



From Humanism to Posthumanism: Theoretical Shifts in Literary Studies

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Abstract— This paper looks at the change from humanism to posthumanism and asks a basic but important question: What does it mean to be human today? In literature and culture, this change shows that we can no longer think of human life as separate or complete on its own. Our lives are deeply connected with technology, nature, and other living beings. Traditional humanism focused on Renaissance ideas, motives, freedom, logic, and commitment. It gives central position to human beings (anthropocentrism) for meaning. Humanism helped to save human worth and liberty, but it also inspired the faith that humans are more important than animals, nature, and the environment. Posthumanism crosses these limits. It focuses upon science, technology, feminism, and questions the faith that humans are the central point of everything. Humanism sees a fixed meaning of identity, but its opposite, posthumanism sees a changing meaning of identity and relationships. This new way of thinking inspired human beings to think about ethics, individuality, freedom, and power in a world that is influenced by technology and environmental problems. Posthumanism is more hopeful and helpful in connecting humans and nonhuman things. In the 21st century, we can say that humans and nonhuman things can live together in the future.



Keywords— Humanism, Anthropocentrism, Posthumanism, Literary Studies, Interdependence

I. INTRODUCTION

For a long time, people believed that humans had always lived at the center of the world. Humanism taught us to think logically, to trust cause, to give preference to education, and to believe in human worth and liberty. These ideas helped to make modern society and motivated people to take a stand against inequality and unawareness. In many ways, humanism offers an inspiring perspective on what human beings can achieve.

But today, the world looks very different. Technology plays an important role in everyday life in today's world. Science can change human structure, and it even has the potential to create new forms. At the same time, environmental damage suggests to us that humans are interconnected to nature. Humans depend on nature, and nature is affected by what humans do.

Posthumanism inspires us to think about the situation in the right direction. It does not say that human beings are

clueless. Instead, it says that humans are not alone and do not hold a superior power over everything. We are a small part of the biggest network that includes everything, like animals, nature, and machines. But human beings are connected with relationships.

In recent years, the existence of human beings has become less stable. Digital technologies are influencing how we think and communicate all over the world. Medical science crosses the limits of the body, and the growing natural disaster reminds us that human life is interconnected to the earth. Because of these changes, many thinkers question the old idea that humans are the center of the universe. Posthumanism takes a stand for this type of questioning. It encourages us to see humans as part of networks rather than as isolated beings.

Stories from science fiction have played an important role in helping people to understand these changes. Novels such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and Philip K. Dick's *Do*

Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? Use characters like cyborgs and androids to explore how technology reshapes the body and the mind. In Gibson's world, consciousness can move through digital spaces, while in Dick's story, readers are forced to ask how we can tell real human emotions from artificial copies. Both writers show that the line between the human and the machine is no longer as clear as it once seemed.

Posthumanist thinking develops other critical theories, especially those that challenge the fixed meaning and strict rules. Like deconstruction, it encourages the readers to read against the grain and question the idea that was given by the writer in the text. The Human subject is not fixed or stable, and humans are not superior to nature. At the same time, Posthumanism is related to postcolonial studies and feminist theory. Feminist theory is closely interconnected with posthumanism because both challenge traditional and rigid ideas.

Postcolonial criticism and posthumanism have a common motive. Both theories try to break down the classification of categories like upper and lower. Both theories focus on equality. Postcolonial theory questions the idea of colonizer and colonized, white and black. Posthumanism questions boundaries between humans and machines, culture and nature, humans and non-humans. Feminist theory supports this critique because posthumanism and feminism are interconnected. Feminist theory also takes a stand against the fixed and traditional image of "human."

In literary studies, posthumanism becomes a useful way to understand the new texts that give an important and active role to non-human things, which is called personification in literary terms. It is very useful for little ones to make them understand moral ethics. In Richard Powers's *The Overstory*, trees and forests are treated as living participants in a shared world. Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* examine the troubling moral questions raised by biotechnology and make readers think about where the limits of human life should be drawn. Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood* trilogy goes even further by imagining futures based on mixture, change, and cooperation between humans and alien species, offering a powerful vision of coexistence rather than control.

These discussions remind us that humanism gave an important perspective to think about cause, rights, and dignity, but these are not enough on their own. The conditions of the modern world require more flexible and responsible way of thinking. Posthumanism gives us important opinions by reminding us that our future will depend on technology. The 21st century is a digital age. Human life is deeply connected with nonhuman forces like robotics.

II. HUMANISM IN LITERATURE

If we want to understand what posthumanism is, first we have to understand humanism because posthumanism is a critical theory against humanism. It questions the fixed meaning of human existence. Humanism took birth during the Renaissance, when individuals focused on human life, abilities, and experience. Instead of believing in religion blindly, people started to give first priority to reason, learning, personal experience, and responsibility. They believed that human beings have the potential to shape their own lives and improve. From this outlook emerged ideas such as respect for human nobility, curiosity to know the world, freedom of thinking/thought, and asking questions rather than believing blindly in traditional

Between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, figures such as Petrarch, Erasmus, and Leonardo da Vinci helped to spread confidence in human creativity. Humans are very creative at that time because they spend more time learning new things and new ideas. This type of thinking did not fade with time, and became even more stronger during the Enlightenment age. Thinkers such as Locke, Rousseau, Voltaire, and Kant encouraged people to trust their own thinking, challenged higher authorities, and defended their own rights. These types of movements promote a modern understanding of human beings that questions traditional beliefs and live life on their own terms. Humans are accountable for the creation of society.

John Locke is closely connected to the humanist point of view because he cares about reason, freedom, human rights, and he speaks against injustice and power. He saw that people learn through their experience and shape themselves. They are not born with fixed ideas. He sees people as learners who are shaped by their experiences, not as beings born with fixed ideas. He focuses on the fact that humans are born on a blank slate and learn through experiences and education. He suggests that "reading furnishes the mind only with materials of knowledge; it is thinking that makes what we read ours." (Locke 216)

During the Enlightenment, writers used humanist ideas to question oppressive institutions such as the Church and the monarchy and to argue for ideals like freedom, equality, and justice. They trusted in human capability to understand the world through observation and reason. They did not blindly trust tradition and customs. They promote individuality over uncritical belief.

Contribution of Major Thinkers in Humanism

Charles Robert Darwin (1809–1882): Darwin changed the way of people think by offering them a new way to think about their existence. He did not accept the explanations that were based on religious belief, but he observed nature, compared, and collected evidence. Through his theory of

evolution, Darwin showed that life is constructed over long periods of time by natural processes. His works motivated people to question fixed meaning, to think for themselves, and make decisions logically. In this sense, his ideas fit closely with the humanist belief in learning through experience and inquiry. "Ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge: it is those who know little, not those who know much, who so positively assert that this or that problem will never be solved by science." (Darwin 1) He was reminding us, in a very human way, that real wisdom grows from curiosity and the courage to keep asking questions.

Mary Ann Evans (1819–1880) (George Eliot) is recognized as a pioneer of modern secular humanism. Her novels thoughtfully explore the lives of everyday people, focusing on their challenges and the ways they develop their own sense of morality. Eliot emphasizes that genuine moral progress arises from human empathy, thoughtful understanding, and personal reflection, rather than from reliance on divine rules. "It is a narrow mind which cannot look at a subject from various points of view." (Eliot 66)

Matthew Arnold (1822–1888) was a leading figure of nineteenth-century humanistic criticism who viewed literature as a "criticism of life." He argued that literary works should cultivate moral awareness by expressing truth and beauty, and he believed that as religious certainties declined, poetry would increasingly serve as a major source of ethical and spiritual guidance.

Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) was a central figure in the modern age. She focused on inner experience rather than outward action. She was associated with the term "Stream of Consciousness" and was a member of the Bloomsbury Group. She talks about consciousness, gender, identity, and time in novels such as *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), reshaping how fiction represents subjective reality.

Themes in Humanism

Humanism takes humans as the subject of core meaning, knowledge, and value. Humans are treated as the most important part of history and culture and always ranked above the environment, animals, and non-human things that existed in the world. Humanism tests human worth and potential. The most important characteristic of humanist thought is to believe in reason, which is a key quality of humans that distinguishes humans from other non-human things. Rational thinking, reason, logic, and critical testing are some characteristics of human beings. Through this, humans can gain knowledge and develop society without the blind trust in religious authority and superstitions.

Humanism also developed the idea of freedom of human beings and a self-directed subject that is capable of

performing moral duties. Through this, humans can understand their active role in shaping their lives and building a brighter future. The humanist point of view promotes the worth of every person. It encourages people to learn about ethical behavior, respect for human life, and a sense of moral duty. Education holds a central position in humanist philosophy. Humanists value the study of literature, philosophy, art, and history as requirements for developing intellectual abilities. Learning is the key to unlocking the storehouse of knowledge. It fosters intellectual thinking and encourages to participation in social and professional life.

Limitations of Humanism and Birth of Posthumanism

Despite its historical importance, it has been criticized for several limitations. The first one is its primary focus on subjective ideas and its tendency to prefer individual experience over empirical and scientific approaches. Humanist thought is also criticized for focusing on an optimistic view of human nature, paying much attention to violence and conflict. It has been criticized for reflecting cultural values, which limit human understanding/thinking. Its emphasis on personal growth and individual freedom can downplay the importance of social life, responsibilities, and systemic power dynamics. Humanism limits human thought and struggles to define text scientifically.

After Humanism, Posthumanism takes its place as a critical theory that comes in response to humanism. Humanism is an anthropocentric approach, and posthumanism defines other concepts that are connected to humans. Posthumanism is not totally against humanism; it does not advocate for the end of humanity, but it is a re-evaluation of the human role within a broader system of relationships. By challenging the idea of human exceptionalism, posthumanist theory highlights interdependence and hybridity. Posthumanism sees that humans are tied to nonhuman things like plants, ecosystems, animals, and technology. In this way, posthumanism can be understood as the response to the restrictions of humanism and offering new opportunities to connect globally through technology. Posthumanism argues that humans are not a fixed identity but a constructed category through situations in every age.

In literary and cultural studies, posthumanism developed as an important and remarkable framework in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, largely due to the contributions of scholars such as N. Katherine Hayles and Rosi Braidotti. (Hayles, 1999) These scholars reconceptualize subjectivity as embodied, relational, and technologically mediated, rather than isolated or self-sufficient. (Smith, 2025, pp. 144-167) Consequently, posthumanism signifies a substantial shift from human-centered perspectives to approaches that

acknowledge the complex networks and material conditions shaping contemporary existence.

Humanism has been criticized for both theoretical and practical limitations. Critics underline its focus on subjective ideas and interpretations of human nature, which may neglect social, cultural, and structural factors. Humanism says that humans are superior to other things, but posthumanism says that human beings are not everything; they are interconnected, which means they are not isolated; they are linked with animals, the environment, and technology. They are not independent but dependent on other beings and systems. Where humanism trusts science and logic for social development, posthumanism argues that knowledge is influenced by social conditions.

It is against this backdrop of critique that posthumanism emerges. Rather than declaring the end of humanism, posthumanism re-evaluates the meaning of human in a world that is interconnected with non-living things. In this sense, posthumanism offers many ways to understand subjectivity, ethics, and expand knowledge through a network. Thinkers like Michel Foucault played a role in challenging the idea of a stable and universal human subject, arguing that “man” is a historical formation. Posthumanism gained recognition in literary and cultural studies during the late 20th and early 21st centuries through the work of N. Katherine Hayles and Rosi Braidotti. The main theme of their works is that human beings are not independent and self-sufficient, but they are relational and shaped by technological and material forces.

Posthumanism: Major Concepts and Perspectives

Technology and the Posthuman Condition:

Andy Clark reminds us that humans have always connected with technology, tools they invent. Posthumanism examines how artificial intelligence, digital media, and biotechnology influence the present generation. Posthumanism focuses on how technological progress reshapes bodily potential and self-perception. From this perspective, humans can be understood as “natural born cyborgs,” whose thoughts and identities are shaped through the interactions and technologies we use daily. This viewpoint shows how human life now exists in shared space between nature and technology. “The word ‘cyborg’ once conjured visions of wires and implants, but as we have seen, the use of such penetrative technologies is inessential. To focus on them is to concede far too much to the ancient biological skin-bag. What matters most is our obsessive, endless weaving of biotechnological webs: the constant two-way traffic between biological wetware and tools, media, props, and technologies. The very best of these resources is not so much used as incorporated into the user herself. They fall into place as aspects of the thinking

process. They have the power to transform our sense of self, of location, of embodiment, and of our own mental capacities. They impact who, what, and where we are.” (Clark 209)

Decentering the Human Subject:

Unlike humanism, which highlights the rational and independent individual, posthumanism views the human as relational, shaped by interaction, and dependent on context. Identity is shaped by interaction with technology, culture, environment, and non-human forces. It calls for recognizing the interdependence between humans, animals, machines, and nature. Posthumanism challenges humanism because human interests and viewpoints are superior. In today’s world, we can say that humans are a part of a larger network.

Cyborg and Hybrid Subjectivity:

Cyborgs and hybrid subjectivity are central ideas of posthumanism, questioning the humanist point of view of the independent and self-contained individual. A cyborg is a cybernetic organism that combines organic and technological elements. In posthumanism, cyborg is not a scientific or fictional concept; it functions as a metaphor for human existence in the digital world. In “A Cyborg’s Manifesto,” Donna Haraway presents the cyborg as a figure that breaks the rigid boundaries between human/machine, organism/technology, and natural/artificial. “The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics.” (Haraway 7) She suggests that the cyborg represents our condition, how we understand ourselves.

Hybrid subjectivity suggests that who we are is shaped by many forces—our biology, technology, culture, society, and the material world around us. Humans are not completely separate and self-sufficient, but they are constructed by digital systems, the environment, and relationships. The fusion can be seen in different ways:

- Human - Machine (interaction with digital technology)
- Human - Animal (ecological connection)
- Human - Environment (interdependence with the natural world)

From this point of view, identity is dynamic and continuously developing, rather than fixed.

Posthumanism in Literature

In literary studies, posthumanism questions traditional human-centered ways of thinking by emphasizing the fluid boundaries between humans, technology, the environment, and animals. It rejects the concept of the ideal and independent human; instead, it portrays humans as interconnected, hybrid, and sometimes cyborg-like beings, redefining the ideas of identity and agency. In humanism, humans are placed above all; posthumanist writings promote a relational approach, presenting humans as part of

a larger network that includes non-human life and systems. This type of literature addresses environmental issues, including climate change, humanity's domination over nature, and the exploitation of nature through the representation of plants and animals.

Early works in Posthumanism:

While posthumanism is considered a modern theoretical development, its underlying concepts are present in earlier literary works, especially within science fiction. Both Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and H.G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* are significant works in posthumanist theory. These works are valuable because they explore ideas that are closely associated with posthumanist thought. In *Frankenstein*, Shelley questions the humanist belief of her time period by blurring the boundaries between human and artificial life. The novel examines issues of identity and the moral consequences of scientific and technological advancements. Similarly, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* by Wells examines the distinction between humans and animals, highlighting the interconnected nature of life.

Contemporary Literature in Posthumanism:

Modern literature shaped by posthumanist theory examines human life freshly and more honestly. It demonstrates that humans are no longer separate from machines, animals, or nature but are closely intertwined with them. Many writers use stories about technology, genetic modification, and hybrid beings to explore how these developments are transforming our world. These works often reflect the problems of the Anthropocene, such as climate change and environmental damage, and ask readers to think about their responsibility toward the planet. By giving importance to non-human beings and forces, this kind of literature challenges the old idea that humans are the center of everything and encourages us to see ourselves as part of a larger, shared world.

Analysis of Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968)

Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is a thoughtful science-fiction novel that asks deep questions about life, machines, and what it means to be human. The story is set on a broken Earth after a terrible nuclear war, where many people have already left the planet to find safer places to live. Those who remain hold on to real animals as something precious and meaningful. The novel follows Rick Deckard, a bounty hunter whose job is to track down and "retire" androids—artificial beings who look, think, and behave almost just like real people. "Empathy, evidently, existed only within the human community, whereas intelligence to some degree could be found throughout every phylum and order, including the arachnida." (Dick 29)

Philip K. Dick's novel explores the idea that living in a society dominated by powerful systems can force individuals to compromise their core values. The story illustrates how to survive, people may find themselves making decisions that go against their own beliefs, leaving them with feelings of guilt or discomfort. As these difficult choices accumulate, a person's identity can become unstable and uncertain. Ultimately, the narrative suggests that in such an environment, it is impossible for anyone—human or android—to remain entirely innocent or at peace with themselves.

Analysis of Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1991)

The essay *A Cyborg Manifesto* is widely read as part of Haraway's 1991 book *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*. It is a landmark work that challenges human beings to reconsider their existence in this technological world. Haraway uses the term "cyborg" as an example, a hybrid of machine and human organism. She shows how humans, machines, and animals are interconnected. The manifesto depicts a society in which gender and identity are not stable or rigid but dynamic and flexible, shaped by culture and digital forces. Instead of fearing technology, Haraway encourages us to engage with technology, to work with it. She encourages us to dismantle old divisions, such as male/female, nature and culture, and mind/body. The cyborg becomes a symbol to understand life in an integrated, connected, and imaginative way.

Analysis of Nancy Katherine Hayles's *How We Become Posthuman*

N. Katherine Hayles is a renowned writer of American literature whose works examine how science, technology, literature, and life are interconnected. Her book "How We Become Posthuman" is a foundational work in posthumanist studies. In it, she examines how technology and scientific development reshape human perception. She argues that humanity is deeply rooted in material reality and technological systems, so these connections are reshaping the real meaning of human life. "If my nightmare is a culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being, my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival." (Hayles 5)

Analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005)

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* is a powerful novel that invites readers to question the meaning of being human in a

world shaped by science. By telling the story of clones who are created only for organ donation, the novel shows how unfair it is to treat some lives as less important than others and questions the idea that humanity depends only on how someone is born. Even though the clones are artificially made, they can feel, remember, love, and make choices about their lives. In this way, the novel presents them as fully human in their emotions and experiences, despite their controlled and limited existence. "There are no deferrals. There have never been any deferrals. And you are... clones." (Ishiguro 259)

"We were created to donate. That's what we were made for. That's why we exist." This line exposes how cloned bodies are reduced to biological resources, reflecting posthumanism's critique of **human exceptionalism** and the treatment of life as disposable matter. (Ishiguro 164)

Analysis of Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (2013) and Posthuman Feminism

The Posthuman: Braidotti points out that traditional humanism, which celebrates a rational, independent, Eurocentric, human-centered idea of "man," doesn't really fit the world we live in today. Our lives are shaped by technology, globalization, environmental challenges, and systems that control life in complex ways. She suggests posthumanism as a new way to think about these issues—one that moves humans out of the center and instead focuses on our connections with others, our dependence on each other, and our responsibility to care for both human and non-human life. "The posthuman condition urges us to think critically and creatively about who and what we are becoming." (Braidotti 12)

Posthuman Feminism: Posthuman Feminism is generally associated with the book "The Posthuman." Rosi Braidotti's posthuman feminism offers a fresh perspective on who we are and what feminism means today. She challenges the fixed notions of identity and traditional gender categories. She argues that human life is shaped by relationships with others and by the technology we use.

Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway are prominent thinkers of posthumanist feminism, but they define it in their own way. Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway are key thinkers in posthuman feminism, but they approach it differently. Braidotti highlights the fluid and relational nature of identities and the responsible connection with technology. Haraway, on the other hand, introduces imaginative figures like cyborgs to challenge the fixed identities of humans and gender. She emphasizes that knowledge is situated and produced collectively. Together, their contribution to posthumanism increases the scope for feminism to consider not only the human subject but also non-human things and the universe we all share.

The Impact of Posthumanism on Contemporary Human Life

Posthumanism has shifted our understanding of what it means to be human by challenging traditional beliefs about human independence, rationality, and superiority. For example, theorist N. Katherine Hayles discusses both the risks and opportunities that technology brings to human identity. She warns against reducing our bodies and lives to mere accessories but is also optimistic about how information technologies can enhance human experience. (Hayles, 1999) Posthumanist theory emphasizes the dependence of human beings on technology, the environment, and other living things. In everyday life, technology rules us and influences how we think, communicate, and interact with the world. Posthumanism encourages us to think that humans are not superior or separate. It encourages us to view human life as a part of the natural world and interconnected with other forms of life.

In culture and literature, posthumanism has generated innovative ways for the representation of the human. Literature, movies, and theoretical works engage with cyborgs and artificial intelligence to question the meaning and limitations of humans. These theories show the excitement and anxiety of human life in a technological world.

III. CONCLUSION

This paper explores the transformation of humanity from humanism to posthumanism. It highlights how traditional thinking, like "humans are rational and superior," is continuously questioned. While humanism has focused on dignity, ethical responsibility, and critical thinking, it has faced criticism for its narrow viewpoint on individualism and anthropocentrism. By contrast, posthumanism proposes a relational understanding of humanity in relation to technology, the environment, and other living beings. In posthumanism, humans are interconnected with the digital world. Thinkers like N. Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti, and Donna Haraway, and novels such as *Never Let Me Go* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* We can see how ideas like cyborgs, hybrid identities, and relational ethics show that our lives are shaped through interactions with machines, other species, and the world around us. Literature, in particular, helps us understand the ethical, social, and philosophical questions raised by technology, ecological crises, and human-centered thinking. By challenging rigid hierarchies and expanding our sense of responsibility, posthumanism invites us to see identity, knowledge, and action as flexible, interconnected, and shared across all forms of life.

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