

REDEFINING LIMITS: POSTHUMANISM AND THE NEW CONCEPTION OF HUMAN IDENTITY IN LITERATURE

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Asist. dr. OVIDIU IVANCU
Faculty of Philology, Vilnius University

Abstract: This paper proposes to explore how posthumanist literary discourse redefines human identity by challenging anthropocentric boundaries and embracing hybrid, interconnected modes of existence. Posthumanism, as both a critique and extension of humanist thought, destabilizes fixed notions of the human subject, offering a transformative lens through which literature interrogates identity, agency, and relationality in an era shaped by ecological crisis and technological evolution.

By focusing on key literary texts and theoretical frameworks, this paper examines how posthumanist narratives decentre the human to foreground the entanglement of humans with non-human entities, systems, and environments.

The analysis begins with the philosophical underpinnings of posthumanism, drawing on thinkers such as Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and N. Katherine Hayles. These theorists provide a foundation for understanding posthumanist literature as a site where ontological boundaries between human and non-human are blurred and constantly negotiated.

The paper then examines Han Kang's novel *"The Vegetarian"* which depict shifting identities in response to domestic violence and day to day human aggression. Through these texts, the study highlights how posthumanist literature critiques anthropocentric ideals while envisioning alternative modes of existence that embrace hybridity and relationality.

Moreover, this presentation situates posthumanist literature within a global framework by exploring its intersections with non-Western epistemologies. By addressing the critique of colonial modernity embedded in humanist traditions, it demonstrates how posthumanist narratives foster ethical frameworks that prioritize interconnectedness over hierarchical separations between humans and their environments.

Ultimately, this paper argues that posthumanist literature is not merely speculative but profoundly transformative in its capacity to reimagine human identity amidst planetary crises. By shifting boundaries and embracing relationality, posthumanist narratives offer critical insights into the evolving nature of humanity's role within more-than-human worlds. This paper contributes to ongoing discussions in literary studies by emphasizing the importance of posthumanism as a framework for understanding contemporary challenges to identity and ethics in literature.

Keywords: posthumanism; literature; Han Kang; humanism; hybridity

1. Posthumanism. Theoretical foundations

Posthumanism, as articulated by Rosi Braidotti¹ and N. Katherine Hayles², marks a decisive shift away from Enlightenment humanism's privileging of the rational, autonomous subject. Rather than rejecting the human outright, posthumanism interrogates and destabilizes the normative boundaries that have historically defined and limited the category of the human, especially as these boundaries have excluded women, non-Europeans, and non-human entities from full ethical and political consideration.

Braidotti explicitly frames posthumanism as a response to the crisis of humanism, which she argues is signaled by the resurgence of those previously positioned as "structural Others." She writes:

"The crisis of Humanism means that the structural others of the modern humanistic subject re-emerge with a vengeance in postmodernity. It is a historical fact that the great emancipatory movements of postmodernity are driven and fuelled by the resurgent 'others': the women's rights movement; the anti-racism and decolonization movements; the anti-nuclear and pro-environment movements are the voices of the structural Others of modernity. They inevitably mark the crisis of the former humanist 'centre' or dominant subject-position and are not merely anti-humanist, but move beyond it to an altogether novel, posthuman project"³.

This "post-anthropocentric shift"⁴ involves a radical estrangement from the hierarchical relations that privileged "Man" and requires a process of dis-identification, or what Braidotti – drawing on Deleuze – calls "active deterritorialization." She explains:

"The post-anthropocentric shift away from the hierarchical relations that had privileged 'Man' requires a form of estrangement and a radical repositioning on the part of the subject. The best method to accomplish this is through the strategy of de-familiarization or critical distance from the dominant vision of the subject. Dis-identification involves the loss of familiar habits of thought and representation in order to pave the way for creative alternatives. Deleuze would call it an active 'deterritorialization' "⁵.

Braidotti also emphasizes the ethical dimension of posthuman subjectivity, proposing that:

"Making friends with the impersonal necessity of death is an ethical way of installing oneself in life as a transient, slightly wounded visitor"⁶.

N. Katherine Hayles⁷, in *How We Became Posthuman*, similarly critiques the foundational binaries of Western thought, particularly the opposition between mind and body. She is critical of the notion that information is immaterial and that

¹ Rosi Braidotti. *The Posthuman*, Polity Press, 2013.

² N.K. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, University of Chicago Press, 1999.

³ Rosi Braidotti. *The Posthuman*, p. 37.

⁴ Rosi Braidotti. *The Posthuman*, p. 121.

⁵ Rosi Braidotti. *The Posthuman*, pp. 88-89.

⁶ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 132.

⁷ N.K. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*.

consciousness can be uploaded to a computer, a view she sees as neglecting the significance of embodiment. Hayles writes:

“Although Moravec’s dream of downloading human consciousness into a computer would likely come in for some hard knocks in literature departments, literary studies share with Moravec a major blind spot when it comes to the significance of embodiment”⁸.

She cautions against the seduction of fantasies about disembodied immortality, proposing instead a version of the posthuman that “embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality”⁹.

Both Braidotti and Hayles thus call for a reconfiguration of subjectivity that is attentive to materiality, embodiment, and the complex entanglements between human and non-human entities. Posthumanism, in their view, is not a negation of the human but a critical project that seeks to move beyond the limitations of Eurocentric, patriarchal, and anthropocentric humanism. It challenges the binaries of human/animal, nature/culture, and mind/body, and instead proposes a more relational, situated, and ethically responsive understanding of existence in a technologically mediated and ecologically interconnected world.

Critical posthumanism, as distinguished from transhumanist posthumanism by scholars like Stefan Herbrechter¹⁰, focuses on deconstructing humanist assumptions rather than enhancing human capabilities through technology. This distinction is crucial for literary studies, as it emphasizes the interpretive and analytical possibilities that emerge when traditional humanist reading practices are questioned.

2. Philosophical antecedents

The philosophical foundations of posthumanist literary criticism are deeply indebted to poststructuralist thought, particularly the works of Michel Foucault¹¹ and Jacques Derrida¹². Both thinkers interrogate the assumptions underpinning Enlightenment humanism and its construction of the human subject, providing crucial tools for posthumanist critique.

Michel Foucault’s method, as articulated in *The Order of Things* (originally published in French in 1966), offers a systematic critique of the historical formation of knowledge and subjectivity. Foucault famously announces

⁸ N.K. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, p. 284.

⁹ N.K. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, p. 5.

¹⁰ Stefan Herbrechter, *Critical Posthumanism and the Posthuman Condition*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, translated by Alan Sheridan, New York, Vintage Books.

¹² Jacques Derrida, , *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, translated by David Wills, in *Critical Inquiry*, 28(2), 369–418, 2002.

the “death of man” as a central event in the epistemic shifts of modernity. He writes:

“As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end. If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared... then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea”¹³.

This passage encapsulates Foucault’s argument that “man” as a category is not a universal or timeless essence, but rather a product of specific historical and discursive formations. His approach exposes the contingency of the human subject, opening the way for posthumanist thinking that refuses to take the human as a fixed point of reference.

Foucault’s analysis also deconstructs the binaries that structure humanist thought, such as reason/madness, order/disorder, and human/animal. He demonstrates how these distinctions are not natural but are constituted through regimes of knowledge and power. As he notes:

“Order is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression”¹⁴.

Jacques Derrida, particularly in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, extends this critique by challenging the foundational human/animal distinction. Derrida’s deconstruction reveals the instability of the boundary between human and animal, which has long been central to humanist philosophy. He interrogates the “anthropocentric subject” by asking:

“The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. And thinking perhaps begins there”¹⁵.

Derrida’s work destabilizes the privilege of the human as the sole bearer of subjectivity, reason, and language, thus contributing to the posthumanist project of decentering the human and reimagining ethical relations beyond anthropocentrism. “There is no animal in the general singular, separated from man by a single indivisible limit. We have to envisage the existence of “living creatures” whose plurality cannot be assembled within the single figure of an animality that is simply opposed to humanity. This does not of course mean ignoring or effacing everything that separates humankind from the other animals, creating a single large set, a single great, fundamentally homogeneous and continuous family tree going from the *animot* to the *homo* (*faber*, *sapiens*, or whatever else). That would be an *asinanity*, even more so to suspect anyone here of doing just that. I won’t therefore

¹³ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, p. 387.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, p. XX.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, p. 397.

devote another second to the double stupidity of that suspicion, even if, alas, it is quite widespread”¹⁶.

Together, Foucault and Derrida provide the philosophical groundwork for posthumanist literary criticism by exposing the *constructedness* and contingency of the human subject and by deconstructing the boundaries that have historically defined and limited human realm. Their insights enable posthumanist critics to interrogate literature and culture in ways that move beyond the exclusions and hierarchies of traditional humanism.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of "becoming-animal" in *A Thousand Plateau*¹⁷ has been particularly influential in posthumanist literary criticism. Their rhizomatic thinking offers alternatives to hierarchical, anthropocentric modes of understanding that have traditionally governed literary interpretation.

“A becoming-animal always involves a pack, a band, a population, a peopling, in short, a multiplicity. We sorcerers have always known that. It may very well be that other agencies, moreover very different from one another, have a different appraisal of the animal. One may retain or extract from the animal certain characteristics: species and genera, forms and functions, etc. Society and the State need animal characteristics to use for classifying people; natural history and science need characteristics in order to classify the animals themselves”¹⁸.

These philosophical foundations provide the theoretical apparatus for reading literature beyond humanist frameworks.

3. Posthumanist literary theory and criticism

The field of animal studies has significantly contributed to posthumanist literary criticism. Scholars like Susan McHugh in *Animal Stories*¹⁹ demonstrate how literary texts both reinforce and challenge species boundaries. Her analysis reveals how animal narratives can disrupt anthropocentric reading practices and open new interpretive possibilities.

Kari Weil's *Thinking Animals*²⁰ examines the epistemological challenges of representing non-human animals in literature, arguing that literary texts provide unique insights into human-animal relationships that exceed purely philosophical or scientific approaches. This work exemplifies how posthumanist criticism can reveal the limitations of humanist literary interpretation while opening new avenues for understanding interspecies relationships in literature.

Donna Haraway's influential work, particularly *When Species Meet*²¹ and *Staying with the Trouble*²², has provided conceptual frameworks for understanding

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, , *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, p. 415.

¹⁷ G. Deleuze, & F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

¹⁸ G. Deleuze, & F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p. 239.

¹⁹ Susan McHugh, *Animal Stories: Narrating across Species Lines*, University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

²⁰ Kari Weil, *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now?*, Columbia University Press, 2012.

²¹ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

companionate relationships between humans and other species. Her concept of "response-ability" has influenced literary critics to examine how texts represent ethical relationships across species lines, moving beyond simple anthropomorphic projections to consider genuine interspecies encounters.

The intersection of ecocriticism and posthumanism has produced significant literary work on human-nature relationships. Timothy Morton's concept of "ecology without nature"²³ challenges romantic notions of pristine nature, arguing instead for an ecological thinking that recognizes the interconnectedness of all beings without resorting to idealized natural categories.

Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*²⁴ introduces the concept of "thing-power," arguing for the agency of non-human objects and materials. This materialist posthumanism has influenced literary critics to examine how texts represent the agency of non-human entities. Her work challenges traditional literary criticism's focus on human agency and intentionality.

Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's *Material Ecocriticism*²⁵ develops a framework for reading the material dimension of literary texts, examining how matter itself participates in meaning-making processes. This approach demonstrates how posthumanist criticism can reveal the material foundations of literary production and interpretation that humanist criticism often overlooks.

N. Katherine Hayles' groundbreaking work *How We Became Posthuman* examines the relationship between cybernetics, literature, and posthuman subjectivity. Her analysis of cyberpunk fiction and other technological narratives reveals how literature both anticipates and responds to technological transformations of human identity. Hayles' concept of the "posthuman" emphasizes embodiment and distributed cognition rather than disembodied technological transcendence.

"The posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction. Consider the six-million-dollar man, a paradigmatic citizen of the posthuman regime. As his name implies, the parts of the self are indeed owned, but they are owned precisely because they were purchased, not because ownership is a natural condition preexisting market relations. Similarly, the presumption that there is an agency, desire, or will belonging to the self and clearly distinguished from the "wills of others" is undercut in the posthuman, for the posthuman's collective heterogeneous quality implies a distributed cognition located in disparate parts that may be in only tenuous communication with one another"²⁶.

²² Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, 2016.

²³ Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Harvard University Press, 2007.

²⁴ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*, Duke University Press, 2010.

²⁵ Serenella Iovino & Serpil Oppermann (Eds.), *Material Ecocriticism*, Indiana University Press, 2014.

²⁶ N.K. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, pp. 3-4.

The field of digital humanities has also contributed to posthumanist literary criticism by challenging traditional notions of authorship, textuality, and reading. Scholars like Johanna Drucker²⁷ argue that digital technologies require new theoretical frameworks that move beyond humanist assumptions about individual creativity and linear textuality.

The new materialist turn, exemplified by scholars like Karen Barad²⁸ and her concept of "agential realism," has significantly influenced posthumanist literary criticism. Barad's framework of "intra-action" challenges traditional subject/object distinctions, providing tools for analysing how human and non-human agencies interact within literary texts.

Stacy Alaimo's concept of "trans-corporeality"²⁹ examines how human and more-than-human bodies intermingle, challenging bounded notions of individual identity. This theoretical framework has proven particularly useful for analysing contemporary environmental literature and science fiction that explores permeable boundaries between human and non-human entities.

Feminist scholars have made crucial contributions to posthumanist literary criticism. Rosi Braidotti's nomadic ethics³⁰ provides frameworks for understanding non-unitary subjectivities in literary texts, while Val Plumwood's ecological feminism³¹ offers critiques of the dualisms that structure both patriarchal and anthropocentric thinking.

Donna Haraway's cyborg feminism continues to influence analyses of science fiction and other speculative genres, providing tools for understanding how literary texts imagine alternative forms of identity that transcend traditional gender and species categories. Her more recent work on multispecies storytelling has opened new directions for feminist posthumanist literary criticism.

Posthumanist literary criticism has developed distinctive approaches to close reading that attend to non-human agencies and materialities within texts. Rather than focusing exclusively on human consciousness and intention, posthumanist close reading examines how texts represent the interactions between human and non-human entities, the agency of material objects, and the permeability of seemingly stable categories.

One ongoing debate within posthumanist literary criticism concerns the extent to which non-human entities can be understood as possessing agency. Critics argue that attributing agency to non-human entities risks anthropomorphizing them, while proponents contend that recognizing non-human agency is essential for moving beyond anthropocentric frameworks.

²⁷ Johanna Drucker, *SpecLab: Digital Aesthetics and Projects in Speculative Computing*. University of Chicago Press, 2009.

²⁸ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meanin*, Duke University Press, 2007.

²⁹ Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Indiana University Press, 2010.

³⁰ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, Columbia University Press, 2011.

³¹ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Routledge, 1993.

The literature on posthumanism and literary studies reveals a rich and evolving field that continues to generate new theoretical insights and methodological approaches. From its philosophical foundations in poststructuralism to its contemporary applications in animal studies, ecocriticism, and new materialism, posthumanist literary criticism offers valuable tools for understanding literature's representation of human and more-than-human relationships.

Future directions for this field include continued engagement with decolonial perspectives, further development of interdisciplinary methods, and exploration of how digital technologies are transforming literary production and reception. As environmental crises and technological developments continue to challenge traditional humanist assumptions, posthumanist literary criticism remains a vital area of scholarly inquiry.

The ongoing debates within the field reflect its theoretical richness and political stakes. Whether focused on the agency of non-human entities, the politics of posthuman subjectivity, or the cultural specificity of posthumanist theory, these discussions demonstrate the continued relevance of posthumanist approaches to literary studies. As the field continues to evolve, it offers increasingly sophisticated tools for understanding literature's capacity to represent and imagine relationships that exceed traditional humanist frameworks.

4. Posthumanist narratives and the dissolution of human boundaries.

Case study: "The Vegetarian" by Han Kang

Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*³² presents one of the most radical explorations of posthuman transformation in contemporary literature, offering a profound meditation on the dissolution of human-animal-plant boundaries that lies at the heart of posthumanist discourse. The novel's protagonist, Yeong-hye, embarks on a journey that moves beyond mere dietary choice to encompass a fundamental rejection of human social structures and an embrace of plant-like existence.

"- I'm not an animal anymore, sister, she said, first scanning the empty ward as if about to disclose a momentous secret. I don't need to eat, not now. I can live without it. All I need in sunlight"³³.

Yeong-hye's transformation begins with her refusal to consume meat, but this initial act of resistance evolves into something far more radical: a desire to transcend human embodiment entirely. As the narrative progresses, she increasingly identifies with plant life, ultimately expressing her wish to become a tree. This metamorphosis challenges the anthropocentric assumption that human consciousness and agency are inherently superior to other forms of life. Through Yeong-hye's journey, Han Kang interrogates the violent hierarchies that structure human relationships with both other humans and non-human entities.

The novel's exploration of becoming-plant resonates powerfully with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of "becoming-animal," extending their

³² Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*, Granta Publications, translated by Deborah Smith, 2015.

³³ Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*, pp. 153-154.

posthumanist framework to encompass vegetal transformation. Yeong-hye's desire to root herself in earth and live through photosynthesis represents a rejection of the bounded, autonomous human subject celebrated in humanist discourse.

"- No one can understand me... the doctors, the nurses, they're all the same... they don't even try to understand... they just force me to take medication, and stab me with needles"³⁴.

Her transformation is not presented as pathological but as a form of resistance to the patriarchal violence that structures her social world.

The Vegetarian demonstrates how posthumanist literature reveals the interconnectedness of human and more-than-human worlds. Yeong-hye's transformation occurs in response to the violence she experiences within human social structures, particularly patriarchal marriage and family systems. Her turn toward plant life represents not an escape from the social but a recognition of alternative forms of agency and being that exist beyond anthropocentric frameworks.

The novel's representation of Yeong-hye's mental state challenges traditional distinctions between sanity and madness, rationality and irrationality.

"Look, sister, I'm doing a handstand; leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands... they delve down into the earth. Endlessly, endlessly... yes, I spread my legs because I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch; I spread them wide..."³⁵.

Her desire to become plant-like is presented as a logical response to the impossibility of existing as a fully human subject within the oppressive structures that surround her. This aligns with feminist posthumanist critiques of normative human subjectivity, particularly those developed by scholars like Rosi Braidotti, who argue that the humanist subject has historically excluded women, non-Europeans, and other marginalized groups.

Han Kang's detailed attention to Yeong-hye's physical transformation reflects posthumanism's emphasis on embodied, material existence rather than abstract notions of consciousness or identity. The protagonist's refusal to eat meat, her attempts to survive on water and sunlight, and her final identification with trees all emphasize the material dimensions of posthuman becoming. This focus on embodiment challenges humanist traditions that privilege mind over body and reason over sensation.

The novel's exploration of eating, hunger, and bodily transformation resonates with new materialist approaches to posthumanism, particularly those developed by scholars like Jane Bennett and Stacy Alaimo. Yeong-hye's changing relationship to food and her body reflects what Alaimo terms "trans-corporeality"—the recognition that human and more-than-human bodies are always already intermixed and mutually constitutive.

5. Conclusions

³⁴ Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*, p. 156.

³⁵ Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*, p. 127.

In the exploration of posthumanist literature, we find ourselves at the threshold of a transformative journey, one that challenges the very essence of what it means to be human. This literary discourse, rich and multifaceted, invites us to step beyond the confines of anthropocentric thought and embrace a world where identities are fluid, interconnected, and ever-evolving.

As we delve into the narratives that define this genre, we uncover a tapestry woven with threads of philosophy, ecology, and technology. These stories do not merely speculate on the future; they actively reshape our understanding of identity and agency in an era marked by ecological crises and technological advancements. Through the lens of posthumanism, we see a world where humans are not the sole protagonists but part of a vast, interconnected web of existence.

At the heart of posthumanist literature lies a profound ethical and political imperative. These narratives call us to question the hierarchical structures that have long defined our relationships with the natural world and with each other. They challenge us to envision a future where interconnectedness and relationality are the guiding principles, fostering ethical frameworks that prioritize the well-being of all beings.

As we stand on the brink of this new era, the insights offered by posthumanist literature are more relevant than ever. They provide us with the tools to understand and address the cultural, social, and political dimensions of our rapidly changing world. By situating human experiences within broader ecological and technological contexts, these narratives offer valuable perspectives on the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Looking to the future, the field of posthumanist literary studies holds immense promise. As we continue to explore the intersections with decolonial perspectives, digital humanities, and new materialisms, we open new avenues for understanding and imagining our place in the world. This ongoing journey is not just an academic pursuit; it is a vital endeavour that has the potential to reshape our collective future.

Posthumanist literature invites us to embark on a journey of discovery and transformation. By embracing hybridity, relationality, and interconnectedness, we can envision a future that is more inclusive, ethically responsive, and attuned to the complexities of our more-than-human world. As we navigate the challenges and opportunities of this new era, the insights offered by posthumanist narratives will be our guiding light, illuminating the path to a more just and sustainable future.

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