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Towards the New Paradigm of Existence, Human to Posthuman:

Reflections on Subash Chandran's *A Preface to Man*.

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The term “Posthumanism” is a contemporary theoretical term put forward by researchers with disciplinary backgrounds in philosophy, science and technology and literary studies, for these groups, Posthumanism designates a series of breaks with foundational assumptions of modern Western culture. It claims to offer a new epistemology that is not anthropocentric and therefore not centred in Cartesian dualism. It seeks to undermine the traditional boundaries between the human, the animal, and the technological. The postmodern theorist Ihab Hassan coined the term and offered a seminal definition in an article entitled "Prometheus as Performer: Towards a Posthumanist Culture?". As its name suggests, a defining characteristic of Posthumanism is its rejection of the values held on top by the traditional Western Humanism. In the words of Rosi Braidotti, “From Protagoras’ assertion that it is “the measure of all things”, to Da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man, the privileging of the human instils a set of “mental, discursive and spiritual values” (13). This notion comes to form the basis for political policies of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. Man is understood as an “intrinsically moral” being, functioning as a kind of vessel for perfect rationality and reason.

Armed with these tools, man is capable of a limitless expansion toward his own perfection, and entitled to claim, as his own, whatever objects or others he encounters along the way.

This privileging of man as the centre of everything is what Posthumanism aims to attack.

Hassan says that posthuman does not mean the literal end of man but the end of an image of man shaped by Descartes, Thomas More and Erasmus. Braidotti in her book *The Posthuman* outlines that with the rise of ideologies like Fascism and Communism, Humanism started its ascending in the 1960s and 70s. Both these former ideologies represent a significant break from European Humanism: Fascism promoted a “ruthless” departure from the Enlightenment reverence for human reason, while Communism advocated a “communitarian notion of humanist solidarity” (17).

The publication of Foucault’s *The Order of Things* signalled the peak of the disfavour for Humanism in the field of socio-political theorisation. It wasn’t until this that intellectuals began to seriously consider what exactly was meant by “the human” and the values associated with that term. Attempts made by Jacques Derrida with his theories on ‘Deconstruction’ further decentred the Humanistic ideals which were treated as an intellectual basis for European imperialism. In this way, radical intellectuals of post-1968 rejected both classical and socialist Humanism, and the Vitruvian ideal was “literally pulled down from his pedestal and deconstructed” (Braidotti 23). What was learned from the deprivileging of the human was that “individualism is not an intrinsic part of ‘human nature’ ...but rather a historically and culturally discursive formation” (Braidotti 24). It is from here that the Posthumanist thinkers such as Cary Wulf, Katherine Hayles, Donna Haraway and others argue for a new mode of thinking which could be characterized as ‘Posthuman’. Thus inaugurated the new paradigm of critical thinking—Posthumanism.

Posthumanism is a new and different paradigm of conceptualising life and everything associated with that. In the opinion of Katherine Hayles Posthumanism tries to conceptualize

'human' in new ways, in its entanglement with nature, culture, and technology. Using examples such as experimental science and the incorporation of technology into the arts Posthumanist thinkers wanted to establish an undeniable convergence that has already begun, and the "unified consciousness" that humans must strive towards if they want to evolve into something like the 'becoming human' or the 'transformative homo sapiens'. Hence, the primary concern of this new paradigm is the subversion of all kinds of dualisms, particularly the binary nature/culture, and its privileging of the human to the harming of other ontological possibilities and agential entities. The idea then is to promote a sense of co-living through co-evolving. For Rosi Braidotti, it is an attempt to turn ethics zoe-centric so that it takes into consideration all forms of life—human and nonhuman. The nonhuman, according to Richard Grusin can be broadly conceived as "animals, plants, organisms, climatic systems, technologies, or ecosystems" (78). Grusin contends that the nonhuman turn, on the contrary, emphasizes how human and nonhumans have always coevolved, coexisted, and collaborated.

The Posthumanism attempts to understand its individual in relation to their awareness of imperfectability or disunity within him or herself and it has an emergent ontology not a stable one. It focuses on the idea of 'becoming subjectivities' as formed by different emerging factors. So, a posthuman figure allows for alternative perspectives and positions to question, destabilize, and decentre "the human" and all its associated values and privileges to turn place it back onto its universal biological context. This shall be a real paradigm shift as it works to the effect of redefining not only the way one sets one's socio-moral objects but also in the way one imagines oneself in one's ethical self-relation. This thread of Posthumanism, including the changing notion of subjectivity and the disruption of ideas concerning what it means to be human, is often associated with Donna Haraway's concept of the 'cyborg'. The concept of the cyborg is a rejection of rigid boundaries, notably those separating "human" from "animal" and "human" from "machine." She writes, "The cyborg does not dream of

community on the model of the organic family, this time without the oedipal project. The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust” (92).

Posthumanism can be considered as an ethical and political necessity to deal with the contemporary world in which a desire for sociological and technological advancements is stained by an anxiety over the eco-biological aspect of the planet in whole. By affirming the politics that takes into account the existence of human and nonhuman especially the advancement in the field of technologies and environmental are also considered while conceptualising the Posthuman subjectivity. Rosi Braidotti in her book *Posthumanism* outlines what she sees as the three major strands of Posthumanist thought. The first is reactionary Posthumanism, which essentially denies the decline of Humanism entirely, arguing rather that humanist ideals provide the only workable model for adaptation to the globalized economy. The second strand she identifies is analytic Posthumanism, which comes from science and technology studies. It provides a lot of practical insight into advances in technology and science. The third strand of Posthumanism is the critical Posthumanism. The primary goal of critical Posthumanism can be understood as an effort to reject individualism and turn not to nihilism or defeatism, but to a formation of a wholly new understanding of a non-unitary subject, who is inherently embedded within a planetary (or, even universal) whole. Even though she condemns the first strand, the reactionary Posthumanism, by saying that “there is no room for experimenting with new models of the self” (39) this turn can be seen as the first step towards the creation of a non-unitary subject which she wishes to theorize in the critical Posthumanism.

Subash Chandran’s *a Preface to Man* can be considered as book that encompasses what Braidotti termed as the reactionary Posthumanism. The novel neither makes use of cyborg as a protagonist nor a sci-fi style of narration. Chandran’s characters and atmosphere

are very much ‘human’ and the life he is describing is not mediated by the new forms of life likes robots. Placing himself in the tradition of Humanism, Chandran is trying to give an account of changes in man and how he is entering in to the Posthuman situation. By dedicating his novel “for those who were born in the last century and are living in this century”, Subash Chandran’s attempt is similar to reactionary Posthumanism. He is neither leaving the Humanistic tradition nor disregarding the changes it has to incorporate. But he definitely underlines the altered subjective points.

The novel is tracing the story of Indian life, especially the life of a Keralite of the past hundred years through its emotional history. The divisions of the novel into four parts corresponding to the ‘purusharthas’, the four-fold goal of the human life in Indian philosophy. It may be argued that Chandran is writing a preface for the “human” which he thinks is disappearing from the world-scene. In his speech on the occasion of receiving Kendra Sahitya Academy Award, Subash Chandran declared that his novel is an attempt to investigate the transformation happened in man in light of the concept of “universal human”. And he stresses that this particular transformation from the world of meaning to the world of meaningless was much complex in the Keralites.

He starts the novel in the future, in the year of 2026 when his protagonist Jithendran alias Jithen dies in his apartment in Thachanakkara, a local place in Kerala. The novel progresses through the letters written by Jithen to his wife Ann Mary during their six-year courtship. The letters appear as an epigraph to each chapter in the novel through which the reader is able to understand the difference between the time and the difference in the human. It can be considered as a technique used by Chandran to inform his readers about the paradigm shift that occurred in our life—the transformation of life from Humanism to Posthumanism. Characters like Narapilla, Govindan Master Kunjammamma, Poosappi etc are the people who belongs to what we may call the paradigm of Humanism. That is why the

only living character of the past Govindan Master constantly worries about the losing all those he considered to be the greatest values of his life. He comments that the “new age words are born from conjoining those once considered opposite” (Chandran 370). Taking language’s position as a constructor of reality Govindan Master’s worry is the reflection of Posthuman time or Posthuman reality. It is a reality that came into existence by negative the notion of reality itself.

Ihab Hassan notes in his “Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?” that Posthumanism must be viewed as the representation of the convergence of two opposing aspects of our reality like imagination and science, or myth and technology. Such convergence or conjoining is what Master was talking about. Jithen’s lifelong ambition of writing a novel about Thachanakkara and its people is an unaccomplished project. One reason for that may be the lack of an anchoring point that is characteristic of the world of ‘becoming life’ and ‘becoming subjects’. Though he made many attempts to complete his venture, his own ideas and dilemma of the importance of those principles that guided the past generation in the present scenario made Jithen forget about the mission. Jithen was well-aware that the society has changed, and he experiences himself as a Posthuman. He grieves, “without a person, philosophy, or movement to seek refuge in, time was getting crushed. In old places of moral rectitude everywhere, new greed had been installed. Life was becoming empty without being able to find a decent soul as a friend or mate or a guru” (Chandran 377). This feeling of emptiness is coming from the deconstruction of all those values, those ‘human values’, that this man thought to be his innate abilities or qualities. It is an irrevocable departure to a new paradigm of things, relations and values. Losing of a friend or mate or guru is symbolic representation of the loosing of Humanistic ideals basically, in which teaching morals and leading the human individual to a virtuous path is the duty of teacher, peer and companion.

Jithendran is a subject that is split between the two paradigms of living and thinking about life. He sways between the two existential poles: one fixed on a humanistic desire for existential meaning /sense that is certain and stable, while the other planted on the posthumanist disjuncture from all humanist orientations. He is fully within context of technology and development while at the same time engaging in a retrospective reflection over the lost meaning. Jithendran feels “to forget the faraway Thachanakkara and the Ayyattumpilli blood” but at the same time when “he sat in the glass case of his transplanted life, reminisced about Thachanakkara , he would get caught in the net of feeling that he was both places simultaneously” (Chandran 415). This ‘belonging to both places simultaneously’ is what the reactionary Posthumanism advocates in one sense. It does not neglect the Humanistic tradition but at the same time it identifies with new technological development and focuses on how a human can adapt to that situation. Jithen’s desire for transplanting himself from human centred world to the technology centred world is clear when he, being appointed as a manger in the company, says that “he would be able to buy mobile phone and an internet enabled computer. If so, he would be able to easily forget the far away Thachanakkara and the Ayyattumpilli blood” (Chandran 356). In a sense, it is a critique of the Posthuman cyborg culture that is further alienating humans from the biological context of natural life. Clinging on the technology and progress as the core life Jithen’s wish to be a man whose life has been controlled by the technology is the wish and life of an every-day posthuman. He is a man tossed between the conceptual frame of decentring human for the natural context and the alienating order of the everyday domineered by technology. In the latter context one’s past or roots or ‘blood’ does not come to relevance. Jithen’s declaration “I have nothing to be proud of in being born as a human” (Chandran 1) is an understanding of seeing himself as nothing more than a life-force, a life equal to the other life-forms of the universe. Jithen is reaching near to an affirmation of a Zoe-centric life as advocated by the

critical Posthumanist thinkers. It is not a privileging of the zoe over the bios, that is the biological over the social, rather it is an affirming the zoe or the biological giving due weight to it. Idea of being superior or “the measure of all things” is changed to the view of seeing himself similar to other forms of life. Thus, he has no feeling of pride in him about being human. The same point can be read in two ways: 1. as a critique of the Posthuman alienation through technology or what we call Anthropocene, and 2. as an affirmation of the common and universal over the particular and special. Jithendran’s image of fish living in the water tank also may be remembered here as an example for the transplanted life he is experiencing. When he notes that the “its [fish’s] memories of life spent in river becomes a fable; a flowing story, written on the water for someone for some else... it considers the rubber doll that sits nearby and spits aerating bubbles, its relatives” (Chandran 356) it touches two aspects of the same concern: the deprivileging of the ‘social-being’ in favour of a biological one and the alienating factors of the Anthropocene that comes as an effect of the insertion of technology into life.

The shift of focus from the Humanism to Posthumanism is evidently portrayed in Subhash Chandran’s novel by incorporating multiple viewpoints. By moving effectively between the ideals of the humanistic tradition and the hopes of Posthumanism, Subhash Chandran’s novel *A Preface to Man* is trying to provide a preface to the Posthuman condition itself. Reading the novel along what Braidotti called the reactive Posthumanism, the novel yields a fruitful field of critical engagement and insight.

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