



The Posthuman in Ray's *Aranyer Din Ratri* and *Agantuk*- Embracing the Redefined Self

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Abstract

Posthumanism is one of the emerging fields of study in recent times. It deals with a redefined perspective toward man. It advocates that man has always been in existence, which is a concoction of that which man considered to be the Other. The Self and the Other exist in a natural rhythm in the Universe. The theory delves deep into the nature of Man and attempts to travel away from the Humanistic idea that Man is at the centre of all the functioning of Nature and views Man as apart from Nature. Posthumanism suggests man to be a part of nature. A discussion of human nature cannot be completed without the mention of the Renaissance Man Satyajit Ray. The paper attempts to locate hints of a Posthumanist discourse in Ray's *Aranyer Din Ratri* and *Agantuk*.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Anthropocene, Self, Other, Nature, Satyajit Ray, Nature.

In recent times, Posthumanism has emerged as a systematic attempt to counter the very foundation of the perception of 'human', to journey towards a more extensive study of human existence and being. Posthumanism rejects ideas that place humans in a superior or exceptional position compared to other beings and existences, living or non-living. Posthumanism rather seeks to base human existence on ideas such as 'species egalitarianism' and 'monistic vitalism' (Susen, 2022). Posthumanist scholarship is primarily based on a doctrine of relations. This means that all that we know of the Self today, we have arrived through our century-old existence with the Other. Standing in the 21st century, having centuries of history to fall back on, it no longer remains an astounding lingering epiphany that humans are not at the centre of the Universe or even their own everyday lives. The boundaries between who or what is the Self increasingly get blurred with each passing minute in today's world and time. There has been a lot discovered and yet there remains a lot to discover still; and as is the method, art unfolds life. World renowned filmmaker, Satyajit Ray, in his last attempt to enrich Indian cinema, gifted us *Agantuk* (1991), which aids our understanding of such a post-humanistic approach that constantly appeals to the nature of human existence that does away with the superiority complex of Man and reminds them time and again how it exists only in a rhythmic concoction of the Self and the Other. However, why did there arise such a need to adhere to a different perspective towards Man altogether? The Posthumanist theory may be viewed as a "deconstructive project striving to overcome the anthropocentrism of modern humanism as developed during the European Enlightenment" (Howard, 2023). In a detailed study on Anthropocene and Posthumanism, CA. Howard delves into the foundation of why posthumanism entered the scenario and how it is related to the present world circumstances:

a survey of anthropological and wider social science literature over the past decade or so suggests that our material entanglements certainly do matter in the twenty-first century... materiality and the dissolution of 'nature' and 'culture' is not just a manifestation of conceptual exhaustion, but directly related to the environmental catastrophes, exploitation of resources and eco-technological evolution signalled by the Anthropocene. (Howard, 2023)

The basic argument here emerges that it is now time to move away from the conception 'man versus nature' and move more towards the idea that nature has always been the original generating force inside us, along with all its living as well as non-living elements. While humanism sets humans apart from nature, projecting and promoting an anthropocentric perception as the reality, posthumanism attempts to redo this totalitarian structure and suggests how humans exist not as the singular Self at the centre of the Universe but rather in a homogeneous blend with the Other (New Thinking Allowed, 2019). In his final statement, Satyajit Ray, gifted Bengali cinema with the character of Manmohan Mitra, who not only points out the hypocrisy humans have created in terms of modernity and civility, but also how humans belonged, as they always have, amongst and as part of Nature, in harmony with several other elements, both living and non-living, considered as the Other. Humanist geographers had put the singular figure of Man in the epicentre and tried to examine and analyse the role of human agency, creativity, and consciousness in making sense of the world. Posthumanism, while still an ambiguous term in itself, tries to introduce newer dimensions, which rather are to be the oldest, within the stiff categorization of the Self and the Other. Manmohan Mitra, following his abrupt entrance into the Bose household, is greeted with as much ambivalence amongst the family members as has been the attitude amongst scholars regarding posthumanism. However, both these emergences hold much significance.

Posthumanism proves to be a crucial perception requiring certain deliberations. Manmohan Mitra contributes to the concept of posthumanism by bringing forth the hallow of self-entitlement that humans have created around themselves in the name of civilisation and modernity. This is especially highlighted in the scene where Bose's lawyer friend tries to humiliate Mitra with his knowledge of civilisation and underlining all the "good" that humankind has brought about itself and how it is now on the well-assured path towards the epitome of success. The scene so goes that Bose calls one of his lawyer friends to get to the basis of who Manmohan Mitra exactly is, his history, and the sort of individual he is, debating that an unrelated third person could probe into queries that Bose, given his and his wife's supposed kinly proximity, could not indulge in, out of politeness. The result was a diplomatic yet rigorous and curt tussle between Mitra and Mr. Sengupta, the lawyer. In the struggle that ensues Mitra unfolds quite a few layers regarding who he is as an individual, but makes it clear that understanding him would be a task beyond impossible for a person such as Mr. Sengupta, whose mindset has the advent and progress of human civilisation, believed to be based on Man's singular ability to develop and prosper, at the very locus of all and every perception of reality that surrounds him. Mitra, himself an outstanding scholar in the field of anthropology, goes on to describe his time in Latin America as spent amidst the tribal and in the jungles and other remote places, striving to move closer to nature, not necessarily to move away from humans or civilisation as such but from the middle-class materialistic mindset that had grown to govern people from that time itself. He demonstrates how man, from his savage and primitive state, emerged into "civilised beings", amidst nature, using the same, taking shelter from and in the same, and how humans are essentially a part of the much larger Natural world, to be seen as he is, a part of the entire functioning of Universe and not as located at some singular and exceptional locus of existence at the centre of all such

functioning. On being questioned on his views on science and technology, he points out that the Eskimo using opaque ice to build Igloos should be considered as much technologically advanced as any other urban-based inventor or discoverer. Another brilliant instance where a glint of a posthumanist perception could be detected is the sequence where Mitra describes the phenomenon of eclipse to his grandson and his friends. He describes it as one of the best magic tricks of the Universe. While not pointed out explicitly, this scene would awaken the realisation in the mind of the viewer, how human life is fundamentally a part of the Nature that surrounds us and fuels us, making us at once aware of the transience as well as the significance of human life, underlining yet again that humans exist in co-relation with the Other and not as a singular Self at the basis of all the 'magic' of Nature and the Universe.

Posthumanism, however, is not a movement about going back to Nature. Posthumanism is about a changed perception of man, denying him the superiority that he believes is at the basis of his growing acquisitiveness. The character of Manmohan Mitra advocates such a philosophy. As stated already, Mitra's character is not against human command over rationality, and neither does he deny the progress that humans have achieved. His concern is rather regarding the superior position that Man has grown to place himself in, forgoing and forgetting the roots, the Nature, that he has originated from, is a part of, and will eventually return to. The ending scene of the movie could be interpreted to demonstrate this possible argument of Mitra. The scene shows Anila Bose, Manmohan Mitra's niece, dancing with the tribal, matching steps to their music and dance, in a rustic backdrop, a sharp contrast to the opening scene of the movie, - settled in an adequately accessorised middle-class household.

Ray played with similar ideas in his *Aranyer Din Ratri* (1969), a film based on a novel by Sunil Gangopadhyay, by the same name. While the main interest throughout the film remains that of the relations that grow, re-define, formulate, or re-establish themselves through the entire stretch of the film, the characters, by the time of their return to the urban materialistic lifestyle, seem to have come to a conclusion that indeed their time amidst Nature did have an impact on themselves and their way of thinking. This could easily draw an inference as to how Nature has always been an intrinsic part of the Self, not something to be commanded by humans but rather which governs the nature of the Self along with all its other elements- other biological elements as well as the non-living elements, - all that Man until now had considered as the Other, in a zest of a superiority that he believed he enjoyed. The easiest explanation for such anthropocentric behaviour is also the most obvious one. Human beings' existence, like all other species, is centred around the Self and this behaviour is natural to them. They rather live "at themselves" rather than "for themselves" or "in themselves". That which drives humans is the self-centred radius that is governed by the zest to manifest the 'will' to carry on in their singular being, they are "anthropo-(self)-oriented" (Howard, 2023) and are socially conditioned to be so. Helmuth Plessner was a German zoologist and also a philosophical anthropologist who had made an observation that the basic element of distinction between humans and other biological elements of Nature is relayed in the relation, as drawn by humans, that they share with the surrounding environment.

Humans are described as occupying a uniquely 'ex-centric position' in that they are able to distance or objectify their own physical existence and the world of praxis; something other animals cannot do. The consequence of what Plessner calls our 'double aspectivity' – both being a physical body (Körper) and having a body (Leib)- is that humans have a 'broken relation' with nature (Howard, 2023)

According to Plessner, such an "ex-centric" positioning of the Self explains why humans could experience a state of "disequilibrium or 'constitutive rootlessness'" (Plessner as cited in

Howard, 2023) This sense of immense disequilibrium, Man tries to compensate in his mind, through technology and culture. Such manifestations are termed by Plessner as the “utopian standpoint”.

Like other organic beings, humans do not experience their environments in a total and objective sense, but through corporeal schema that operate by the ‘law of mediated immediacy’. Pre-envisioning posthumanism, Plessner sees our inbuilt corporeal media as augmented by technologies, which in turn creates further distance between the human beings and nature (Howard, 2023)

Keeping with the above discussion, let us once more come back to the stories that Ray’s movies, the two in context, unfold. Anila and Sudhindra Bose live in their posh, decorated home in South Calcutta. They also have a young child named Satyaki. The story of *Agantuk* unfurls in an ordinary, fairly organised household scene of Anila and Sudhindra Bose. Anila is shown to have just received a letter from “M. Mitra”, her uncle. Manmohan Mitra has long been absent in the ordinary familial space. He has only recently come to know that Anila is the only living relationship he has in India, and before setting off again for Australia, he wants to rest at home for a few days and wishes to get acquainted with Anila and her family. As is quite obvious, the couple feels sceptical to host such an ambiguous figure, and the scepticism is further fuelled when Anila suddenly remembers her grandfather’s will. The couple becomes suspicious as to whether this is at all the real Manmohan Mitra, or someone else posing to be him in order to get their hands on the share of the inheritance. What follows is a quest to discover the real identity of this person. After quite a few failed attempts, Sudhindra invites home a lawyer friend of his to gently question the Man so as to get to the core of his identity. This is exactly where the audience comes to know about the Manmohan Mitra who was not only an anthropologist in theory but also in practice. Human nature evidently interested Mitra vastly and to enjoy the real essence of living he roamed various corners of the globe living with the indigenous and tribal folk of the place. A diplomatic tussle of ideologies follows the meeting of the lawyer and Mitra, at the end of which the lawyer, losing his calm, asks abruptly and harshly about the purpose for which Mitra was visiting the Bose household, asking him to either “come clean or just clear out”. The next morning, the couple finds the uncle to be gone. Eventually, they find him in a jungle village of a native tribal community of India. The scene ends with Anila dancing with the tribal folk, the movie being shifted from the urban setting of the household that dominated the first parts of the film to a wholesome, rustic scene. Following the departure of Manmohan Mitra, the couple learns that he has left his share of the inheritance to Anila.

Moving on to *Aranyer Din Ratri*, where again, we would find an apparently simple plot. Four friends, Ashim, Sanjoy, Hari, and Sekhar, travel away from their urban mundane lives into the jungle, to enjoy a vacation. While on the vacation the men even come across potential love interests, the pursuit of whom leads to a series of adventures and misadventures for the team of four again. Ashim seems attracted to the calm, poised, and smart Mini. Jaya, a young widow, seems to enjoy a spark with Sanjoy, but soon loses interest as he fails to perform up to her expectations. Hari succeeds in seducing Duli, a young Santhali woman, but the relationship does not mature. Shekhar is bereft of any such love interests except for his profuse interest in gambling. All four of them are fighting their own battles and the masks often peel off from time to time. They arrive at themselves at the end of the vacation and, even though they do not admit this to one another, individually all of them realise, in their own manner, that Nature did awaken the soul that the spirit of materialistic superiority had till then kept dowsed.

As is evident, the stories of Ray are pretty simple. It is as Pauline Kael, the New

Yorker critic, had justly observed, “no artist has ever done more than Satyajit Ray to make us re-evaluate the commonplace” (. It is perhaps only obvious, therefore, that in this man’s works lie so many instances of posthumanism. It goes on to show how simple and present the idea of such a perception of Man had always been. Posthumanism rather than being a completely new definition of the concept of being human, is rather a re-defining of the way the Self looked at itself. Here too Ray tries to depict human nature but does a little something extra. The true essence of both these films can be perceived in the representation of people in urban lifestyles, engrossed in the Self, and then contrasted with the same persons’ representation in a space closer to Nature, where the Self realises that it truly belongs and exists in a concoction with the Other-Nature and its elements, both biological and non-biological. As CA Howard observes:

a relational ecology can no longer be avoided in the struggle for coexistence in the Anthropocene. Facing up to the ecological crisis and its underlying anthropocentrism, an anthro-de-re-centred orientation calls for resituating the ‘anthropos’ in a relational nexus. In a shared world, the human is co-constituted not only by its own ‘humanity’, but also by ‘human-and-non-human’ and the socio-material dynamics of ‘physicalities-cum-culturalities’ and vice versa. (Howard, 2023).

Howard further cites in his work:

Ghassan Hage observes that anthropology ‘works critically through a comparative act that constantly exposes us to the possibility of being other than what we are’. Traditionally, this has been through the lens of culture in a humanistic sense. What a posthuman anthropology sensitizes us to is that we already are Other than what we think we are. (Hage, 2015 as cited in Howard, 2023)

Ray in his films asserts this very nature of human beings, the capability to go beyond what or who they identify as the Self, not by challenging or dominating Nature and its elements so as to prove themselves in a superior governing position, but by realising that the Other has always been a part and parcel of the Self and is naturally deemed to be so. Posthumanism is yet to secure substantial ground being a relatively new entry in the field of literary theories. However, instances of the same can be found across literatures across the globe. To cite Ray again, many of his short stories tell tales of posthumanist encounters, the most evident example of which would be the stories of Professor Shanku. Even though popularly known as the Renaissance Man, there are instances that deliver notions or hints of posthumanism in Ray’s films and stories along with the works of other stalwarts of Indian cinema and literature as well as world literature. We stand today at such a juncture which makes it an inevitable quest to once again set out to solve the question of the Self and how to exactly define it. In recent times, with the advent of technology, the very concept of being a human has now become a question mark. Posthumanism attempts to redefine the concept of being human in newer circumstances that face the world by paradoxically defining a humane existence that is most essentially and crucially rooted in Nature, existing in a musical harmony with all the other elements- both living and non-living elements present in Nature. The Self exists in a lilting metrical relation with the Other, functioning together, and not at the heart of the entire Universe, commanding and governing Nature.

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Bio-note

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