

Rewriting the Human: Ecofeminist and Posthuman Visions in Vandana Singh's Speculative Fiction

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Abstract

This article brings Vandana Singh's speculative fiction into a dialogue that draws together ecofeminist challenges to patriarchal, anthropocentric thought and posthumanist critiques of human exceptionalism. The short stories "The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet" and "Requiem" provide the ground for this exchange, each following characters whose lived experiences disrupt familiar boundaries between self, environment and species. Creating a posthuman affective awareness that unsettles extractivist thinking, these narrative ruptures act as forms of transgression, subtly reshaping what it means to be human. Drawing on ecofeminist and posthumanist theory, this discussion foregrounds the interconnectedness of all life forms and calls for non-anthropocentric futures grounded in care, entanglement, and resistance to anthropocentrism. This article intends to establish that Singh's speculative fiction makes us rethink what it means to be human. It critiques patriarchal and anthropocentric views, showcasing the shift toward a posthuman subject part of a larger interdependent ecosystem.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Posthumanism, Speculative Fiction, Multispecies Entanglement, Anthropocentrism

Introduction

In the age of the Anthropocene, where ecological collapse and gender inequality intersect, speculative fiction assumes a renewed urgency, serving as both a cautionary tool and a space to envision utopias and dystopias before the worst becomes a reality. In "The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet", a woman named Kamala feels a sensory transformation of her body into a planet. Though her experiences seem bizarre to those around her, for her, it is almost as if she had always been a planet. "Requiem" features a scientist, Rima, who vanishes in the Arctic while pursuing research entwined with the voices of bowhead whales and shifting ocean currents. And her niece, who begins to understand the larger ecosystem while grieving for her aunt. In both stories, the human figure is not at the centre but part of a wider living system, threaded into the environment, species and histories that extend beyond 'human' life. Enlightenment era Humanism is anthropocentric at its heart, which places humans as

the foremost being or species among all. It “others” the sentient, non-sentient entities, such as other-than-humans, non-humans and also “others” fellow humans over the differences based on gender, race, sexuality or ethnicity, etc. It creates immutable definitions of the human and the non-human, at the risk of forming exploitative relationships and worldviews.

Posthumanism responds by deconstructing what is considered to be ideal humanism. It decentralises the anthropocentric worldview. It does not mark the end of humanism; rather, it is a “continuum” of the humanist phase, questioning the idea of human supremacy and reiterating that we are all part of a larger system. Greta Gaard, in her 2022 work “Toward an Ecofeminist New Materialism: Agency and Action in a More-Than-Human World”, stresses the importance of placing ecofeminism in conversation with posthumanist new materialisms, particularly as a way to address the ecological precarity of the Anthropocene. Mary Mellor, in her Introduction to *Feminism and Ecology*, says, ecofeminism is “a movement that sees a connection between the exploitations and degradation of the natural world and subordination and oppression of women” (Mellor 1). Ecofeminism adds more complexity by tracing the links between the exploitation of nature and the structures of patriarchy that enable such exploitation. As Foster reminds us in her 2021 article, ecofeminism continues to provide vital insights into how ecological and gendered oppressions remain intertwined in the twenty-first century. It critiques this assumed right to exploit both the environment and women. Speculative fiction provides these frameworks with the space to function vicariously, creating imagined worlds where dominant narratives and hierarchies are disrupted.

Indian Literature has been engaging with ecofeminist perspectives and studies, deeply shaped by the material realities of the Anthropocene. And Vandana Singh’s speculative fiction provides fertile ground for exploring these intersections, grounded in Indian reality. She uses the genre not only to reimagine scientific and speculative futures but also to interrogate the dominant narratives rooted in patriarchy, colonialism and anthropocentrism. This article examines Singh’s short stories “The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet” and “Requiem”, arguing that they rewrite the human through ecofeminist and posthumanist visions.

Symbiosis and Posthuman Becoming in “The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet”

In “The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet”, Singh constructs a Kafkaesque narrative that uses figurative or sensory transformation as a metaphor for resistance. The protagonist, Kamala, is a middle-aged woman oppressed by a patriarchal society and neglected by her husband. Living a life where her “Self” is not respected for who she is, but rather is acknowledged only for her service and care to others, she feels a sense of weariness and existential crisis. This exhaustion from not being herself triggers a sensory awakening, transforming her sense of self into that of a planetary body, which is very natural to her. Kamala’s transformation signifies a profound shift from objectification to self-actualisation. Here, Kamala ceases to define herself through patriarchal domestic roles and instead finds identity in ecological entanglement. She becomes a body in and of the cosmos, dismantling the borders between self and planet. This is akin to Haraway’s 2016 title “*Staying with the Trouble*”, which emphasises existence with a messy interdependence rather than aspiring toward separation or what Haraway calls “astralization” (Haraway, *Staying* 36). Kamala’s experience is not an escape but a more profound need to be in connection with the planet. Her husband is representative of the patriarchal society that finds her transformation meaningless, even threatening. His failure to understand her metamorphosis symbolises a broader cultural refusal to acknowledge interconnectedness. Thus, the story functions both as an ecofeminist allegory and speculative resistance to patriarchal subjectivity.

In examining how speculative transformations challenge humanist frameworks, her “becoming” a posthuman-planetary body becomes a route toward liberation, cosmic kinship and ecological symbiosis. The transformation leads to a redefinition of subjectivity not in terms of productivity or rationality but through “an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others” (Braidotti 49). Her transformation is not portrayed as horror or expulsion but as a quiet, cosmic redefinition of the self. Beginning with an ontological rupture, Kamala’s posthuman becoming aligns with ecofeminist visions of interdependence and multispecies kinship, as exemplified by the cohabitation with the “insectoid alien army” (Singh, *Women* 47), that transforms her from the inside out. This corporeal symbiosis reflects what Donna Haraway terms “sympoiesis,” or collective world-making across species boundaries (Haraway, *Staying* 58). It also resonates with Stacy Alaimo’s notion of “trans-corporeality,” where the human body is inseparable from its environment (Alaimo 2). Moreover, Singh’s use of the surreal becomes a powerful rhetorical strategy pushing against the boundaries of realism to illustrate the absurdity of gendered expectations. By invoking planetary transformation, Singh invites readers to reimagine agency not as linear progression or liberation from the body, but as entanglement within the cosmos. These “interconnected entanglements” (Haraway, *Simians* 102) disrupt the dominance of one over the other and foreground non-hierarchical healthy relationships.

From Personal Loss to Planetary Awareness: Posthuman Ethics in “Requiem”

While “The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet” creates a posthuman affective awareness by cosmic becoming, in “Requiem”, the rapidly deteriorating Arctic becomes a place where Varsha’s grief for her aunt becomes entangled with a deepening awareness of the larger oceanic ecosystem. Both stories rewrite the human into a posthuman subject through subversive alienation and ecological immersion, respectively. If Kamala’s metamorphosis reimagines domestic alienation as cosmic liberation, then “Requiem” offers mourning as a portal into a posthuman, ecofeminist ontology. In “Requiem”, Singh critiques not only human exceptionalism but also the extractivist worldview that severs ecological memory and multispecies ethics. The Arctic is not merely a setting; it is a living, grieving and responsive entity. Retracing her aunt Rima and her partner Jimmy’s research on possible interspecies communication between bowheads, humpbacks and blue whales and learning how they have altered their migration paths in response to climate change, Varsha becomes truly aware of the existence of intelligent life beyond humans. She also realises the damage wrought by human exploitation. Here, grief serves as a shared planetary condition, not simply a personal loss. The grief is not only about the loss of human life, but also the worry for a planet undergoing rapid deterioration. Varsha, having a metropolitan, rationalist worldview, finds herself developing a deeper understanding of how ecology, indigenous knowledge and sustainable living intertwine. This moment of cognitive dissonance aligns with Val Plumwood’s critique of Western dualisms such as mind/body, human/nature, reason/emotion, which sustains both ecological destruction and gendered oppression (Plumwood 2). Singh’s narratives refuse these binaries; the personal and ecological, the scientific and mythical, flow into one another.

The melting ice, the whale songs that facilitate communication both within their species and with humans, the shifting migration patterns in response to environmental change, and the Inupiaq tribe’s sustainable whaling practices illustrate “trans-corporeality”, a view of the body as immersed in, and responsive to environment (Alaimo 17). As Stacy Alaimo writes, recognising these “material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world” can help forge “ethical and political positions...in which ‘human’ and ‘environment’ can by no means be considered as separate” (Alaimo 2). Varsha’s grief for her aunt becomes inseparable from associating with the Arctic’s fragile ecosystems, revealing the deep entanglement of human affect and environmental

change. Her transformation is epistemological and she no longer sees nature as passive but begins to listen to it. Her grief becomes the conduit through which she shifts from a human-centred to one based in ecological entanglement, a posthuman reorientation toward the nonhuman world. In this way, Singh constructs what Rosi Braidotti calls “zoe-centred egalitarianism” —

“... the core of the post-anthropocentric turn: it is a materialist, secular, grounded and unsentimental response to the opportunistic trans-species commodification of Life that is the logic of advanced capitalism” (Braidotti 60).

-By decentring human exceptionalism and affirming life as an interconnected, relational assemblage. Through Rima’s diary entries, Varsha learns that in such a remote and cold place, most of the time, the only food source is meat, and “it is never sold, only shared.” Whales are a sacred part of the Inupiaq people’s life and existence. When Vegan Rima asks Jimmy how they can bear to eat such “amazing creatures”, Jimmy thoughtfully replies, “Because we are not apart, we are a part.” (Singh, *Ambiguity Machines* 287). Varsha learns through her aunt by reading how Rima comes to an understanding of how life works when she says, “Thus I am made of many things—mother’s milk, fruit of guava and mango trees, rice of the Indian Gangetic Plain, vegetables of splendid variety, meat of many creatures, and now—bowhead whale” (Singh, *Ambiguity Machines* 287). Kyle Whyte reminds us that for Indigenous people, the Anthropocene does not signal a wholly new epoch but rather extends a long history of colonial disruption: “for many Indigenous peoples, the Anthropocene is not a new problem, but the repetition of old colonial problems” (Whyte 153). Seen in this light, “Requiem” places Indigenous epistemologies at the centre of climate imagination, presenting them not as marginal traditions but as essential resources for thinking about survival in a rapidly deteriorating world.

Singh in the Context of Indian and Global Speculative Fiction

Ursula K. Le Guin, in her Introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, reminds us that “Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive”, and as a genre it seeks to imagine “what if” (xii), opening up endless possibilities. Vandana Singh’s fiction exemplifies this, envisioning alternate realities of feminist resistance and intertwined species and terrains, while questioning what it means to be human when the boundaries between the self, other and nature are blurred. Her narratives challenge Enlightenment conceptions of the superior, rational, and anthropocentric human by presenting women protagonists whose transformations are shaped by deep ecological and affective entanglements. Kamala and Varsha develop a posthuman consciousness not by erasing their identity as humans, but by rewriting the “Self”. As Francesca Ferrando remarks,

“Once we underline the human not as one but as many, some may emphasize that other notions and practices – such as interdependence, symbiosis, affinity, and so on – are as fundamental as the category of alterity [...]”, (70)

Highlighting the relational multiplicity of Singh’s characters. Singh’s position as a South Asian writer with global reach makes her work influential in broadening the scope of Indian Speculative Fiction beyond its traditionally “Western” inflections. As Khilnani and Bhattacharjee (2022) observe in their edited volume *Science Fiction in India*, SF is now being recognised as a critical site where postcolonial, ecological and feminist paradigms intersect. Singh complicates and enriches the genre by embedding feminist and non-anthropocentric worldviews that resist dominant cultural and epistemological paradigms. By situating her short stories within the intersecting frameworks of ecofeminism and posthumanism, it affirms that such perspectives and literary strategies are not just tools for critique, but are acts of imaginative reconstruction, opening pathways for more entangled, sustainable and ethical existence.

Conclusion

This study has shown how Vandana Singh's speculative fiction rewrites the human through ecofeminist and posthumanist visions. In "The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet", Kamala's metamorphosis transforms domestic alienation into cosmic becoming, while in "Requiem", Varsha's mourning becomes a pathway to ecological connection and awareness. Read together, these narratives dismantle anthropocentric binaries and foreground interdependence, grief, and multispecies kinship as conditions of human existence. This article contributes to ongoing debates by situating Singh within both Indian speculative fiction and the global environmental humanities, whose work critically engages with postcolonial and ecological paradigms, simultaneously claiming its place within Western traditions and challenging them. It establishes how Singh's fiction rewrites the human self into a posthuman being, envisioning ethical futures grounded in what Braidotti calls "zoe-centred egalitarianism."

By tracing Kamala's metaphorical symbiosis with the nonhuman and Varsha's epistemological shift through grief, this study has shown how Singh's stories embody the critical urgency of ecofeminist and posthumanist thought. As mentioned earlier, Singh's speculative fiction therefore works as both a warning and an act of reimagining. By exposing the dangers of anthropocentrism while opening space for ecofeminist and posthumanist futures, her stories remind us that the human is not separate from, but entangled with, fragile planetary systems. In this sense, her work keeps alive Le Guin's invitation to ask, again and again: what if?

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