

# The Posthuman Imagination



# The Posthuman Imagination:

*Literature at the Edge  
of the Human*

Edited by

Tanmoy Kundu and Saikat Sarkar

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## MESSAGE

I am intrigued by the subtitle of the book “The Posthuman Imagination: Literature at the Edge of the Human”. Indicating a range of posthumanism, one assumes the essays of this volume will theorize posthumanism of various degrees and kinds. It is also interesting to note that the book appears to foreground literature as spearheading, or at least, manifesting, the key moments and movements within posthumanism. It also recalls the work of Elaine Graham and others, who trace posthumanist thought in the European Early Modern era.

This edited volume promises to be both exploratory and explicatory. Its interests also cut across multiple genres – speculative fiction, utopian/dystopian texts, and, I assume, more conventional literary fiction.

This is all to the good, and one expects that the book will push the thinking on posthumanism as a literary theme, a scientific trend, and its politics and ideology through its deliberations. To those who thought this up, to the editors and the contributors, my congratulations, and best wishes for its success.

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## FOREWORD

This collection of essays on posthumanism, largely by early career scholars located in India, but with some international contributions as well, builds on a very successful conference organized by the editors at Midnapore College in September 2019, which I was fortunate to have attended. By an unexpected turn of fortune, this volume is taking shape at a time when a global contagion threatens the lives of millions of human beings everywhere, and imperils those ‘human’ solidarities that we had taken for granted, substituting for them the bio-technological regimes of testing, surveillance, digital communication, online work schedules, physical isolation, and remotely linked communities. On the one hand, it seems as though we have abruptly realized the extent to which, in “the late 20th century, our time, a mythic time” as Donna Haraway famously put it, we had already entered the realm of the posthuman, “where we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics”.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the present pandemic has, terrifyingly, brought home to us our human vulnerability, and our inability, even fortified by digital prostheses, the modern pharmacopeia, vaccine regimes, or hospital supplements, to resist viruses that find human bodies ideal hosts in which their own colonies can multiply. To be human, we realize, is to be both animal and machine, subject to all the faults and flaws of both states: perennially on the brink of illness, death, malfunction, or breakdown. Surely it is no accident that the name for a malfunction in the digital realm is ‘virus’.

Thus, it is important to see posthumanism, not as a state beyond, or better than, the human, but as a set of philosophical questions that interrogate human exceptionalism, and point out the faults and flaws in humanism. These questions come at a historical time when “the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks” requires new modes of thought, or new philosophical recognitions. In fact, as Cary Wolfe emphasizes, posthumanism comes, not simply after humanism, but before it: it reveals “the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being, not just in its biological, but also its

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<sup>1</sup> Donna J. Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 150.

technological world, the prosthetic co-evolution of the human animal with the technicality of tools and external archival mechanisms (such as language and culture) of which Bernard Stiegler probably remains our most compelling and ambitious theorist — and all of which come before that historically specific thing called ‘the human’ that Foucault’s archaeology excavates”.<sup>2</sup>

Stiegler’s recent death (5 August 2020) should impel us to look again at the new theoretical paradigms adumbrated by his work on technology, and to understand that the true nature of this enquiry is not triumphalist, celebrating technological mastery or the transhumanist belief that we can engineer immortality for ‘ourselves’ through mechanized supplements, but an investigation of the complex relations between ‘technics’, time, memory, desire, and individuation. The essays in this volume, some of which I had the privilege of hearing as conference presentations, deal with a range of issues from the ontology of objects to animal-human relations to artificial intelligence, prostheses, disease, dystopia, digital protocols, ecological catastrophes, capitalist crises and futurist thought. Collectively, they constitute an important contribution to the literature of posthumanist critical thought today, and I hope that they will find a wide and interested readership.

—Supriya Chaudhuri  
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<sup>2</sup> Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xv.

## PREFACE

### THE PERSISTENCE OF THE HUMAN: OF *POST*-HUMANISM AND *POST-HUMANISM*

The articles in this volume have emerged from papers presented at a conference on “Humanism and After: Literature’s Journey from Humanism to Cyber-culture and Other Forms of Post-humanism”, organized by Midnapore College on 24-25 September 2019, at which I had the opportunity of delivering the keynote address. The conference was an opportune intervention at that point of time, no doubt, but in the year that has passed by since then, it, and therefore this volume itself, seem to have come to occupy a far greater significance.

In September 2019, at the time of the conference, the world was already mired in the quicksand of competitive fundamentalisms, of communal fascisms, and of sectarian assertions, leading to violently intolerant action amongst fellow human beings belonging to divergent beliefs. Fanned further by lies, hatred, and fake news, spread by much of the technologized media, we were already face-to-face with the emergent reality of being dehumanized, losing touch with what is humane in us; being rendered inhuman. In the year that has passed by since then, this has been further aggravated, with our humanity and cherished human values being threatened further, not only through an increased global consolidation of the forces of majoritarianism, but also through the somewhat unexpected pandemic, which exposed the seamier side of our fragile humanness even more. Not only did the virus lay bare the puniness of the hallowed human, even after centuries of vainglorious claims to have mastered the natural world, it also uncovered the jagged edges of myriad inequities – economic, social, biopolitical, and technological – that underlie our very existence. As human beings continue to wrestle with their helplessness before the pandemic, we have seen ourselves plunge into the new normal of an economy in tailspin, involving retrenched labourers, severe curbs on human mobility and interaction, enhanced xenophobia, and a virulent media spinning diversionary narratives evermore. It is in this multi-pronged political and epidemiological context, where we have practically ceased to

be human, that we have to probe the meaning of what it is to presume ourselves as *post* human today. The question is whether, in these dehumanizing times, there is merit in celebrating the moment as being *after* humanism, beyond a humanism that has become irrelevant and passé, as an irrevocable move towards *post*-humanism, or is there a greater ethical need to resurrect and rekindle the humane in us and recreate a new radical humanism, a *post-humanism* of sorts, one that that could rescue us from the inhuman monsters that we have ourselves become.

To answer this question, it may be worthwhile to look at what the ideology of Humanism, as it was forged from the days of early modernity in Europe (if not from the times of antiquity itself), stood for. Three features most certainly marked the move towards what would eventually be called 'liberal humanism': an emphasis on secularism, or a non-theistic stance towards life; a focus on critical thinking, rather than reliance on dogma or superstitions; and a belief in human freedom and progress. The possibility of liberal humanism was further bolstered by such cognate concepts as being 'humane' or 'humanitarian' on one hand, and dabbling in the newfound academic discipline of the 'humanities' or the liberal arts (comprising grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy) on the other. Needless to say, it is precisely secularism, criticality, and freedom of thought and action, which seem to be under threat in our currently inhuman times, as indeed the value of being humane, or studying the humanities, may have lost much of their original charm today.

There is no doubt about the fact that Renaissance Humanism, as it fashioned itself through the whole of Modernity, and particularly the Enlightenment, and gained the form of liberal humanism, had its own share of problems. First, it was clearly anthropocentric, with the human being, as distinct from other animals by virtue of his capacity to speak and reason, being considered the veritable centre of the universe, leading not just to a hierarchy amongst humans and other living and non-living beings, but also to ecologically disastrous consequences. Secondly, and more problematically, it presumed a universalism, or an essential unity of the human race, which led to its presumption of a particular human subject (the white, Christian, economically solvent, able-bodied, straight, male subject, of course) as the ideal, resulting in other human subjects being often considered sub-human, leading to severe hierarchizations amongst human beings on grounds of race, class, gender, etc. These are precisely the problems that posthumanism as a discourse seeks to expose and critique. For posthumanism, the privileging of mind over body, and the consequent privileging of the presumably 'sentient' man over other human beings, of all human beings over animals and plants, of all living beings over inanimate objects – as

liberal humanism ends up doing – is untenable. Needless to say, a category like the ‘cyborg’, in whose machinic assemblage, distinctions like inanimate/animate, animal/human, man/woman, stand ironically undone, becomes – for the posthumanist – a possible ontology for a future politics (though, Donna Haraway, the preceptor of cyborg-radicalism, would reject the term ‘posthumanism’ and instead prefer to use ‘companion species’) or a category like the ‘anthropocene’, or a takeover of the world by the anthropos, severe enough to have geologically impacted it, have emerged as key concepts within posthumanism.

While such posthumanistic interventions would have led to new political theories and practices, such as environmentalist movements, animal rights activism, cyborg-feminism, object oriented ontology, etc., the possible danger of an uncritical embracing of the non-human, including the technological entailed within it, has also led to immanent critiques of post-humanism from within itself, through discourses like critical posthumanism, post-cyborg ethics, or what is even called post-posthumanism. The point, however, is whether a posthumanistic critique of liberal humanism, and even an immanent critique of that itself, may not run the risk of turning into anti-humanism, much on the lines of Nietzsche’s celebratory misanthropy that may turn against human rights, and contribute to the inhumanism that plagues today’s world. Would it not be more worthwhile to counter the problems of liberal humanism by proposing alternate versions of humanism itself, versions that are other than Humanist, but are still ethically oriented towards a commitment to being humane?

It is to look for such alternate templates of humanism that I will urge one to turn towards two short mid-20th-century texts: “Existentialism is a Humanism” (1945/1946) by Jean-Paul Sartre, and “Letter on Humanism” (1946/1947) by Martin Heidegger. The first (named in some English translations as “Existentialism and Humanism”) is a lecture delivered by Sartre at Club Maintenant in Paris, on 29 October 1945, published in 1946, in which, while presenting his well-known thesis of how ‘existence precedes essence’, Sartre focuses on how ‘freedom’ emerges from meaningful action on the part of the human subject in taking ‘responsibility’ for the other, while being fully aware of one’s ‘abandonment’ and of the possible consequences of the same. Thus, Sartre points towards a ‘humanism’ that is not at all self-centred (as the primary charge against liberal humanism goes), but is oriented towards ethical action and responsibility for the other. Heidegger was asked some questions about this very text by Jean Beaufret in a letter dated 10 November 1946, and the response that Heidegger gave in another letter, in December 1946, forms the text of his “Letter on Humanism”, published in 1947. Heidegger *prima facie* reverses Sartre’s

idea of existence preceding essence, with his suggestion that there must be an even more primary ‘essence’ (‘Wesen’ in German, connected to the Sanskrit root ‘vasati’ or ‘dwelling’ or ‘grounding’) – an ‘essence of action’, an ethical imperative as it were, that propels the human subject to act and ‘exist’ – which precedes action-driven ‘existence’. But, in a way, he is on the same page as Sartre. Whether existence precedes essence, or it is the other way round, the focus in both is on the ethical imperative to act responsibly towards the other, and this alternate model of an other-regarding humanism also fulfils the original etymological sense of the word ‘exist’ (the Latin ‘ek-sistere’ means to ‘stand out of oneself’) for both.

Thus, there are indeed alternate models of humanism itself, which stand in stark contrast to humanism, insofar as they focus on the existential practice of ethical action, oriented towards the other, as the basis of being human, rather than enshrining a particular model of the hegemonic self as the centre of the universe as the essence of humanism, as our primary problem with liberal humanism was. Thus, rather than throwing the baby out with the bathwater, and discarding the possibility of humanism altogether in critiquing the problems that official humanism does present, and ending up probably in collusion with our inhuman times, maybe there is greater value in cultivating alternate humanisms, a radical humanism. Thus, rather than presuming oneself to have moved beyond humanism altogether, to a phase that is ‘after humanism’, the need, probably, is to rewrite humanism itself into an ethical project of caring for the other, as a politically resistant bulwark against contemporary insularisms and obscurantisms – a discourse that is ‘post’ liberal humanism indeed, but is an even further strengthening of the human in these inhuman times, a *post-humanism*.

And, this overhauling of humanism, while retaining the possibility of being ethical and humane still, can be best done by the humanities – by literary and cultural texts and other forms of expression of human creativity, and by exegeses on them. On the humanities lies the onus thus, of re-imagining humanity, and of rewriting the story of what it is to persist to be human in a future-technological world that threatens to render us inhuman. I am happy to say that the wide range of critical scholarship that is exhibited in the essays that follow, which engage with a vast array of literary texts that deal with questions of humanism and posthumanism, strive to do precisely that, and succeed.

—Saugata Bhaduri

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## INTRODUCTION

At the time of writing this introductory essay, India, as well as almost the entire world, has been hit by an unforeseen global pandemic caused by a novel coronavirus (COVID 19). As the country struggles under a state-regulated lockdown imposed as a social distancing measure to fight COVID 19, some hitherto unheeded problems related to the lockdown are surfacing. One such problem is the unavailability of domestic help for middle-class Indian households, due to the prohibition of social interaction. These workers, chiefly hailing from the slum areas, are considered potential carriers of the infection because of their stringent living conditions. In India, the employment of domestic help is considerable in number, and ranks as one of the most common means of earning in the unorganized sector. And the practice cuts across different regions, religions, and economic tiers, within India. The reason why I am referring to this in an introductory essay on posthumanism is because this has led people to speculate about a hypothetical situation in which domestic help is offered by robots and not human beings. Robots are immune to infection and could easily tide over a situation like this. And this can no more be dismissed as the musings of idle minds, or at best, a possibility in some distant future. Hanson Robotics' humanoid, 'Sophia', who has recently visited Kolkata, is evidence that we are going to have robots contributing to our daily lives much sooner than was expected - even ten years ago. And this takes us directly to some of the central issues of posthumanism.

To readers of Bengali literature, the hypothetical situation mentioned above brings to mind a short story by Satyajit Ray. *Anukul* was first published in the magazine *Anandamela* on December 24, 1986. In this story, a businessman, Mr. Nikunja, brings home an 'android' (a robot that looks like a human being, a humanoid) named Anukul as his domestic help. To the surprise of his owner, Anukul appears to possess a mind of his own that can decide ethical questions. This sentient nature of the humanoid is further highlighted in the Sujoy Ghosh directed short film *Anukul* (2017), which is adapted from Ray's story. In the film, Anukul and Mr. Nikunja, here a teacher of Hindi, ponder over ethical questions related to *The Mahabharata* and *The Gita*; books that Anukul loves to read. Here again, Anukul shows an independent mind that can act on its own in ethically conflicted moments.

The study of humanoids, their capacities and rights, is a potent site of posthumanist enquiry. A humanoid like Anukul can be seen as humanity's 'other'. Hence, an enquiry into the nature, body, and rights, of such non-human beings may be viewed as aligned with academia's interest in bringing into academic discourse various sub-categories of humans considered as 'other' in the human mind. One can trace such interest back to the feminists who raised voice against sexual disparities. The list can be expanded to include categories of race, caste, colonialization, disability, animals, etc. One must remember that, despite posthumanism's futuristic dimension, which is one of its many dimensions, posthumanism can be related to other pre-existing critical domains, such as postmodernism. Neil Badmington, who wonders if posthumanism resists theorization, claims that it is a critical "working-through of humanist discourses" (22). *Anukul* also attracts our attention to the coherence of the human body. In *Posthuman Bodies* (1995) Halberstam and Livingston attempt to address the challenges posed at this afore-mentioned coherence. Rather than enquiring into "some subsequent development state" of humanity, they study how it "collapses into *sub-, inter-, trans-, pre-, anti-*" (viii).

In the short-film *Anukul*, Ghosh brings in added social issues, such as human domestic help protesting against the employment of robots. That machines would ultimately rise against human beings, and do them harm, is a concept that has been ingrained in our cultural imagination through the representation of posthuman beings as dangerous in various cultural texts. Elaine Graham, in her essay "The Politics of the Post/Human", studies such representations of posthuman beings as aliens or monsters, and opines that such recurrent images would frame our moral response to posthuman beings in a negative way. Graham studies in detail Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and claims that the failure of Victor Frankenstein, who tried to play God and ended up creating a monster, has been etched in our minds so powerfully that it has made a destructive effect on human genetics. It can be argued that the metaphors culled from Shelley's text are so pervasive that public discussion of science cannot avoid them. This can be seen as technophobia, a sentiment shared by many.

Technophobia, or fear about a future in which technological invention, e.g. robots, will supersede humans in their ability to think for themselves, is akin to the concept of singularity which transhumanism celebrates. The concept of singularity, popularized by Raymond Kurzweil, imagines a future in which technological change would advance beyond our comprehension to create a superintelligence that would render humanity redundant, and would leave us with no other option but to merge with it and become cyborgs. Understandably, thinkers are wary of such a possibility. In



*Our Posthuman Future* (2002) Francis Fukuyama raises the alarm against the harmful effect of technological advancement, and the fear that the aim of posthumanism is to replace humans with a new species. Because of his alarmist view, Fukuyama's understanding of posthumanism can be termed as apocalyptic, a notion shared by various cultural texts, e.g. the *Terminator* movie series, which visualizes the future ruled by machines. Fukuyama contends;

Human nature shapes and constrains the possible kinds of political regimes, so a technology powerful enough to reshape what we are will have possibly malign consequences for liberal democracy and the nature of politics itself (7).

Explaining Fukuyama's reading of posthumanism, Andy Miah writes:

Fukuyama's posthumanism is an observation from the perspective of political economy rather than moral philosophy. He indicates that the politics of biotechnology – or biopolitics, as they are often described – are such that, where human enhancements are allowed, this will weaken the moral force of human rights by the claims of chimeric, cybernetic or transgenic species, or over disputes about the ownership of DNA. He envisages a situation where, what is today regarded as a normal level of health might be seen as grotesquely inadequate from the perspective of a super-enhanced human, and this will translate into social pressure to become enhanced. [...] It is evident that he considers the ethics of biotechnology as inextricable from this broader political economy of scientific research. Indeed, Fukuyama is concerned that a commercial model of biotechnology will overwhelm an ethical foundation to society that is based on humanitarian concerns [...]. (73-4)

Rosi Braidotti is similarly concerned with the capitalist intervention and its propensity to commodify living beings into useful units and codes. While talking about the frightening aspect of posthumanism, she refers to “the four horsemen of the posthuman apocalypse: nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology and cognitive science” (59). Though her biblical metaphor refers to apocalypse, Braidotti is positive about a new kind of posthuman ethics which can solve problems generated by biotechnology.

At the opposite end of Fukuyama's bioconservative belief, which argues that humanity is, and will be, endangered by biotechnology, stands the technoprogressive argument of Gregory Stock, whose book, *Redesigning Humans*, came out in the same year as Fukuyama's *Our Posthuman Future*. In fact, these two writers were on lecture tours in the year 2002 with their contrasting theses. Stock speaks positively about the impact of technology on human society and dispels the fears regarding a

dangerous future as unfounded. Robert Pepperell, in *Posthuman Condition* (2005), also addresses questions related to how our own superiority has led to the creation of a technology that is smart enough to outgrow us. It is conjectured that, possibly, we may witness in our lifetime the synthesis of intelligence and consciousness in beings created by us. Though Pepperell's reading of posthumanism appears to be anti-humanistic in nature, he is more hopeful than Fukuyama, as he conceives of a possibility of embracing technological advancement, and underscores the necessity to evolve new theories to realize a profound interconnection between all living beings.

Posthuman studies is not entirely projected onto the future. Rather, its genealogy can be traced in past critical thought. We have already quoted Neil Badmington above, contending that posthumanism is a working-through of humanist discourse. Let us cite his contention in detail here:

The writing of the posthumanist condition should not seek to fashion “scriptural tombs” for humanism, but must, rather, take the form of a critical practice that occurs *inside* humanism, consisting not of the wake but the working-through of humanist discourse. Humanism has happened and continues to happen to ‘us’ (it is the very ‘thing’ that makes ‘us’ ‘us’, in fact), and the experience—however traumatic, however unpleasant — cannot be erased without trace in an instant (22, *italics original*).

In her well-known study *What Is Posthumanism?* Cary Wolfe too, observes that humanism as a discourse is still operational and cannot be discarded easily. She contends that the term ‘posthumanism’ itself seems to have worked its way into contemporary critical discourse in the humanities and social sciences during the mid-1990s, though its roots go back, in one genealogy, at least to the 1960s (xii). The genealogy that Wolfe refers to belonged to Michel Foucault, who, in the closing paragraph of *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, contends that, “As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end” (387). Foucault is an example of a thinker who may chronologically predate posthuman studies, but whose thought is relevant to it. Nietzsche is even an earlier thinker who can also be cited as an influence on posthumanism, and especially transhumanism. Stefan L Sorgner, in his oft-cited essay, “Nietzsche, the Overhuman and Transhumanism”, counters Nick Bostrom to argue that Nietzsche, with his concept of the ‘Übermensch’ (the overhuman) can be seen as an ancestor of transhumanism. Sorgner cites Habermas as having a similar notion regarding this. Wolfe, in her study, lays down a genealogy of posthumanism by delineating how, through the works of some early thinkers, posthumanist studies has taken its shape as a critical discourse.

We will discuss transhumanism in some detail later, but here we may quote from the introductory essay to the volume *Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction*, by the editors Robert Ranisch and Stefan Sorgner, who opine that:

[...] transhumanism can be seen as a stance that affirms the radical transformation of a human's biological capacities and social conditions by means of technologies [...]. The link between the human and the posthuman is the *transhuman*, an abbreviation for a transitional human, to which transhumanism owes its name. In this regard, transhumanism can be understood as a *transhuman-ism*. By the same token, transhumanism, according to its self-understanding, is a contemporary renewal of humanism (7-8).

Though transhumanism, and to a major extent posthumanism, are projected into a futuristic world the texts of the past can also be read through a posthumanist lens. Studies like *The Bible and Posthumanism*, edited by Koosed (2014), *Genetic Gold: The Post-human Homunculus in Alchemical and Visual Texts* by Smith (2009), and *Posthumanist Shakespeare*, edited by Herbrechter & Callus (2012), can be cited as examples of such reading. As an academic and cultural discipline, posthumanism, because of its inter-disciplinarity, is hard to define. In fact the 'post' in 'posthumanism' is ambivalent in nature, as is suggested by Herbrechter. When read as 'post-humanism' it can be seen as an array of deconstructive readings to critique the humanist discourses, whereas if the hyphen is placed between 'posthuman' and 'ism', it can be seen as a philosophical discourse about the engineered beings of the future.

In a comprehensive book chapter "A Typology of Posthumanism", Matthew Gladden differentiates between such closely-linked terms as 'posthumanization', 'posthumanity', 'posthumanism', and 'posthuman':

The processes of 'posthumanization' are those dynamics by which a society comes to include members other than 'natural' biological human beings, who, in one way or another, contribute to the structures, activities, or meaning of the society [...]. 'Posthumanity' refers either to a collection of intelligent beings – whether human, synthetic, or hybrid – that have been created or affected by a process of posthumanization or to the broader sociotechnological reality within which such beings exist. 'Posthumanism' is a coherent conceptual framework that takes the phenomenon of posthumanization or posthumanity as its object; it may be developed as part of an academic discipline, artistic or spiritual movement, commercial venture, work of fiction, or form of advocacy, among other possible manifestations. 'Posthuman' can refer to any of the above: a process

(posthumanization), collection of entities (posthumanity), or body of thought (posthumanism) (35-6).

Francesca Ferrando, who contends that posthumanism has become a generic and all-inclusive term, underlines the post-anthropocentric nature of posthumanism; “Posthumanism is often defined as a post-humanism and a post-anthropocentrism: it is ‘post’ to the concept of the human, and to the historical occurrence of humanism, both based [...] on hierarchical social constructs and human-centric assumptions” (*Posthumanism*, 29). Gerald Alva Miller highlights the plasticity of the term in his essay “Conclusion: Beyond the Human: Ontogenesis, Technology, and the Posthuman in Kubrick and Clarke’s 2001”:

The posthuman subject is a multiple subject, not a unified one, and she or he (a distinction that also gets blurred in posthuman-ism) is not separate from his/her environment. Technologies become extensions of the self, and humans become only one type of individual in a vast ecosystem that includes digital as well as natural environmental forces. In other words, posthumanism is partly about leaving behind the old notions of liberal humanism [...]. But it also begins to gesture toward a much more radical state, a state beyond the current human form (164).

Miller’s observation of the posthuman subject being “not separate from his/her environment” brings to attention one major debate in posthuman studies; the debate related to the question of embeddedness and embodiment. This can be traced to the publication of N. Katherine Hayles’ *How We Became Posthuman* in 1999. Hayles raised serious issues with the claims made by techno-idealistic posthumanists like Hans Moravec, who argued that, one day, it would be possible to download human consciousness to a computer. The idea consists of the belief that the mind is actually a sum total of patterns of information, and the biological neurons of the brain act only as containers. Hence, if these biological neurons can be replaced by electronic replicas, then the mind or the consciousness would remain intact, and if this can be done, a human being can transcend the biological life span and live forever. One can trace this idea back to Rene Descartes, who prioritized the mind over the body and, thereby, ushered in an age-old binary between the mind and the body in which the former is way more significant than the latter. As an idea, it is fascinating to think of a way of preserving the human mind alive after the biological death of the body. One is reminded of an episode from the British anthology science-fiction TV series *Black Mirror*, created by Charlie Brooker. In the first episode of the second season, named “Be Right Back”, a pregnant woman, Martha, loses her social media-savvy boyfriend Ash in an accident. A severely depressed

Martha is later contacted by a company which creates a simulated audio character profile of Ash based on his footprint in social media. Later, the company upgrades its technology and creates a synthetic body of Ash for Martha, who is stunned by the replicating powers of technology. Though this synthetic replica looks like Ash, and doesn't age with time, Martha realizes that it is not Ash, and it cannot fulfil the lacunae created by his demise.

This fictional episode can be seen as underlining Hayles' argument, which strongly voices reservations about the idea that the mind can be separated from one's body. Tarr and White observe:

Hayles took cybernetics and transhumanism to task for their belief that such a separation is possible, and that someday we will be able to upload a human consciousness into a machine, or free it from physicality completely. No, says Hayles; all knowledge, all information, is instantiated in some physical form and cannot exist without it. Human consciousness is tied to the human body, not just in the brain, but throughout every micrometer of the physical self. Similarly, that physical self is embedded in a natural environment, not separate from that environment but part of it (xv).

Apart from the mind/body binary, this can also be seen as an interplay between a newly emerging binary, between an organic body and the machine. Posthumanists can be seen extending the deconstructive critics' critique of the powerful self/other binaries that liberal humanism established; e.g. male/female, white/non-white, heterosexual/non-heterosexual, western/non-western and so on. Posthumanists argue that the most significant binary now posits human with different sets of others; animals, machines, the disabled, cyborgs, clones, etc.

The human/machine binary is a source of fear for many people. The idea that one day the world of humans may be shared by highly intelligent and sentient machines makes them fear their own extinction. That machines would be able to think for themselves was posited by Alan Turing, who, in 1950, proposed an 'Imitation Game' in which an interrogator would communicate through a text-based computer interface with someone sitting in a different room, and would try to determine the nature of that being. Turing suggests that, if the interrogator cannot determine whether the being is a biological being or a technological one, it proves that the machine is thinking for itself. Though Turing does not elaborate on his thesis, mankind has majorly been uneasy with the idea of a thinking machine, and this unease has given birth to alarmed literary and cultural expressions. When chess legend Gary Kasparov was defeated in a game of chess by an IBM computer in 1997, the spectators did not cheer the IBM programmers when

they accompanied Kasparov onto the stage after the game. *Frankenstein* has already been cited as an example of human terror at the creation of a sentient being. Hans Christian Anderson's fairy tale *The Nightingale* (1884) also prefers a biological being over a machine. In the story, an emperor shifts his attention to a mechanical nightingale for its beauty and singing, and banishes his pet, living, nightingale. But later the mechanical bird crashes and the real nightingale comes back, demonstrating feelings of loyalty and friendship. In more recent years, apocalyptic fiction and movies have reiterated the same sentiment of fear and unease.

But the monstrosity of *Frankenstein's* monster is a result of his rejection by human society, and not something he was created with. It can be surmised that mankind's fear of alienation would be further enhanced by its own alienation of whatever it does not consider to be human. C. H. Gray, in *The Ethics and Politics of Cyborg Embodiment* (1997) puts forward a "cyborg bill of rights", asking us to broaden what is seemingly a narrow definition of humanness. Frank Furedi contends:

Instead of celebrating man's attempt to transform nature, history and civilisation have been recast as a story of environmental destruction. From this standpoint, the application of reason, knowledge, and science, are dismissed as problems, because they help intensify the destructive capacity of the human species. 'Humans are, literally, a species out of control', notes a misanthropic contribution. From this perspective, humanism itself is the problem (Cited in Miah, 80).

This aspect of posthumanist thought can be seen as a challenge to the concept of a fixed human nature, and argues in favour of a redefinition of humanism which would incorporate biotechnology, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, and genetics. In sum, this is a plea to incorporate within us the four horsemen of posthumanism that Braidotti talks about. These are not indicators of some apocalypse, but a call to understand the need for coexistence. However, such a call is not easy to respond to, as in our cultural imaginary, the technological future is shown to be rather more murky for mankind than bright.

Having talked about different aspects of posthumanism, we would now focus our attention on the major categories of posthumanism. Andy Miah argues that there are three principal categories of posthumanism: biopolitical, cultural, and philosophical. Francesca Ferrando also talks about three major categories of posthumanism, and these are critical, cultural, and philosophical. Stefan Herbrechter divides posthumanist thinkers into two major categories; affirmative and skeptical. Among the affirmative thinkers there are the 'techno-euphorians' who celebrate the advancement of technology, at times naively, and the techno-pragmatists who accept the fact

that, irrespective of one's wishes, the advancement of technology is inevitable and one must learn to co-exist. The pragmatists try to gloss over the negative possible effects of such technology and highlight the positive factors. On the other hand, stand the skeptical posthumanists. Among them are the alarmists, or people with an apocalyptic vision which thinks of the future as bleak for humans, who will be obliterated, modified, or subdued by technology. There are also people with a deconstructive attitude, who attempt to deconstruct and critique the theoretical lapse in the ideation of the techno-euphorians, and point out the ruptures in the ways future is conceptualized.

When one takes a closer look at the categories posited by Miah and Ferrando, one can see that two of their sets of triadic categories overlap, and, thereby, leave us with four principal categories; critical, cultural, philosophical, and biopolitical. It can further be noted that while two of these four principal categories, namely philosophical and biopolitical, are premised upon an understanding of posthumanism as a set of hypothetical elements whose impact can either be welcomed or resisted, the other two, i.e. the cultural and critical, understand posthumanism to be an existing sociotechnological reality which needs to be analyzed. One can see that posthumanism can be approached by trying to understand it as a body of knowledge with different socio-cultural ramifications. It can also be approached through the purpose it serves, or can serve in the future, for mankind. Matthew Gladden contends that different categories of posthumanism can be covered by five main types of posthumanism: critique, imagination, conversion, control, and production. He writes;

'posthumanism of critique'... employs posthumanist methodologies to identify hidden anthropocentric biases and posthumanist aspirations contained within different fields of human activity [...] 'posthumanism of imagination' [...] creatively envisions hypothetical future posthumanities so that their implications can be explored. [...] 'posthumanism of conversion' [is] aimed at changing hearts and minds and influencing the way in which human beings view the world around themselves. [...] 'posthumanism of control' [...] seeks either to develop new technologies that give individuals control over their own posthumanization or to implement legal or economic controls to govern the development of such technologies. Finally [...] 'posthumanism of production' [...] develops a robust and rigorous theoretical framework that is then employed to successfully generate concrete products or services within the contemporary world (43).

Here again, one can see that these five main types can be understood either as approaching posthumanism as a body of knowledge to be analyzed, or by the practical purpose they serve for us.

At the beginning of our close look at the four chief categories of posthumanism mentioned above, let us quote an observation made by Ferrando in her essay “Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms”:

Although the roots of posthumanism can already be traced in the first wave of postmodernism, the posthuman turn was fully enacted within the field of literary criticism — what will later be defined as critical posthumanism — by feminist theorists in the nineties. Simultaneously, cultural studies also embraced it, producing a specific take which has been referred to as cultural posthumanism. By the end of the 1990s posthumanism (critical and cultural) developed into a more philosophically focused inquiry (now referred to as philosophical posthumanism), in a comprehensive attempt to re-access each field of philosophical investigation through a newly gained awareness of the limits of previous anthropocentric and humanistic assumptions. Posthumanism is often defined as a post-humanism and a post-anthropocentrism: it is ‘post’ to the concept of the human and to the historical occurrence of humanism, both based [...] on hierarchical social constructs and human-centric assumptions (*Posthumanism* 29).

Critical posthumanism is not concerned with what comes after human, but applies critical methodology to deconstruct humanist assumptions premised upon binaries. It challenges any narrowing of the definition of the human down to some normative characteristics. It attempts to incorporate the ‘inhuman’ and ‘non-human’ within the ambit of the human. Herbrechter contends:

...a critical posthumanism is aware that humanism as a grand narrative [...] might have stalled but that it will continue to be available and that only persistent deconstruction will eventually change or undo humanism and prevent it from reinscribing itself in new forms within posthumanism and, in particular, transhumanist discourses (44).

However, unlike transhumanism, posthumanism considers, or can consider, humanity without technology, and can address unarticulated predispositions.

Critical posthumanism also critiques what can be termed as speciesism, a pervasive belief in the supremacy of the human species. Elaine Graham observes that, the ‘The Human Genome Project’ was mythologized as “the key to all mysteries of human behaviour, both biological and cultural” (119). A problem with such a mythology is a corollary belief that there is an ideal DNA code to represent the entirety of humanity. Our DNA



is not unique to us, rather “the DNA is one of several components with little more than an average role to play” (Nayar, 84). Critical posthumanism asserts that we are not the only intelligent species in the world, especially today, when the concept of ‘species’ can be extended to non-biological beings as well. However, this advocacy for the incorporation of technological beings is not congruent with the idea that the mind is a disembodied system of codes and information. We can see that critical posthumanism shares Hayles’ contention that humans need to be seen as embodied selves, and that posthumanization is not tantamount to the dematerialization of the human body. Ferrando writes; “transhumanist reflections, in their ‘ultra-humanistic’ endeavors, do not fully engage with a critical and historical account of the human, which is often presented in a generic and ‘fit-for-all’ way” (*Posthumanism* 28). This non-critical awareness of human history is not something that critical posthumanism endorses, as for critical posthumanism, “[t]echnology is neither the ‘other’ to be feared and to rebel against (in a sort of neo-Luddite attitude), nor does it sustain the almost divine characteristics which some transhumanists attribute to it (for instance, by addressing technology as an external source which might guarantee humanity a place in post-biological futures)” (Ferrando, *Posthumanism*, 28). Critical posthumanism not only shares the postmodernist agenda of deconstructing the shibboleth of human normativity, but also is alive to the concept that our life is getting increasingly technologized and that bioinformatics is an integral part of life.

Andy Miah opines that the origins of what is known as cultural posthumanism are best discussed by Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston in *Posthuman Bodies* (1995). Ferrando adds that Neil Badmington’s *Posthumanism* (2000) and Miah’s essay itself, are other starting points to understand cultural posthumanism. It would be handy to cite here a definition by Gladden, which reads;

[...] cultural posthumanism understands ‘posthumanity’ to be a state that already exists within our contemporary world. It argues that the nature of posthumanity can be diagnosed by applying the tools of cultural studies to analyze elements of contemporary culture, including works of literature, film, television, music, painting, sculpture, architecture, fashion, computer games, tabletop roleplaying games, and religious and political speech (50).

Like critical posthumanism, cultural posthumanism also puts its focus on the present and not on a distant future with some ‘technological boom’. Halberstam and Livingston opine that it studies the way humanity has already collapsed into “*sub-, inter-, trans-, pre-, anti-*” (viii); it has to be prefixed with different qualifiers, as human subjectivity can no more be seen

as a monolithic entity. Cultural posthumanism is also interested in the process of posthumanization and its articulation in cultural texts. For example, science fiction is a site of enquiry to detect how we in the present, imagine the technological future, and how that betrays a fear of posthumanization.

Neil Badmington's observation that posthumanist intervention is a "working-through of humanist discourses" resembles the contention of Elaine Graham, who sees posthumanism as an "interplay between the world of scientific, bioethical theorizing and the world of the cultural imagination – myth science fiction, popular culture and religion" (Cited in Miah, 77). Graham, whose study of *Frankenstein* has already been discussed above, may again be invoked here, as her contention that the imaging of technological advancement in various fictional texts frames our responses to the future, which in reality may turn out to be something different, is one relevant strand of cultural posthumanism. We may also note that one related dimension of the story of Victor Frankenstein is the question of ethics and justice. What was thought to be an overreaching act of God-like presumption is not considered in the same ethical light anymore. But the issue of ethics is always a corollary to scientific inventions, as one persistent concern over such invention is the fear that all its uses will be usurped by the rich and powerful and will be used against the realization of social justice.

Miah contends that this questioning of the nature of justice and ethics is cultural posthumanism shared with philosophical posthumanism. The two categories of posthumanism discussed above analyse socio-technological reality already existing. Philosophical posthumanism, on the other hand, is concerned with a set of hypothetical future possibilities. Francesca Ferrando contends that philosophical posthumanism is a development from both critical and cultural posthumanism. She observes:

By the end of the 1990s posthumanism (critical and cultural) developed into a more philosophically focused inquiry (now referred to as philosophical posthumanism), in a comprehensive attempt to re-access each field of philosophical investigation through a newly gained awareness of the limits of previous anthropocentric and humanistic assumptions (29).

This observation is corroborated by Matthew Gladden:

Philosophical posthumanism draws on the insights of critical and cultural posthumanism, integrating them into traditional methodologies of philosophical inquiry in order to reassess earlier philosophical claims with a new awareness of the ways in which philosophy has been suffused with

“anthropocentric and humanistic assumptions” that limit its scope, comprehensiveness, and effectiveness (58).

By philosophical posthumanism, one may mean a branch of philosophy with a posthuman turn, or facets of critical and cultural posthumanism with a major focus on philosophy.

Donna Haraway’s manifesto on cyborgs may be seen as an intersection of the philosophical and cultural aspects of posthumanism. Ferrando is of the opinion that it is through the mediation of Haraway’s critical feminism that technology enters the posthumanist debate. It can be glossed that Haraway’s philosophy of the cyborg is a critical practice to puncture the culture of patriarchy. Through her conceptualization of cyborgs, she imagines a post-gender world which is devoid of dualism and binaries. Haraway is an important thinker, as her concept of the post-gender world dismantles the strict boundaries “between human and non-human animals, biological organisms and machines, the physical and the nonphysical realm; and ultimately, the boundary between technology and the self” (Ferrando, *Posthumanism*, 28-9). Summing up Haraway’s study of cyborgs, Miah opines that her posthumanism, which can be read as cultural posthumanism, is “intended to disrupt uniform ideas about what it means to be human and the social and political entitlements this might imply” (78), and by extension, the disintegration of the liberal human subject is one primary focus of cultural posthumanist enquiry.

Though philosophical posthumanism may be seen as a development from these branches of posthumanism, it is important to note the differences between these. Philosophical posthumanism speculates about future technologization, and pitches its enquiry at the level of ontological and epistemological, as well as phenomenological, questions. Though philosophical posthumanism is concerned about our technological enquiry, its focus is not limited there. Defining the scope of philosophical posthumanism, Francesca Ferrando, in her book *Philosophical Posthumanism* (2019), writes:

Philosophical posthumanism is an onto-epistemological approach, as well as an ethical one, manifesting as a philosophy of mediation, which discharges any confrontational dualisms and hierarchical legacies; this is why it can be approached as a post-humanism, a post-anthropocentrism, and a post-dualism (22).

It may be noted that cultural posthumanism is also interested in the speculative future of technology. But its interest lies in analysing how our present culture is desirous or afraid of future changes. In contrast, philosophical posthumanism looks at the future as an enquiry of the ontological, epistemological, and phenomenological implication of such

changes. By nature, philosophical posthumanism can be read as a dispassionate thought experiment into what it means to be not-human. Gladden contends:

By exploiting philosophical methodologies, and a knowledge of science and technology, such thought experiments allow philosophical posthumanists to understand the ways in which human nature may be transformed or superseded through future posthumanization – without necessarily advocating or opposing such transformations in the way that a biopolitical posthumanist would (59-60).

As Miah observes, philosophical posthumanism is not entirely concerned with the changes that would happen to human beings in the future as a result of posthumanization, but rather posits a broader perspective on the way in which what is understood to be non-human is also affected by such changes. One look at the pervasive use of computers, and artificial intelligence today, can only lead one to imagine a future where such use would be even further magnified. The smart homes of today, in which we use voice-commanded AI, such as Google Home or Amazon's Alexa, which are surreptitiously tapping into our bedrooms (i.e. the most intimate spheres of our private lives) and mapping our choices, to create a character profile of us. Based on this, with their intelligent algorithms, they start regulating our choices and preferences; proof already of the power AI holds over our lives. Such prolific presence of the technological would contribute to the creation of a different kind of ecosystem in which the physical would coexist with the digital, and the difference between the two would increasingly be one of degree, rather than of kind. The implications of such AI and its impact on our lives are analysed from ontological, epistemological, and phenomenological, perspectives.

In our delineation of these major categories of posthumanism, we have noticed that they both overlap with, and differ from, each other. Whereas both cultural and critical posthumanism analyse socio-technological reality, already existing philosophical posthumanism looks ahead from the present day, and speculates about some hypothetical possibilities. However, all three of these are meant to enhance our understanding, and do not affect change. Applying the categories proposed by Gladden, mentioned above, we may further note that philosophical posthumanism may fall under the category of 'posthumanism of imagination', and both cultural and critical posthumanism may be labelled as belonging to the category of 'posthumanism of critique'. The fourth major category of posthumanism (biopolitical posthumanism) is different. It can be categorized as 'posthumanism of control'. Though it shares with

philosophical posthumanism its speculative nature, it is different in its objective. Rather than being interested in understanding posthumanism from an epistemological perspective, biopolitical posthumanism is practical in its orientation, and is interested in producing specific change.

We have already noted before the different theoretical positions assumed by Fukuyama's bio-conservative approach, and Stock's techno-progressive stance. Their opposing positions are important for understanding biopolitical posthumanism. It is also important to know about transhumanism, as a bio-conservative thinker like Fukuyama contests the tenets of transhumanism. Mapping out the nature and scope of transhumanism, Ferrando writes:

The movement of transhumanism problematizes the current understanding of the human, not necessarily through its past and present legacies, but through the possibilities inscribed within its possible biological and technological evolutions. Human enhancement is a crucial notion in transhumanist reflection; the main keys to access such a goal are identified in science and technology, in all of their variables, as existing, emerging, and speculative frames — from regenerative medicine to nanotechnology, radical life extension, mind uploading, and cryonics, among other fields (*Posthumanism*, 27).

Transhumanism is future-oriented, and technology does play a serious part in it. Ferrando further writes about the different types of transhumanism:

Distinctive currents coexist in transhumanism, such as: libertarian transhumanism, democratic transhumanism, and extropianism. Science and technology are the main assets of interest for each of these positions, but with different emphases. Libertarian transhumanism advocates the free market as the best guarantor of the right to human enhancement. Democratic transhumanism calls for equal access to technological enhancements, which could otherwise be limited to certain socio-political classes and related to economic power, consequently encoding racial and sexual politics. The principles of extropianism have been delineated by its founder Max More as: perpetual progress, self-transformation, practical optimism, intelligent technology, open society (information and democracy), self-direction, and rational thinking (*Posthumanism*, 27).

From Ferrando's observation, and especially through her distinction between libertarian transhumanism and democratic transhumanism, it can be seen that there are some ethical concerns about our transhumanist future which complicate any simplified view of a world which is to be upgraded by technology.

A biopolitical posthumanist is differentiated on the basis of whether one desires the technological changes, or opposes them. Gladden observes;

Biopolitical posthumanisms manifest a strong future orientation: they attempt to predict the long-term impact of pursuing particular new biotechnologies and – based on such predictions – work to actively facilitate or impede the creation of such technologies, by spurring political or regulatory action, influencing public opinion, advancing scientific research and technology commercialization, or through other means (71).

Bio-conservatism can be understood as a rejection of transhumanism which, basically, is a belief that technology helps us upgrade the limitations of humanity. This upgrading, however, is celebrated by the techno-progressive people. But, as Ferrando says, it is important that one should keep in mind the related ethical questions. One look at what Nick Bostrom says about the different types of human enhancement in his essay “Why I Want to Be a Posthuman When I Grow Up” makes it apparent why it is important to think through the possibilities offered by transhumanism. Bostrom contends that the technologically engineered human beings of the future can possess either (a) an enhanced “capacity to remain fully healthy, active, and productive, both mentally and physically”; (b) enhanced “general intellectual capacities [...], as well as special faculties such as the capacity to understand and appreciate music, humor, eroticism, narration, spirituality, mathematics, etc.”; or (c) an enhanced “capacity to enjoy life and to respond with appropriate affect to life situations and other people” (134).

This difference of beings with either enhanced health, enhanced intellect, enhanced emotions, or a combination of all three, brings at its wake one more relevant question usually overlooked by the techno-progressive thinkers. This becomes clearer if one casts a look at an economically uneven country like India. These supposed enhancements would come at a cost which would be impossible for most to bear. Herein, corporate capitalism would play a big role. In this regard, one may refer to *The Boys* (2006-12), an American comic book series by Garth Ennis and Darick Robertson, in which human babies are technologically enhanced to become superheroes by a powerful corporate house - Vought International - which markets them and uses them for monetary profit. This is an insightful manifesto of a possible future in which the rich and powerful are able to further the difference between them and the poor with the help of such corporate-created, genetically-engineered, beings who, under the guise of justice, would actually stand against the less privileged. *The Boys* was later developed into a web television series by Eric Kripke for Amazon.