New Critical Concerns of Literature Classroom: Examining Posthuman Identity Through *Blade Runner*

Bhumika Sharma & Shibasambhu Nandi

Abstract

The present article undertakes the investigation of new critical concerns such as posthuman identity, cultural shifts and ethical dilemma of the future society that is determined by technology. It proposes the use of digital media, new textual forms and innovative-cum-experimental methods like science fiction movies as a part of literature classroom and explicates how such strategy could be instrumental in effective teaching-learning. Incorporating films as a methodical tool can help to facilitate literary discourse, which may require more imaginative and dynamic approach for better comprehension. The paper analyses the movie *Blade Runner* (1982) for examining the posthumanist issues through analytical rendering of screen narratives in a literature classroom.

Keywords: Posthumanism, identity, transgression, films, science fiction, methodology

Posthuman in Literary Studies: Subject, Allied Concepts and the Method

Present day learning, like many other human life experiences, has become primarily defined by technological intervention. Be it the content of study or the method of imparting knowledge, each seems to be essentially mediated by human-technology interface. It evokes the overall impression of living in the posthuman age. The idea of posthuman is a conception which has become one of the vital concerns of literary speculation. Though posthumanism finds its root in postmodernism, its

trace can be found in Ihab Hassan's *Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture* (1977). Turning into a critical cultural discourse, posthumanism emerges as the deconstruction of humanity, appreciating the plasticity and flexibility of human nature. It helps to know the unknown, future, and altered identity of human beings who incorporate various technologies into their bodies. Posthumanism embraces all current forms of life, including transhuman, hybrid, Cyborg, chimera, and posthuman organisms. As explicated by theorists, "Posthumanism sees the assemblage of organic, mechanic, natural and other circuits as producing subjectivity. There is no subjectivity that predates the circuit because there is no body that is not always techno-social" (Nayar, 2014, p. 98).

The manifestation of posthuman ideas is more visible in the arena of science fiction. Being a genre closely associated with new envisioning and new becoming, it has engaged with and analysed minutely many issues related to the contemporary cultural shifts. The present paper is an attempt to examine how literary and critical studies include new areas of study such as posthuman discourse in its pursuit of knowledge. It addresses how it perceives the human desire of enhancement and the development of technological methods to realize it. How it engages with science, both in theory and practice, to examine its implications in human journey from primitive to posthuman. Moreover, it indicates how the new pedagogical tools can facilitate the investigation of various cultural developments as a part of literary studies. Indubitably, the idea of posthuman brings forth the human pursuit for enhancement as an academic concern. It relates the idea of posthumanism with the subject of transhuman and posthuman identities. 'Transhumanism,' a term coined by Julian Huxley in the essay "Transhumanism" (1957), is an enquiry into blurring of boundaries in the human attempt of enhancement. It is about the transcendence of human body, which also "treats technology as a means of 'adding' to already existing human qualities and of filling the lack in the human" (Nayar, 2014, p. 16). Using higher level of intelligence and astute cognitive power, human beings attempt to exact the upliftment of human conditions. As Huxley in *New Bottles for New Wine* (1957) says:

> The human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself - not just sporadically, an individual here in one way, an individual there is another way, but in its entirety, as humanity. We need a name for this new belief. Perhaps

transhumanism will serve: man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature (p. 17).

The concept of 'transhumanism' with the desired goal of improving human conditions, has paved the way to the idea of Cyborg, which is also a critical concept in the posthumanist discourse. Cyborg is seen as a blend of human and machine. It is a symbol of the ontological kinship of the human with non-human. Cyborg is a creation, which allows the blending of physical human and non-human, organic and inorganic. Cyborgs can also be defined as mechanically enhanced or altered human beings who could survive the extraterrestrial environment. Haraway (1991) in *A Cyborg Manifesto* writes, "Cyborgs are not about the Machine and the Human, as if such Things and Subjects universally existed. Instead, cyborgs are about specific historical machines and people in interaction" (76). This mixture of the organic and the inorganic as coded devices is one kind of gateway used by the theorists to accomplish the merging of the mechanical and the inorganic ones. Katherine Hayles (1999) argues, "[The posthuman] implies not only a coupling with intelligent machines but a coupling so intense and multifaceted that it is no longer possible to distinguish meaningfully between the biological organism and the informational circuits in which the organism is enmeshed" (p. 35).

In the light of the above, one can say that posthumanism is expanding the boundaries of humanity. It presents the view that humans have the power to transform themselves. Indeed, in constant human pursuit to attain higher level of existence, posthumanism becomes a journey to conquer physical and intellectual limitations. The posthuman engages with the possibility of human-machine interface. It predicts how incorporating, technological or mechanic tools into the body may enhance human living conditions. Rosi Braidotti (2013) in *The Posthuman,* argues, "This mechanic vitality is not so much about determinism, inbuilt purpose or finality, but rather about becoming and transformation" (p. 91). Certainly, posthumanisation emerges as the technologization and the cyborgization of the humans who, as a consequence, immerse within an expanding techno-culture. In fact, "...posthuman view configures human beings so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines" (Hayles, 1999, pp. 2-3). In other words, posthumanism celebrates the ongoing deconstruction of humanism, claiming, "man is not at all that he claims to be" (Badmington, 2006, p. 241).

The posthumanist age focuses on erasing the boundary between human and other organic species as well as humans and machines. "... posthumanism is thus a discourse of life itself...'Life' in posthumanist discourse is discussed as a process of becoming through new connections and mergers between species, bodies, functions and technologies... Human life is about becoming, but a becoming with other life forms" (Nayar, 2014, p. 47). To address such ideas, traditional pedagogy needs new methods and platforms to execute text-tech integration for effective class room teaching. It presents a challenge in terms of choosing the appropriate tools that can facilitate such discourse more substantively. In the wake of new communication technology, mass media and its adjunct audio visual medium could offer operational apparatus for bringing technology mediated learning in English class room. Since it is evident that films capture and represent the cultural shifts effectively, their incorporation as a part of classroom strategy is a prudent initiative. It may allow films to become a regular methodological apparatus in the process of learning.

Films not only appeal to mass sentiments, but they also trigger intellectual debates conducive to sincere academic engagement. On the one hand, they bring the prevailing social reality on screen, on the other, their engagement with cultural issues allows an imaginative learner to envision the future. Hence, films have been perceived as an effective pedagogical tool to elicit academic response and discern new cultural conditions. Films have provided a good resource to literature in the form of screen presentations. It is interesting to investigate how films address cultural questions pertaining to new theoretical and critical concerns like the posthuman. To illustrate the premise, the present paper undertakes an analysis of the science fiction movie *Blade Runner* to investigate how it engages with the idea of posthuman in a world defined by technological interventions. It explores how the screen representation of certain concepts helps the viewer-learner to critique the present as well as to envision the future for evoking ethical concerns. It also peruses how using the audio-visual medium in the classroom predicts the complexity of the posthuman era.

Blade Runner: The Question of Uncertain and Replicated Identity

Blade Runner is a 1982 dystopian science-fiction film, directed by Ridley Scott. It is based on Philip K. Dick's novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric*

Sheep? The novel portrays a picture of a post-apocalyptic future world where every creature struggles for their survival. It is a technologically modified world where the human condition is presented in terms of altered reality and uncertain identity. The film is set in the 2019 futuristic dystopian city of Los Angeles, where the former blade runner officer Rick Deckard is called upon by Officer Gap and Bryant to hunt down four synthetic humans called "replicants", illegally entered into the Earth zone to extend their lifespan.

The movie *Blade Runner* uses a highly technologized socio-cultural setting to indicate the blurring line between humans and machines. It is a world where political authorities are concerned with the extinction of organic species and culturally cultivate robot-servants, identical to humans. In the movie, Los Angeles is shown as an example of futuristic society, wherein one may witness the cohabitation of humans, androids, replicants, and AIs. Society accepts the citizenship of not only humans but also of non-humans. People are predicted as liberal and optimistic. Big corporations create androids to form off-world colonies. They use machines to explore other planets and alongside, ensure control over them. Humans do not hesitate to use mechanical devices and advanced technological support systems. Creations of and interventions in the off-world colonies is a sign of the extension of human control over the whole universe. Human as an enhanced and power driven race is justified here. Technology is used to gain control over other planets. However, there remains a concern to preserve human genetic integrity. Hence, they attempt to maintain strict law and order so that humans could be distinctly identified from their mechanic replica-cum-androids. The system strongly opposes illegal trespassing. That is why, when four replicants illegally enter Earth, the police immediately call Deckard, the blade runner to hunt them down and retire; in other words, annihilate them. Deckard follows the protocol, hunts them one by one and kills all of them. On the one hand, it proves the logical reasoning of the technologized future man, who behaves more rationally than emotionally, and can kill other beings ruthlessly for maintaining human-machine distinction. Deckard does so without listening to the replicants' counter arguments about the system. He poses like a cruel killer with no emotion and concern for these artificially created beings.

On the other hand, this mission of hunting and killing the replicants informs the viewer-learner that humans have a strong desire to retain

their human status. With this intention, Bryant, Officer Gap, and Deckard, all three involve in the venture to free the city from the trespassing of artificially created replicants. They want no 'non-human' entity to inhabit the Earth. This forecasts the future psychological concern of human society, impinged on the technology-based humans. Humans may want to live with machines and use them for their comfort, extension of power and exploration of unknown places; however, they would not accept the infringement of their integral identity, marked territory and assumed controlling power. They are more comfortable with their human surroundings and want to retain the purity of human identity, in a way, by maintaining the demarcations with regard to identification and co-habitation. They experience the community sense only when surrounded by human beings, and not while cross-bordered by artificial creatures.

Here lies the dichotomy of the relationship between humans and machines. Though humans, consciously or unconsciously, seem to move towards the formation of a blended society containing both humans and non-humans, they have a suppressed desire to destroy the artificially created non-human beings, especially when it is observed as a threat to the natural endowment of human identity. That is why, the relationship between humans and machines is not easy to decipher. It is complex, unstable, and uncertain. Along with the confusing relationship, the distinction of identity of both humans and machines also remains uncertain. In the posthuman age of human-machine close interface, it is difficult to know who is purely human and which one is a machine. Identity seems to be in ever-flux. The posthuman age, marked with the interchangeable human consciousness and artificial intelligence, blending of organic and inorganic and ongoing genetic mutation, makes it almost untraceable to find out 'what' constitutes the actual animate being. Both humans and genetically engineered artificial beings seem to be unsure of their identity. As presented in the movie *Blade Runner*, Deckard first fails to identify Leon's real status as Leon gives him company hiding his real identity of being a replicant. In the same vein, Sebastian also initially does not identify Pris as a replicant and provides her shelter. Later, when he comes to know the real identity of Roy and Pris, he finds himself unable to free himself from their trap. Not only a person, whether human or replicant, is unaware of the other's identity, but as an individual being is also unaware of their own identity in the technology-

based posthumanist society. Just as Rachel is shown unaware of the fact that she is a replicant, and her memories are actually transplanted from Tyrell's niece. Therefore, the future society anticipates a complex structure and chaotic reality, wherein each individual appears to be in doubt of their true identity. Each one grapples with the dilemma to ascertain in what proportion one's ontology contains artificial engineering and to what extent one's natural cognitive capacities have been replaced by AI.

This film also indicates how corporate power will work in the future society. The posthuman stage may lead to a more concentrated capitalistic force that breathes life in a humanoid form of God. It will be a society that is wholly or partially controlled by corporate houses. Tyrell in the film is shown as the maker of replicants. He creates these artificially engineered creatures to establish off-world colonies. His industrial production of replicants facilitates the development of new habitats. Corporate houses here work almost like a God-like agency as they emerge as the creators of new civilizations. They give birth to new species, which lie beyond the traditional markings of natural and artificial, organic and inorganic as well as human and machine. Tyrell creates replicants deliberately to form a new race of artificial beings, just as in traditional philosophy, a supreme natural power named God has created organism including humans to inhabit the Earth. Such corporate lords not only work as God-like creators but also try to colonize the Earth through engineered and mass produced population. They have a covert desire to gain control over the Earth just as the notion of supreme power incarnating God invisibly controls human mind through individual faith and institutionalized religion. This is how the movie *Blade Runner* presents the corporate power's futuristic vision of controlling society as well as the socio-political structure of humanity mediated by technological advancement.

Application of Text-tech Pedagogy for Facilitating Posthumanist Discourse

The new critical concerns like posthuman identity, anthropocentric approach, human-machine interface and ethicality of human choices require a different learning environment beyond textual engagement. These posthumanist concepts not only reflect cultural change but also merge the present reality with an envisioned future. Such conceptual and theoretical ideas could be better comprehended with the enhanced

textuality and technology mediated pedagogy. Literary and critical texts require to be placed in broader spectrum to review the cultural development as a part of posthumanist experience. The movie undertaken as a case study illustrates how the use of technologically enhanced tools for carefully planned discursive purposes in a literature class room endorses the idea of posthumanist reality. It creates new learning environment to move beyond the limited and esoteric ideological debates to delimited posthumanist speculations. Posthumanism is a cultural experience. Various critical notions surrounding posthumanist discourse need to be addressed both in their distinction and interrelation. Learners are expected to grasp their connection and relevance in the posthumanist context through different angles such as identity crisis, future society, deconstruction of anthropocene, and posthumanist ethical concerns. When tools like screen narratives are used in a planned manner to deliver such ideas in audio-visual form, it creates a simulative learning environment that facilitates effective deliverance of such ideas. In addition to the traditional textual exposition, the visual pods and audio-visual cues may add extra charm to the fictional screen narratives drawn upon literary texts. It may enhance students' learning experience by allowing them to make sense of what had been generally considered merely as an imaginative configuration. The future oriented classrooms are expected to fill the gap between reality and fantasy, and allow a viewer-learner to practically embrace the human-technology interface. The traditional textual descriptions of literary texts may allow a learner to imagine the situation in episodic forms, but when the same events are presented through a cinema screen, the viewer-learner gets the immediate experience of living abstract theories like posthumanism. One experiences it through a carefully designed discursive classroom environment.

Posthumanist concepts are vital issues in the present context of a technology-driven society and the re-contextualization of select movies for enhanced pedagogical objective illustrates the point. As in *Blade Runner*, the screen incarnation of replicants gives a convincing proposition of new posthumanist species. Certainly, a viewer-learner's visualization is assisted by semiotic presentation of a replicant or a cyborg on the screen as a part of integrated pedagogy. A viewer-learner can perceive the images of flying cars in *Blade Runner* to the emerging possibilities of future technology. In fact, when the viewer-learner watches the android

figures, they can visualize the posthumanist co-evolved world where humans may have to live with artificially engineered creatures in future. Watching the human-like androids, one could imagine of the functional technologies that may change the human world through artificial creation and mechanical replication.

The posthuman is the upcoming stage of the age old human endeavor for enhancement. It marks the process in which organism evolved from simple to complex bio-technological constitution. Following the same, humans attempt to transcend themselves for attaining higher abilities. It portends their entering into the status of posthuman, which accepts 'hybridity' as a part of existence and replicated humanity as a distinct species. It portends the imminent coexistence of humans and non-humans in the form of both the higher level genetically muted organism and sophisticated machine. The movie succeeds in bringing these core issues into a literature classroom through strong theoretical frame, gripping narrative, audio-visual effects and powerful role play through text-tech pedagogy. It allows the viewer-learner to have a close look of future society jointly inhabited by non-traditional existence, and engineered objects. *Blade Runner* examines the prospective robotics and implications of AI in terms of coexistence of humans with new unconventional species. The question is whether the human desire for enhancement will create a better society, wherein all species transcending the biological boundaries will enjoy the fulfilling 'hybridity', or the human identity itself will confront a more disastrous condition marked with discontinuity, complexity and chaos. Science fiction movies visualize such situations in a creative manner to draw attention to the future concerns of posthumanist stage. *Blade Runner* helps the viewer-learner to visualize that the future society would be a mixed and complex system on account of technological interventions and evolution of new species. It may ensure coexistence of humans, robots, cyborgs, and AIs, yet the dilemma and confusion faced in such fluid situations deserves academic and critical engagement. Besides, the presently increasing role of powerful corporate forces also needs to be critically reviewed in the posthumanist context of literature classroom before humanity actually plunges into such a future.

References

Badmington, N. (2006). Posthumanism. In P. Wake & S. Malpas (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to critical theory* (pp. 240-41). Routledge.

Bostrom, N., & Roache, R. (2008). Ethical issues in human enhancement. In J. Ryberg, T. Petersen, C. Wolf, & P. Macmillan (Eds.), *New waves in applied ethics,* 120-152. www.nickbostrom.com.

Braidotti, R. (2013). *The posthuman*. Polity Press.

Haraway, D.J. (1991). A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century. In *Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature.* Routledge.

Hassan, I. (1977). Prometheus as performer: Toward a posthumanist culture. *The Georgia Review, 31*(4), 830-850.

Hayles, N.K. (1999). *How we become posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics*. The University of Chicago Press.

Herbrechter, S. (2018). *Posthumanism: A critical analysis*. Bloomsbury Publishing India.

Huxley, J. (1957). Transhumanism. In *New bottles for new wine*. Harper.

Nayar, P.K. (2014). *Posthumanism*. Polity Press.

Scott, R. Director. (1982). *Blade Runner*. The Ladd Company, Shaw Brothers, The Blade Partnership.

Bhumika Sharma *is Assistant Professor in the Department of English, School of Humanities & Languages, Central University of Rajasthan, Ajmer.*
sharmabhumika@curaj.ac.in

Shibasambhu Nandi *is a PhD Scholar in the Department of English, Central University of Rajasthan, Ajmer.*
shambhunandi1235@gmail.com