

## Transcending Human in the Twenty-First Century: A Reading of the Web Series—*Human*

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### Abstract

The present article believes that the web series on OTT platforms are significant digital texts available in the twenty-first century, just like cinema has been in the twentieth. Web series, as a medium of popular culture, have turned out to be a vital medium that can draw our attention to contemporary social concerns. The Indian Hindi language web series, *Humans*, available on Disney+ Hotstar, is one such that brings up the subject of drug trials, human experimentation, and the political-capitalist nexus permeating the medical industry. This study proposes a transhumanist analysis of the web series *Human*, focusing on how the medical sector can turn hazardous if left in the hands of profiteering capitalists. The web series is an excellent example of posthuman (dis)order, in which a human can turn a monster and traumatize the lives of the impoverished. The importance of medical ethics and responsible handling of biotechnology can lead to an apocalypse if not managed responsibly.

**Keywords:** Transhumanism, posthumanism, ethics, trauma, apocalypse, capitalist, medical science, biotechnology, OTT and web series

OTT platforms and the web series and online shows that they host have lately emerged as a popular medium grabbing the attention of the masses through their unconventional content. During the period of the Covid lockdown, a boom was witnessed in OTT subscriptions, especially among youth. Due to their low-cost production, unrestricted story-telling and ease of accessibility, web-based stories have become extremely popular in the entertainment industry. The other reason for

their proliferation is that they can be produced without enlisting the services of expensive actors and crew, such as *Panchayat* (2020) available on Amazon Prime Video, *Gullak* (2019) on TVF Play and Sony Liv, *Yeh Meri Family* (2018) on TVF Play, *Girl in the City* (2016), *Criminal Justice* (2019) on Disney+ Hotstar and so on. These are some of the web shows which have gained popularity solely on the merit of their unique, intriguing content and great performances. The OTT platform has also become another reservoir of texts in popular culture that initiate dialogues on many important issues. The Indian, Hindi language web series, *Human* (2022) directed by Vipul Amrutlal Shah and Moez Singh and produced by Vipul Amrutlal Shah and Aashin Shah available on the Disney + Hotstar platform is one such that has created a buzz through its exceptional storyline, critical content and a good cast. The Shefali Shah and Kirti Kulhari starrer *Human* reveals the problems of human drug testing and the world of medical scams. The series presents a horrific picture of the medicinal world that commercializes the lives of the poor and exploits them to mint money. During the years of the Covid-19 pandemic, and especially during its second wave in the year 2021, the world has faced a similar experience: on one hand, there was an army of medical personnel who worked tirelessly for the sake of humanity, many of whom had to sacrifice their lives; and on the other, there was a contrasting picture of medicines, injections, sanitizers, oxygen cylinders and equipment being hoarded and sold at higher prices. Owing to such experiences, it is crucial to establish a conversation between the humanities and sciences to create empathetic awareness about moral issues in the domain of medicine.

The term 'posthumanism' alludes to a populist assessment of a new era, a fresh approach to critical thinking concerning humanism. It is a discourse examining power dynamics and representations that historically have positioned humans in a dominant relationship with other living forms. Pramod K. Nayar (2014) views it as "a philosophical, political and cultural approach it addresses the question of the human in the age of technological modification, hybridized life forms, discoveries of the sociality (and 'humanity') of animals and a new understanding of 'life' itself" (13). The present research paper tries to study the web series *Human* through a posthumanist eye, where we witness the dehumanization of mortal beings through clinical trials and human experiments. Considering the backdrop of medical trials

and experiments, the web-series also deals with the issue of medical humanities. It demonstrates how severely medical ethics have been compromised in the market-driven medical industry, where the value of human life has been replaced by that of financial gain. It analyses the two main plots of the intense drama that is *Human*. The two plots are interwoven—one depicts the death, destruction, and life-taking side-effects revolving around the success of a new drug, and the second plot considers the fate of a group of girls suffering from depression who are being treated as clinical subjects under medication to brainwash them of their traumatic past. This human experiment on captive girls can be read as an attempt being made by the capitalist element to dominate human emotions through the use of certain drugs. It turns into a transhumanist approach, where one sees how with the help of technology, medicines, and experiments humans are trying to transcend the constraints of body and mind to control human evolution. This thriller of a series gives us a sneak into the lethal side of medical advancement bereft of hope and morality. Posthumanism as a philosophy forces us to rethink what it means to be human and challenges the supremacy of humans in the coming times. The negation of Nature and advancement of technology in the posthuman world makes us vulnerable to unethical practices that might surge in the approaching decades and *Human* is just an illustration of the same. Robots and humanoids are some of the mechanical creatures that symbolize the immense possibilities that artificial intelligence holds in store. One is reminded of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818) which also shows what medical science can achieve in the future—winning over death. All the developments in the domain of medicine are steps to detach the human body from the clutches of death. Frankenstein as a creature is not acceptable to human society because of its wilderness, that's why he says, "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous" (Shelley, 1982, p. 95). The figure of the 'monster' in *Frankenstein* is shown as an example of a living being struggling (but failing) due to unacceptability. It becomes an instance where the human and the trans-human world interact and the fear of both the worlds is quite evident. Frankenstein suggests an unsuccessful attempt at (trans)human development as people regard it as a threat to the human world itself.

According to transhumanism, there is sufficient room for development in the human body, and this may be accomplished with the aid of

machinery and technology. There is a significant emphasis on the human-machine relationship for the advancement of the human body. Transhumanism is seen as a domain of immense possibilities but it also poses the danger of the downfall of human values. Many of the films based on artificial intelligence and robots have shown replicas of human bodies, where minds are all under control and have no space for emotions or morality. Yuval Noah Harari (2018) in his work, *21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, gives an apt interpretation of coming times, and says, "As biotechnology and machine learning improve, it will become easier to manipulate people's deepest emotions and desires, and it will become more dangerous than ever to just follow your heart" (p. 267). The very introduction of *Humans* is telling: "In the race to make the next money-spinning drug, saving lives takes a backseat and people become less than human. Step into the murky world of drug trials." The pursuit of wealth and the spread of mechanization have transformed us into "less than humans", virtually monsters capable of terminating others to satiate materialistic hunger. While discussing the genealogy of posthumanism in his work *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*, Stefan Herbrechter (2013) pertinently articulates:

In this sense, posthumanism supports a number of scientific, medical but also economic and military institutions and their discourses. Finally, the power relations within a discourse (e.g. transhumanists versus neohumanists) and between different discourses (e.g. religious moralists versus neo-Darwinists) produce ideological effects based on different 'regimes of truth' (in Foucault's terms). (p. 47)

A parallel can be drawn between this web series *Human* and Margaret Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake* published in the year 2003. The novel is set against the backdrop of an apocalypse caused by genetic experimentation and pharmaceutical engineering that results in the extermination of humans from planet earth. The experimentation being carried out by one of the characters called Jimmy leads to the outbreak of a fatal virus in the BlissPlus pills created by Crake. The outbreak of the virus causes the extinction of humans and allows Atwood to showcase her post-human world devoid of humans. Quite similar to Atwood's plot is *Humans* where two plots are progressing simultaneously, one dealing with the creation of an illegal drug, S93R a.k.a. Saviour, being funded by the Vayu Pharma after its profits have dried due to their inability to get a breakthrough at manufacturing Covid vaccine. The

second section deals with a bunch of girls living under Roma Ma and Gauri Nath; trials are being conducted on them in consultation with a doctor from Italy who gives them medicines to forget their trauma. They are part of Dr. Gauri Nath's dream project of a multi-specialty neurological trauma centre called Elisir. The complex plot of the web series shows us the reality of renowned hospitals exemplified through capitalist structures such as Hospital Manthan, Vayu Pharma, and Elisir. While talking about the girls under the tdrug trial, Dr. Gauri Nath refers to them as, "*Ladki nahin, human guinea pig*" (Not a girl-human guinea pig) (S1 E3 "Secret Lives" 35: 24). Dr. Ross from Italy, who is guiding Gauri Nath on the trauma erasure experiment states about the medical trial, "They are being medicated under my supervision into a state of euphoria as preparation of an experiment and remember, as I've always said, even if we fail, it is only to learn" (S1 E5, "Not My Baby", 3: 25). The girls undergoing the drug trial are merely mediums for them on whose bodies they plan to lay the foundation of Elisir—a profit-making hospital. *Human* thus presents before us a social wasteland that has sacrificed all its ethical values at the altar of materialistic desires. The capitalist-medical professionals have turned into monsters, who are abusing the poor to further their mean interests. Transhumanists like Anders Sandberg and Nick Bostrom have frequently expressed concern about the possible danger of such human trials. Misuse of technology may result in the extinction of humans and other species forever, yet in the current rush towards materialism, no one is concerned about the 'existential risk' to the globe.

Francis Fukuyama (2002) in his work, *Our Posthuman Future*, tries to assess the biotechnological advancements in terms of utilitarianism but concludes that it is much graver than it appears. He says, "It is rather a fear that, in the end, biotechnology will cause us in some way to lose our humanity—that is, some essential quality that has always underpinned our sense of who we are and where we are going..." (p. 101). Fukuyama's fear is evident in the web series where the living subjects are being dehumanized in the name of medical revolution. But what sort of progression are we aiming at where humans are being treated worse than animals for the benefit of a few? The trauma erasure medical trials being conducted on the group of captive girls symbolically portrays the modern individual's desire to harness the human mind. In the process here, the girls are turning into callous monsters who are

oblivious to others' pain and suffering. Throughout the series, these girls have been shown smiling strangely even while treating patients in a serious condition. This unsettling smile on their faces represents their state of mind, in which they are oblivious of the consequences of their actions. "Let's create a revolution", is how the protagonist Dr. Gauri Nath sees her experiments. Her brutalizing outlook towards these girls is clearly visible in the way she maltreats them for her own good. She attempts to brainwash these girls and has brought them on the pretext of erasing trauma from their psyche, but instead of lessening trauma, she severely tortures them during her experiment. She says, "Do whatever you want to do with these girls. Our experiment should not fail" (S1 E3 "Secret Lives" 35: 24). This illustrates how success and fame are of paramount importance to her and the lives of these girls are entirely unimportant. The issue of bioethics is quite central to the web series. It poses serious questions by depicting various situations that pertain to the medical world. The way (in)human trials are carried out by taking advantage of people's poverty discloses the absence of clinical ethics in drug trials. The healthcare industry has become more of a field for corporate enterprises, and they only look for profitable opportunities even at the cost of exploiting the downtrodden.

Scott Bukatman (1993) in his work, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*, interprets the virtual space and calls the cyborg and androids "the barbarians storming the gates of humanity" (p. 16). Although the medical revolution is clearly for the good of humanity, the capitalist framework tends to commodify it for its profit. The web series symbolizes capitalist structure in the form of the Hospital, Pharma companies, and politician ministers who exploit these proletariats like Mangu and his family, or the group of traumatized girls living in fear of Roma Ma. In the capitalist structure, these oppressed are on the lowest rung of the ladder. They sell their labour by offering their bodies to these medical entrepreneurs. *Human* offers an opportunity to reconsider what it means to be human in the twenty-first century. Gauri Nath, herself representing the dominant structure in the web series, also lives a traumatic life and takes injections to wipe off her trauma. She pretends to have a calm personality, leads a lavish life, and is a person who uses her body to achieve her ambitions. Her unethical lifestyle is a source of trauma for her, which she believes can be managed with medicine. She has no regrets for her immoral methods in the medical drama; on

the contrary, she genuinely believes that through the experiment she is conducting on a group of girls, she would be able to forget her entire past, pain and trauma (*Hum hamara pura past pura dard sab bhul jaenge*, S1, E3, "Secret Lives" 35: 44). Stacy Alaimo (2010) in her celebrated work, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* quite aptly argues that trans-corporeal ethics urges us to find a way through the material, economic, and cultural structures that are all at once so detrimental to the living world and yet are so hard to oppose or change (p. 18). The web series *Human*, on a universal level, rightly examines various materialistic forces and their harmful effect on the human body.

To conclude, *Human* exposes the nexus between large private hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, and government officials who exploit the deprived in clinical trials for new drugs. The opening scene of the web-series shows the trapped dying rabbits on whom these medical trials are conducted and the entire web-series portrays humans being treated no worse than animals. At one point the character of Gauri Nath in the series says "What's the value assigned to the lives of poor-people? Zero" (S1, E3, "Secret Lives"). In the posthumanist era, the distinction between rich and poor has become so blatant that it no longer distinguishes between poor humans and animals. The trauma erasure experiment, discussed in the web series is one such example that demonstrates how the advent of technology has reduced people to nothing more than test subjects. This transhumanist idea poses the risk of turning humans into mere machines, humans with no emotions. The web-series showcases a world where medical ethics have gone down the drain. If we pay close attention, we might see that the health sector is gradually evolving into a corporate industry and is continually looking for ways to expand capitalist dominance. Fukuyama (2002) rightly points out, "What is ultimately at stake with biotechnology is not just some utilitarian cost-benefit calculus concerning future medical technologies, but the very grounding of the human moral sense, which has been a constant ever since there were human beings" (p. 102). In light of the above statement, the medical thriller *Human* exactly cites those problems which confront beleaguered humanity. We must remember that the domain of biotechnology has the potential to revolutionize the field of medical science, but if not used wisely, it can also exterminate humankind. In the text *Medical Humanities: An Introduction* by Nathan Carlin et al. (2014), the interaction between technology and medical science is visualized thus:

a host of unimaginable technologies will create a world in which distinctions between humans and machines, reality and virtual reality, or even life and death disappear completely. The union of man and machine would surely give new meaning to the “prosthetic man” that Freud (1856–1939) envisioned almost a century ago. (p. 85)

Although it is widely believed that modern medical technology improves our health and saves more lives, it has also coincided with a rise in health inequities. The use of technology carries numerous promises but also brings dangers and ethical dilemmas. The series raises serious concerns about the growing human greed in the twenty-first century and highlights the importance of ethics in the medical field. During the recent pandemic of Covid-19, which wiped out millions of people on earth, we realized the importance of medical ethics when medicines and related equipment were being black-marketed. The dearth of integrity and morality that can yield horrific results in the contemporary scenario is well portrayed in this web series. The web story appeals to us to revisit the purpose of humanity in contemporary times or else the biggest fear of mankind, apocalypse might soon turn real.

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