

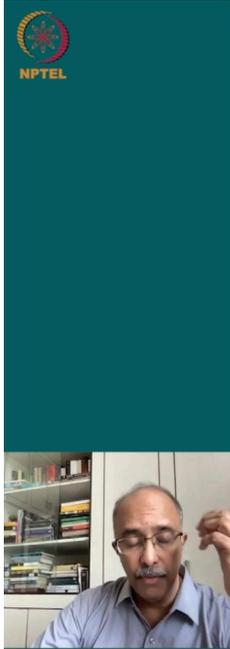
Posthumanism: An Introduction
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Lecture 34

Lec 34 : The Posthuman, the Anthropocene and the Post-natural in Contemporary Literature -I

This is Pramod Nair of the Department of English at the University of Hyderabad, and we continue our exploration of the post-humanist intersection with environmentalism, the Anthropocene crisis, and what we are trying to trace as the post-humanist responses to these current conditions. In the previous modules, when we looked at post-humanist responses, we noted the fact that Literature has been a major domain in which responses have been enunciated and articulated forcefully in several cases to the Anthropocene crisis, which is basically the climate change crisis. We have also noted that in fields such as bio-art and performance art, there have been multiple forms of responses. Artists working with organic material, artists working with their own bodies, artists working with soil, animal life, plant life what have you to demonstrate the post-humanist view of the world as one made up of connections rather than separation: the linkages of the human and the non-human, the living and the non-living, the

intertwining of environmental injustice with social injustice. We have also noted that the critical genealogies of post-humanism which include feminist responses to science and technology, disability studies, animal studies, and plant studies all of these have incorporated specific views of the Anthropocene, specific responses to the Anthropocene, for the simple reason that post-humanism emerges as a critical school, almost coterminous with the rising consciousness about the climate crisis. So, for people working with literature by which I mean, of course, both novelists and literary critics it has been a very clear index of how human perceptions of humanity have produced an environmental crisis, which means to say that the post-humanists have recognized that humans positioning themselves at the top of the hierarchy an instrumental view of the world their idea that we need to dominate and control other forms of life,

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Climate change fiction (of many varieties, including eco-apocalypse and eco-topia) is a key genre of posthumanist fiction with a strong interest in the Anthropocene.

Examples of these include Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* Trilogy, Paolo Bacigalupi's *Windup Girl*, Becky Chambers' *A Psalm for the Wild-built* and others.

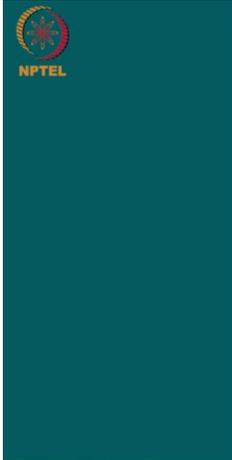
The Posthuman, the Anthropocene and the Post-natural in Contemporary Literature I

This view, for many of the post-humanists practically for all the post-humanist the key problem. So, post-humanists draw attention to the fact that we are not autonomous, coherent entities; we are connected identities, that our subjectivity is actually inter-subjective, that what we think of as a human form is, in fact, an assemblage, a congeries, of multiple life forms, and that we survive, we live, we eat, We have neurological, alimentary, orthopedic, and other processes all working because we have ingested sometime in our evolutionary past We continue to retain some of these, and that's why these other life forms are a part of who we are.

That's why even the non-living life forms, the inanimate, constitute us. As in humans. So, this is an important recognition that we are not separate. In the next couple of sessions, we will look at post-humanism, this particular theme of the Anthropocene and the post-natural in contemporary literature. Cult works now Paolo Bacigalupi's 'The Windup Girl,' Becky Chambers' 'A Psalm for the Wild-Built,' Margaret Atwood's 'MaddAddam' Trilogy have become cults because they bring together the genre of climate change fiction and posthumanism literature to show that

The post-humanist stance on the world, the planet, and other life forms is actually an environmentalist perspective. Now, climate change fiction is of many varieties, which includes the eco-apocalyptic, the ecotopian, and the industrial techno-disaster novel. Post-humanist Anthropocene fiction ensures that the human is not the center of action, but very often shows that wherever the human being is the center of action, it has resulted in environmental troubles, disasters, or catastrophes. Instead, post-humanist Anthropocene fiction shows the intersections of the human and the non-human, the living and the non-living.

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Posthumanist Anthropocene fiction refuses to set the human as the centre of the action but shows the intersections of human-nonhuman, living and non-living ontologies.

Posthumanist Anthropocene fiction embraces a nonhuman perspective as well, seeking to communicate and centre the suffering and subjectivity of the nonhuman, or as much as of this can be imagined.

Eg. In Jeff VanderMeer's *The Strange Bird* the sensations and suffering of the biotechnologically modified bird is the focalizing vision of the novel.

The Posthuman, the Anthropocene and the Post-natural in Contemporary Literature I

So it refuses to give primacy to the human, which is really the crucial dimension of post-humanist thought. So where there is a clear centering of the human, a hierarchization of the human, you know that there has been, as a result of this, some kind of environmental catastrophe. Degradation of the ecosystem, or what have you. And for post-humanists, therefore, the focus must be on the intersections of the human with the non-human, the living and the non-living. Post-humanist Anthropocene fiction also tries very hard to embrace a non-human perspective as well.

So it tries to communicate the suffering and the subjectivity of the non-human as much as you can. Imagine the non-human. So if you look at Anthropocene fiction, as well as Jeff VanderMeer's 'The Strange Bird,' if you look at the prose writings about the peregrine falcon, 'If I Were a Beast' and others, you will see this attempt to embrace, to present, to document the non-human perspective. You might recall an earlier Richard Adams novel also about rabbits, which is obviously the key instance of an earlier text. Richard Adams' 'Watership Down,' I'm sorry, I got the name and the author mixed up.

But the animal perspective is being foregrounded. So what does it mean? It means very simply that let's not think of the human and the human's suffering, the human's ambitions and aspirations as the key plot device of any novel. Let's also start thinking of the non-human and what role it plays. Let's think of the non-human as life forms with character, life forms with agency, life forms with the will to do things.

Okay? Post-humanist Anthropocene fiction acknowledges the locals. It focuses on the fact that a particular locality, a particular locale, is very often the scene of climate change's consequences. So if you think of novels like 'The Nutmeg's Curse,' which is not quite a novel, but if you think of 'Gun Island,' the 'Ibis Trilogy' from Amitav Ghosh, the new slavery novels of Isabel Allende I'm thinking of 'Island Beneath the Sea,' 'Legacies,' 'The Homegoing,' Cynthia McLeod's 'The Cost of Sugar' several of these ones.

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Posthumanist Anthropocene fiction acknowledges the local/locale/locality as the immediate scene of climate crisis, but also demonstrates how this crisis may originate elsewhere.

Such fiction often presents events occurring on global scale rather than just a local one.

Eg. David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* shows how events from some part of the world impacts an entirely different part of the planet. Almost all of Amitav Ghosh's recent work (fiction and non-fiction, *The Ibis Trilogy*, *Gun Island*, *The Nutmeg's Curse*) shows colonizing and globalizing Processes that affect the land, its resources and people in distant parts of the planet); and the neo-slavery novels of Isabel Allende (*Island Beneath the Sea*), Yaa Gyasi (*The Homegoing*) and Cynthia McLeod (*The Cost of Sugar*) show how European cultures of travel, sugar consumption drove plantation cultures in the 'New World'

The Posthuman, the Anthropocene and the Post-natural in Contemporary Literature I

The focus is very interestingly articulated. The novels show the transformation, the impact on a particular locality, a country in Africa, a village in Kerala, a suburban place, or an island in Mauritius or Bengal. But its refusal to foreground only the locals. What do I mean by this? I am suggesting that the crisis in a particular locality, the crisis in a particular region, is not originating in that particular region.

Which means to say that the locale or the locality may have the adverse impact of things that have happened elsewhere. And if you go back over your previous modules, I gave you the example from Marwa Cohn's work on the Arctic and the Inuit people, where Cohn demonstrated that the toxins in their blood in the blood of the Siberian Greenland native people Those toxins don't originate in their regions simply because there are no polluting industries there. What's that supposed to mean?

It means very simply that events happen somewhere, and consequences are here. So Chernobyl affected animal and plant life in Sweden. It produced acetone in England. So to say that we don't have any polluting industries and we are safe is actually an illusion. It's a myth.

As we have understood with Bhopal and Fukushima and Chernobyl and Three Mile Island, geographical variation does not necessarily ensure geographical isolation. So you may be somewhere else, but that does not mean you won't be affected. Which is why my example came from Marlacon's *Silent Snow*, a nod towards Rachel Carson's pioneering work *Silent Spring*. Marlacon discovered, and I'm repeating here, that the Inuit and the Siberian and the Greenlander people had large quantities of toxins in their blood, in their breast milk, in their bodies, Although they did not produce any of those toxins in local factories.

Tracing the origins of these toxins back in time and place, Marlacombe discovered that they, as in the toxins, originated in American industries. The toxins were dumped into the Atlantic. The toxins from the Atlantic got into the bodies of animals such as the beluga, whales, and the seals. The Inuits and the Siberians and the Greenlanders consumed the meat of these creatures and therefore assimilated the toxins. Now ask yourself this.

What's local here? How is it local? The point I want to underscore here is that post-humanist anthropocene fiction may focus on a particular locality, but very often they present the events as occurring elsewhere or on a global scale, but which impacts local populations, local soil, water, etc. To reiterate the examples I mentioned before, almost all of Amitabh Ghosh's fiction and non-fiction

Shows how globalizing activities and processes, such as colonialism, the slave trade, and resource extraction, affect the land, the people, and the resources. The newer slavery novels do much the same thing. Post-humanist Anthropocene fiction embraces what people now call deep time. Deep time is a time before humanity appeared. Or at least in the very early stages of humanity's appearance on Earth.

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Posthumanist Anthropocene fiction also addresses 'deep time', a time well before humanity (or at least its antiquity) and sometimes time several centuries into the future.

In many cases there is a forced return to a more 'basic' life (back to earth), the making of a new theology ('Earthseed' in Butler, 'the gardeners' in Atwood) that is more connected with the earth.

Eg. William Golding's *The Inheritors*, about the Neanderthals attempts to imagine human origins and futures.
The post-apocalyptic novels of Octavia Butler (the *Xenogenesis* Trilogy), Atwood (*MaddAddam* Trilogy) and earlier texts like William Golding's *The Inheritors*

The Posthuman, the Anthropocene and the Post-natural in Contemporary Literature |

Post-humanist Anthropocene fiction always tries to think in terms of what the planet was like during that time. And one of the early and classic instances of such a text is William Golding's *The Inheritors*. So you ask yourself, where and how did the transformation of the planet occur? How was the planet before, and how is it now? What is the genealogy of planetary crisis?

What is the genealogy of climate disaster? But another kind of post-humanist Anthropocene fiction also exists. And that is when, in the post-apocalyptic world, humanity is forced to return to a very basic, non-technological life. What does that mean?

In stories and novels, such as Octavia Butler's or Margaret Atwood's, humanity discovers that the earth has become unlivable, and not only is it unlivable, but they also lack the requisite technology, resources, including fuel, to survive there. Some of you might even remember fictional feature films, such as *The Book of Eli* or *I Am Legend*, which depict So it is devoid of people, devoid of products, devoid of consumer culture, right? So the idea is also that humanity might have to return to a more basic life form. 'Basic' is in quotes.

And in many cases, such as Octavia Butler's and Margaret Atwood's, a new theology begins to emerge, a new way of spirituality begins to emerge, and in these cases, the theology and the spirituality are embedded in the earth by which I mean it is more connected, more grounded than what it used to be. So this is not about just having new gods and demons, no. It's about recognizing the connection of humans with the rest of the planet. It's about how humans, when forced to, can actually live with just nature and no technology. But that's not all.

Post-humanist Anthropocene fiction also reimagines the city. So it's not just about going back to nature. It notes that the city has somehow retained its spaces but rethinks the relationship with water or air, which means let's not retain our traditional approaches to water, air, and the elements. Let's not think in terms of repeating the mistakes we have made. Okay.

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Posthumanist Anthropocene fiction also reimagines the city and human spaces by focusing on elements like water or air (Bayes)

Given posthumanism's emphasis on ecologies and human forms (and other lifeforms) as interlinked, these texts focus on commonalities and relationalities.

Eg. In Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* the creation-story of the deity (Nu Wa) centralizes the role of water in the origin stories of land, lifeforms and even nations. The novel also unsettles the myth of single-origins and authenticity.

The Posthuman, the Anthropocene and the Post-natural in Contemporary Literature I

Given posthumanism's interest lies in also emphasis on ecologies and ecologies which are interlinked, posthumanist anthropocene fiction focuses on commonalities and relationalities, not just isolated pieces of life or forms of life. So, here are examples such as Larissa Lyne's *Salt Fish Girl*, which is a creation story of a deity, which centralizes the role of water in the origin stories of the land. It is about nations, of course, life forms, and it unsettles the idea of single origins and authenticity. Post-humanist Anthropocene

fiction imagines different forms of ecological and anthropogenic. By anthropogenic we mean human origin trauma and attempts to overcome this.

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Posthumanist Anthropocene fiction also imagines different forms of ecological and anthropogenic (of human origin) trauma and human attempts to overcome these.

Eg. In Don DeLillo's *Zero K* imminent natural disasters, an overuse of technology, and terrorism threaten the planet. The secluded cryonics facility operated by the Convergence company offers the solution: freeze your body now and wake up in the future – a techno-utopian escape plan.

The Posthuman, the Anthropocene and the Post-natural in Contemporary Literature I

So if you were to take a look at Don DeLillo's *Zero K*, disasters are coming. But if the disasters are coming, which touch on the planet and human life, technology comes to the rescue. Now this, if you might remember, is the transhumanist emphasis, right? The technology in the rescue.

And in Don DeLillo's novel *0K*, a company offers to freeze your body and retrieve it several years later, by which some things would have presumably settled down. Transhumanist anthroposy in fiction calls attention to themes like species death and the post-natural. What does "post-natural" mean? A term popularized by Rebecca Raglan and others. The post-natural is a wilderness constructed by humans.

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Posthumanist Anthropocene fiction also calls attention to themes like species death and the 'postnatural' where nature, in the form of wilderness, is also constructed by the humans through technology.

Eg. In the 'new weird' fiction of Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* Trilogy, the wilderness that is now inhospitable to humans is itself the product of human global capital and technology. The creatures in his *Borne* are lab- and industry manufactured even as the river water, the soil and other elements have been irreversibly toxified. (Nayar)

In Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (the first part of the *MaddAddam* Trilogy) both humans and nonhumans (plants as well as animals) are technologically modified.

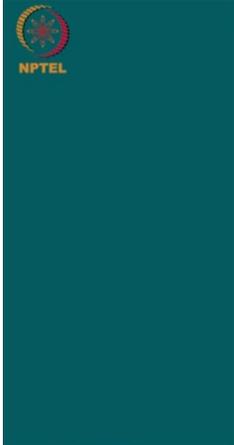
The Posthuman, the Anthropocene and the Post-natural in Contemporary Literature I

Now, that might seem like a contradiction in terms. It sounds very much like a contradiction in terms. That you have the wild areas, the wilderness. But only the wilderness has been constructed by humans. And when you say constructed by humans, you invariably think of the construction of anything by humans involving technology.

An excellent example of a wilderness that has been produced for particular reasons, in this case commercial, would be Jurassic Park. Now, in the post-humanist anthropocene fiction, this wilderness has to be protected and safeguarded, etc., etc. You see it in the new weird fiction of Jeff VanderMeer. I'm thinking principally here of the Southern Reach trilogy, where the wilderness... is the creation of a certain kind of conjunction, shall we say.

It has become inhospitable to humans, but it's the result of human global capital and technology, and you see this amplified in his later novel *Borne*. Here, lab and industry manufactured creatures although everything has been toxified, right? You see it also in *Oryx and Crake*. So, post-humanist anthropocene fiction is interested in planetary precarity, and allow me to reiterate the point I have made before: that while the interest is in the local conditions, the local incidents, a good post-humanist novel is

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Posthumanist Anthropocene fiction is interested in

- Planetary precarity
- A relational and connected identity of all life forms
- Rethinking the relationship between the living and non-living
- The collapse of techno-utopias
- The ethics of creating post-natural worlds

The Posthuman, the Anthropocene and the Post-natural in Contemporary Literature I

Climate change Anthropocene novels will show that whatever is happening in a particular locality, in a particular locale, is not originating there but originates elsewhere. Which means although the scale, the scale of the local, is just a particular town, The novelists show that whatever is happening in that town comes from somewhere else, but also that this town contributes to the expansion of the problem to somewhere else. So it's impossible to think of completely segregated places. We are looking at a condition where there are multiple demands.

Multiple demands. Right? And whatever has happened, like the instances we have looked at, you do not know what has happened elsewhere, but you are also affected. That is planetary precarity. So planetary precarity is not necessarily global nuclear war.

No, not at all. Planetary precarity is the precariousness of your life and mine in our specific villages or cities because something has happened elsewhere. So we lead, as in humans, lives in a particular locality with the assumption that we are away from the world. No. Not quite the case.

Right? So, planetary precarity is a mixture of the local and the global, a scaling up of the local into the global. It emphasizes a relational and you can please see this as a summary post-humanist anthroposophical answer looks at... A relational and connected identity of all life forms, which causes us to rethink the relationship between, or relationships between, the living and the non-living, but also the hierarchy between the non-living and the living. Anthropocene fiction rejects the idea of techno-utopia.

It is not feasible. It's not feasible. It sometimes calls for rethinking the relationship in terms of rewilding, bringing back extinct species. It looks at the ethics of creating post-natural worlds. Is it alright to create worlds like that?

Is it alright to, with the use of capitalism, technology, and humanity, construct an artificial place which we then call the wilderness? Okay, so the debate here is actually between not just the local and the global of different scales but the ethics of setting aside land as land for the animals. The human forest dweller might wonder, alright, as to... Is this wilderness at all? Now, if you go back to your classic work on the subject, which would be Jurassic Park, the attempt is to bring back dinosaurs and create a wilderness sanctuary. Right?

They call it a park. Yes. Except that the dinosaurs lived in a time when they were the biggest predators on Earth. Most of the dinosaurs were vegetarian. Okay?

Assuming that the breeding of the dinosaurs is successful, the question you have to ask is: Is the world of Jurassic Park now a replica of the world they inhabited before humans came? The answer is very definitely no. So here is wilderness, here is an animal sanctuary, but both created by the active collaboration between science, technology, and human capital. So Post-humanist Anthropocene fiction also wonders about the ethics of

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The Posthuman, the Anthropocene and the Post-natural in Contemporary Literature I

creating supposed national parks, and that in most cases, the national park is emergent due to the conjunction that we have been speaking about. And the conjunction sometimes does not work, which is, of course, the premise of Jurassic Park that when you put the dinosaurs into an environment, saying, 'Oh, this is what they ate; this is how they lived,' the point is: Are you sure? And as you can see from the overdramatic presentation, you have to somehow control even the wilderness. So the wilderness has been created and controlled. The animals there are built by us and are natural. The post-natural is a mixture of these.

We will continue this exploration in our next session.