

Interwoven Realities: Posthumanism and the Blurring of Boundaries in Select Literary Narratives

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Abstract

Posthumanism challenges traditional humanist perspectives by examining the relationships and boundaries between the human, nonhuman, and technological worlds. In literature, it explores how these intersections reshape identity, agency, and ethics in contemporary society. This paper investigates posthumanism in literary texts, focusing on its deconstruction of anthropocentric views and its emphasis on the interconnectedness of all entities. It draws on the works of theorists like N. Katherine Hayles and Rosi Braidotti, who provide a framework for understanding how literature can destabilize traditional dichotomies of nature/culture, human/machine, and self/other. The study analyzes key texts, including Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and Octavia Butler's *Dawn* (1987) in the Lilith's Brood trilogy, highlighting their portrayal of cyborgs, genetic engineering, and hybrid beings. These narratives illustrate how posthumanism redefines identity, ethics, and humanity's future. The final section explores the ethical implications of posthumanism in literature, advocating for a more inclusive approach to existence that values all forms of life and technology. The paper argues that posthuman literature not only reflects contemporary anxieties about technology and ecological crises but also offers a critical lens for envisioning futures that embrace diversity and interconnectedness. Through this exploration, the paper reflects on the discourse on posthumanism, which influences both literary studies and broader cultural understandings.

Keywords

Posthumanism; human-nonhuman relations; hybrid identity; anthropocentrism; bioethics.

Introduction

In contemporary discourses of posthumanism, traditional humanist perspectives are increasingly challenged owing to the nature of the evolving relationships and boundaries between humans, nonhumans, and the technological world (Hayles 2023). The emergence of posthumanism signifies a critical shift in how we understand identity, agency, and ethics, particularly within the

realm of literature. Posthumanism extends beyond the humanist framework that has long dominated Western thought. While humanism privileges the human as the measure of all things, emphasizing rationality, autonomy, and superiority over other forms of life, posthumanism questions these assumptions. It proposes that humanity is not an isolated pinnacle of creation but rather a part of a complex, interdependent network that includes

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animals, machines, and other entities. As N. Katherine Hayles notes, posthumanism shifts focus from the human being as an autonomous agent to a more fluid understanding of identity shaped by our interactions with technology and the environment (Jackson 2022). This research analyses the elements of posthumanism as reflected in literature, focusing on the redefinition of identity, ethics, and future of humanity. It examines the depiction of posthumanist themes in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Octavia Butler's *Dawn*, the first book in her Lilith's Brood trilogy. Through this, we examine how these literary works consider the ethical implications of genetic engineering, the commodification of human life, and the blending of human and extraterrestrial DNA. In the process, we highlight the relevance of posthumanist literature in addressing contemporary issues such as applications of artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and the resulting ecological crises.

This research is grounded in the theoretical framework of posthumanist scholars like N. Katherine Hayles and Rosi Braidotti. While Hayles emphasizes the fluidity of identity shaped by interactions with technology and the environment, Braidotti's theory of the posthuman underscores the need for an affirmative ethics that transcends human exceptionalism and recognizes the agency and intrinsic value of all living things. Braidotti argues that:

the posthuman is empirically grounded, ... [and] aims at achieving adequate understanding of these processes of undoing the human. It does not define a dystopian future condition, but provides a frame to understand the ongoing processes of becoming-subjects in our fast-changing times (Braidotti 3).

Analysing Posthumanism in *Never Let Me Go* and *Dawn*

In literature, posthumanism offers a rich terrain for exploring themes related to identity, ethics, and the interconnectedness of all forms of life. Literary texts often serve as a mirror to societal

anxieties and aspirations, and in the case of posthumanism, they also show how people relate to technology and the nonhuman world. Numerous studies have examined important texts and theories in posthumanism. Donna Haraway uses the concept of the cyborg in her work to subvert the strict classifications that humanism imposes. Hayles' contributions focus on the shift from human autonomy to a networked understanding of identity, and Braidotti emphasizes a post-human ethics that values all life forms. In examining *Never Let Me Go* by Ishiguro, the review addresses the ethical implications of genetic engineering and the gross commercialisation of human life. Butler's *Dawn* is examined from the perspective of how the text explores hybridity as well as the ethical and existential implications of merging human and alien DNA.

In the dystopian world depicted in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, human clones are created for the purpose of organ donation (Martincorena et al., 2018). The novel explores the moral ramifications of both genetic engineering and the commercialisation of human bodies. The clones, despite being fully human in their emotions and experiences, are denied the same rights and recognition as naturally born humans. The moral limits of scientific progress is stressed upon by dwelling on the dehumanising effect of adopting a solely utilitarian perspective to existence. The theme of Posthumanism is manifested in Ishiguro's depiction of the clones' existence and their struggle for self-identity (Khan 2023). The novel challenges the notion of a fixed human essence and suggests, instead, that identity is constructed through relational experiences and societal interactions. The clones' existence underscores the fluidity of identity and the ethical necessity of recognizing the interconnectedness of all beings.

In *Dawn*, Octavia Butler explores the merging of human and alien DNA to create a new hybrid species (Turan 2023). The trilogy posits ideas concerning the nature of humanity and the possibility of genetically manipulated living forms. The hybrid beings, with their unique abilities and perspectives, embody the posthuman vision of a

future where traditional human attributes are transformed and expanded. Butler's work is particularly significant for its exploration of the ethical and existential implications of hybridity. The characters in *Dawn* navigate their new identities and find ways to coexist with both human and alien cultures. This narrative emphasizes the possibility of creating a more inclusive and diverse future, aligning with Braidotti's call for an affirmative ethic that embraces all forms of life.

According to critics, the exploration of posthuman themes in literature is not merely a speculative endeavor but carries significant ethical implications (Noh 2022). By challenging anthropocentric views and advocating for the interconnectedness of all entities, posthuman literature prompts us to reconsider our ethical responsibilities toward nonhuman beings and technology. It urges us to move beyond the binary oppositions that have historically structured our understanding of the world (Zidan 2023) and to adopt a more holistic perspective that values diversity and interdependence. In our contemporary era, which is characterized by rapid technological advancements and ecological crises, the insights provided by posthuman literature have become increasingly relevant. As we grapple with issues such as artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and climate change, the need for an inclusive ethical framework that respects all forms of life becomes ever more pressing. Posthumanism, with its emphasis on the interconnectedness of all entities, offers a critical lens through which we can envision more sustainable and equitable futures through an exploration of identity, agency, and ethics.

Redefining Human Identity

The story of Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* revolves around the redefinition of human identity. Clones make up the posthuman society in the novel, where humans have invented themselves with genetic engineering. These clones, serving the medical industry in a capitalistic society, have been created to provide organs for regular human beings to extend their lifespan, and struggle to feel like themselves in a society which sees them as nothing

more than biological resources. The novel follows the first-person narrative of the protagonist, Kathy. H, a 35-year-old human clone who reminisces about her idyllic childhood spent at the boarding school of Hailsham where she and her two friends, Ruth and Tommy, grew up along with other fellow-clones.

Growing up in Hailsham, the clones do creative art work, read and appreciate classics like *Daniel Deronda* and also experiment with sex as teenagers. They are depicted as human beings, possessing emotion and self-awareness, thereby provoking the question: are the clones in *Never Let Me Go* human or nonhuman? It is evident from their physical constitution that the body of a clone is identical to that of a human being. They are also equipped with sensitivity and intelligence like ordinary human beings. These clones, however, serve human interests, as they are created to donate vital organs to humans. They are treated as slaves and objects of exploitation, to sacrifice their whole bodies for the benefit of human society.

Though the clones display their artistic talent to be wholly like human beings, their fates do not change. Later in the novel, the former Headmistress of Hailsham, Miss Emily, tells Kathy and Tommy, "...your art would reveal what you were like, it would reveal your souls. We did it to prove you had souls at all" (Ishiguro 260). Adopting a stance, from the human perspective, Miss Emily discloses to Kathy and Tommy the reason why humans ignore the existence and suffering of clones. She says, "...the world didn't want to be reminded how the donation programme really worked. They didn't want to think about you students, or about the conditions you were brought up in" (Ishiguro 264).

Towards the end of the novel, Kathy feels rather pensive at the prospect of Tommy's upcoming fourth donation:

How maybe, after the fourth donation, even if you've technically completed, you're still conscious in some sort of way; how then you find there are more donations, plenty of them, on the other side of that line; how there are no more recovery centres, no

carers, no friends; how there's nothing to do except watch your remaining donations until they switch you off. It's horror movie stuff, and most of the time people don't want to think about it. (Ishiguro 279)

The novel implies how the clones, though a counterpart of human beings, are alienated as "the other" and dehumanized. It prompts reflection on the relationship between high tech and ethics in contemporary society. The moral turpitude of capitalistic society and an ethical lapse of the anthropocentric worldview of humans is hinted at.

Katherine Hayles highlights how interactions with technology and surroundings affect an individual's identity (Hayles 2016). This becomes evident from the way the clones' identities are constructed through their social interactions and the responsibilities that society assigns them. Their interactions and the restricted liberty they are granted underscores the intricate and ever-changing character of human identity in a digitally mediated society.

In *Dawn*, identity is defined in a different way. Through her contacts with the Oankali, an alien civilisation that combines human DNA with theirs to produce hybrid beings, the chief character, Lilith Iyapo, experiences a metamorphosis (Smith 2022). This fusion of alien and human traits subverts the conventional understanding of what it is to be human, underscoring Hayles' theory that identity is the result of a dynamic and fluid interaction between biological and technological components. The hybrid creatures have to learn to live with their new identities, which are continually changing as a result of their encounters with alien and human societies (Molina 2016).

The story starts with the awakening of the novel's protagonist Lilith from stasis by Oankali, the aliens who save her and a few other survivors from the post-nuclear holocaust that has annihilated the Earth. The Oankali have, however, genetically altered the bodies of the humans. As the "lucky" few slumbered, the Oankali toiled in the intervening period, to restore the planet and make it inhabitable

for humanity's return. Lilith is commissioned to lead the first wave of the survivors.

As the story progresses, the readers learn that the holocaust was an outcome of the conflict between the USA and Russia, which prompts the intervention by an alien species from another galaxy. Butler delves into the Oankali's biology and culture. Readers are informed of their lifecycle, from puberty well into adulthood. They socialize and live as triads rather than couples. The gender-neutral ooloi forms the link between male and female. The Oankali are shown to be technologically advanced but in an organic way. They grow and replicate their organisms and objects from "prints" of each entity's molecular makeup. They keep their subjects in Venus flytraps, which sustain them during their hibernation. Lilith explains to the humans she's leading that the Oankali "manipulate DNA as naturally as we manipulate pencils and paintbrushes" (*Dawn* 188).

Lilith confesses over time that she feels like a lab rat trapped in a captive breeding program. "We used to treat animals that way," (*Dawn* 3). She says that "[w]e did things to them—inoculations, surgery, isolation—all for their own good. We wanted them healthy and protected—sometimes so we could eat them later" (3). The Oankali, especially the ooloi however see "great potential" in humanity's several mutations. Butler suggests that it's an uncomfortable development. Though she does not get deep into the intra-species racial dynamics, she subtly hints at inhuman transgenic studies that humans often carry out in the name of scientific advancement. Her novel shows how the theme of coercive experimentation is also carried over to sex. The ooloi carry out chemical and neurological manipulation to control their patients and seek their consent in a more insidious way.

Thus, Butler's *Dawn*, like Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* raises the question, what does it mean to be human? Is it simply genetics—after all fluidity has always been a characteristic feature of our DNA. It has ensured evolutionary malleability, a point underscored by Butler when Lilith's strength is restored by an ooloi, back to the level of our primate

ancestors. As the Oankali indicate, what truly defines us as humans is our tendency to be both sapient and hierarchical. Despite their strangeness, the aliens also have these common traits. At times, the Oankali are even likable. They manifest emotions like love and grief differently. The novel depicts how there's considerable overlap with the human varieties of such emotions to make the readers ponder where the lines of difference are—or whether they even exist.

Both works highlight the ambiguity and complexity of identity in a posthuman setting. The clones' identities in *Never Let Me Go* are fashioned by their social interactions and roles in a technologically sophisticated society, demonstrating how relationships and outside forces may have an impact on an individual's identity. Similarly, in *Dawn*, identity is portrayed as a dynamic interplay between biological and technological elements, with Lilith Iyapo and the hybrid beings experiencing constant identity transformation through their interactions with the Oankali.

Ethical Implications

The posthuman philosophy of Rosi Braidotti emphasises the necessity of a positive ethics that acknowledges the agency and inherent value of all living forms, transcending the idea of human uniqueness. In *Never Let Me Go*, the moral ramifications of organ harvesting and cloning are thoroughly examined. The presence of the clones raises important concerns regarding the commercialisation of human life and the ethical bounds of scientific progress. The work challenges the utilitarian approach to the clones and challenges readers to think about their moral obligations to creatures produced by biotechnology. The novel advocates for a more inclusive ethical framework that honours all sentient things, refuting anthropocentric ethics that celebrate cloning as a human achievement, which leads to a devaluing of individual lives within a capitalist economy. *Dawn*, similarly, explores the existential and ethical ramifications of genetic engineering through a fictional exploration of the consequences of fusing human and extraterrestrial DNA. Through the

Oankali's genetic engineering of humans to produce a hybrid species, readers are challenged to consider the ethical consequences of genetic manipulation as well as the value of diverse forms of life. The story is consistent with Braidotti's positive post-human ethics, which affirms the agency and inherent value of all living things, even nonhuman ones. As Oankali's acts are presented as both intrusive and perhaps helpful, *Dawn* presents readers with a complicated set of ethical questions that make them think carefully about the subtleties of ethical duty in a posthuman society.

Divergent Perspectives on Humanity's Future

The two stories' divergent perspectives on the future are what really set them apart. *Never Let Me Go* warns against crossing moral limits by imagining a dystopian future in which clones are exploited and dehumanized as a result of technological advancements. In contrast, *Dawn* presents an evolutionary picture in which genetic merger with the Oankali promotes enabling human evolution (Molina 2016). Unlike Ishiguro's pessimistic portrayal of the potential for technology innovation to commodify and dehumanize human life, Butler's story implies that embracing variety and interdependence can lead to a more inclusive and morally sound future. Butler's depiction provisionally resembles Braidotti's post-human ethics, which recognise the interdependence of all living things. This story promotes an inclusive and morally tenable attitude towards biological and technological developments, encouraging a future that appreciates variety and interdependence. The hybrid beings in *Dawn* symbolise a new, transcendent humanity, implying that when used responsibly, scientific and biological advancements could have good outcomes.

In both *Never Let Me Go* and *Dawn*, themes like genetic engineering, commercialisation of human existence, and the moral dilemmas posed by breakthroughs in biotechnology are very pertinent to our modern concerns. Ishiguro explores the moral conundrums raised by organ harvesting and cloning in *Never Let Me Go*, which relate to the ongoing discussions over the limits to science vis-a-vis

morality. The book critiques the idea that human life is nothing more than a collection of biological parts and demands for a reconsideration of this idea. By contrast, *Dawn* sheds light on the advantages and disadvantages of genetic engineering and the blending of human and extraterrestrial DNA. At the same time, despite the optimistic depiction, Butler highlights the importance of considering ethical frameworks that honour the inherent worth of all living beings, and help in promoting a more sustainable and inclusive approach to technological breakthroughs. Collectively, these books show how crucial it is to take ethical dilemmas into account in the light of rapid advancements in science and technology.

Challenging Anthropocentrism

Never Let Me Go presents clones as sentient beings with consciousness, complex emotional lives and unique identities. The clones defy the notion that they are nothing more than biological resources since they feel love, creativity, and are in a quest for self-awareness. The story emphasises the intrinsic value and interdependence of all sentient beings while raising ethical concerns about the treatment of any living form as a commodity. Ishiguro's story, thus, highlights the moral conundrums that arise from human exceptionalism and promotes understanding of the innate humanity and interdependence of all living things.

Likewise, *Dawn* undermines the human-centred world view by introducing the Oankali, an extraterrestrial race that genetically combines with humans to produce hybrid entities (Mumi and Joseph 2020). This hybrid entity challenges all

preconceived ideas about what it means to be human and emphasises how interconnected all life species are. In line with Rosi Braidotti's posthuman theory, Butler's novel imagines a future in which identities are malleable and transformed by contact with other cultures and species (Arvidsson and Jones 2023).

Both books, in their respective ways, promote an ethical framework in approaching technology-human interactions, sounding a cautionary note on the need to embrace technology and biological breakthroughs with more inclusivity and ethical responsibility, which acknowledges the inherent value of all living species.

Conclusion

This research has delved into the principles of posthumanism in literature, focusing on the redefinition of identity, ethics, and speculation on the future of humanity through an analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Octavia Butler's *Dawn*. By approaching the texts through the theoretical lenses of N. Katherine Hayles and Rosi Braidotti, we have explored how these novels challenge anthropocentric views and emphasize the interconnectedness of all entities. The importance of ethical issues in determining human destiny in the face of recent advances in biology and technology is highlighted in both the books. As examples of posthuman literature, the works offer an in-depth examination of ethics, identity, and agency while also providing insight into the intricate interactions that exist between people, technology, and the environment to enable greater inclusivity and an integrated way of living in challenging future times.

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