

The Ontologies from Human to the Post-Human

Brahamjeet Singh

Abstract

This paper aims at undertaking a critical examination of the notion of ‘human’, the way it has been theorised, qualified and used, and the manner in which it has come under critical scrutiny after the second half of the twentieth century. It will investigate the transformations that have taken place in our understanding of the ‘human subject’ with the emergence of post-humanism. Further, it will discuss the philosophical and historical conditions that necessitate a shift in the way ‘human subjectivity’ and the notion of ‘human’ need to be thought. It will go on to highlight the inevitable inclusion of subject’s structural others (technology, animal, and earth others) into the question concerning the ‘human subjectivity’. Finally, it will address the issues of ethical accountability and sustainability when it comes to techno-mediated capitalist society that commodifies and profits from everything that lives.

Keywords: Humanism, Post-human, subjectivity, agency, ontology

In 4.5 billion years of history of Earth, humans appeared only about 200,000 years ago. It amounts to a mere blink of an eye if we equate it to a twenty-four-hour long day. Through science and

technology, we have managed to emerge as a force that has initiated unnatural and serious transformations at planetary levels, so much so, that our age is now being referred to as the age of the ‘Anthropocene’¹. It appears that human beings have in fact become the dictating agents of this planet’s course in the sense that they virtually hold the key to life on it. But at the same time this alleged absolute agency is making us increasingly conscious of our inter-dependence with everything that is outside of us, be it biological, ecological, technological or otherwise. The radical technologies of our age, though empowering, have unfolded the possibilities of non-human rationality and knowledge production. It, at the same time, implies the possible existence of non-human subjectivities.

The question then rises thus: if non-human entities can produce knowledge, are they capable of producing thought as well? If so, then is there a possibility in A.I.² to develop consciousness? This seems highly unlikely for two reasons. Firstly, even the most advanced A.I. that we currently have is only as good as the data and the algorithms it is provided with; which is to say, if we are to compare the brain of an A.I. with that of a human, the A.I. brain would be only as good as an earthworm’s. Secondly, it is impossible if knowledge production and complex thought are understood to be separate processes altogether. Thought can only exist in a space where there is a possibility of its reciprocation: an essential non-linearity. Martin Heidegger in *What is Called Thinking?* (1968) claims: “[t]hought has

1 The term ‘anthropocene’ is used to refer to our present age, where humans have become a significant geological force affecting all life on the planet.

2 The abbreviation A.I. will be used for Artificial Intelligence throughout in this paper.

a gift of thinking back ... [o]nly when we are so inclined toward what in itself is to be thought about, only then are we capable of thinking” (4). Knowledge, on the other hand, can be produced by mere accumulation of data without requiring the former. Thought can arise out of knowledge only if the agent concerned is self-conscious. The question of machine consciousness, therefore, becomes a contested area amounting to a near impossibility in the practical domain. But the claims about rational machines remain intact as even with the brain as good as an earthworm’s, which produces knowledge about its given surroundings through receptors, they too are capable of producing knowledge with the help of algorithms fed to them.

Technologies such as xenotransplantation, genetic engineering, germ-line editing, stem cell engineering, cloning and 3D bio printing have proven the manipulability of the human subject and its embodied form. Memory implantation, for example, has already become a real possibility. Elizabeth F. Loftus, known for her research on the nature and creation of false memories, claimed in an interview with the *Business Insider*, “it’s pretty easy to distort memories for the details of what they actually saw, by supplying them with suggestive information” (Dodgson 2017). The National Centre for Scientific Research, France, conducted an experiment in March 2015 in which they stimulated the brains of five sleeping mice and managed to create a positive feeling for a certain location in their minds. The impression was so strong that they started searching for the location on waking up (Devlin 2015). These technological interventions problematize the conventionally understood notion of human subject by foregrounding the flexible and malleable character of human body.

Rosi Braidotti, a noted philosopher of posthumanism, in her book *The Posthuman* (2013), states that “there is an agreement that contemporary science and biotechnologies ... have altered dramatically our understanding of what counts as the basic frame of reference for the human today (40). The questions that then emerge are: What does it really mean to be human in our contemporary world? How are we to define what categorically counts as a human? What kind of ethical subjects will we emerge as?”

Any critical engagement with posthumanism should necessarily begin with humanism as its historical and philosophical background. Humanism emerged in Europe as a response against the excesses of religious structures during fifteenth century. Divine agency stood questioned and the Enlightenment ideal was born. It went on to assert that ‘human beings’ must take hold of their thought and action, an idea that later resonated in Descartes’ proclamation “*cogito ergo sum*” and Nietzsche declaring the god dead. The European philosophers started defining human beings as rational, autonomous, self-regulating, and unique. This definition was fortuitously consolidated in the sphere of science and technology as can be seen in the rise of the printing press, the steam engine, the telescope and modern medicine. These inventions, underpinned by the assumptions of Enlightenment, enabled humans to become masters of their spiritual world and finally of this physical world. Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, in his lecture *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1946) claimed that human existence precedes its essence. “Man simply is” and there is no ‘other’ cause of his actions (6). Man, he argued, “... is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing – as he wills

to be after that leap towards existence” (6). Such approaches encouraged the growth of socio-cultural structures and politico-economic institutions that assumed the centrality of the human. The sense of subject thus formed, claimed: agency, transparency, an ability to make choices, and a sense of moral superiority. In the process, human beings came to see themselves as the supreme life form of this planet.

This allegedly self-proclaimed status of humans as transparent, rational and autonomous subjects, nonetheless, stood questioned in the middle of the twentieth century and was shattered by horrors of the two world wars. The generation of theorists that came after was completely disillusioned, with their minds trying to comprehend the state of rupture. The period resonated with the slogan: ‘death of the subject’. Foucault, in his works, presented ‘man’ as an effect of discourses rather than a sovereign, self-regulating entity. In *The Order of Things* (1994), he famously argues that “[m]an is an invention of recent date ... [and] one perhaps nearing its end” (387). The human subject now stood decentred. The postmodernists’ claim that the subject is under constant erasure further placed it into a state of an ontological uncertainty. The outcome of this brief demise of the subject, however, was a realisation that the ‘subject’ simply cannot be done away with.

Posthumanism developed as a settling of the turmoil generated by nearly five centuries of exclusionary practices of European humanism that led to genocides, slavery, and eventually the two world wars. The upheaval caused by these events, coupled with the political and philosophical movements of late 20th century, opened up new vistas for re-thinking the ‘human’ in the light of contemporary political,

scientific and philosophical horizons. Posthumanism therefore, as a philosophical framework, attempts to radically re-define the ontological grounding of the human subject. N. Katherine Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics Literature and Informatics* (1999), suggests that posthumanism has triggered a “significant shift in [the] underlying assumptions about subjectivity” (3). This shift, however, was initially in no way an absolute departure from humanistic notions of subjectivity. It’s initial tendencies of preserving Humanism in some residual form could be seen in the wake of cybernetics which was closely aligned with Transhumanism. It envisioned an entire race of mechanically enhanced individuals which was named humanity plus (H+). It tended to re-inscribe the traditional assumptions while “articulat[ing] something new” (6).

Within the framework of Cybernetic theory, ‘human beings’ are situated in a constantly ongoing feedback loop of information. Like intelligent machines, the basic function of humans is to process information: “Indeed, the essential function of the universe,” Hayles says “as a whole is processing information” (239). Subscribing to this view human subject can be understood as “an amalgam ... of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (3). The human subject, thus, always exists and functions in a symbiotic relationship with the environment, receiving information from it and feeding back to it in processes. The humanist notion of an exclusive unitary agent, belonging to a distinct ‘self’, stands challenged in this scenario as the feedback loop involves application of “distributed cognition” which implies the involvement of a multitude of agents

interacting in order to facilitate information processing. N. Katherine Hayles defines her critical engagement with the posthuman in terms of studying:

... how information lost its body ... how the cyborg was created as a technological artifact and cultural icon ... [and] how a historically specific construction called the human is giving way to a different construction called the posthuman. (2)

Cybernetic theorists including Hayles have at length talked about the erasure embodiment of the subject which is an indirect return to Cartesian mind body distinction. In this context, Hayles states, “post-human constructs embodiment as the instantiation of thought/information, it continues the liberal tradition rather than disrupts it” (5). This continuation of the liberalist tradition is one of the limitations of Cybernetic theory. Such practice causes it to regress back into what it was initially trying to escape. The kind of Posthuman theory that is intended to be advocated here is based on Spinozist monistic ontology and therefore it rejects the Cartesian dualism as flawed because it theorizes the mind-body interactions as causal; taking place between two separate essences, one being the intellect and the other, an extension in physical space. Spinoza, in his *Ethics* (1996), demonstrates:

[T]he object of the idea which constitutes the human mind is the body, and it (by P11)³ actually exists. Next, if the object of the mind were something else also then since nothing exists from which there does

3 P11 (Proposition 11): “*The first thing that constitutes the actual being of a human Mind is nothing but the idea of a singular thing which actually exists*” (*Ethics* 38).

not follow some effect there would necessarily (by P12)⁴ be an idea in our mind of some effect of it. But (by A5)⁵ there is no idea of it. Therefore, the object of our mind is the existing body and nothing else ... From these [propositions] we understand not only that the human mind is united to the body, but also what should be understood by the union of mind and body. (40)

The central idea in Spinozist monism, therefore, focuses on overcoming the dialectical schemas and formulating a unitary understanding of matter. This active engagement with monism, allows matter to be defined as self-organizing and vital. Contemporary French philosophy terms this approach as “vital materialism.” Monism, notes Rosi Braidotti, “results in relocating difference outside the dialectical scheme, as a complex process of differing which is framed by both internal and external forces and is based on the centrality of the relation to multiple others” (56). The kind of Posthuman philosophy that is being advocated here is a method that inevitably rejects human centrality altogether. Braidotti argues that human subject, in this thought, is envisioned as “freed from his delusions of grandeur ... no longer allegedly in charge of historical progress” (23). It tries to move

4 P12 (Proposition 12): “*Whatever happens in the object of the idea constituting the human mind must be perceived by the human mind, or there will necessarily be an idea of that thing in the mind; that is, if the object of the idea constituting a human mind is a body, nothing can happen in that body which is not perceived by the mind*” (*Ethics* 39).

5 A5 (Axiom 5): “We neither nor perceive any singular things [NS: or anything of *Natura naturata*], except bodies and modes of thinking” (*Ethics* 32).

away from the postmodern crisis of reality escaping into an eternal postponement triggered by a supposed demise of the subject and calls for a firmly grounded subject that is both embodied and embedded.

Braidotti considers posthuman theory, “a generative tool to help us re-think the basic unit of reference for the human” (5). She forms a case for re-conceptualizing the human subjectivity in a manner that has a grounded accountability towards its structural others and is inclusionary. It accounts for the post-war and postmodern critique of humanism, ‘life’ commodifying practices of advanced capitalism, bio-politics and necropolitical aspects of the post-human. Posthumanism lays stress on “an embodied and embedded ... form of accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality and hence community building” (49). Thus, moving away from the unitary humanist subject, it proposes a non-unitary “nomadic” subject. This posthumanist subject suggests “an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others” (49). The subject, therefore, is defined within a system of multiple belongings and inter-relations among human and non-human agents.

Braidotti envisions the ‘becoming’ of posthuman taking place through three processes: “becoming-animal, becoming-earth and becoming-machine” (66). ‘Becoming-animal’ aspect of the transformation works on “the displacement of anthropocentrism and the recognition of trans-species solidarity on the basis of our being ... embodied, embedded and in symbiosis with other species” (67). Becoming-earth, on the other hand, is geared towards questions of “environmental and social sustainability” (67). It addresses the issues

concerning ‘earth-others’ in the wake of technological mediation. Finally, the becoming-machine dimension explores “the division between humans and technological circuits, introducing bio technologically mediated relations as foundational for the constitution of the subject” (67). This triadic process shapes the embodiment of the posthuman subject, placed in a world that actively dilutes our understanding of the bodily boundaries.

This notion of the fluid embodiment is best exhibited in Cyborgs. The Cyborg operates in the realm of the imaginary and so holds immense potential for “contestation” of the bodily boundaries that have historically “marked class, ethnic, and cultural differences” (85). Posthumanism, according to Katherine Hayles, envisages body as an “original prosthesis” and turns it into an assemblage when we learn to manipulate it (3). She, nonetheless, is of the view that the problem of embodiment needs to be re-considered as an integral tool of lived experience. “There is a limit,” she vehemently argues, “to how seamlessly humans can be articulated with intelligent machines, which remain distinctively different from humans in their embodiments” (284). Thought, in order to be enacted, necessarily needs an embodied form.

The problem concerning ethics becomes extremely complex when it comes to our technologically mediated advance capitalist society. What kind of ethics then, are we to affiliate with this new becoming of ours? If our ‘becoming’ is to occur amid a multitude of others, then we need to rethink and resituate the subject in a world that is entangled and interdependent at all levels of life. Braidotti, in her spring 2017 lecture at Yale, titled “Memoirs of a Posthumanist,” says

that "... ethics is about interacting affirmatively in the world, together with a multitude of human and non-human others" (24). Commenting upon the nature of moral and ethical dilemma one faces when one confronts the non-human other, Derrida, while analysing D. H. Lawrence's poem "Snake" in *The Beast and the Sovereign* (2009), writes:

There is the first comer, the first comer is the snake and one has to say, naturally, that morality, ethics, the relation to the other, is not only coming after the other, helping oneself after the other, but after the other *whoever it be*, before even knowing who he is or what is his dignity, his price, his social standing, in other words, the first comer. I must respect the first comer. (239)

Derrida here refers to an 'other' that existed before the human. This already existing state of the 'other' presents a moral dilemma as to the reception of the "first comer." The 'other' that existed before the human subject holds a superior position in the planetary hierarchy. The existence of the human is indebted to the already existing condition of this non-human other. Should it then be respected as the "first comer" or is it a potential threat to the position of the human in ecological power relations? So, what really should be the nature of our moral judgements and actions? In *On the Origin of Species* (2008), Darwin demonstrated that the human species "... had not been independently created, but had descended, like varieties, from other species" (6). Moreover, the acknowledgment of numerous life-forms and entities as our non-human other broadens the spectrum of ethical exploration by involving matter, ecologies, and the technological into the picture.

It is not 'agency' and 'responsibility' per se that needs to be critically examined and re-thought; rather, it is the *nature* of 'agency' that we as human beings have and correspondingly the *kind* of 'responsibility' that we need to assume that requires urgent philosophical and political attention. In so doing, we may have to re-define the basic principles of right and wrong in a way that is in tune with our contemporary predicament.

Braidotti, in *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (2006), proposes a *zoe*⁶ driven ethics of affirmation for the emergent nomadic subject and discusses the ethical implications of such 'nomadic subjectivity'. Contesting the popular belief that only a liberal humanist view of the subject can guarantee moral and ethical agency, she argues in her *Tanner Lectures at Yale University*:

[The] traditional ethical formula of humanist subjects was the contemplation of their own mortality, balanced by the prospect of the eternity of their rational soul. The ethical formula of postmodern subjects, on the other hand, was deep skepticism about the foundational robustness of any category, including that of subjectivity itself. The post-nuclear subjects' ethical formula focused on extinction of their and other species as a distinct possibility... (Braidotti, 2017: 26)

In other words, the ethical formula for the posthuman subject should be based on recognizing the 'difference' and the possibility of the end of all life. It should be a framework that is geared towards the re-invention of connections between human and non-human others. The

6 The Greek word 'zoe' means life. In this case, every life form that constitutes the non-human 'other'.

posthuman condition, Braidotti suggests, is a state of collective existence. She sees ‘nomadic ethics’ as a force that assures the possibility of an affirmative becoming.

We are heading towards what Slavoj Žižek in his work, *Like a Thief in the Broad Daylight*, calls “the end of nature” (32). “Nature” he says, “is to be understood” as “the reliable background of human history, something which we can count on always being here” (32). As an already present point of reference to our existence on this planet, nature holds a mirror to both our ‘sense of self’ and the ethical universe.

With five hundred years of humanism coming to an end, it is no longer possible to continue using available frameworks of inquiry for they would arguably be incomplete and irrelevant in our contemporary scenario. The gradual disintegration of the humanist universe, however, should be seen as the unfolding of “unexpected possibilities for the recomposition of communities, for the very idea of humanity and for ethical forms of belonging” (Braidotti, 2013: 103). Consequently, it is not only our sense of self (i.e., subjectivity) that has to be rethought but our relationship with our structural others also needs to be re-defined. The resulting emergence thus will then certainly calls for a necessary restructuring of our ethical and moral universe. Hu(man)s, as a result, can no longer be considered to be the ‘measure of all things’. Human-centric ontological systems therefore must die if we are to develop new thought systems that are sustainable, inclusionary, and align with the post-human subjects that we are in the process of becoming.

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About the Author

Brahamjeet Singh is a research scholar in the Department of English, Punjabi University, Patiala. The topic of his research is "Interrogating the (Post) Human: A Study of Subjectivity and Ethics in Select twentieth Science Fiction." He is undertaking his research through the study of two Post-humanist thinkers: Rosi Braidotti and N. Katherine Hayles.

Ecological Exploitation of Dalits in Mahasweta Devi's Play *Water*: Crumbling Ecology and Postcolonial Dalit Identity

Vaibhav Pathak

Abstract

Mahasweta Devi's *Water* problematizes the issues of caste exploitation and ecological hegemony. The paper aims to critically engage with the intersection of issues of water scarcity, gender relations and postcolonial Dalit identity. The faultlines in the post-independence rural Bengali society, the landlord-tenant relationship, and the ecological injustice meted out at Dalits are the issues that Devi takes up. The paper analyses the caste oppression faced by Dalits as individuals as well as a community. Postcolonial representation of oppression, issues of ambiguous referentiality, and limitations of language are the issues that the paper takes up during the course of analysis. The paper explores the use of traditional ecological knowledge, the realisation of exploitation and awareness of trauma as a means of liberation.

Keywords: Ecology, Caste trauma, Postcolonial, Dalit Identity, Literature and Ecology

The dramatic integration of issues of water scarcity, caste oppression, ecological hegemony, and gender is portrayed in Mahasweta Devi's play *Water* (1976). This paper attempts to critically engage