that exploit the land, the nonhuman and differentially organized humans:

- Plantations
- Slavery
- Capitalism
- Colonialism

For posthumanists the Anthropocene is marked by a radical dichotomy: some forms of life are 'bare life' and do not therefore count (called *zoē*) and some forms are valued (called *bios*)

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The human impact on the planet has raced ahead, has accelerated. So it's not a question of human impact measured at the slow glacial pace of agriculture. With industrialization, things have accelerated. With digital technology, with steam, with the nuclear age, we

have seen a progressive acceleration of the human impact on the planets, by which we mean human impact on the non-human, but as well as on the non-living, including rocks, soil, earth, water, etc. So Paul Krugsen's point is that the Anthropocene is a way of looking at a timescale

over which humanity has impacted and impacted adversely on the planet. So the Anthropocene is a concept that, like I said before, has more or less emerged alongside the post-humanist school of thought. Because the human impact on the planet, according to the post-humanist, has produced unequal life chances for different species. So it's not just a question of measuring impact on, say, fossil fuels and what we have done with fossil fuels. It's not enough to say that nuclear technology has done this, this and this to say several plants, several animals, several humans, of course.

But a vision of human impact across the planet, which involves looking at, say, plastics, nuclear technology, Species death, industrial disasters and a whole gamut of human activities, human culture. So the Holocene followed by the Anthropocene is the sequence we have looked at. But for the post humanists who have consistently argued that you cannot separate the human from the non-human, the Anthropocene is a very workable concept. The Anthropocene intersects with post-humanist thinking in terms of human actions.

And I have mentioned all of them just now. Agriculture, the enormous use of fossil fuels, accelerated use of fossil fuels, and multiple different forms of technology, including the nuclear and the genetic. But that is one aspect of it. But there are political and economic organizations, processes that have exploited the human, the non-human and have organized the non-human and the human into various categories of people. Think of plantations, slavery, capitalism, colonialism.

These are political and economic systems, political and economic systems structures or processes whereby humanity has undertaken to reorganize the planets, to reorganize the human and to reorganize the non-human. Plantations, slavery, capitalism and colonialism are modes of organizing all forms of life, but also forms of organizing the non-living, the non-living. So post-humanists see the Anthropocene as marked by a very clear, a very radical dichotomy where some forms of life are countable, and are valuable. called bios and several forms of life that don't count that are just what Giorgio Agamben would call bare life.

They are just bare life. So for the posthumous, the Anthropocene gives us this dichotomy. that there are forms of life that are hierarchically superior, that are visibly powerful, that are visibly technologically advanced, and as a result, they are in a position to exploit the other forms of life, as well as the non-living form. So, that's why for the post-humanists, the Anthropocene is a very useful argument. Now, think about the fact that something like colonialism

which was built upon the exploitation of the land, the exploitation of natural resources, and the exploitation of people. These changes, these processes induced by colonialism, altered the very conditions in which many people lived, such as indigenous people.

Indigenous people have adapted to change, of course. They have adapted to nature, yes. We are not glorifying the indigenous way of life.

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Colonially-induced environmental changes altered the ecological conditions that supported Indigenous peoples' cultures, health, economies, and political self-determination. While Indigenous peoples, as any society, have long histories of adapting to change, colonialism caused changes at such a rapid pace that many Indigenous peoples became vulnerable to harms, from health problems related to new diets to erosion of their cultures to the destruction of Indigenous diplomacy, to which they were not as susceptible prior to colonization. Indigenous peoples often understand their vulnerability to climate change as an intensification of colonially-induced environmental changes.

--- Whyte



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Please understand that. There is no romanticizing the indigenous way of life. But what is important to recognize is that their relationship with nature was slightly different. They have adapted to change. Colonialism made such drastic changes at such a quick pace that indigenous people could not cope.

So, As people have noted, from health problems to new diets, new languages, and the erosion of the soil on which they have lived for generations, which means that indigenous people even now understand their vulnerability to climate change as the result of a history of colonially induced changes. This means that for many indigenous people, their contemporary vulnerability, their current vulnerability to climate change, is the result of a history of plantation cultures, capitalism, and colonialism. So for most of these people, the question of ecological justice As I am referring to indigenous people, the question of ecological justice is linked to questions of social justice.

You cannot speak of plantations. You cannot speak of agriculture in the New World, which was a term given to the United States of America from the 15th century, a moment of discovery and so on. You cannot talk about agriculture in the New World without talking about slavery. You cannot talk about slavery without talking about the organization of land into plantations. Like, we cannot speak about the organization of land in colonialism without speaking about the racialized forms of labor.

Which is to say that Our history, as in human history, involves specific socioeconomic processes that have treated the land and its inhabitants by which I mean both human and non-human in particular exploitative ways. So that's why the concept of the Anthropocene has certain historical resonances for people such as the indigenous tribes of the world. Now, I want to move on to our sense of the planet. Our sense of the planet, our sense of our 'home,' is never pure in that sense.

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Our sense of the planet and its denizens is mediated by technologies and techniques of visualization, calculation, mapping, simulation, from geological surveys to Google Earth to the Blue Marble photograph

This includes multiple forms of *seeing* the planet: from maps to literary texts.

For posthumanists and environmentalists these mediated forms of viewing the planet have always focused on humanity at the top of the order, as the centre of the universe.



Blue Marble, 1972



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Our sense of the planet stems from a very mediated, very technologically mediated, visual, mapped, calculating simulation. This could include the geological surveys of From the early 19th century, some of you may know that the Trigonometrical Survey of India mapped the land for its physical features, but also for its mineral resources. Then the Survey of India, the organization, was established in the mid-19th century to carry this out in a more methodical fashion. So geological surveys prepared maps.

You even now see those maps. If you look at those maps, it will say at the foot, Survey of India. The maps are authoritative because they are produced and published by the Survey of India. Then you have Google Earth. And then you have, of course, the famous Blue Marble photograph.

I do not know whether you have seen it. It's worth taking a look at. The Blue Marble photograph is the first complete picture of the Earth from outside the Earth. It was taken from the... I would like you to take a look at this. It was taken so that you could grasp the entire... It was taken from a spacecraft, and the entire planet was visible for us to see for the first time.

Which means to say, our awareness of what the Earth is stems from that kind of visualization. These are ways of seeing the planet. Maps... Global shots like this of the planet, the globe itself. And then there are literary texts.

So for post-humanists and environmentalists, these are mediated forms of viewing the planet. But for post-humanists and, of course, environmentalists who accept the argument from the Anthropocene, specialists argue that whenever we see the Earth, whenever we present the Earth, we present the human at the hierarchical top. That It's humanity which rules. It's humanity that dominates, that the planet belongs to us humans.

We do not want to accept any other ownership. We do not concede any other form of ownership. So these mediated forms of viewing have focused on the human at the center of the world, at the top of the hierarchy. Now we know that post-humanists have asked for a rethink of animal-human relations. For example, the nature park, the zoo park, and the sanctuary.

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Posthumanists examine attempts by animal rights activists to rethink the animal-human relations for example in terms of building sanctuaries. Thus, for some sanctuaries are

- 'places as opportunities for actions of affirmative ethics and responsibility for humans and animals in a logic of interdependence and affective ethical relationships'
- 'political commitment and proactive engagement of trade associations and non-profit international organisations aiming at reconciling the commercial and ethical aspects of wildlife sanctuaries'

Tomassini et al



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And opinion is divided about this: whether sanctuaries are places which offer space and opportunity for a certain kind of ethical responsibility towards animals. And it is determined by a logic of interdependence. But others have also argued that the political commitments and the role of international organizations, trade associations, and others are attempts to reconcile the commercial and ethical aspects of the wildlife sanctuary. Which means to say that the wildlife sanctuary is not a politically neutral thing of just putting animals together and letting them live free lives. There is a very strong political, economic, social, and ethical dimension to the question of the sanctuary, as I have just outlined for you.

So, I want to run through a small list here of how post-humanists address ecological issues. Post-humanists argue that we live in the age of biotech engineering, genetic engineering, and therefore we are in the age of the post-natural. By post-natural, we mean that we have learned how to modify, tamper with, and tinker with nature. Now, in speculative fiction, in science fiction, we see human, animal, and machine hybrids, which are now a reality. We have accepted that there is a potential loss of human control over the non-human and the non-living.

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Posthumanists addressing ecological issues note the following as well:

- We live in the age of post-natural beings: the creation of biotech engineering,
- in speculative fiction, we have seen human-animal-machine hybrid beings, which are now a reality,
- We see a potential loss of human control over the nonhuman and the non-living (this is addressed in the genre of popular cinema called ecohorror, exemplified by films like *The Meg*, *Lake Placid*, *The Shallows* etc),
- New visions and versions of wilderness,
- Human lives are embedded in 'abiotic, nonorganic' matter (Gormley),
- An interest in Deep Time – a geological timescale that is well before humans appear on earth, and thus an interest in ancestry and evolution of lifeforms ('an imagining of a time before origins, before there was such a thing called humanity', Herbrechter),
- Speculate on a world without humanity,
- A different course of human evolution where humans cohabit with other life forms, maybe even alien ones (the subject of much sci-fi, such as Octavia Butler's) so that species integrity erodes

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And we think of genres like eco-horror or ecological horror, where humans are trapped in situations, besieged by predatory birds, predatory animals, sharks, etc. So, it's an awareness that human control over the non-human world is not as effective as we believed it was. The post-humanists also look at new visions of wilderness. We are very interested in acknowledging how we are embedded in abiotic and non-organic matter. For instance, the fact that we have bones.

Bones come from calcium. Calcium comes to us from the earth into which fossils of predecessor generations have gone. So, the chemicals that make us organic. Living, alive, which is to say that what we think of as life, as animated matter, actually hinges upon inanimate matter, chemicals, which are not live organisms, but it is because of those non-living organisms that we are alive. We have a very strong interest post-humanists have a very strong interest in deep time, which is about the time before humans as we now know them, the Homo sapiens of Heronauts, and therefore we have a very strong history in the evolution of life forms.

How was it at the time of the Neanderthals? What kind of life did the hominids have? The cave art, which we know has survived over many millennia of evolution, captures a certain kind of life of the Neanderthals. But in sharp contrast to the interest in the ancient world, we also speculate on a world without humanity, which has primarily been seen in a thought experiment in Alan Weisman's book, *The World Without Us*. So what would it be like to have a world, to have a planet without humanity on it?

And there are plenty of last-man novels that we are aware of, starting with Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*. Then, of course, finally, we speculate on how human evolution may proceed in the future. Will we proceed the way we have proceeded now, or will there be an involvement and cohabitation with other life forms as well? We recognize technological interventions.

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It also recognizes that:

- With increasing technological interventions, there is a loss of both bodily and psychological individualities in the humans (Collado-Rodriguez),
- Dehumanization and zombification – where the latter was also famously associated with factory labour by Marx – in posthumanist literature and film expresses an anxiety over the potential loss of human individuality,
- There are more-than-human and other-than-human modes of life and existence,
- Human enhancement – from the merely corporeal to the moral – is in the offing and perhaps inevitable



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We also acknowledge dehumanization, zombification in post-human lives. We acknowledge that there are more-than-human and other-than-human forms of existence. But finally, we also think in terms of human enhancements. Can we think in terms of humanity evolving in ways where we have enhanced certain features of ourselves, whether cognitive, intellectual, moral, or ethical? Can we be better and different humans?

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Precisely because we have enhanced ourselves. So, as you can see in this wide-ranging session, we have looked at the link between ecology and post-humanist thought. Our post-humanists are interested in the evolution of the human, the future of the human, and the impact of the human on the natural world. Thank you.