

# Beyond the Human: Posthuman Intelligence, Oceanic Ecologies and Ethical First Contact in Ray Nayler's *The Mountain in the Sea*

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

Special Issue: 2

Month: January

Year: 2026

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

Citation:

Dharanipriya, B., et al.  
"Beyond the Human: Posthuman Intelligence, Oceanic Ecologies and Ethical First Contact in Ray Nayler's *The Mountain in the Sea*." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2026, pp. 182–86.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v13iS2-i4-Jan.10601>

**Ms. B. Dharanipriya**

*Assistant Professor*

*Dr N.G.P. Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India*

**Ms. M.C. Shree Akshatha**

*Assistant Professor*

*Dr N.G.P. Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India*

**Ms. M.B. Narmadha**

*Assistant Professor*

*Dr N.G.P. Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India*

## Abstract

*The Mountain in the Sea* by Ray Nayler is a contemporary novel. The story focuses on the discovery of a specific kind of octopus in the Con Dao Archipelago, which exceeds human-driven ideas through its complex interaction and extraordinary intellectual capabilities. By recognizing human as a concept and embracing the power, cognitive ability and moral significance of non-human creatures. Posthumanism acts as a theoretical structure that questions the humanistic assumption of human exceptionalism. By means of post-humanistic components such as human beings, the octopus's species, the sea and the marine system, this study aims to show the various degrees of intelligence and interactions that go far beyond humans. It also reveals the issues related to anthropological notions and poses the difficulties that human beings face. In addition, it addresses the moral consequences, the significance of artificial intelligence, as well as its impact on society. Besides highlighting overlapping narratives through the characters, this research further illustrates an exact representation of interdependence and human intervention, which threatens the natural environment and mankind's inhumaneness against the natural world where they reside in. The research examines innovation in technology that fosters domination instead of harmony and cooperation, such as the power of corporations, systems using AI and surveillance. The novel analyses surveillance culture and the collapse of capitalism as a means to establish its post-human implications. Commercial powers seek to control, investigate and make profits from humans and other bodies, revealing the hybrid characteristics of biopower.

**Keywords:** Posthumanism, Human Exceptionalism, Artificial Intelligence, Capitalism, Biopolitics

## Introduction

Ray Nayler, a writer from the United States and Canada, has received Hugo and Locus Honors. Ecology, systems theory, and issues of consciousness and intelligence, including artificial and animal intelligence, have been covered in his writings. *The Mountain in the Sea*, Nayler's very

first novel, is about discovering the culture of sentient octopuses off the Vietnamese coast. It was a finalist of the Nebula Award, the Los Angeles Times Ray Bradbury Award, and the 2023 Locus Award for Best First Novel. Esquire ranked it one of the greatest science fiction novels of all time. *The Mountain in the Sea*, published in 2022, is a near-future thriller that examines themes like consciousness, non-human intelligence, and corporate exploitation through the discovery of a highly intelligent octopus species off the coast of Vietnam. The novel earned the 2023 Locus Award for Best First Novel.

*The Tusks of Extinction*, Ray Nayler's second book, is a novella about reviving the woolly mammoth. It was published in 2024, won the Hugo Award for Best Novella, and was a finalist for the Nebula and Locus Awards. *Where the Axe Is Buried*, his third book, is a near-future thriller that will be released on April 1, 2025. It depicts an uprising against a society ruled by artificial intelligence and dictatorial governments. His fourth novel, *Palaces of the Crow*, is set in the present day and follows the narrative of four teens who survive a winter in the forests between the Nazis and the Red Army with the help of a group of extraordinarily clever crows.

*The Mountain in the Sea* by Ray Nayler is a contemporary eco-speculative novel that interrogates dominant human-centred assumptions about intelligence, agency, and ethical responsibility. Set against the backdrop of the Con Dao archipelago, the novel revolves around the discovery of a species of highly intelligent octopuses whose complex modes of communication resist conventional linguistic and scientific interpretation. Through this premise, the narrative destabilises the humanist belief that rationality and moral significance are exclusively human traits, instead foregrounding the possibility of distributed intelligence across species. *The Mountain in the Sea* is a near-future novel that draws on world events now to create a compelling read. We have a near-future story with elements of climate change, overfished oceans, AI, killer drones, shady corporate deals and espionage – not to mention a study of intelligence and what it is to be human. The plot really runs in three strands. In the main plot, Ha Nguyen is a marine biologist who has recently accepted a role to observe and examine an octopus colony around the archipelago of Con Dao in Vietnam. There have been rumours of strange things happening on the shore. Ha's interest in marine biology overrides her concern about who she is working for, because the whole archipelago as a reserve has been bought by corporate tech giant DIANIMA, and the area has been cleared of its residents for this study.

Ha finds herself on the archipelago with two unusual comrades. One of them is Altantsetseg, a Mongolian soldier and bodyguard there to look after Ha, and the other is the genderless Evrim. Evrim is the world's first – and only – android, on the archipelago for their own protection. In the second, we meet Rustem, a Russian cyberhacker who takes on a covert job to infiltrate a uniquely intense neural network. In the third plot line we meet Eiko, someone due to start a new job for DIANIMA in Ho Chi Minh Autonomous Trade Zone, but before that happens, he is pressganged and finds himself a slave on an AI-run fishing boat, struggling to survive the extreme conditions he has to work in, as well as the beatings and abuse given to him and others by armed guards. These initially disparate threads intertwine until by the end all is connected.

The central problem addressed in this study is the persistence of anthropocentric frameworks within modern epistemology and ethics, which position humans as the primary subjects of knowledge and value. Such frameworks marginalise non-human forms of life and reduce ecological systems to passive resources. Post-humanist theory offers a critical alternative by challenging the notion of human exceptionalism and emphasising relational forms of existence. This paper argues that Nayler's novel critiques anthropocentrism and proposes a posthuman ethics grounded in multispecies coexistence, ecological responsibility, and the recognition of non-human agency.

## Review of Literature

Posthumanism emerges as a theoretical movement that questions the philosophical foundations of classical humanism, particularly its emphasis on human rationality, autonomy, and moral superiority. Scholars such as Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and Cary Wolfe argue that the human subject has been artificially separated

from ecological and technological networks, leading to ethical hierarchies that privilege human interests at the expense of other forms of life. Posthuman thought seeks to decentre the human and reconceptualise agency as distributed across biological and technological systems.

Literary and eco-critical studies have increasingly examined representations of non-human intelligence, particularly in relation to animals and marine ecosystems. The ocean has been conceptualised as a space of alterity, where alternative forms of cognition and communication challenge terrestrial epistemologies. Scientific research on octopus cognition has further complicated anthropocentric models by demonstrating advanced problem-solving abilities, memory, and social learning. Within literature, the octopus often functions as a symbol of radical otherness, embodying a form of intelligence that cannot be easily assimilated into human categories.

In addition, critical studies of speculative fiction have explored themes of surveillance, capitalism, and biopolitics. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of biopower, scholars argue that modern power operates through the regulation of life itself, extending into biological bodies, digital data, and ecological systems. Corporate surveillance in speculative narratives reflects contemporary anxieties about technological domination and the commodification of both human and non-human life. However, there remains a significant research gap in posthuman readings of Nayler's novel that integrate octopus intelligence, artificial intelligence, and oceanic ethics within a unified critical framework.

### **Posthumanism**

Posthumanism is a philosophical and cultural trend that questions traditional forms of understanding what it means to be human, often focusing on how technology, the environment and non-human beings shape human life. It questions the delimiting boundaries between the human and the non-human, and calls into question the revaluation of ethics, identity and agency in the ever-growing interconnected world. This school of thought encourages a study of the effects of scientific and technological advancement within the context of human perception and connection with other creatures. The term posthumanism can be a philosophical and critical paradigm that denies the centrality of the human subject and challenges the hierarchical distinction among humans, animals, machines, and environments. In contrast to transhumanism, which tends to enhance human abilities with the help of technology, posthumanism focuses on relationality, weakness, and moral dependence. It criticizes Enlightenment humanism on the basis that it creates the human as an independent and rational subject who is not tied to material and ecological situations.

One of the central ideas of posthumanism is non-human agency that acknowledges the existence of animals, machines and ecosystems, which have some kind of intelligence and power, which can impact social and ethical reality. Ethical relationality also implies that moral responsibility is not born of human superiority but rather by interdependence and mutual vulnerability. Distributed cognition criticises the idea that intelligence is particular to individual human minds and suggests it is a part of a system of interaction between biological and technological systems. In the novel by Nayler, the posthuman principles are personified by the octopuses, which have intelligence that is not dependent on human beings, and artificial intelligence systems that are beyond human control. Even the marine environment operates as a living system to be resistant to the reduction to a spatial background. Posthumanism, in its turn, offers a critical perspective in terms of which the ethical and ecological connotations of the novel could be analytically approached.

### **Humanistic Assumption of Human Exceptionalism and the Domination of AI World**

The octopuses in the novel are shown to have multifaceted types of intelligence that are not based on human linguistics. They are non-linear, embodied, collective, and should not be carried out or assume that language has to follow human grammatical patterns in order to be meaningful. This description is consistent with posthuman theories of distributed cognition, where intelligence is viewed as a product of interaction, and not individual consciousness. The very concept of the ocean is depicted as an active ecological system

instead of an inert ground. Systems of communication, adaptation and survival of the marine life are linked. The novel challenges anthropocentric epistemologies, which view nature as an extraction object by placing the ocean as a dynamic subject that behaves. This, therefore, makes the acknowledgement of octopus intelligence an ethical necessity, and one that requires the respect of the forms of life, which are beyond the scope of human understanding.

The efforts of human beings to research the octopuses are characterised by scientific arrogance and epistemic violence. Scientists want to decode the non-human forms of communication into human models, thus subjecting them to a system of categories that cannot adequately explain alien intelligence. This process represents larger trends of colonial and scientific domination, whereby knowledge production is a control instrument as opposed to comprehension. This anthropocentric way of approaching nature is criticised in the novel as the ethical debacle of the first contact that is based on mastery and categorisation. It instead suggests a different model based on ethical humility, according to which human beings acknowledge the boundaries of their knowledge, and address non-human intelligence by engaging with it in a relational surrounding but not in a hierarchical manner. First contact thus becomes an ethical experience instead of a scientific conquest.

Artificial intelligence in the novel is a technological innovation and a control mechanism. The AI systems follow the actions of human beings, control the information, and support corporate power. These technologies are a threat to human autonomy and establish a society where human beings are under constant monitoring and algorithmic control. One of the major parallels is the domination of octopuses by humans and the domination of humans by AI. In the same way human beings are known to desire to control non-human intelligence, they are instead the ones who are subjected to technological control. Through this recursive configuration, the ethical risks of top-down thinking are seen, where the logic of domination continually propagates the cycles of exploitation between species and systems.

In the novel, capitalism works as a universal framework of exploitation which impacts ecosystems, livestock and human labour. Corporations desire to transform existence into capital by making use of genetic information, biological information and resources from the environment. It's in accordance with Foucault's concept of biopower that asserts that living organisms can be controlled and manipulated to exert power. The novel explores the concept of capitalism that changes both humans and non-humans into sources for generating money, as human beings are observed and behaviour is controlled, aquatic ecosystems are getting exploited for technological progress. So, natural ecosystem destruction evolves into another form of commercial destruction, disclosing the ethical repercussions of economic development.

The connection of individuals, animals, machines and the environment is an important theme in the novel. They are an integral part of complex chains of communication and dependence instead of living in solitude. The false sense of mankind is shown by the unavoidable environmental consequences of human actions towards non-humans. The novel's depiction of the environmental catastrophe acts as an important warning about human-centred assumptions that prioritise immediate control over sustainable development in future. Posthuman morality particularly highlights interdependence, generosity and social duty as basic principles that rise as an essential option.

## Conclusion

The overall study concludes by focusing on artificial intelligence, scientific dominance and biological connection. Ray's novel conveys an effective criticism of human exceptionalism. The novel challenges anthropological notions and presents a future human moral framework by its representation of an octopus's cognitive abilities, machine learning and financial slavery. By reframing initial contact as an ethical instead of imperialist conversation, the novel presents an important contribution to posthuman literary research and eco-critical theory. Finally, it promotes a transformation from domination to peaceful coexistence, suggesting that understanding agency and the significance of all kinds of existence is crucial for the development of moral living.

**References**

1. Alaimo, Stacy. (2016). *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times*. University of Minnesota Press.
2. Braidotti, Rosi. (2013). *The Posthuman*. Polity Press.
3. Braidotti, Rosi. (2019). *Posthuman Knowledge*. Polity Press.
4. de Waal, Frans. (2016). *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* W. W. Norton.
5. Foucault, Michel. (1978). *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1, An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. Pantheon.