

Exploring Posthuman Concerns in Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World*

Waqar Yonus Butt

Lecturer, Dept. of English, Bhaderwah Campus, University of Jammu, J&K, India

Rakesh Kumar

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Bhaderwah Campus, University of Jammu, J&K,

India

Abstract:

Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* evinces an unspecified locale and unravels an image of a utopian world. It emanates posthuman concerns by manifesting issues ranging from scientific inventions and technological progression to theological affiliations and social problems. The text unravels its predisposition for science fiction as well as the concepts of utopian and dystopian discourses. It contains characters which are largely nonhuman, but showcase human-like attributes by espousing values escorted by pragmatism, empathy and mutual recognition. Their world is a world that promotes peace, harmony and co-existence. The paper strives to analyse the text in the light of posthumanism and subverts the anthropocentric notions of the Enlightenment.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Humanism, Discourse, mini-narratives, Utopia

Introduction:

Published in 1666, Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* revolves around an uncertain timeline and depicts a picture of a post-human world. It is conceived to be an anecdote endeavouring to depict contours of a typical utopian world. It can also be regarded as a forerunner of proto-science fiction containing elements that would later develop into science fiction. The novel constitutes aberrant characters comprising bear-men, worm-men, fly-men, ape-men and fish-men engaged in different professions, manifesting peculiar wisdom and intellectual capacity as reflected by humans. They remain amiably together cherishing their dreams and ambitions in the world engulfed by peace. Violence, bloodshed and ruthless carnage find no mentioning since the inhabitants "had no other enemies but the winds" (7).

Regarding the presence of unusual portrayal of characters, Mihoko Suzuki in her essay “Thinking beings and animate matter Margaret Cavendish’s challenge to the early modern order of things” underlines, “Margaret Cavendish challenged early modern epistemological frameworks, in particular, contemporary understanding of animals, plants, and matter, and the ascription of uncontested human superiority over all other living beings and the environment” (Suzuki, 183). The author’s inclination to create such marvellous characters as Haraway articulates subverts the barrier between the human and animal as it coerces transformation of human sensitivity and animalistic bestiality through her colouring of half-human and half animal species. (Haraway, 10-11). By viewing through the perspective of posthumanism, the novel undermines the formative boundaries and clear-cut human distinctions. The creatures are shown to be living amicably unlike the humans whose behaviour is conditioned by prejudices for gender, caste, religion, nationality etc. Francesca Ferrando who has written seminal works on posthumanism emanates:

The Seventies called for a revisitation of the notion of the human by acknowledging that, in the Western tradition, only a specific type of human had been recognized as such: he had to be male, white, Western, heterosexual, physically able, propertied and so on. Such a revisitation called for recognition of all the (other) humans, who had been left out. (169)

Unlike humans, these non-human characters are very captivating in the sense that they do not engage in any contention or belligerence. They reveal the capacity for mutual respect, compassion and consideration. There is no sectarian concern hampering their state of affairs and their display of harmony is unparalleled. Therefore, an investigation of Cavendish’s work from the framework of posthumanism allows a comprehensive and meaningful analysis of half-human hybrids who accentuate instincts no less than humans. It concomitantly illustrates that their mental superiority and ability to reason and rationalise is not less than humans. They meticulously display their skill of reasoning, empathy and pragmatism that once were the sole attribute of humans who are languishing in a state of baleful immorality and emotional apathy.

DISCUSSION:

The dependence of humans on technology and other disparate entities is indispensable in orchestrating their life. It maintains human relationship with others and undermines any kind of anthropocentric view of humans. The anthropocentric worldview of the humans shows human superiority over non-humans, thus, reinforcing the idea of man's predominance over nature and inanimate objects. The posthumanist philosophers use neologisms to accentuate their approach and subvert the anthropocentric convictions. Rosi Braidotti reflects the similar impulse against such notions by asserting:

‘Life’, far from being codified as the exclusive property or the unalienable right of one species, the human, over all others or of being sacralized as a pre-established given, is posited as process, interactive and open-ended. This vitalist approach to living matter displaces the boundary between the portion of life – both organic and discursive – that has traditionally been reserved for anthropos, that is to say bios, and the wider scope of animal and non-human life, also known as zoe. (60)

This has accentuated new approach of New Materialism which finds its roots in the posthuman convictions asserting the significance of matter having innate value and disparities. Such proposition is consequential in empowering entities with inimitable powers and subjectivity where everything is ontologically identical and none precedes the other.

Sharing similar notions, posthumanism subverts the human-centred or anthropocentric assertions that is, “a posthuman theory of subjectivity that does not rely on classical Humanism and carefully avoids anthropocentrism” (Braidotti, 56). During 1990's, posthumanism found its ground and roots in Macy conferences about cybernetics that occurred between 1946-1953 (Wolfe, xii) and feminism of the 1980s (Ferrando, 169). The approach is a set of beliefs that followed humanism of the Enlightenment and it shatters such humanistic beliefs at its core. The Enlightenment humanism suffered from severe drawback as it privileged humans over the nonhumans. It impulsively put humans at the centre and belittled everything that defined nonhuman and obstinately ignored the interdependence between the two. Since its inception, posthumanism inclines towards providing new insights about human relation with the nonhuman and it disparages the human dominion as portrayed by the Western canon. Bolter asserts,

“Posthumanism seeks to undermine the traditionally firm boundaries between the human, the animal, and the technological” (1). Therefore, posthumanism rigidly disrupts the anthropocentrism and is applied to different arenas comprising sociology, philosophy, literary studies, critical theory, science and technology etc. It offers new incentives to comprehend human nature and relation to the normal world as well as undermines Cartesian dualism, “Posthumanism deconstructs any ontological hierarchy; a multidimensional network depicts more closely what is at stake, even if there is no representational autonomy” (Ferrando, 170).

In *The Blazing World*, Cavendish depicts a picture of Utopian world reminiscent of Thomas More’s *Utopia* where More presents a world where peace flourishes and the state of affairs is escorted by reason and there is no crime, oppression, poverty and capitalism. Cavendish’s work presents a scene abundant with nature and matter as it unravels a world inhabited by men who are half-animal and half humans who reside together peacefully and amicably. Another world that coexists with this world is always in strife and contention. *The Blazing World* is a work of utopian fiction written and published in the seventeenth century. Also, her work does not exclusively talk about the utopian or dystopian literature. Thomas More’s *Utopia* also underscores the contours of utopian society where the official state of affairs is exclusively based on reason and the absence of private property, class distinction, poverty, or crime. Francis Bacon reiterates the idea of the anthropocentric view by proclaiming, “human power and dominion over nature” (Merchant, 734) in *The New Atlantis* published in 1627. His venture in the form of the book is another example glorifying reason and logic. *The Isle of Pines* (1668) penned by Henry Neville which is written in epistolary form accentuates a utopian society where a man and four women are shipwrecked on a deserted island. The pristine atmosphere prevailing on the island is disrupted by humans as they gradually begin to multiply and establish their communities. The incongruity that thrives between Cavendish’s work and the others drives from the fact that the half-human-half-animal characters coexist in peace whereas the place dominated by humans is besieged by antagonism and contention. It is categorised as blazing due to the presence of blazing stars in the sky and the presence of inhabitants which are halfhuman and half-animal who tend to share one creed, law and language resulting in incomparable peace and tranquillity. The place inhabited by humans is rife with conflict, murder and chaos. The acrimony between humans is so huge that one finds the presence of other unbearable. Even with the technological advancements, they irrevocably fail to establish mutual respect and

understanding which the animal like monsters easily cherish. Consequently, both the world decenter the position of the humans as Supreme Being by flouting their different positions.

Cavendish uses third-person narrative to emanate his perspective where an anonymous narrator describes expedition of a nameless woman, loved by a merchant beneath her social status. The merchant is sentimentally inclined towards her and finding no other way to win her, abducts her in a vessel that is carried by winds to the North Pole. The merchant and other men die from severe cold and the survivor is only the “this virtuous lady:”

But alas! Those few men which were in it, not knowing whither they went, nor what was to be done in so strange an adventure, and not being provided for so cold a voyage, were all frozen to death; the young lady lonely, by the light of her beauty, the heat of her youth, and protection of the gods, remaining alive: Neither was it a wonder that the men did freeze to death; for they were not only driven to the very end or point of the pole of that world, but even to another pole of another world, which joined close to it; so that the cold having a double strength at the conjunction of those two poles, was insupportable. (Cavendish, 3)

The other world avers intricate disparities where the unusual creatures walk upright as humans. They unveil traits which are both humanly and animalistic. They resemble humans in their proclivities whether in their bodily needs or in their shared cultural traits making us comprehend the different attributes of their personalities. The lady encounters them when the boat is seized by the bitter cold waves of the ocean when all the sailors aboard are killed and she is left alone in difficult straits and is eventually rescued by them. They treat her kindly and once they become certain of her safety, sink the boat along with all the dead on the ship. This burial signifies their intelligence and ingenuity as they seem to comprehend the fact that the corpses are to be done away with or eliminated somehow. The lady seems to be intimidated in their presence as their traits and shapes are monstrous and by her understanding that she is at unknown place. She has not encountered them earlier and is uncertain about their motivations. They reveal engrossing features like they can speak in their own language, share opinions, listen to things and even can decipher their intricate issues. Their way of life is characterised by order, happiness and prosperity. Their description is given in the following words:

The Empress having hitherto spent her time in the Examination of the Bird- Fish- Worm- and Ape- men, &c. and received several Intelligences from their several employments; at last had a mind to divert herself after her serious Discourses, and therefore she sent for the Spider-men, which were her Mathematicians, the Lice-men which were here Geometricians, and the Magpie- Parrot- and Jackdaw-men, which were her Orators and Logicians. The Spidermen came first, and presented her Majesty with a table full of Mathematical points, lines, and figures of all sorts, of squares, circles, triangles, and the like; which the Empress, notwithstanding that she had a very ready wit, and quick apprehension, could not understand; but the more she endeavoured to learn, the more was she confounded: Whether they did ever square the Circle, I cannot exactly tell, nor whether they could make imaginary points and lines; but this I dare say, That their points and lines were so slender, small and thin, that they seem'd next to Imaginary. The Mathematicians were in great esteem with the Empress, as being not only the chief Tutors and Instructors in many Arts, but some of them excellent Magicians and Informers of spirits, which was the reason their Characters were so abstruse and intricate, that the Empress knew not what to make of them. There is so much to learn in your Art, said she, that I can neither spare time from other affairs to busy myself in your profession; nor, if I could, do I think I should ever be able to understand your Imaginary points, lines and figures, because they are Non-beings. (39-40)

They did not show any antipathy for her “were they so far from exercising any cruelty upon her, that rather they showed her all civility and kindness imaginable,” (14) and as the time gradually passes she feels at home and is even ecstatic in their presence. *The Blazing World* is populated by “men like Foxes, only walking in an upright shape, who received their neighbours the bear-men

with great civility and courtship,” and even consider the idea of taking the lady as gift to their emperor. The author gives the description about the different animals that exist:

The rest of the Inhabitants of that World, were men of several different sorts, shapes, figures, dispositions, and humors, as I have already made mention, heretofore; some were Bear-men, some Worm-men, some Fish- or Mear-men, otherwise called Syrens; some Bird-men, some Fly-men, some Ant-men, some Geese-men, some Spider-men, some Licemen, some Fox-men, some Ape-men, some Jack daw-men, some Magpie-men, some Parrot-men, some Satyrs, some Gyants, and many more, which I cannot all remember; and of these several sorts of men, each followed such a profession as was most proper for the nature of their Species, which the Empress encouraged them in, especially those that had applied themselves to the study of several Arts and Sciences; for they were as ingenious and witty in the invention of profitable and useful Arts, as we are in our world, nay, more; and to that end she erected Schools, and founded several Societies. The Bear-men were to be her Experimental Philosophers, the Bird-men her Astronomers, the Fly-Worm-and Fish-men her Natural Philosophers, the Ape-men her Chymists, the Satyrs her Galenick Physicians, the Fox-men her Politicians, the Spider- and Lice-men her Mathematicians, the Jackdaw- Magpie- and Parrotmen her Orators and Logicians, the Gyants her Architects, &c. (10-11)

The creatures concocted by Cavendish are fictional comprising “progenitor[s] of the posthuman” with “a hybrid—a human-alien construct” (Nanda, 115). Such animals indicate to the idea of xenotransplantation that subverts the alleged human-animal hierarchy in the natural order. It argues for the redefinition of species and their relation wherein “Advances in genetics and techniques of genetic manipulation seem to provide tangible evidence of the porous quality of barriers between species and thereby complicate the notion of species altogether” (Bolter, 3). The animals are independently co-existing without any human involvement that dismantles the notion of Enlightenment and identity of humans as “androcentric, exclusionary, hierarchical, and Eurocentric and measurer of all things” (Braidotti, 677). The intellectual capacity of these animals renders one to consider the posthuman conditions of the humans in the universe. It is also escorted by the fact that the technological advancements of the present century has

astonishingly undermined all the barriers and made miraculous inventions that are changing the possibilities of the human future. Donna Haraway likens humans with cyborgs underlining the significance of technology and the way it has become indispensable for humans. Regarding the human-animal hybrids in *The Blazing World*, “Haraway’s cyborg is not merely transhuman, but posthuman, as a rejection and a reconfiguration of the values of the traditional humanist subject” (Bolter, 1). The posthuman era of mankind is not a recent phenomenon, but on the human civilisation it has dawned upon since their discovery of fire and its control and wielding as per their own will:

It is fire that allowed Homo-erectus to sleep safely at night on the ground; it is fire that cooked the food that nourished and developed our outrageous brains; and it is fire that made us human. In our intertwined ontologies we collapse materiality and metaphor: we are fiery, and fires die. We can understand these fusions and confusions when we see the bricks of Babel remain as relics of the architecture of a common language; when we see glass mediate impossible truths of immanent matter; and when we grant pyrophiliacs feel the objecthood and artistry of being made by fire. We can realize it: we are pyromena – we are fire’s doing. (Harris, 47-48)

The idea that humans share the same fate as the non-human entities existing in the nature due to creation of binaries and stereotype like self-other, goo-bad, human-animal, agency-structure, life-machine renders a separate understanding and restructuring of humans in the universe. The tenets of posthumanism suggest the disruption of humans “in relation to either evolutionary, ecological, or technological coordinates” (Wolfe, xvi). The ominous hierarchy of the humans have caused tremendous damage to the earth and have spearheaded the catastrophes such as pandemics, famines, global warming, ozone-hole etc. Posthumanism tends to create a space where the actions of the humans ought to be regulated and transformed.

CONCLUSION:

The Blazing World underscores the concerns about the position of humans in the world inhabited by other species and their role in plundering the resources and making it vulnerable to unprecedented crisis. In spite of the fact that posthumanism is a recent phenomenon; Cavendish's work candidly unravels concerns shared by Posthumanism. Her work transcends her age and emanates its relevance in making conspicuous the issues confronted by the present generation. The text contains characters which are largely nonhuman, but showcase human-like attributes by espousing values escorted by pragmatism, empathy and mutual recognition. Their world is a world that promotes peace, harmony and co-existence. The paper endeavoured to examine the text in the light of posthumanism and subvert the anthropocentric notions of the Enlightenment.

References:

- Bolter, J. D. *Posthumanism*. In Christian Fuchs (Ed.). The international encyclopedia of communication theory and philosophy, (1-8). <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/book/10.1002/9781118766804>.
- Braidotti, R. "The posthuman as exuberant Excess." In Francesca Ferrando (Ed.). *Philosophical Posthumanism* (First ed., pp. xvi). Blumsbury.
- Braidotti, R. *The Posthuman*. Polity Press.
- Braidotti, R. *Posthuman feminist theory*. In Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth (Eds.). "The Oxford handbook of feminist theory" (673-698). Oxford University Press.
- Cavendish, M. *The Blazing World*. Global Grey. <https://www.global>

greybooks.com/blazing-world-ebook.html

Ferrando, F. *Posthumanism*. Tidsskrift for kjønnsforskning, 38(2), 168-172. “A

Posthuman View of The Blazing World.” *IBAD Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi / IBAD Journal of Social Sciences*, (13), 2022.

Ferrando, F. (2013). “Posthumanism, transhumanism, antihumanism, metahumanism, and new materialisms differences and relations.” *An International Journal in Philosophy, Religion, Politics, and the Arts*, 8(2), 26-32.

Haraway, D. *Manifestly Haraway*. University of Minnesota Press.

Merchant, C. ‘The violence of impediments’: Francis Bacon and the origins of experimentation. *Isis*, 99(4), 731-760. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/597767>

Nanda, A. “Re-Writing the Bhabhian “Mimic Man”: Akin, the posthuman other in octavia butler’s adulthood rites.” *ARIEL*, 41(3-4), 115- 135.

Suzuki, M. “Thinking beings and animate matter margaret cavendish’s challenge to the early modern order of things.” In Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Ed.). *Challenging women's agency and activism in early modernity*, (183-206). Amsterdam University Press.

Wolfe, C. *What is posthumanism?* University of Minnesota Press.