

**Posthumanism: An Introduction**  
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**Lecture 37**  
**Lec 37 : Posthumanism and the Anthropocene: Group Discussion**

Hello there. So welcome Shri Lakshmi and Akshata. This is the lesson on the post-human and the Anthropocene for week 7, and the overall course is on posthumanism, as you know. Our specific agenda for today is to look at the intersection of interests between post-humanist ways of thinking and particularly environmentalism and what is being called the Anthropocene moment. So let's start with Chilakshmi, with the idea, the genre, the theme of the Anthropocene as expressed in fiction Solarpunk.

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Would you like to start off by telling us a line or two about Becky Chambers' fiction on this? Yes. So Becky Chambers' Monk and Robot series consists of two books called A Psalm for the Wild-Built and A Prayer for the Crown-Shy. These were published in 2021 and 2022, respectively. These are very hopeful narratives that talk about not a very, what should I say, disturbed world or a dystopian world, but they explore human and non-human interactions.

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In the novel, it is between a human and a robot called Moscap, a human monk named Dex and a robot called Moscap. These interactions are very hopeful and they give off very good vibes in the sense that they're just traveling around, selling tea, and discovering the world, so to speak. What Solarpunk does is advocate these very hopeful ways of looking at the world.

The world is not always lost. It's not just desolate or dystopian, but it can be, you know, caught back in ways that if you interact better with nature, if you use sustainable resources and things like that, the novels show how these interactions make the future better. In the sense that the future is not just dystopian. The future is not always bleak or desolate.

It has hope. There is hope in the future, and the future can be... you know, seen in a better light when you read these novels. So that's basically what Solarpunk does. It's not apocalyptic.

Not apocalyptic, not at all. Right. So it's not the end-of-the-world scenario. And like you said, it's a kind of sustainable narrative about sustainable worlds. And what you said, a different relationship with nature and

Yeah, so the battle that you see of man versus nature is not so much visible in the solarpunk. Akshata, would you like to respond to that and build on this when we talk about the Anthropocene's intersection with posthumanism? Yeah, in the sense that, you know, a lot of post-humanist critiques of the Anthropocene point out that it often has a very cynical kind of edge to it. That a lot of times they are not able to imagine a different future because the Anthropocene seems like the endpoint of the narrative. Also, in the sense that because the Anthropocene itself, the word itself comes from Anthropos, meaning humankind or mankind, and a lot of representations of the Anthropocene, a lot of the stories we tell about the Anthropocene have to do with

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the agency of humankind and how they have transformed the planet. So I think a story like Becky Chambers' *A Psalm for the Wild-Built*, what it does is that it helps us to again see human beings in relation to non-human beings and to see them as being embedded in a sort of wider network of beings. Excellent, yes. There's no doubt that it is a different imagination of the future of the planet and of humanity.

But it's also important and interesting to see that Becky Chambers and earlier works on ecotopias speak of sustainability of survival in terms of communities rather than individuals. And that this becomes important as a theme because you're not looking at the lone survivor walking through a desolate countryside, which should be McCarthy's *The Road*. Instead, you have communities not necessarily fighting it out. So let's talk briefly about survival, sustainability, and community themes. Shrilakshmi, would you like to dwell upon that quickly?

Yes, sure. So when you're talking about survival and sustainability themes, what we can see is that Posthumanism is basically about mutual cooperation, living and entanglements, and entangled living and stuff like that. So what you're looking at is the formation of a multispecies community in which the species system, in fact, does not work. A human is not the center of the community that we're looking at.

We're looking at multispecies communities where life forms evolve together. and evolve alongside one another. In these texts, for example, we have Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* or Becky Chambers. In any of these texts, if you look at what they're advocating for, it is a very shared space, a shared community of

living where the human is no longer the center and life forms evolve together as and when possible.

And competition is always rejected in favor of cooperation as well. Yeah, that's interesting because rather than seeing human evolution as solely dependent upon competition, you're talking about cooperation and collectivization here, almost as though indicating that we need to rethink the foundations of human society. And if this cooperation and collectivization, as you pointed out, Sri Lakshmi, is across species as well. Yeah, so Akshita, what do you have to say about this business of communities which are cutting across species, which will, of course, modify how we see ourselves and our experience of the world, which will be broadly speaking

Human subjectivity itself is changing. But the center of that community would like to respond to Srila Lakshmi and say something about this? Yeah, a lot of theorists again, post-human theorists who critique the idea of the Anthropocene also object to the very word 'Anthropocene' because it centers humankind. And, you know, people like Stacey Aremo and Donna Haraway all say that we need other stories that include other species, that we need to think of the Anthropocene always with multiple species. And I think there are you know, this is not a new idea because if you look at Indigenous authors like Linda Hogan, and if you look at some of her poetry, she examines how humankind

is always entangled with other species, not only in the present, as you said, but has co-evolved with them, that there are these ancient kinships. And some of her poems, like if you look at her poem 'Crossings,' it's like an enactment of a memory because the narrator talks about remembering a time when humankind and whales were related or they crossed each other in their paths of evolution. And this, in a sense, she calls it a 'clan of crossings,' that it's a community built out of these evolutionary histories, out of these shared evolutionary paths. So I think that is one of the ways in which authors respond to the idea of how we go about trying to imagine a multispecies community.

Except that, of course, the problem people have raised about the Anthropocene is predicated on the idea that we cannot really visualize the world through another species' eyes because we can only have a vision or a perception determined by our cognitive abilities that have evolved over the millennia. And to suddenly switch between species is not really possible, nor is it perhaps desirable. But yes, the arrogance that makes us assume we are the center of the planet, the center of the universe, the center of all life forms is interesting. And therefore, the shift toward the collective

which marks a major shift in the way we think about it. So, yeah, those are lovely points. And I was just thinking, and I will return here to Akshaka, that in the case of post-human subjectivities, the coordinates that you have yourself outlined species identity, deep time (which is a big theme now), and planetary scale you note the fact that We, as humans, have for a long period of time foregrounded human agency. So would you like to say something about these coordinates in terms of the post-human intersection with the Anthropocene?

Yes, I think when the word Anthropocene, which emerges in scientific debates, arrives in humanities and cultural studies, one of the main questions addressed is the question of

scale. Because when you talk about the Anthropocene, we're talking about geological time, not the human span of life. So that has been one of the major concerns: how do you represent something that is on a different scale, a scale that we cannot perceive or sense? In that sense, there have been representations like if you look at Edward Burtynsky's Anthropocene project, where he has these photographs of the earth, large frames of vast landscapes being quarried, mined, or used for agriculture all of which try to emphasize how human agency, in this accumulated form on a planetary scale, functions and leaves these marks on the earth.

But there have also been critiques of this kind of representation, as you said, that this Anthropocene narrative only emphasizes human agency. And these photographs often depict desolate landscapes without any human presence. But the perspective is from outside the earth itself, and there are no non-human agencies involved. So I think because posthumanism gives us this idea that individuals are not bounded, isolated subjects, but always entangled with and embedded in their environment.

So I think that is a major contribution when it comes to post-humanism helping us to read or re-read the Anthropocene: to think of the Anthropocene subject itself differently not as removed and rolling out and away outside the planet, but to think of human beings and human agency as being in place, embedded within a place. That's very neatly put, yes. I was also thinking, just as you were speaking about Sri Lakshmi's project on Octavia Butler, which is not quite fiction about the Anthropocene per se, but it does call into question the centering of the human particularly in the case of Butler, where the agency is not necessarily of Earth-bound non-humans, but extraterrestrial non-humans, which offers you a very different vision of the points that you are making. Shrilakshmi, would you like to come to this via a little bit of your Octavia Butler reading and work?

Yes. So I'd say, yes, the agency and power, sex relations, gender, and everything are imagined in very different ways in Butler's texts. So what we observe is that, for example, if we talk about the extraterrestrial beings who communicate with each other via neurosensory inputs or things like that, the communication happens on a very different level. So I'm also thinking of someone like Liu Cixin's Three-Body Problem, where the extraterrestrial beings there are the Trisolarans, people from Trisolaris who don't know how to lie. So one of the first things that they're worried about regarding human beings is that they ask, 'Oh, you lie? So how do you lie?'

That's something that they ask. So I think... Does it come naturally? Yeah, does it come naturally? Yes. Since Akshata was talking about the Anthropocene and how humans... We can only see from our point of view and not from the point of view of the other species around.

So, yeah, I was just thinking about the three-body problem. Yes, so we're looking at other species which... sort of communicate in different ways and sort of imagine lives in very different ways that we ourselves are unable to think or imagine the scale of. So, sir, what is the question again? Yeah, the point is that in the case of Butler, she is not looking at relationality and subjectivity with other earthbound creatures.

Yes. In the case of all others, we are thinking of post-human subjectivity as relationality, interconnectedness, but they're still earthbound. In the case of the Butler narratives, you're looking at extraterrestrial, non-earth species coming in. So that lends a further layer to questions of the post-human subject, doesn't it? Yes, yes, yes, it does.

So... So... Ways of looking at, for example, race and sex and gender changes. So we're not just looking at, let's say, race in the sense of black or white or anything like that. So we're looking at it, it doesn't matter anymore. The ways we think about race does not matter.

So what matters is humankind as a whole against another species that is going to conquer us. So, I think if you think about the Anthropocene, and climate change and global warming and everything on that aspect, on that scale, then we might be able to, you know, sort of react to it on a different scale, if that makes sense. Yes, it does. Principally because the matter of scale is of great concern.

Geological scales, yes, the kind of divisions we have made. But also in this case, an entirely different scaling up of operations because it's interplanetary. I think also outer space as well. Yeah. So I want to return to Akshata's point about multispecies and questions of the non-human.

And think in terms of text. You mentioned Bertensky. But would you like to tell us a little more about any other texts that the students enrolled in this course could read in terms of relational and embodied subjectivity? I know you're interested in Nick Hayes's work. So would you like to tell us something about that?

Yes. So, in this case, he does a graphic adaptation, a rewriting of Porridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,' and it's a graphic novel. It's really interesting because as you read through the narrative in the graphic novel, we move from a more Enlightenment view of the human subject toward a more post-human view. And it's interesting that he uses the geography of the page itself to do this. So, in the beginning, you have the human main protagonist, the mariner, in a lot of the early panels. He's alone in his panels, and he has those very firm boundaries in place. But as we move through the text, you have other animals that swarm around his panels, that jut into them, that are kind of you know he's tightly cramped into his panels with these marine animals who look him in the face.

And if, in the beginning, he uses binoculars or the lens on, you know, a rifle to look at other animals. But as he moves through the text, he is forced, in a sense, to acknowledge that they're looking back at him. And it's really interesting because Nick Hayes uses the grammar of the graphic novel itself because, you know, in some places these panels shatter, in some places these frames kind of get mixed up with other panels. So I think that's a very interesting way of showing us how this subjectivity is not isolated, it's not bounded, but it's always, in a sense, enmeshed with other subjectivities. Yeah, that's a lovely text for this particular purpose.

Maybe not as powerful as, say, Butler's fiction, because Butler does a lot more with, say, gender, which Nick Hayes does not do. And which brings us to the next big point in post-humanism's intersection with the Anthropocene, and that's the question of corporeal

identity. We have mentioned Stacy Alaimo and trans-corporeality, so let's move to that one. And Alaimo's argument about the trans-corporeal subject and you just mentioned it, Ashwita is that human bodies are not bounded, And they are actually relational.

Some of it originates in the rather horrific storytelling that Butler does, where, for example, I'm thinking of 'Bloodchild.' Which does a lot of this. The gender-bending things that Ursula Le Guin does in 'The Left Hand of Darkness,' all of which are based, in one sense, on bodies. So let's turn to Shri Lakshmi and ask her about the trans-corporeality thing, using your own examples from your preferred texts. Shri Lakshmi?

Yes. So if you're talking about how the body is imagined and reimagined in very different ways throughout texts. So we have just mentioned 'Bloodchild.' So in 'Bloodchild,' what happens is there is an extraterrestrial species called the Tlic, which lay their eggs in the bodies of human males. And that is all right, doesn't seem very gruesome.

But the most gruesome part about it is when the eggs start coming out; they mature, and they start coming out, and they just start eating their way out of the body if not taken out in time. So that is a very gruesome depiction of how the body can be reimagined in other-than-earthly spaces. Yeah, that's one of the most frightening tales that you read, isn't it, Shri Lakshmi? Practically in all of Butler, I think 'Bloodchild' stands out. Also, I think novels like 'Clay's Ark,' where the human body becomes transformed into an unidentifiable species, more or less.

You're an animal and a human. You're not an animal, not a human. And I think the complication of the body, but in the case of Klesak, of course, emotionally and intellectually as well, your urges and drives are different. Yeah, so I think Bloodchild is a great example to begin with. I'll move back to Akshata now...

forms of knowing and gathering evidence which become a part of environmental justice movements, which are also built around questions of the trans-Paparian that, for example, toxins affect not just the human body, but also others. Would you like to talk about this a bit? Yeah, you know, Shreedakshmi just mentioned that when you look at that child, you have a you know, or when you look at plays out, you have human beings who are transformed into something that is unrecognizable. And that is science fiction, but if you look at a novel like Ambika Sudhanandam's Swarga, which talks about real-life incidents that happened in Kaseko district in Kerala, where endosulfan poisoning, that was the pesticides sprayed on cashew nut plantations, and how they begin to affect human beings, but also everything else in that landscape.

And, you know, a lot of times they talk about how human children, you know, it causes very fast genetic mutations and human children are born And if you look at the novel, a lot of times these children are seen as not being human, that they don't look human at all, that in a sense they are being transformed. The subtitle of the English translation itself is a post-human tale. So it is about how, in a sense, endosulfan is messing with human bodies and transforming them into something that's unrecognizable. And the novel, like you said,

When it comes to gathering scientific evidence, say CLM or others who theorize trans-corporeality, they argue that in today's world, where so many toxins are widespread, it becomes difficult to even understand oneself. So when these people fall sick, it takes them a long time to realize that angiosarcoma is the cause. And again, there are political questions: Do you have evidence for it? Do you have medical evidence? How do you prove that this is what is happening?

And he depicts people struggling with this because the scientists who should be investigating are either silent or forging documents, making it hard to prove causation. It's a very difficult process to map which chemicals cause what. So that is something he depicts very well how citizens struggle to understand and master scientific ideas. Yet this scientific knowledge is part of the post-human ethical stance: you should diagnose a problem.

You should have alternatives, which is why, if you revisit the earlier text you mentioned Becky Chambers's work, it's interesting that it is not. Chambers does not advocate a 'return to earth' argument. There is technology. There is a notion of an advanced civilization, yet it is not the technological utopia postmodernists favored, meaning they are not anti-technology when discussing a 'return to earth.' There is a new religion, of course Earthseed in Butler.

There is a group called the Gardeners in Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam Trilogy. Which means to say that the post-human theme does talk about trans-corporeality, which is inter-species, as Butler shows and Sri Lakshmi mentioned, and with technology, as both of you have highlighted, which brings us to the really major point about how human evolution is being remapped. And that would be the question or theme of co-becoming. So let's return to Shri Lakshmi on this theme of co-becoming, which is, of course, a centerpiece to most of these theories. Shri Lakshmi?

So I was thinking about how new knowledge systems are formed within these narratives as such. New knowledge systems that sort of incorporate not just one way of looking at life, not just the preferences of one species or one partner species, but both human and non-human alike. So, for example, we have Earthseed, which is a religion called Earthseed in the Parable of the Sower and Parable of the Talents. So in Earthseed, what we have is it advocating for partnerships across and beyond to reach the stars, basically.

The motto of Earthseed is to scatter humankind across the universe and to reach other worlds. So what we have is new knowledge systems that arise as such, and they extol sustainability; they extol technology, of course, as necessary to reach the stars, spaceships and the like. And to expand the idea of companion species also, to include Donna Haraway's companion species, in order to form a new kind of multi-species community which thrives on partnerships and companionships.

So, yeah. Yes, so it is more or less co-becoming or becoming with, except that you're not looking at earth-bound species alone; you're not looking at plants or animals alone. You're looking at all sorts of other life forms. Akshita, what do you have to say in response to Akshita's points about this? Hmm. So when you think about companion species I mean, Butler, of course, looks at interstellar communities and all of that.

But when you think about companion species, it is also so simple to think about in the sense that it is what we eat that makes us. And one of the poets I mentioned earlier, Linda Hogan, also has a poem called 'Inside,' which is very interesting because she's playing with what is inside the human, what is outside, and what makes us flesh. That's how she starts the poem. And she talks about how deer meat becomes the hands that work, enabling human labor, and how swallowed grains enable human spirituality.

And spirituality is something we always think of as exclusive to humans. But I think it's very interesting because she talks about how these food grains that we eat nourish us, keep us alive, and in a sense, participate in those spiritual acts that humankind performs. So I think that's one way of thinking about co-becoming: to think about how the human itself cannot survive without the non-human. A biologist like Scott Gilbert talked about how there is no biological individual that you are alive only because you depend on other species just to be alive. So I think that's the most basic sense in which we can understand how we co-become with other species: that we would not be but for other species.

Yeah, I'm sure we understand that very well. So I want to conclude with a question to both of you, and you can give me quick responses to that, whether this particular way of looking at the world in the post-humanist school of thought, particularly looking at the Anthropocene world, does it constitute a certain ethical stance? That is, I think, the way we can wind this up. First, Shri Lakshmi, and then over to you, Akshata. Shri Lakshmi?

So I didn't quite get the question. Does the post-humanist approach here to co-becoming, trans-corporeality, and of course the anthropos, represent a certain ethical stance? Yes, because if you're thinking about the post-human as a genetically improved species, then what we're looking at is that there is no longer a human, right? So we're looking at entangled forms of living. So then what happens to the human as such?

What happens to, you know, life itself, I think, is something that needs to be thought of when we talk about multispecies companionships and living. So the idea of life itself is more open and dead. Akshita for final remarks on the question of this. So what post-humanism gives to the Anthropocene, if you look at them both together, is the idea of relationality, that we are so related.

Because the Anthropocene tends to emphasize human agency as separate somehow. And what the post-human does is that it gives us this idea of relationality and entanglement. As Shri Lakshmi said, the ethics emerge out of those sites of entanglement and out of those sites of intersection. If I have a minute, you know, if I can just give a quick example. If you look at Chris Jordan's Midway project, in which he photographs these albatross birds in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. You know, an island that is far away from humanity so far that these birds do not usually encounter human beings at all.

But when he photographs them, these albatross chicks are dead because they've been fed plastic objects. Like, and when he looks at these photographs, you see, you know, caps of pens or bottom lids, stuff like that. You know, the ordinary objects we use every day. And when you see them as the cause for the death of a bird, you know, so far away from you, that in a sense, I think, sort of encapsulates what post-human ethics would be in the

Anthropocene. That because we are relational and we are always embedded in these relations,

then we have to be accountable to them. So I think that's one way of thinking about ethics post-human ethics in the Anthropocene. We should be what people at Harare will speak about as response and responsibility. Our response to the world is also a responsibility. Well, yes.

That was, I think, a wonderful conversation. It covered a whole lot of ground. So thank you, Srila Lakshmi and Akshata. I'll stop recording now.