



# “But, human is all I am”: Exploration of Posthuman Feminism and (Dis) embodiment in the Short Story of Vandana Singh

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**Abstract**— *The aim of this study is to explore the notion of ‘human’ identity in reference to the spectrum of posthumanism. The study will highlight how the idea of posthumanism challenges and widens the borders of the category of ‘human’, allowing the traditionally excluded categories, such as ‘women’ to be considered as humans. The study will analyze the issue in reference to the story, “With Fate Conspire” by Vandana Singh where the author blurs the line between past and present. The story includes three interconnected women who with the help of a machine renegotiate the identity of women and move forward from the traditional concept of ‘human’.*

**Keywords**— *Human, Identity, Machine, Posthumanism, Women.*



## I. INTRODUCTION

Posthumanism is a theory that renegotiates traditional humanism along with contrasting the ideas of anthropocentrism. As Braidotti (2017) asserts, feminism along with other minority, postcolonial, and animal studies form a group that falls outside the traditional ideas of humanity, which forces the pre-conceived ideas of a ‘human’ under severe scrutiny. The humanist ideals that were born during the Renaissance period provide a restricted version of humans, where an able-bodied, white, male person is considered the perfect embodiment of the human race. One of the examples of this ideology is the portrait of the “Vitruvian Man”, painted by Leonardo da Vinci in the 15th century and it is safe to say that we have internalized the definition of humans by looking at this portrait of a nude man for more than 500 years (Braidotti, 2013). The portrait is considered to be the ideal representation of man (human), which excludes women, Blacks, the disabled, and many other people who are considered inferior or ‘other’. Where humanism excludes them, posthumanism is a discipline that is inclusive and

pushes the boundaries of the ideals of humanism. Posthumanism advocates for a post-anthropocentric world, where neither Anthropos lies at the center of the universe, nor ‘man’ is considered the universal measure of all things. The case for the emancipation and inclusion of women as a group is thus argued and fought along the lines of equality that posthumanism promotes (Koistinen & Karkulehto, 2018). The point where feminism and other minority studies meet posthumanism stems from the inequality that they have endured and the resistance towards a hierarchical conceptualization of the term, ‘human’. Posthumanism is also a post-dualism theory that resists the binaries of man and woman, animal and human, human and machine, White and Black, heterosexual and homosexual and integrates and analyses them together and equally. Many contemporary fiction writers have been inspired and influenced by this inclusive theory and incorporate them in their works. One of these writers is Vandana Singh who is an Indian science fiction writer and a physicist. One of her most popular books that include the posthuman ideals of resistance and amalgamation is

*Ambiguity Machines and other stories*, published in 2018. This article will use one of the short stories, published in this anthology, named "With Fate Conspire" to examine and analyze it in reference to the notion of posthuman feminism. In her work, Singh explores the posthuman ideals of embodiment, association, negotiation of identity, relationships with machines, and the place of women in a posthuman world.

## II. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Posthumanism is used by feminist scholars as a tool to navigate, resist, and reinvent the set notions of the human. Following the arguments of Braidotti (2013), posthumanism can help in not only re-thinking the references related to the term 'human', but also exploring the relationships between non-human subjects and objects. Non-human subjects and objects both refer to living and non-living mechanisms. Humanism has not only set a standard model for humans but also for the world. Humans are expected to adhere to the rules of society, follow laws, and lead a civilized society and it is hard to say whether humans are the ones who make the rules of civilization or the opposite. However, outside this civilized world, there lies a world where human standards are expected without giving the designation. For example, people expect animals to show humane qualities, which include patience, understanding, intellect, and empathy without considering them as their equals. Humans believe themselves to be the superior species both to animals and machines, but they also expect humanity from them (Haslam et al., 2008). Most contemporary science fiction follows this principle as well, where machines are either friends of humans or rise up against them. In both scenarios, they are attributed with both positive and negative qualities associated with humans. This humanization is more easily understandable through the way people have created an Oedipalized relationship with a few selected species, namely cats and dogs (Braidotti, 2013). The Oedipalized relationship is based on the anthropocentric ideals of humans that negotiate the identity and existence of these animals only in relation and reference to humans. This blurs the lines between humans, animals, and machines, allowing the later identities to become inevitably associated with the former. This association is understood and taken by people through different perspectives as they often lead to contrasting revelations. For example, the bond between animals and machines can either be fruitful for both, for none, or for one of them. Since women have always been categorized as 'other' for example, as highlighted by Simone de Beauvoir in her revolutionary book, *The Second Sex*, they sometimes form a greater bond with animals and machines (non-humans). Since posthuman

ideas stretch the boundaries of the 'human', it presents the categories of traditional 'others' with an opportunity to amalgamate and associate themselves with the notion of 'human'. This association allows women to re-negotiate their identity in society and challenge humanist ideals.

It can also be argued that replacing humans as the center of the world or rapid technological enhancement can also bring many negative changes and complicate the animal-human-machine dynamics. This threat and easily changeable identity of humans has been called, "ex-man" by Massumi (1998, p. 59), according to whom, this 'ex-man' is born out of the torn enlightenment man who has been "deterritorialized and bifurcated". This event is not only significant in the history of post-anthropocentrism but also in post-humanism. The posthuman world with technological enhancement and ideas of deconstruction have met with both hostility and criticism on the one hand, and hope and anticipation on the other. Thus, the position of women can also be analyzed in a positive and a negative way as explored by different science-fiction authors. For example, on the one hand, fiction books like *Frankenstein* (2019) by Jeanette Winterson highlight how women can get replaced or even dominated by the emergence of the machine. The book talks about sexbots that can manage to not only satisfy the sexual needs of a man but can also become their ultimate and perfect companions (Winterson, 2019). A real-life example of the same phenomenon can be Sophia, the humanoid robot who became the first robot to receive legal personhood in any country. She received the citizenship of Saudi Arabia in 2017, a country where biological women were not even allowed to drive cars during that time. This unique issue of replacement thus problematizes the relationship between women and machines. However, the positive sides are also explored by many novelists, including Vandana Singh. In the story, "With Fate Conspire", the machine helps Gargi to connect with the other women and learn about them. It works as a catalyst that forwards the story but stays in the background. In contrast to the other science-fiction works, here the machine is not an all-compassing and primary entity, rather it is a secondary character. Thus, it shows that women can find their voice and share their narrative in the posthuman world which is a privilege that they never had in the old world.

## III. ANALYSIS OF THE STORY, "WITH FATE CONSPIRE"

"With Fate Conspire" centers around a female protagonist, named Gargi who lives in a post-apocalyptic world and is adorned with a special ability that allows her to communicate with the past through machines. The story

begins with a dream sequence where Gargi dreams about a man who was dreaming too. The first sequence thus brings up the question about dream embodiments, which allows Gargi to experience something real, but at the same time fails to communicate the perspective and the information clearly. As Ferrando (2020) mentions in her book, *Philosophical Posthumanism*, every perspective is embodied, but the embodiments do not necessarily have to be physical. This allows the dream of Gargi to be a perceived reality and an embodiment through which she can receive knowledge through a dualistic state of mind of being both awake and asleep. The story moves forward and allows the reader to know that Gargi is part of a scientific experiment where the scientists are trying to visit the past to learn about a poet named, Wajid Ali Shah as they believed it could have averted the world-ending catastrophe that they faced. In her dream, Gargi has also talked about a delta, which is later described in the story as "made by a river of time, not water" (Singh, 2018, p. 9). The idea of time and river is very closely associated in the story because the scientists that Gargi is working with (or rather for) are trying to change the future and avoid catastrophe by changing some interconnected events in the past. The theme of changing the future through changing the past itself shows its deep connection with each other, where, for example, the state and condition of women are also changeable. Since, the story highlights that "history and time control each other" and time is not a linear idea, the posthuman ideals of the contemporary world can actually affect the events of the past (Singh, 2018, p. 13). Now, in reality, it is not possible to change history, but the way historical events and the way history judges a category, such as 'humans' or 'women' can be changed and altered through the discussion in the present. So, in a sense, posthuman ideals allow us to stretch the borders and analyze history through the present. This can help in understanding the character of Rassundari and her association and relationship with Gargi because even if they belong from different times, they intricately share each other's lives and influence each other. The story, in fact, includes three women, namely Gargi, Kajori (Dr. Mitra), and Rassundari who assimilate with each other and influence the works and lives of each other at every step. This hints at the idea of feminist solidarity which is a significant concept while discussing the concept of inclusivity in posthumanism.

While discussing and addressing the issues of posthumanism, the story also highlights the past notions of 'human' through the treatment of women. As the paper already mentioned, following the assertions of Rosi Braidotti that she included in her book, *The Posthuman* (2013) that women among other minorities were excluded

from the notion of 'human' and were categorized as the 'other'. In this story, most of the characters are women who not only highlight the position of women in the present contemporary age but also in the past. The analysis of both the times and their trajectory can thus help in locating and positioning the concept of 'human' in reference to the posthuman world. The representative of the old, traditional world, Rassundari entails and emphasizes the inequalities and oppression that women faced in 19th-century Bangladesh. Rassundari's struggle to satisfy her own family while trying to educate herself is a significant example of the way she is positioned in the lower stratum of society. Education, equality, and agency are basic human rights that are denied to her, through which society excludes her from the category of 'human' and upholds its traditional definition. However, the fact that she was eventually able to write her autobiography at the age of 60, called "Amar Jiban" allows a ray of hope to future generations that widening the borders of the 'human' category is not only possible but also worthy. It is worthy because 250 years later, maybe a woman like Gargi will be encouraged to educate herself through the book. The autobiography of Rassundari in fact stands in contrast to the song that Gargi mentions, named "Babul Mora" which talks about a woman "leaving her childhood home with her newlywed husband, looking back from the cart for the last time. Father mine, my home slips away from me" (Singh, 2018, p. 4). The song "Babul Mora" is written by Wajid Ali Shah and talks about the experience of a woman, which brings out the question of how much the perspective of a man can accurately describe the experiences of a woman. Thus, while the autobiography of Rassundari is an example of a work that pushes the boundaries of the 'human' category, the song adheres to the tradition of the old world and upholds the categorization of women as the 'other' who are incapable of and/or denied the opportunity to control and voice their narratives.

The oppression and the treatment that Rassundari faced in the 19th century also resonates through the experience of Gargi. Gargi is an uneducated woman who is only a subject of interest to scientists because she is one of the few people who can connect with the machine and witness the events of the past. Even this crucial role comes with its own bondage and problems, as Gargi refers to the scientist as her 'captors'. She feels trapped in the building and feel forced to spy on Wajid Ali Shah, while her own interest lies in Rassundari. Similar to Rassundari, she is also uneducated, trapped, and at the mercy of others. Thus, similar to Rassundari, Gargi can also be categorized as the 'other'. Gargi is different, not only because she can connect with the machine, but also because influencing

and changing the past and the future lies in her own hands. She can change the future (specifically the catastrophe) by changing the past, through Wajid Ali, but she chooses to spend time with Rassundari. This implies that interacting with Rassundari may have changed her future and may have also influenced the trajectory of the catastrophe, allowing her a power that the traditional category of 'human' denies her. When Gargi mentions that "all my hauntings have been of people who are hurt, or grieving, or otherwise in distress", it enables the reader to associate her position with all the people who came before her, and were categorized as 'others' (Singh, 2018, p. 4). She associates herself with not only Rassundari in particular, or all women in general, but also emphasizes the pain of everyone that she feels. For example, in the mentioned sentence, she is talking about a tired old man who used to creep into her mind, whom she later refers to as Rahman Khan. This man is also a representative of the 'other' because, in the story, he is a fragment of the imagination and memory of Gargi from whom she adopted the language of poetry and "a vision of freedom" (Singh, 2018, p. 5). Gargi is the posthuman embodiment in the story who can also be referred to as a 'trans-specific being'. Trans-specific beings as highlighted by De Castro (1998) and later mentioned by Ferrando in her book, *Philosophical Posthumanism* (2020) are beings who can transcend their species-specific borders. Gargi thus becomes a trans-specific being when she overcomes the limitations and borders of human beings and connects with a machine or the people from the past.

The association between humans and machines is also highlighted in the story where the only reason that Gargi has any control, agency, and power in her life is due to her connection with the machine that can connect someone to the past. Through this connection with the machine, Gargi is able to connect with Rassundari and enter the lives of the dead man and Kajori. Since the machine makes everything possible, it can be considered the enabler of the story and the center of their connected lives. The three interconnected women in the story, namely Kajori, Gargi, and Rassundari come together to save the world with the help of the machine and while they think they are using the machine, it is the machine that manages to influence all their lives significantly. For example, Gargi meets Rassundari through the machine, and the relationship that grows between them, which although can be categorized as one-sided, highlights the importance of the machine in a relationship between two women. The association of Gargi with the dead man, who thinks of her as Kajori is also due to the machine that allows them to talk to each other through dreams. Thus, the connection and the solidarity between women that develops during the narrative owe

much to the inhuman presence. In addition, the relationship of the machine with men and women is portrayed differently in the story. While it helps Gargi in multiple ways, it brings death to the man who has a painful and negative relationship with the machine. The machine thus becomes an agency that allows the women, in general, and Gargi, in particular, with power and control over their own lives and the narrative.

There are three major female characters present in the story who not only manage to connect with each other but also influence each other significantly. One of the most easily recognizable influences in the story is what Rassundari has over Gargi. She not only influences her to restart her educational journey but also made her question her own life and state. When Gargi started reading the autobiography of Rassundari, she felt that it was written in a more peaceful tone than she expected, considering the injustices and problems Rassundari faced in her life. It allowed Gargi to realize that holding onto the past and allowing yourself to be defined by others is a choice, which Rassundari rejected. Thus, the influence of Rassundari on Gargi is clear, but the question is whether Rassundari was ever influenced by Gargi or not. She used to look up towards the ceiling and she could feel the presence so maybe she was touched by it. Gargi talks to her from the ceiling, although Rassundari cannot probably hear her or see her, but, since Gargi mentions the book of Rassundari to her, maybe she senses it, and this is what inspired her to write the book. So, past and present can both influence each other, to change the future. In this sense, the notion of humanity that we have today, or we had, for example during the time of the Renaissance can help each other to develop a more all-encompassing and inclusive notion of humanity, which will not be oppressive towards anyone. In addition, both Gargi and Rassundari complicate the plan of Dr. Mitra to change the course of the future by changing the past. They not only play a part in the death of the lover of Dr. Mitra but also manipulated and sabotaged the experiment that Dr. Mitra was doing. Thus, the dynamics of the relationship between the women characters highlight the theme of the story and the notion of humanity.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be said that the story, "With Fate Conspire" by Vandana Singh locates and analyses significant elements of posthumanism and forces the readers to question and examine the relationship between women and machines. The categorization of women and machines in the same sentence refers to the notion of 'others' which both groups are categorized as, in the

spectrum of 'humanism'. They share the struggle to be accepted in the category of human, and while the question is more straightforward for women, it is more complicated for machines. However, in this story, it is not the aim of the author to highlight machines as 'human', but rather to allow machines and the notion of posthumanism to help and enable women to widen the boundaries of the category of 'human' and find a place for themselves within it. The story is therefore significant in exploring the posthuman world and the unique relationships it carries.

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