

## **Posthumanism: An Introduction**

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**Lecture 35**

### **Lec 35 : The Posthuman, the Anthropocene and the Post-natural in Contemporary Literature -II**

This is Pramod Nair of the Department of Industry, University of Hyderabad, and we continue our exploration of the intersections of post-humanist thought, critical post-humanist thought, with environmentalism, or what we are calling post-human and anthropocene, post-human and anthropocene. And in the previous sessions where we looked at this particular intersection, we noted how post-humanism's emphasis on relationality, intersubjectivity, the famous Stacey-Alima theorization of transcorporeality and other concepts, decenter the human. It also demolishes the very prevalent, very widely held view that the human being is not only at the center of the universe but the human being is also entitled to govern over, to dominate, to and to use other forms of life on the planet.

Which means for critical posthumanism the Anthropocene which is defined as the era of the earth or the planet which has seen the direct interventions of the human. The Anthropocene is a notional era in the age of the earth where human influence has had the maximum impact, most of it, of course, negative, which means to say that the Anthropocene is a theoretical concept which notes that humans have adversely affected the earth and in the process affected the life worlds, the life choices, the abilities, the very grounds of survival. of several non-human life forms. But it has also adversely affected the non-living, which means to say that the role that humanity has played in shaping the planet to what it is today is irreversible and undeniable.

So the Anthropocene crisis, which is essentially the crisis of climate change, is attributed in this post-humanist view to the actions of humanity since its arrival upon Earth. It is also important to recognize that critical posthumanism concepts which decentralize the human, which decenter the human, are attempts to show that humanity is not the center of the universe nor is humanity or the human form an autonomous self-contained coherent being. That what we identify as the human is an assemblage of multiple organisms co-producing life, co-evolving into life over millennia on planet earth. It also means that for critical post-humanists

Our mythic instrumentalization of the world, our conceptual creation and construction of humanity as an abhazal, as a crown of creation, has often regularly neglected this position, this fact that we have co-evolved with creatures, that our rise, expansion, and success is principally due to the cooperation of other creatures. So when the post-human addresses the Anthropocene, it also notes the fact that in many cases we have constructed wildernesses that are post-natural, as if they're not natural creations; they are produced. We took the example of Jurassic Park, you know, the more famous books slash films to talk about this. So we now speak of post-human rights, which are the rights of

animal-human hybrids, human-machine assemblages, and new life forms that have been created by humans.

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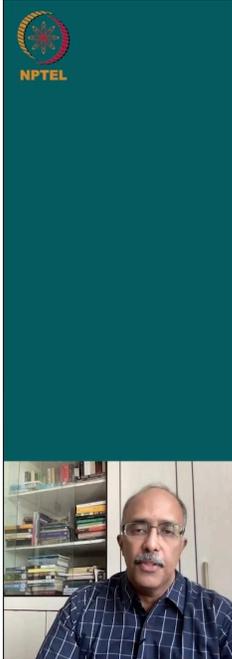
One now has to speak of 'posthuman rights' of

- Animal-human hybrids
- Human-machine assemblages
- New life forms and organisms modified by/created by humans (clones, artificial beings).

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

So in today's, this particular module, we'll be looking at the post-human, the Anthropocene, and the post-natural in contemporary literature. So let's take a look first at the post-natural wilderness that we now see. Much contemporary sci-fi showcases the struggle of humanity on a toxic, toxified, eroded planet. If you think of Cormac McCarthy's famous novel, *The Road*, or you think of the film *I Am Legend*, the planet Earth has been contaminated, toxified to such an extent that life is very difficult there. Not only for humans, please understand not only for humans.

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#### The Postnatural Wilderness

Much contemporary sci-fi showcases the struggle of humanity

- (i) on an /toxified/eroded planet
- (ii) In places where humanity is excluded, or where it is too dangerous for humans to go
- (iii) On detechnologized earth
- (iv) In a return-to-the-land and feral lives

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In places where humanity has been excluded, such as the famous exclusion zone in and around Chernobyl, where the explosion took place, the nuclear reactor accident occurred, you will see that it is too dangerous for humans to go. You will also see the struggle of humanity on a de-technologized earth, and you can think of images from films that constantly show vehicles without fuel or large-scale malls without electric power because power has more or less gone off, given that there's no more humanity to ensure power generation. All forms of technology therefore have more or less been eroded or completely died. It's also, as you might remember from what you said last time, a return to the land where they have to return to basics of surviving on land and they lead feral lives.

Literature about post-national wilderness demonstrates how humanity survives. I just gave you the example of I Am Legend. Then there is, of course, Octavia Butler's famous Parables and Xenogenesis series. Margaret Atwood's now cult text, the Mad Adam trilogy, the novels of Becky Chambers. In all these, the authors, the novelists signal a recolonization, but with a difference.

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Literature about postnatural wilderness demonstrates how humanity survives (*I Am Legend* [film], Octavia Butler's *Parables* and *Xenogenesis* series, Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy), the novels of Becky Chambers (*A Psalm for the Wild-built*)

They signal both the (re)colonization (but with a difference: deference to Nature) and utilization of Nature. (Nayar)

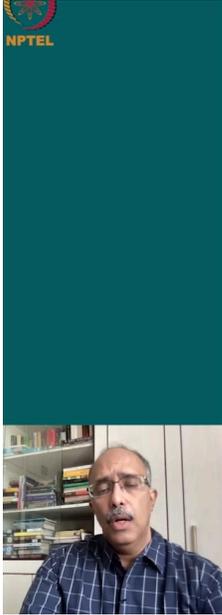
#### The Posthuman, the Anthropocene and the Post-natural in Contemporary Literature - II

This recolonization of the earth has a different attitude toward nature, which is primarily one of deference as respect and a different attitude toward the utilization of nature. Which is to say that humans are not abandoning the Earth. That is also one of the themes where you migrate to another planet and set it up as an alternative home for humanity. The theme is called terraforming in science fiction.

But that's not the point I am emphasizing here. What I'm drawing attention to is that in these novels, humanity tries to recolonize the Earth, to return to Earth. Given their history of disaster, of environmental crisis, they return to colonize the Earth with a very different set of attitudes toward nature, with a very different and even deferential attitude toward nature, which is to say that I'm not over-exaggerating the claim here that humanity has learned from its past. Now, I do not want to go that far, but it's definitely clear that humanity, in these novels at least, has begun to say that, you know what, perhaps we should not go back to that form of life.

Perhaps we should change our approach to nature, be less utilitarian, and be more careful in terms of utilization of resources. So, it's a different attitude. The post-natural is a term that comes from Rebecca Raglan, who defines it as dangerous areas where humans are excluded, and human exclusion from these areas causes them to become wilderness reserves. This means once humanity leaves a particular place or is unable to return to it, that place becomes the province, the domain of animal and plant life once again.

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#### The postnatural

'dangerous areas where humans are excluded ... human exclusion from these areas that makes them wilderness reserves' (Raglan)

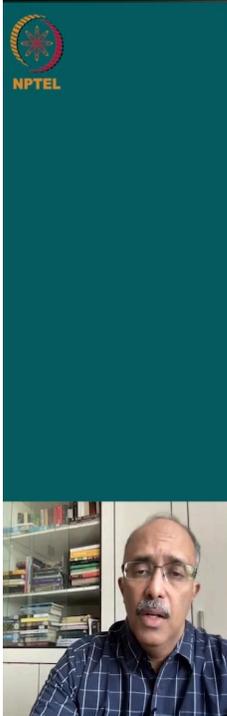
Although fictional strategies may differ in important ways from perhaps more narrowly defined strategies that Raglan discusses (she is referring to nature-writing, not fictional texts, in her typology), her idea of a postnatural wilderness set aside *due* to human intervention is important in understanding the novel as a wilderness text. In this sense, wilderness may also be wasteland or urban wilderness. (Crane)

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Effectively, once humanity exits the scene or the place, it becomes available for other forms of life to occupy. Because humanity has always prevented other life forms from making the same kind of claims upon the land, upon the place, since the bulk of the land was occupied by humans. Other commentators have noted that fictional strategies may differ in important ways from the more narrowly defined strategies that Rebecca Raglan has discussed. Raglan is particularly discussing nature writing.

But the idea of the post-natural wilderness is important enough because we need to understand human intervention as preparing the world and wilderness in a different way. And wilderness may also therefore be a wasteland or urban wasteland. We have mentioned this novel before, but Jeff VanderMeer's new weird fiction, particularly in 'Borne' and other texts, is about the more-than-human. 'Borne,' of course, is a biotech thriller, and it asks a very old question, one dating back to Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein.' What are the responsibilities that humans have toward the creatures we have created?

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Jeff VanderMeer's 'new weird' in *Borne* and other texts are about more-than-human.

*Borne* as a biotech thriller asks: what is the human responsibility towards what humans have created?

The posthuman is dependent on the 'post-natural': a world and its inhabitants irrevocably altered by the humans.

In the post-apocalyptic world of VanderMeer, the human and nonhuman have all been reduced to *zoe*, or bare life. In that desolate landscape, humans do *not* have the upper hand, and the helplessness of the humans ... as they struggle to survive is a vision of a post-anthropocentric world.

It is not the extinction of the human as much as a dethroning of the human from the centre of the earth

Nayar

*The end of the Anthropocene implies the end of human control over nature: the future belongs to human-nonhuman hybrids*

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

The post-human in Jeff VanderMeer's world, particularly in 'Borne,' the post-human is dependent on the post-natural, a world that has been irrevocably altered by humans, which means in the post-apocalyptic world of VanderMeer, the human and the non-human have been reduced to bare life. I'm using the term, of course, from Giorgio Agamben, where he distinguishes between bare life and political life. But in VanderMeer's post-apocalyptic world of post-apocalyptic, some future age in Earth's history, the humans do not have the upper hand. And they foreground the helplessness, as the novels foreground the helplessness of the human as they battle to survive in a particularly hostile world.

It is, as I said, recolonization. But the recolonization is a very difficult task that has been set out for them. So it means, basically, that humanity has to survive, struggle, and battle the elements. This does not mean, as in this kind of fiction, the extinction of the human as much as a de-centering of the human. It does not mean that the human dies, but humanity ceases to exist as the center of the world, as the center of the planet.

So the end of the Anthropocene, if there is such a thing, implies the end of human control over nature because the future belongs to human-non-human hybrids. There is no pure human race left. All humanity has been cyborg, has become chimerical, or they have become chimeras. And the human-machine, human-animal hybrid will be the norm of what we understand as humans.

So the future will belong there. Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote* were the monsters and the freaks. And the shifting identity suggests a rejection of common humanity. And it points to how humanity constructs its monstrous others. Basically, that humanity builds its others.

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Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote*: The monsters and freaks, and the shifting identities suggests a rejection of common humanity and points to how humanity constructs its (monstrous) others.

In cyberpunk texts like Laura Mixon's *The Glass House* a cyborg identity enables the human to possess non-traumatic multiple selves, including the duality of sexes. The focus is on identity as not-stable.

Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* is also about unstable identities but this time, the human identity also interfaces with spirits and others.

Sasha Myerson in Vint and Buran

In short fiction such as Octavia Butler's 'Speech Sounds' and Ted Chiang's 'The Great Silence', the stories blur the self/ other boundary. Through their 'representation of the animal and the infrahuman', they call for a 'reconsideration of the human and of consciousness' and in the process a 'mobilizing [of] a posthuman ethics'

Maria Ferrandez-Sanmiguel in Vint and Buran

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Laura Mixon's *The Glass House*. Again, a cyborg identity enables the human to have multiple selves. Some of which are also of indeterminate or double gender. So the focus is on identity, which is flexible, which is dynamic, which is constantly shifting and moving around. Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* is also about unstable identities, except that in this case, human identity interfaces with demons, gods, spirits, and all sorts of

inhuman, non-human forms of being. And therefore, it again signals the fact that there is no stable human identity. Now, what do these convey? I mean, what do these kinds of complicated identities convey? The point is that we have assumed for a very long time that humanity, when it evolves, when it develops,

Will retain a measure of our current conditions, looks, and physiology. But why do we assume that when humanity evolves into a later form, we will look the same and behave in the same way? So many of these authors, like Kathy Acker and Nalo Hopkinson, are probing the future of human evolution. That our consciousness, our looks, our physiology could all very well become something else. Principally because what we think of as natural as in human beings being quote-unquote natural we now know is not natural.

Right from the moment of conception and birth, humans are shaped in particular ways. Limbs, teeth, the shape of the head all are massaged, pummeled, and treated in ways so that they look and function as per the norms we have defined humanity by. But why do we assume that the future of humanity will also be like this? Or conversely, can we think of

humanity as evolving into slightly or majorly different forms? Why not? I mean, what is the particular advantage of our current mode of being? Nature itself is constantly being

organized, governed, and renewed by humans and technologies. And as a consequence, when you think of conservation projects and sanctuaries, what is natural about the sanctuary?

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But 'nature' itself is being organized, governed and renewed by humans and technologies, so that what is 'natural' and what is not becomes difficult to distinguish.

Eg.

- Conservation projects
- Rewilding (the resurrection of extinct species)

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What is natural about wildlife conservation or biodiversity reserves? As you know, biodiversity reserves and biospheres are major programs and projects now, which involve scientists, anthropologists, governments, etc. And we have things called bioreserves. India has a few.

Several countries have a very large number of bio reserves. And what are these biodiversity parks? Biodiversity parks are the official formal name by which we know them. What are these biodiversity parks? The question is, are biodiversity parks natural?

As in the landscape, the animal life, the plant life are, in some sense, in our understanding, natural. But humanity organizes that place in a way that those animals are not disturbed. that the plant life remains fertile, green, etc. So, is it natural? Is the sanctuary in which we want to keep the elephants, the birds, or a particular species of fish or whatever it might be these natural?

Or are they post-natural? Where the wilderness, the sanctuary, the biodiversity park are all actually interventions engineered by a complicated mixture of human life as in humanity technology, as in science, because I do not know whether you are aware of the fact that the animals and birds released into these sanctuaries or brought there are often tracked with the help of GPS monitors installed on them. Now tell me, or think about it for yourself: is it a natural park? Is it a natural animal?

Is it in any way what we understand as Nature with a capital N? Then think of projects like rewilding. Rewilding is the attempt to bring extinct species back to life. The first major one is, of course, the novel we usually return to: Michael Crichton's Jurassic Park,

which also, of course, becomes our best, very large-scale blockbuster from Steven Spielberg. You also have James Brady's *Ghost Species* and numerous works of nonfiction, such as *Mammoth: The Resurrection of an Ice Age Giant*.

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Rewilding

Rewilding/postnatural texts:

Fictional works like *Jurassic Park* (Michael Crichton) and *Ghost Species* (James Bradley), non-fiction such as *Mammoth: The Resurrection of an Ice Age Giant* (Richard Stone)

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Rewilding is the attempt to revive extinct species. The dinosaur, of course, is the big challenge, as the novel and the film show. But it's also to do with what people have argued is the healing of nature. And the Global Charter for Rewilding the Earth, which is now available, was the result of a major rewilding conference in Jaipur two years ago. Rewilding is defined in the Global Charter for Rewilding the Earth as helping nature heal.

It means giving space back to wildlife, and I'm quoting from the document. Rewilding means giving space back to wildlife and returning wildlife to the land, as well as, of course, to the seas. Rewilding is the mass recovery of ecosystems and the life-supporting functions they provide. Rewilding means restoring and protecting specific places on land and in the ocean where nature is free to direct the ebb and flow of life. It's about allowing natural processes to shape whole ecosystems.

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'restoring species and, more important, ecological processes that are absent from contemporary landscapes – especially predation, grazing, succession, dispersion, and decomposition ... a desire to shift the target baseline for conservation away from premodern agricultural archetypes toward the pre- historical ecological conditions that characterized the northern hemi- sphere at the end of the Pleistocene.... The aim is to create analogs of what emerged after the retreat of the glaciers and before agriculture, forestry, and animal domestication'

Lorimer

'science will be complicit in this modification [of a hybrid world] ... the result is a proliferation of knowledge controversies ... there is no single Nature or mode of Natural knowledge.... The Anthropocene is multinatural

Lorimer

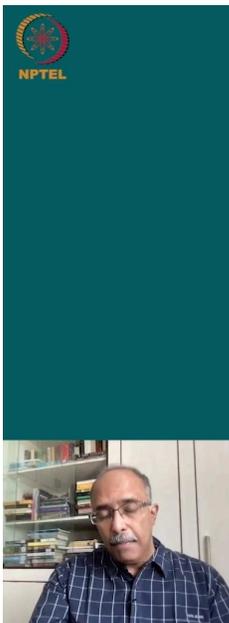
Rewilding means *helping Nature heal*. Rewilding means giving space back to wildlife and returning wildlife back to the land, as well as to the seas. Rewilding means the mass recovery of ecosystems and the life-supporting functions they provide. Rewilding means restoring and protecting specific places – on land and in the ocean – where Nature is free to direct the ebb and flow of life. Rewilding is about allowing natural processes to shape whole ecosystems so that they work in all their colorful complexity to give life to the land and the seas. Such wild lands and waters are critical to sustain ecological vitality by supporting intact food webs and natural processes.

*Global Charter for Rewilding the Earth*

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Now, this all sounds very good, right? I mean, it sounds as though it is something we should do to bring these species back. Except, of course, the problematic line: rewilding is about allowing natural processes to shape whole ecosystems. How exactly are you doing this when you mark off spaces, when you bring technology into the picture? The point is that there's a moral stance also.

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The idea in rewilding is to compensate for the anthropogenic extinctions of several species.

And to

repopulate the modern landscape with extinct fauna like the mammoths

Rewilding is projected as an attempt to save the earth itself and the return of the keystone species is not only about nostalgia for the extinct animals but a necessity directed at the future.

(Nayar)

In rewilding, 'nature' is multinatural, technologized and so represents a postnatural condition

It takes the laboratory into the outdoor areas and makes the outdoor a part of the laboratory.

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That is why the term 'healing nature'. The idea in rewilding is to compensate for the extinction of several species for which humanity has been responsible. That humanity caused the deaths of innumerable species. The dodo is a famous example. Of course, the woolly mammoth is another.

And the woolly mammoth is being rewilded. They are attempting to bring back the woolly mammoth in Siberia in something called the Pleistocene Park. So, it's restitutorial. We are trying to bring back the woolly mammoth or any other species that we have destroyed. And we want to repopulate the modern landscape with extinct creatures like the mammoths.

Rewilding is a project to save the earth itself and to bring back the keystone species. But as I've argued elsewhere, this is not only about the nostalgia for extinct animals, but it is seen as a necessity directed at the future that once these megafauna, megafauna is the term for creatures like the woolly mammoth, they help conservation of the planet's resources. They churn up the soil, they destroy other kinds of plants, they become different, they redo the predatorial order of animals and creatures. So this is what rewilding means.

So as Jamie Lorimer and others have argued, and it's worth taking a look at Lorimer's book, *Wildlife in the Anthropocene*, nature, as Lorimer puts it, is multinatural. It's technologized and therefore nature is actually post-natural which means as Lorimer puts it very simply it takes the laboratory into the outside areas and the outside world becomes a part of the laboratory because all your genetic stuff that you're doing biotech engineering experiments that you're doing are conducted in the lab and taken out into the outdoors right so That means the lab has gone outside and the materials from outside are made part of the laboratory. Now, the question then remains, is this natural or is it post-natural? And the answer should be fairly clear because that quote-unquote natural has been redefined, reorganized, technologized through active human interventions, which means to say that this laboratory

So-called nature is actually part of a laboratory experiment. Now, this, of course, brings us to the key ethical questions. And there are four principal ones. Do extinct life forms have the same right to life as current ones? As in, if you bring back dinosaurs, should you say that the dinosaur has the same animal rights as, say, dogs, cats, horses, and crows, etc.?

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The ethical debates around rewilding and the postnatural include questions like:

- Do extinct lifeforms have the same right to life as current ones?
- Should we revive them?
- Since we know little about their ecosystems or their species characteristics, their engagement with predators and prey (there were no humans during the age of the dinosaurs) how do we know how a revived specimen will behave today?
- Is the revived species 'old' or 'new'?

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Should we revive them at all? Then, since we know very little about the original ecosystems as in, what was the ecosystem of the woolly mammoth, the dodo, or the dinosaur? What kind of predators did they face? What kind of prey were they? Because in the case of the dinosaur, for instance, there were no human beings. How do we know how that revived specimen will behave today?

Which is, of course, the premise of Jurassic Park, right? Once you revive a species, but the species lives in a very different ecosystem. The world before humanity appeared on planet Earth was a very different world. It was a very different biome or a very different ecosystem. Now, you try to bring the animal back, but can you bring back the ecosystem as well?

And will that ecosystem fit into the current climatological conditions? As in the weather at the time of the dinosaurs, which determined which influenced the ecosystem is not the weather we have now. So once you bring back the dinosaurs, you may even bring back the kinds of plants they ate. The vegetarian dinosaurs, I mean. But can you bring back the climate?

Can you bring back the temperature, the quality and quantity of rain, the kind of rivers, and other topographical features from that time? Can we bring those back? Finally, how would you characterize these revived species? Are they old or are they new? In one sense, they are very old because they existed and pre-existed humanity on planet Earth.

Once you revive them through technological interventions through cloning, biotech engineering, or whatever it might be would you call them old or new? As you can see, these are very thorny questions. And like in the case of the rights of artificial beings, which we have discussed in the debates around the ethics of post-humans and the ethics toward post-humans, there are no clear answers. But rewilding projects are underway. Rewilding projects have been massively funded.

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And many people who are, of course, worried also that these are quite romanticized notions of bringing back these creatures, but there are ethical and political consequences. So this is something we need to keep in mind when we talk about the post-natural as well. Thank you.