

# Contested Trajectories of the Human: Examining Posthumanism and Transhumanism Through 21st-Century Texts

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## Abstract

*This paper considers the representations of posthumanism and transhumanism in contemporary literature as antagonistic yet connected concepts. Posthumanism challenges the primacy of humans by suggesting the existence of decentred and hybrid identities that transcend anthropocentrism in contrast to transhumanism which has accepted technology as a means to human growth and eternity. The study, through its main approach based on comparative literary analysis, examines how literary texts in the works of Kazuo Ishiguro (Klara and the Sun) and Ian McEwan (Machines Like Me) and Manjula Padmanabhan (Harvest) and Vandana Singh (speculative fiction) maneuver their way through these competing futures. It uses the works of Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti and Nick Bostrom to analyze the ways in which these works articulate the struggle between the aspiration to transcendence and the disintegration of the human. In the end, the article proposes that literature can be an indispensable space to explore these opposing ideologies and provide more subtle insights into the possible ways in which humanity can develop in a technologically mediated age.*

**Keywords:** Posthumanism, Transhumanism, 21st-Century Literature, Comparative Literary Analysis, Human Identity, Technological Mediation, Speculative Fiction, Future of Humanity, Anthropocentrism, Hybrid Identities

## Introduction

Due to the blistering technological innovation, human identity and subjectivity is evolved in a drastic way. The two paradigms of responding to these changes, posthumanism and transhumanism, become two dominant, yet ideologically antagonistic approaches. Posthumanism is more critical of the anthropocentrism and questions the uniqueness of the human species, whereas transhumanism advocates technological advancement as a way of transcending the biological constraints.

Although there have been increasing theoretical discussions on posthumanism and transhumanism, the comparative literary analysis is not sustained that would focus on how these are represented simultaneously in the present day fiction. The bulk of the extant research either concentrates on a single paradigm as such or

addresses abstract philosophical arguments, so what remains unclear is how literature dramatizes the ideological fight between these two versions of the future.

This paper fills this gap by examining how these opposing perspectives are reflected in a modern fiction by arguing that fiction is a valuable tool for dealing with intellectual, ethical, and emotional challenges that these ideologies entail. This paper examines how literary works like *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro, *Machines Like Me* by Ian McEwan, *Harvest* by Manjula Padmanabhan and speculative short stories of Vandana Singh explore the conflict between the continuity of human beings and the disruptive technology. Through these texts literature not merely mirrors but, as well, analyses the alluring and nightmarish nature of posthuman futures, offering a distinctive comparative prism through which the contentious paths of the human can be explored.

### **Posthumanism: Decentering the Human**

Posthumanism poses challenges to the Enlightenment concept of the autonomous, rational human subject, emphasising the interconnection of people, nonhuman animals, machines, and the outside world. Posthumanism (based on the writings of Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti) believes that human identity is no longer stable or homogeneous, but fluid and hybrid.

In *Klara and the Sun*, Kazuo Ishiguro introduces Klara, an Artificial Friend whose sentient perspective blurs the distinction between human and machine. Klara's observations of sunshine and emotional attachment to Josie elicit a complex consciousness, prompting the reader to rethink the requirements for human-like empathy. Ishiguro's story avoids the exaltation of technological growth, instead delving into the ethical terrain of care, friendship, and disposability in a commercialised future.

Similarly, Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest* depicts a dystopia in which bodies become reduced to commodities in a worldwide organ trade. Posthumanism is used here to critique capitalist biopolitics, in which global hierarchies determine the value of the body. The poem clearly shows the loss of agency and autonomy in a world where persons are reduced to bodily resources, threatening the human subject's integrity.

These works are consistent with Haraway's cyborg hypothesis, which states that the boundaries between organism and machine are becoming increasingly blurred. They also agree with Braidotti's assessment that the posthuman subject is a "nomadic subject," continuously in change and disconnected from essentialist humanism.

### **Posthumanism & Sustainability**

Dedeoğlu and Zampaki's scoping review (2023) analyses 45 post humanist and transhumanist articles, identifying key themes such as onto-epistemological plurality, conceptual clarity, and engagement with indigenous worldviews-especially in the context of ecological sustainability and critiques of anthropocentrism.

### **Bridging Critical and Technological Traditions**

Kieran O'Halloran (2023) introduces the concepts of "techno-posthumanism" and "non-anthropocentric posthumanism", arguing that 21st-century techno genesis (driven by AI, VR, biotech, etc.) Can bridge critical posthumanism and transhumanism through shared awareness of techno genesis and the Anthropocene

### **Transhumanism: Aspirations and Concerns**

Transhumanism, as opposed to posthumanism, is founded on the legacy of development and rational control left by Enlightenment humanism. It proposes the use of biotechnology, artificial

intelligence, and nanotechnology to improve human capabilities and eventually achieve immortality. Nick Bostrom, a prominent transhumanist thinker, believes that human enhancement is a moral imperative for overcoming suffering, disease, and death.

In *Machines Like Me* by Ian McEwan, both the potential and the threat of this aspiration is shown. Adam, the android in the novel, is more moral, intelligent and emotionally developed than most of his human counterparts. But this persona is being used by McEwan to pose moral and existential questions as opposed to indulging in eulogism about transhumanism. The perfection of Adam puts in doubt the fallibility and randomness of what human individuality involves, and provokes identity crisis not to Adam, but to people surrounding him.

The transhumanist concepts by Vandana Singh are also questioned in her speculative fiction, as they are introduced in the cultural context and ecology. Her short stories often portray a futures that is characterized by amazement and caution with a strong focus on how technological progress cannot be made without considering sociopolitical and environmental factors. Her writing reinforces the concept presented by Hayles that knowledge cannot be abstracted, and she is important to warn against the disembodied, utopian narratives that are often being marketed by transhumanist ideologues.

### **Literature as a Place of Ideological Negotiation**

Literature represents a rare chance to fill the gap existing between a posthumanist criticism and transhumanist optimism. Literary works enable the readers to feel and critically respond to abstract theoretical stances since they incarnate those ideologies in the form of the narrative.

In *Klara and the Sun*, the weak hope that AI will be able to extend the life of Josie is an expression of desperation and potential moral confusion of the human enhancement. The solar devotion of Klara introduces a spiritual aspect to it, which means that the purpose and faith-seeking in a technologically developed world is still ongoing.

Human inability to accept perfection is an expression of even greater discontent with being human, imperfect, uncertain, mortal. *Harvest* is a postcolonial view on the technological disparities inherent in the world. It not only condemns exploitation which science enables, but also power structures where one type of body is deemed worthy of preservation.

Instead, the works of Singh often explore the idea of community, memory and ecological balance as options, viable alternatives to both techno-utopia and dystopia. Her stories are more about relatedness and less about control; hence more compatible with the ethical vision of posthumanism than the individualistic goals of transhumanism.

### **Conclusion**

The paradoxical directions of posthumanism and transhumanism are indicative of the great uncertainty of humanity on its own future. Contrasting transhumanism, which anticipates perfection of humans as a result of technological advancement, posthumanism cautions against the risks of perfectionism, and, instead, she proposes a transformation of the human, decentricised, vulnerable, and dependent. The modern writing, such as that of Ishiguro, McEwan, Padmanabhan and Singh are significant platforms on which these ideals can be embodied, challenged and re-defined.

A more intersectional and cross-cultural direction of future research would be to incorporate the understanding of feminist science studies, critical race theory, and disability studies in examining the intersection of post humanist and transhumanist discourse with issues of power, privilege, and technology access. Even more possible research might explore emergent AI storytelling and biotechnology ethics within modern fiction, which will give a more detailed overview of how speculative fiction predicts or responds to technological changes in the actual world.

Literature challenges the easily polished stories of development or stagnation by focusing on the affective, ethical, and social qualities. It gives a pluralistic vision of the future whereby technology can alter, but never fully determine the human experience. These fictional explorations are necessary as the human race enters into the depths of transformation, to comprehend the possibilities and dangers of the posthuman era.

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