

Posthumanism: An Introduction
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Lecture 33
Lec 33 : The Environment and Posthumanism

This is Pramod Nair of the Department of English at the University of Hyderabad. And in our modules on posthumanism, while tracing the genealogies of the school of thought that we now identify as posthumanist, we have encountered several subdomains. And the environment has been a principal one. Alongside looking at, say, things like new materialisms, feminist critiques of science and technology, the influence and role played by disability studies, animal studies, and plant studies, we have seen intersections of posthumanist thought with environmentalist ideas, particularly in the rise of sub-disciplines, shall we say, of the blue humanities and others.

We have also seen how concepts like transcorporeality or companion species have influenced the way in which we think about the human. And the consequences have been varied, as we know. And the literature that has emerged in the wake of many of these ideas about the Anthropocene, about companion species, about transcorporeality has also been varied. But what is important to recognize is that these are not watertight compartments. Posthumanist thought or posthumanism, especially in the critical posthumanist version, is not a

specifically watertight, self-contained school of thought. It adapts from many schools of thought, philosophical positions, and political and other activist writings in order to think through ideas about the human. So, as we have seen when tracing the genealogy of posthumanism, critical race theory and postcolonialism, of course, as part of that, feminism has contributed to how posthumanism has evolved. In looking at techniques and technologies of, say, artificial reproductive technologies, genetic and biotech engineering, post humanists have seen what it can mean as potential for the critique of humanism, but also the critique of technology-driven

Pharmacological intervention-driven transhumanists. So, obviously, the range of influences is very large. The types and degrees of influences are huge in number. For us, in this particular module, we are interested in how environmentalism and posthumanism come together. So

For posthumanism, the Anthropocene is the direct result of what they think and argue as anthropocentrism and humanistic or humanist supremacy. The Anthropocene, as you know, is a concept that the international community of literary, cultural, and philosophical scholars has accepted, but in March 2024, it was rejected by the scientific community. The Anthropocene is a concept that proposes a new era for the Earth, like the Triassic and the Cenozoic and other eras. People have proposed it, and it was proposed by chemist Paul Crutzen, who was a Nobel laureate. The Anthropocene is an era marked by human interventions into the planet.

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For posthumanists the Anthropocene (a theoretical concept that proposes a new era for the earth: an era marked by human intervention into the planet) is the direct result of

Anthropocentrism and humanistic supremacy

Which includes:

- A sense that the planet/earth is *for* the humans;
- A belief that the human centres the world, including all life forms.

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Okay, so like the Holocene, the Anthropocene is a major theoretical construction which says, let's measure the Earth's durability, its history, its current status in terms of what humans have done to it. And this is the direct result, they say; the Anthropocene is the direct result of how we have assumed that humans are central to the planet, that humans occupy the top of the hierarchy when it comes to life forms. So both anthropocentrism and the idea or ideal of humanist supremacy are seen as the key problems that generate this Anthropocene. Anthropocentrism and humanist supremacy include, one, a sense that the Earth or the planet is meant primarily for humans.

And you may recall at this point that we have touched upon this in different ways when you looked at animal studies and plant studies, that humans have always had an instrumental view of the planet that the planet, the occupants, the life forms, and the non-living exist to serve humans. So, for many post-humanists, this has been a key problem: we have assumed that the planet exists for our purposes, for our utilization. And the second is that human beings center the world. That the human being, as I said a few minutes ago, is the hierarchical superior of all other life forms.

This, the post-humanists and Anthropocene experts argue, is a key problem. But beyond this, post-humanism also notes that the Anthropocene crisis, which includes the climate crisis, can never be delinked from human practices or human belief systems. Of which they list the following as the principal culprits: Extractivism. Extractivism, of course, is the extraction of fossil fuels and natural resources from the Earth's soil and other zones.

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Posthumanism argues that the environmental/Anthropocene crisis cannot be delinked from human practices and belief systems:

- Extractivism
- Colonialism
- Slavery
- Monotheism
- Capitalism

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Colonialism, slavery, monotheism, and capitalism. Self-explanatory concepts, right? So for post-humanists, the problem has been not just the instrumental use of the Earth, but the specific kinds of usage to which we have put the Earth. That means, for example, this unending exploitation of the Earth's resources, with never a thought that perhaps we are overdoing it, that we are taking more than what we need and that we are taking without ever asking, 'How does this resource get replenished?'

How does this resource get compensated for, that you keep drawing and drawing upon the earth, at some point to run out? And then what happens? So the emphasis that you see today in engineering and ethical debates about the environment, environmental protection, and conservation, about the careful use of resources, about conservation and the search for alternative fuels, stems from a rather late recognition that we've done this for millennia. We have done this across the world. And that has been the principal problem for humans.

But having said that, it is something that applies to all parts of the world. There is a distinction to be made that extractivism and colonialism have gone together in adversely impacting the Global South, or what we can think of as the formerly colonized nations. The history of the planet has much to do with the history of colonial domination. In the colonial eras, South America, Africa, Asia, and several parts of the world have been controlled for their natural resources by the European colonial empires. This applies, as many people have argued, in the case of the New World, as it was called the Americas in the sense that the extractivist, instrumentalist view of the white man's arrival, which results in what is called settler colonialism, has adversely impacted the environment of the indigenous people. This applies to America, this applies to Australia, and this applies to Canada as well, where, for instance, The white man's 'modernity' and modernity will go into quotes for obvious reasons the white man's modernity has hinged upon a very clear extractivist philosophy, a very instrumental view of the earth, irrespective of what

the indigenous people, who are native dwellers in that region, have felt about it or articulated about it.

Which is to say that, in all these parameters that we are looking at, the extraction of fossil fuels, the encroachment upon the natural habitat of animals, the overuse of plants, and the slavery to which the native indigenous people were subjected are not separable. As in, you cannot think of environmental injustice of the kind we have just spoken about as separate from social injustice. So the exploitation of resources and the exploitation of human beings go together. You cannot say that one happens independent of the other.

So for post-humanists, this is an important point because it shows that the history of humanity on the planet has changed. Being, the history of subjugation of the environment, of the animal and plant species, of the non-living, and of other humans. And other humans. So it's linked; it's a continuum. The post-humanist stance on connectedness, on relationality, and on multi-species belonging which we have talked about in some detail before ensures that we decenter the human.

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The posthumanist stance on connectedness, relationality and multispecies belonging decentres the human is a response to the environmental crisis

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And this is a response to the environmental crisis that we recognize. We acknowledge that the environmental crisis is a result of what I've just said: the instrumental view of the planet, the idea that the human exists as the supreme monarch of the planet, the idea that the planet and its other life forms are all meant to serve the human. So, this idea that post-humanists have forwarded that we are all connected, that identity is relational, and that it's a question of multi-species belonging rather than hierarchy has been a response or must be treated as a response to the environmental crisis. Let's go into a little more detail here. How does post-humanism respond to the environmental crisis?

Okay, so let's take a look at some of these things we have rehearsed before, some of these things we have visited in some detail before. So you might detect the overlaps with what we have said and done in the last few weeks. But the post-humanist response to the environmental crisis comes from a call to recognize new ways of thinking about the human. And new ways of thinking about the planet.

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Posthumanism responds to the environmental crisis by calling for whole new ways of thinking about the human and the planet:

- An *ethical* response (or what it calls response-ability) to the earth and all species, and non-living forms;
- Imagining (in literature) a new way of being-in-the-world: by thinking about the lives of other species, their role in our human lives (especially in genres such as ecological fiction and science fiction);
- Recognition of human subjectivity as intersubjectivity that then brings the nonhuman into the loop;

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Which means, first, an ethical response to the earth and all species. But also toward the non-living forms. An ethical response to the earth and all the species therein. And the non-living. This is what the post-humanists, following the work of John Haraway and Rosi Braidotti and others, call responsibility.

It's not just a question of responsibility. It's a question of a responsible response, which is why they play on the word responsibility. So it's a response-ability. So you respond in certain ways. You respond in responsible ways.

So this, for the post-humanist, is a new way of looking at, of thinking about the human and the planet. Then the second response is to think of new ways of imagining the world. You start thinking about the lives of other species, their role in our lives as in human lives, especially in genres such as ecological writings, nature writing, and science fiction. The point they make, and you will see brilliant work on this in the writings of Ursula Le Guin, Tom Honduran, Deborah Bird Rose, and others, working at the intersection of posthumanism and environmental studies. Literature is a way of imagining a new world.

So literature is not driven by the compulsion to describe the world as it is, but to hypothesize as the world could be. That's the big difference. So you imagine an alternative world. You imagine a different planet. You imagine a different way of humans living their lives.

Which is to say that literature provides us with a different vision altogether. Literature provides us ways of imagining other worlds and that's why for people working in extinction studies, people working in environmental crisis literature, people working on social and environmental justice themes pay so much attention to literary representations because their point is science describes the world as it is and offers explanations. Literature, besides doing this, also tells us, well, you know, the world could be different. The world could be of a different form and shape and nature.

The third approach after the ethical and the imagining in literature is to recognize that human subjectivity is intersubjective, is the mixture of, is a result of a conjunction of the human and the non-human. Fourth, post-humanists believe that the retrieval of alternative knowledge systems, which includes, of course, indigenous knowledge, will help decenter Western pedagogy and Western belief systems. They argue that indigenous worldviews, indigenous views of the planet, are of an entirely different order and perhaps it's time to retrieve those rather than go with the exploitative, extractive Western approaches. By Western they mean Euro-American approaches.

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- Retrieval of alternative knowledge systems (such as indigenous knowledge) that helps decenter western pedagogy that has centred the human;
- Modifying the law to include the other-than and the more-than human;
- Rethinking the planet/earth in terms of sustainability, biodiversity and linkages;
- Legislation on practices like waste-dumping by accounting for more-than-human losses so as to enable new practices of care for the planet as a whole;
- Address the links between patriarchy, class, race and technoscience – all of which have contributed to the environmental/Anthropocene crisis;
- Acknowledge other-than-human agency.

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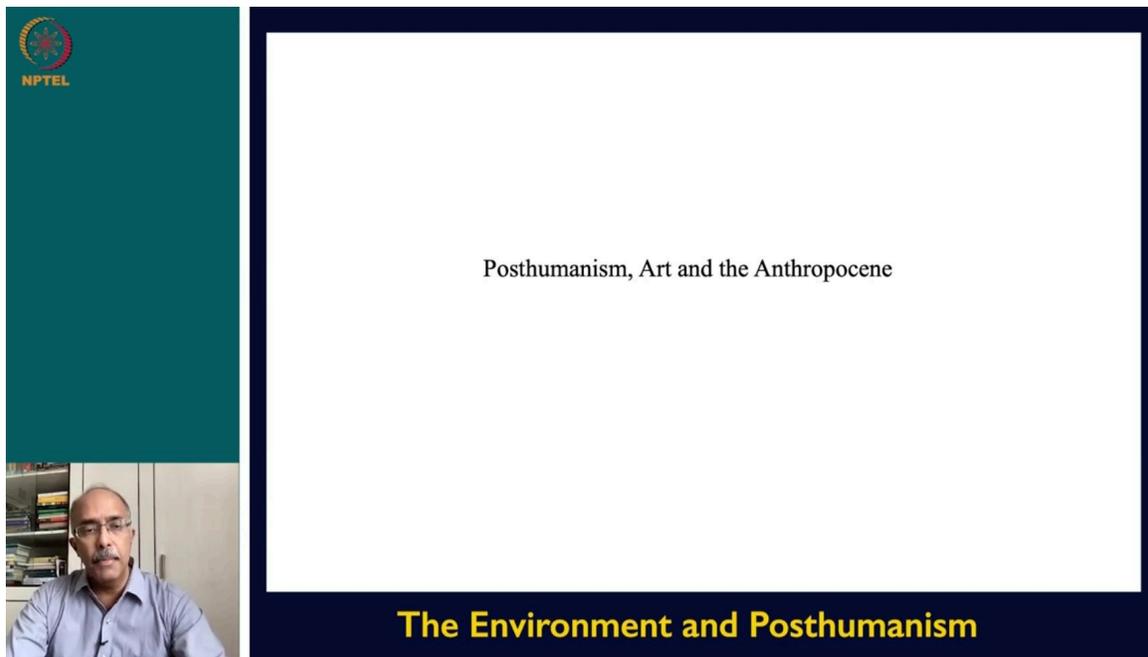
There are problems with this, shall we say, nativist term, which argues that everything about the native and the local is wonderful and the golden age of that particular pre-colonial past and things like that. But be that as it may, it is an alternative vision. And if you look at the poetry from the Global South, the fiction from the Global South, the indigenous writings, they do recommend, they do document an entirely different approach. To the natural world, the approach to the non-living as well. So, for many people, this is a very important move.

Post-humanists also call for modifying the legal apparatus to include the other-than and the more-than-human. It calls for rethinking the planet and the earth in terms of

sustainability, biodiversity, and linkages. It calls for stringent action on practices such as waste dumping, which we know is a particularly serious problem for the Global South. It acknowledges that there is an other-than-human agency, that the non-human also possesses agency, capacity, and will. Then, it makes a great deal of effort to point to the links between patriarchy, gender oppression, class, race, and techno-science.

And they argue that patriarchy, race, and techno-science have all come together to produce a class of experts, scientists, who have contributed to the Anthropocene crisis. Now, one response or one set of responses to the crisis of post-humanism, or the crisis of the Anthropocene and the posthumanism of roasteries, is emergent in art. We have done some work in the previous modules on bio-art and things like that, and I want to dwell a little more on this. Bio-art, as we know, is a post-humanist response to the commodification of nature.

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NPTEL

Posthumanism, Art and the Anthropocene

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On the commodification of nature and In the case of bio art, it draws attention to the unevenness of technology, the dominance of technology, and its impact on nature, other creatures, and life forms. I do not want to return to questions of bio art, which have already been discussed. But what you need to note is that the rise of bio art brings together science and nature. OK, it brings together science and nature.

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'Bioart' is a posthumanist response to:
the commodification of nature,
the centering of the human and
the anthropogenic roots of the environmental crisis

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And the effort is to point out that. The. The organic form that we are interested in, the organic materials with which we work, are actually the result of considerable periods of evolution, the role of other species that have been incorporated into our bodies, and that In all cases, questions of other species becoming part of ourselves are crucial. We have, as you know, looked at other bio art forms as well.

So, as I said, I do not want to dwell upon that. But if you look at posthumanism-inspired projects, which have examined, Anthropocene-like Bauman-Lehi's Microbiocene, Wanderlitz and others, Fungi such as fungal supercoring and Cisalmeriton and other essential species, which have already been discussed in an earlier module. So, Microbiocene uses microscopic algae to make the point that Microbial monuments and sculptures are an attempt to retell the story of Earth's history from a microbial perspective.

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Posthumanism-inspired art projects have drawn attention to the crisis, but also offered news ways of thinking about the human-nonhuman, living-non-living relationships.

Baum & Leahy, Stefan Schouten, Julie Lattaud, Laura Schreuder, Gabriella Weiss
Microbiocene: Ancient Ooze to Future Myths
<http://www.youfab.info/2019/entries/works/g0f4c000001js0.html>

Emma Van der Leest, Paul Verwije, Sybren De Hoog, Aneta Schaap-Oziemlak
Funkee: Fungal Supercoating
<https://emmavanderleest.com/portfolio/fungalsupercoatingfungkee/>

Sissel Marie Tonn, Heather Leslie, Juan Garcia Vallejo
Becoming a Sentinel Species
<https://sisselmarietonn.com/project/becoming-a-sentinel-species>

(Jacobs et al 2023)

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Microbiocene: Ancient Ooze to Future Myths

Used Microscopic marine algae: *Emiliana Huxleyi*
 Sculpture out of sea sediments

Installation of a future archaeological site in which a microbial monument/sculpture is found with symbolic writings on it (“mycroglyphs”), telling the story of Earth’s history from a microbial perspective.

Imagining and acknowledging microbes to be the main storytellers of the history of the Earth. (Jacobs et al)

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Funky, which is fungal supercoding, looks at fungi obviously from the title and it talks about biological coatings to protect biomaterials. And it illustrates the possibility of living matter in an approachable way. What do bio artists hope to demonstrate? What is the purpose of bio art? So think a little bit about that.

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Funkee: Fungal Supercoating

Fungi, isolated from a human patient

Design of a biological coating to protect biomaterials, presented through a commercial and educational set-up explaining bio-based research process.

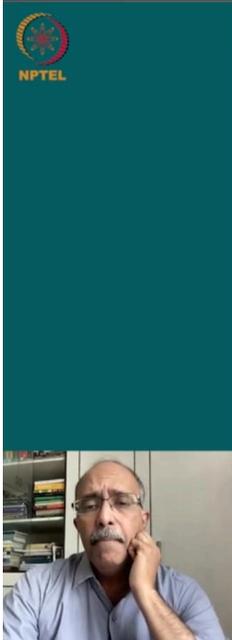
Illustrating possibilities of living matter in an approachable manner

(Jacobs et al)

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It points to the fact that the so-called human uniqueness, or human singularity, is actually not singular. It is actually a conglomerate or, to use a favorite post-humanist term, an assemblage of various elements from the environment, which means that we need to start thinking of the human form, of the human body as such, as a certain assemblage dependent upon other forms. Dependent upon other forms. In all these cases, the emphasis as you can see is on the linkage of humans with other life forms, which, like I began today, is a twist in the tale of humans as hierarchical superiors. It shows very clearly that humans are not inherently superior.

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'Bio artists recognize the other-than-human organisms to be collaborators, which in turn renders interesting perspectives to recast methodological and socially engaged research practices. Including other-than-humans in research-oriented explorations of reality might guide us toward new ways of knowing that intrinsically comprise multispecies entanglement...

As the life-sustaining boundaries of planet Earth are being crossed one after another and sustainable transformation is urgently required, bio art can pave new pathways for reconnecting with the natural world'.
Jacobs et al

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Humans are what they are because they have co-evolved with other species. And bio art is a way of reimagining that. Remember what we have said in our list of things that post-humanists use as responses to the Anthropocene crisis: that in literature, you imagine a world in a different way, right? So does bio art.

Bio art also focuses on rethinking and reimagining the human's relationship with the environment. And as you can see, if you go back to your week five module on bio art, experiments and artworks have been executed through collaborations of artists with scientists, biologists, and medical doctors. They point to humans as sentinel species, humans as possibly affected by plastics in their blood, which is, of course, the artwork becoming a sentinel species. And it draws attention to the fact that these plastics come from the ocean, entering the bodies of non-human animals as well as humans. So the whole idea that

some creatures are not affected is not true. All of us are affected to different but similar degrees. Bioart points to this. So bioart is a very important post-humanist response to the Anthropocene crisis, constantly drawing attention to the fact that we are assemblages, we are relational, we are connected. The toxins that enter the planet in some form will get into us.

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References

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If a toxin gets into us, it gets into other species as well. It gets into the soil and the non-living as well. So, post-humanist responses to the Anthropocene have been varied, particularly in the domains of literature, philosophy, and art. Thank you.