Towards a Posthuman Future: Androgyny, Transhumanism and Culture

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Abstract

This paper aims to look at the scope of transhumanism in the erasure of constructed binary formations through the synthesis of conflicting ideologies and its impact on culture. When conflicting ideologies confront each other, the resultant future is ideally of a synthetic formation. In the conflict between patriarchy and feminism, the future seems to tend towards feminism because the latter upholds the equality among the genders, irrespective of social categorization. Even as it recognizes the existence of it, it rebels against socio-cultural formations. The future could possibly tend towards androgyny and transhumanism. Both are not synonymous but they embody the synthetic formation. The act of procreation was traditionally associated with the feminine. The figure of Thomas Beatie, the first "pregnant man", and the controversy surrounding his gender, with many contesting the revolutionary nature of the pregnancy since Thomas Beatie was born female, with Beatie himself declaring that the desire to have children is not feminine, but human, presents an interesting challenge to critics interested in the future of gender relation.

Evolution, throughout the years has been biologically rooted, is an act of nature. The evolution of the human species might now just involve co-evolution with science and technology. In the constant attempts to push beyond nature-imposed limits, humans have begun to incorporate technology extensively. Even as bioconservatists cite ethics, morality and religion to deter transhumanist bids, it has been understood that "no ambition, however extravagant, no fantasy, however outlandish, can any longer be dismissed as crazy or impossible" (Regis). The acceptance of androgyny in pop culture, transhumanist improvements to life all point to a posthuman future where technology stands not in opposition to humanity but as a co-evolutionary necessity. The legitimacy of socio-cultural constructions ceases to exist and all limiting modes of expression and existence faces eventual dismantling as the transhuman evolves to its eventual posthuman stage. This stage is characterized by the decline of "exceptionalism",

"systems integrated with other systems" (Kevin LaGrandeur) to become a unified collective without discriminatory structures.

Nick Bostrom in "Are You Living in A Computer Simulation?" argues that there exists a possibility that "the human species is very likely to go extinct before reaching a "posthuman" stage". This paper however seeks to discuss the concepts of androgyny and transhumanism in culture as indicative of a posthuman future, irrespective of its occurrence in relation to the longevity of the human race. The titular word 'towards' is thus selected to emphasize that the future is posthuman, culturally, indicative from the cultural practices today and the tendencies identified in cultural and scientific inclinations. Hierarchical and hegemonic socio-cultural formations are detrimental to a community that should thrive on the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity. Rigidity cannot operate for long, with the excuse of morphological differentiation to legitimize discrimination and violence. Transhumanist endeavours to create better human selves have opened a new opportunity to dismantle limiting norms. The study aims to emphasize that transhumanism is capable of liberating the human species from its perilous, restrictive prejudices by evolving humans in tandem with the machinic evolution towards higher intelligence.

An interpretative and analytic approach was used to investigate the trends in androgyny in culture, and various interpretations of transhumanism and posthumanism. There is a rapid rise in the success of androgynous modes of gender expression. The phrase 'gender expression' used alongside the word 'androgyny' might come across as odd as androgyny tends to neutralize patriarchal gender formations that are construed in opposition to each other. But several instances in culture have depicted that androgyny is used both as a gender expression and also as an anti-gender expression. The best example is the global success of

South Korean male idol group BTS. In comparison to Western hegemonic masculinity, BTS and their male idol counterparts in the South Korean pop industry present a 'softer' masculinity, incorporating several traits often tagged as 'feminine'. "Asian musicians switch seamlessly between what is considered feminine and what is considered masculine in a way that is thrilling – and liberating. Their tremendous global platform provides them with a means of creating a new norm for masculinity, one that is more organic and experimental" (The Daily Vox). The resulting expression thus is not asexualized or a new formation as it still imbibes qualities of the gender that is considered as the 'original', corresponding to the sex assigned at birth. Therefore, while androgynous elements do exist, it is not realized in its entirety. On the other hand, androgyny as a mode of gender fluidity and as a means of dismantling normative gender expressions is also finding its own ground. One such example is the American model and activist Rain Dove who prefers to call herself, a 'gender capitalist'. She explains the term: "Gender Capitalism is both Feminist and Masculinist. It's everything-ist. It's the recognition that I, as an organism, am treated differently based on my perceived genitalia and the identity surrounding that relationship" (Posture Mag).

Identities created all stem from the possession of genitalia and bodies become instruments of power. Gender capitalism, understood from Dove's explanation, is the awareness of bodies as mere instruments. Capitalizing on the projection of body through self-expression is Dove's understanding of self-empowerment. The body thus is perceived as capable of infinite expression, playing with, and at the same time, liberating it from, heteronormative gender formations. Such strategic androgyny will lead humankind into an ideal state of non-differentiation. Non-differentiation distinguishes itself from undifferentiation. The Bem Sex Role Inventory talks of undifferentiation as low on feminine and masculine traits. Non-differentiation,

as a term used in this study, is specifically understood not as a state of sameness but rather that of fluidity. Fluidity relates to performativity and reconciliation to what Judith Butler observes in Undoing Gender as the "conflictual character of the psyche" (Undoing Gender 133). There is a constant conflict between essentialism and gender self-determination and strategic androgyny seeks to resolve this through fluidity. Androgyny, though of infinite capacity, operates on limited grounds. It doesn't alter physiologies and thereby cannot grant a subject complete access to a state of subjective experience wholly removed from that connected to the sex assigned at birth. For instance, pregnancy as a bodily experience is accessible to the female sex. Androgyny cannot operate to provide this subjective experience to a human that does not have the capacity to carry an offspring.

Technology can. Sex-change operations have enabled that. An interesting case in this instance is Thomas Beatie, known as the world's first "pregnant man." As a transman, Beatie lives the life of a man but is able to access the physiology of both sexes. This, however, might not be desirable to other transmen as female physiology often leads to "dysmorphic…days" (Feminism in India). Beatie said that the desire to have children is human and therefore, a species desire. Though pregnancy is seen as an ability that the female body possesses and thus feminized, Beatie refuses to see it as a 'female process'. This insistence is important to critique the pseudoscientific discrimination against women and sexual minorities. Beatie's opinion on pregnancy challenges body possibilities and opens a new space of possibilities where individuals can make free, non-institutionalized choices to determine their own lives. This kind of agency begins through the de-linking of institutionalized bodies from social formations of sex and gender.

Thus processes, activities, desires and identities are removed from gender rigidity or sex specificity but rather enter its own state of existence. This is possible through redefining the human body and the collective species-existence as subjective and dynamic rather than static and limited. Transhumanist endeavours have already decreased mortality rates and enabled remarkable advancements in medical science. Many physical disabilities are no longer seen as major deterrents to human capacity and thus the subjective experience is no longer limited as it was earlier. Human morphology can be altered. And with this alters the socio-cultural principles derived from the political construction of the human body. The success of androgyny is not a recent phenomenon; increase in women's participation in the workforce witnessed incorporating fashion choices, attitude and behavioural patterns commonly associated with men. But men readily incorporating socially constructed feminine traits is not as widespread as it is today, albeit in pop culture. Androgyny is more of an aesthetic, expressive choice. Transhumanism on the other hand, has the ability to realize androgyny on levels morphological, physiological and in the future, even psychically.

The evolution of human culture has always inhabited in a realm that seeks to disassociate with the wild 'animal' perceived as its 'original state of being'. All of human psychology, insecurities, fears, instincts and perception, works on the paradigm of human vs animal. Or more precisely, man vs animal since women were not really considered as human and their emotional nature and reproductive ability resulted in her construction as 'part of the wilderness'. The simultaneous disgust and fascination of the wild and the untameable has been the basis of the several cultural movements that attempted to draft a human, civilized and intellectually organized. Kurmo Konsa in "Artificialisation Of Culture: Challenges to and from Posthumanism" uses the word 'artificialisation' to talk of human reorganization of the

environment and culture, elucidating that artificialization is "an anthropogenic transformation of the environment that predominantly takes place under the influence of technological systems". She discusses the fear and the fascination of the wild as the basis of 'Othering' modes of existences that are non-normative. Instead of an expected ideal of tolerance and harmony in the era of liberal democracy and globalization, panicked reactions to rapid flow and exchange of cultural information has led to closed culture and dissolution of flexible cultural mores to superficial fundamentalism, retaining hostility. According to Konsa, the resultant "cultural relativism" leads to hierarchical comprehension of cultures, reverting to the binary of savage and civilised. Transhumanism has led to the severance, or possibly, and quite interestingly, the conflation of the human and animal binary. Irrespective of the resolution of the conflict, the animal-human, as Donna J. Haraway states in "The Cyborg Manifesto", is now a "leaky distinction" (152). She elaborates that "[l]ate twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert" (152). She elucidates the breakdown of boundaries between human and animal, animal-human and machine, and physical and non-physical. Haraway's cyborg calls for a non-essentialized, material-semiotic metaphor that can potentially unite diffuse political coalitions on the lines of affinity instead of identity. As transhumanism constantly modify human bodies and experiences of living, humans become trans-humans and potentially a state where subjective experience is no longer gendered because machinic incorporations can possibly lead to a unified individual, beyond human.

Cary Wolfe notes Foucault's observation, his insistence that humanism is "its own dogma, replete with its own prejudices and assumptions" and founded on Balibar's "anthropogenic universals" and simply an establishment of "different degrees of humanity" (xiv). Humanism thus reproduces normative subjectivity and transhumanism is consequently an "intensification of humanism" (xv). Even as Wolfe sees transhumanism as an improvement of humanism that is not liberating in any sense, the ability of transhumanism to structurally alter the subjective experience of human existence puts forth the notion that transhumans are "eventual posthumans", understanding posthumanism as not a state of 'after-human' as R.L. Rutsky notes (xvii) but rather as anti-humanist, extending subject experience beyond that of the human. The posthuman dismantles anthropocentrism. Even as transhumanism enhances anthropocentrism, the hyperreality of morphological modification leading to subjectivity not characteristic of the embodied human subjectivity, will eventually lead to dismantling of anthropocentrism as the body and body processes become irrelevant to the eventual rise of the posthuman dignity. Different versions of posthumanisms will be embattled on ethical grounds as the ultimate fear of erasure of human existence by artificial intelligence takeover, looms. Posthumanism evolves as machines evolve and conflation intensifies paradoxes only to destroy them completely. Dualisms can no longer thrive on heteronormative fodder and perceptions of reality become bendable and in complete defiance of constructed limits.

There is an interesting thought in the famed sci-fi action manga/ anime that was recently adapted into a Hollywood feature film in 2017, Ghost in the Shell: "What if a cyber-brain can create its own ghost, its own soul?" It is perhaps the essence of this wonder that forms the crux of the ultimate scientific tiff with ethics. Must there be a line that has to be defined as humans constantly innovate and push boundaries? As global terrorism has occupied an extensive

command over cyberspace, it has become amply clear that the future is all about optimum control of the cyberspace, push towards new innovative technologies and expanding all frontiers of digitalization. The future is, posthuman.

Who decides the ethical nature of the application? Take for instance immersive virtual reality that is hypothetically assumed to stimulate a consensus reality that has already been attempted at with augmented simulations and virtual reality applications. The original intention of simulated reality was all about helping disabled individuals but now it has found other applications as well. While related applications are aimed at enhancing the gaming experiences, it could potentially push the boundaries of art and philosophy, connecting people through shared experiences. Ironically it could also result in immunity towards sensitivity, overlooking the individuality of experiences and the complexity of individual human experiences.

Nick Bomstromstates, in the section titled "The Technological Limits of Computation", that "At our current stage of technological development, we have neither sufficiently powerful hardware nor the requisite software to create conscious minds in computers" which basically neutralises the possibility stated earlier from Ghost in the Shell. AI takeover is not really a possibility.

What becomes then of Immanuel Kant's insistence on "*Sapere aude*! Have courage to use your own intelligence!" Intelligence and reality perception stand altered and continually undefinable in a posthuman world. Take for instance the simulated reality depicted in The Matrixseries. Perhaps the only reality that exist is the one we accept because realities are no longer physical and cannot be physically or empirically understood. This alludes to Gilbert Ryle's concept of "ghost in the machine" (Concept of the Mind 069) where Ryle insists that to talk of existence in the mind and body Cartesian dualism is as absurd as to ask if there exists a

ghost in a device that makes it function. Ryle foregrounds rather the basis of existence as 'thinking', the *cogito*. The idea of the *cogito* (propounded by Rene Descartes) has faced criticism that attempt to centre the point of existence to bodily experience such as death (Martin Heidegger) and action (John Macmurray). The faculty that humans place as that which distinguishes it from machines is questionable as imitative and simulative alternatives question the authenticity of the actual. This, therefore, is indicative of a posthuman future where there is a transcendence from binaries and into a machinic reality of collective existence as posthumans. The survival of the fittest no longer works because the concept of the fittest is malleable as will be hierarchy and order. All meaning will be open to a field of continuous play as the Derridean différance reigns to dismantle social constructions.

Nick Bostrom discuss the concerns of species threat in "In Defence of Posthuman Dignity" with the example of transsexuals and the dismissive nature of society, devaluing and marginalising them. Acceptance of transhumans is not an overnight phenomenon. It takes time and can only be realised when it can be allowed to thrive. In the endeavour towards posthuman dignity, Bostrom says that we ought to "work to create more inclusive social structures that accord appropriate moral recognition and legal rights to all who need them, be they male or female, black or white, flesh or silicon". Human and posthuman dignity are not in opposition; "[transhumans] insist that dignity, in its modern sense, consists in what we are and what we have the potential to become, not in our pedigree or our causal origin. What we are is not a function solely of our DNA but also of our technological and social context. Human nature in this broader sense is dynamic, partially human-made, and improvable". The future belongs to the posthuman and every attempt to suppress such a possibility cannot succeed as humans have already normalized the role of technology in expanding sense and subjective experience that to be rid of

it would be akin to de-evolution. One may argue that the mass production of transhumans to an ideal state of perfection would result in the creation of Frankenstein's creature, a monstrous imitation, albeit of the self, by the self. But then again, to view the creature as monstrous is to subscribe to humanist ideals that have already been dismantled in poststructuralist thought. Victor Frankenstein's declaration is a resounding goal of the ultimate transhumanist belief: "there is only one worthy goal for scientific exploration. Piercing the tissue that separates life from death." Frankenstein's creature is not the dark, dangerous Other; Frankenstein's creature is not an outwardly manifestation. The creature does not exist because the experiment is on the self. And self, as transhuman, will herald a posthuman feature, not of machinic monsters but of a synthesis of human and machine, a discovery of the self and the world, not as mystical tales but rather, mathematical, solvable equations.

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