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Shape of Water: A Critical Analysis of Transcorporeal Existence in the Movie *Aavasavyuham*

Adithya P and Lal Surya S

Abstract

Human body is in fact a product of post-enlightenment phenomenon. The appropriation of qualities like rigidity, stability and independence to the ontological properties of human body can be deciphered as an innovation of the enlightenment thought, through the fashioning of binary structures demarcating human from non-human entity. Transcorporeal existence functions as the basic tenet of posthuman philosophy designed to deconstruct such binaries, which facilitate such hierarchy. The Malayalam movie *Aavasavyuham* is founded over this very tenet of fluid identity, by highlighting the life of a ‘frog-man’, thereby advocating the possibility of transcorporeal existence beyond the rigid hemisphere of human-nonhuman binary. This project intends to analyze the multidimensional conceptualization of self using the notion of transcorporeality. This study will be a deconstruction of the popular notion of ‘human-being’ as a fixed set of rational values and ideas by highlighting the intra-active material agency possessed by the character named Joy.

Keywords: Humanism, Binary, Transcorporeality, Deconstruction, *Aavasavyuham*.

Introduction

Water, is specifically known for its flexible property and the quality for attaining different shapes. This shape-shifting (or non-shape) property can be assimilated as a resistive attitude towards ‘systems of knowledge’ that works upon a foreign body by the three-way process of reading, analyzing, and predicting its existence. Water remains out of this three-way process of the human knowledge system by retaining its property of high flexibility. This high flexible property of water is what one observes as the resistive mechanism often been adopted by modern British playwrights, like Harold Pinter, against the overarching hegemonic power that tries to limit worldly phenomena within the limited space of ‘binary’. The birth of a ‘post’ world, specifically after the Second World War, is often noticed for their high suspicious sensibility which gave shape to a knowledge-storm that was powerful enough to sweep away many of those firmly grounded traditional systems, including humanism. The inception of posthumanism paved way for the deconstruction of many of those rigid ideologies regarding ‘human’, which were founded over the structure of human-nonhuman binary. The positioning of humans at the centre of all discourses, and thereby guaranteeing an everlasting status for wielding relentless power by facilitating a system of hierarchy, often necessitates the need for a watertight compartmentalized binary structure. Posthumanism looks at the possibility of existence of ‘human’, by taking ‘him/her’ out of the rigid structure, thereby facilitating a novel sensibility of co-existence.

Transcorporeality is an innovative style that advocates for co-existence by highlighting the interconnection of ‘bodies-of-being’. Just like the salt-water which connects the planetary bodies, there exist certain ever-persisting properties that connect all bodies together. Fluid existence is often highlighted by postmodern sensibility as a notion to counter the ‘solid’ power structures of the past. Fluid existence, as highlighted by Rosi Braidotti, enhances mobility in and across bodies through a ‘transcorporeal’ network of interconnectedness. This very notion of ‘transcorporeality’ dismantles the very foundation of Cartesian dualism, which is situated on the idea of binary-opposing poles as the basis of reality. Transcorporeality attains its full meaning by countering the Cartesian dualism and thereby introducing an interconnected network which enables the co-becoming of the human body and the non-human environment. ‘Being’ness of an entity as it has been envisioned by Western phenomenologists but limited its scope and potentiality within the domain of beingness of man, ie, ‘dasein’. Hence, the possibility of an independent existence outside the boundaries of human consciousness (enlightenment-rational-scientific-being) has become almost impossible. Posthumanism and its deconstructive nature delve into the analysis of the existence of ‘beings’ that are outside the dasein’s interpretation. Transcorporeality, thus entertains an existence which is similar to a being-in-itself with a non-daseinian consciousness. It’s a highly ‘machinistic-assemblage’ interconnectedness that poses a serious threat to the very autonomy of human beings.

The Malayalam movie *Aavasavyuham* in fact problematizes the scope of transcorporeal existence by showcasing an amphibian human-being, which is beyond the conceptualization of all types of beingness. The movie is all about the story of the ‘amphibian-man’ called Joy, who is often introduced to the viewers through the description of other characters. He is represented as a weird creature, often being utilized by men for attaining their material aspirations. This throws more light on the very ideology of the man-wild dichotomy, whereby the latter is left aside to be exploited by the former by drawing on the justification that everything that exists ‘outside’ the human body is material for shaping up human ambition and finding satisfaction by meeting his ‘desire’. Joy remains as a flea in the ear of other ‘normal’ beings, making him an alien, which at last results in his disappearance. The central character, named as Joy, is an amphibian human-being who possesses a ‘permeable self’ enhancing information exchange with other bodies (in this case with water species), making ‘him’ (from his exterior physical stature) a luminal-fluid being. *Aavasavyuham*, as the name indicates, is about the politics of coexistence and the politics of man versus wild dichotomy.

When Species Meet

When the movie begins, Joy is found near a water body lying unconscious. He is then carried and cared for by different hands, of which, a brute majority exploits him for his transcorporeal ablesism. Joy stands as a trans-species body arousing keen interest in ‘normal’ beings because of its material benefits. Joy turns his ability to information exchange by summoning fish, making the ‘normals’ the scope of an easy catch. Though Joy brings monetary enrichment to his friends, he remains as the exploited other throughout the movie. This throws Joy into a paradoxical condition of being a superhuman but marginalized as an infra-human being. Joy blurs the human body borders by embracing a human-machine assemblage. Here he deconstructs the popular discourses of ablesim, humanism, monstrosity and consciousness. A ‘machine’ is a postmodern sensibility towards embracing simultaneous multiple existence. A machinic assemblage which is being embraced by Joy through the interrelationality of man-animal, “...decentres the traditional sovereign, coherent autonomous human” (Nayar, 2017). The whole movie can be understood as an exhibition of Joy’s properties by plugging into novel ‘bodies’ and thereby exhibiting his assemblage-transcorporeal existence. There are two types of interactions that take place in the movie,

which throw more light on the very existence of Joy such as:

- Inter-species interaction: this type of interaction facilitates and substantiates the traditional humanism's species identity, treated as self-contained and unique. Here a hierarchical organization functions for the enhancing of communication between species, where 'human' occupies the centre. This is a close-ended and exclusive system where a certain discursive interaction can only take place. The sexual relationship between Lissy and Joy does fall into this category.
- Intra-species interaction: here the exclusive nature of inter-species interaction is rejected in favor of mixing, assemblages and information exchange. Here hierarchy is destabilized by setting up a 'huanimal' entity. Joy's gills and his body as an ecosystem for many sub species substantiate this claim.

Still a question remains: is this a limitation or a possibility of biology? Popular notions of posthumanism approach this question by stating that a distinctive entity identifiable as human doesn't exist and instead, human is a process, a becoming, "...adding to already existing human qualities and filling the lack" (Haraway, 2021). It in fact disrupts western human exceptionalism. Transcorporeal subjects can be taken as the product of the posthuman philosophy that entertains biological entanglement of various natural entities based on the idea of co-evolution. Here, the qualifier – "trans"- in the word 'transcorporeality', stands for the exceptional quality of mobility enabling the subject to conduct multiple crossing in and across the boundaries premeditated by the 'human' that delimit subjects from conducting co-evolution.

Shape of Water: Joy

The transcorporeal existence of Joy highlights the limitations of the human body and advocates for the need to transcend through congeries of humans and animals. Just like the shapeless property of water, Joy remains alien throughout the movie without submitting to the demands of the society, hence shapeless. Joy finds life closely tied up with the water body. He interacts with marine species and acts as a niche for various marine species as well. Though he retains a specific physical body shape similar to that of a male human, he transcends all these limits by turning out into a being which disrupts the binary structure of man versus the wild. His shape-shifting property can be assumed as something that he has attained from his ecosystem, ie. water body. His body is fashioned in such a way that he possesses various organs retaining his life beneath the deep blue.

Shape of Joy makes one reject the human exceptionalism and accept "the human as co-evolving, sharing eco systems, life process, genetic materials with animals and other forms of life" (Nayar, 2017). When Joy is found unconscious at the beach, Susheelan Vava takes him to a nearby dispensary, only to reveal the fact that Joy is a living ecosystem sustaining life for various marine creatures. Joy is a transcorporeal subject for being biologically embodied and environmentally experienced. These serve as an emergent condition for facilitating a dynamic interrelationship between nature and humans. This fluid, luminal outlook of Joy as a dynamic hybrid of ontologically different elements focuses on the very aspect of mobility of bodies in a larger system. Joy is shaped by his fluid identity which dismantles boundaries and advocates for co-existence and co-evolution. Absconding and arrival seems to work as a motif throughout the movie to suggest the 'plugging-in and -out' style of transcorporeal existence. Due to various reasons, both internal and external, Joy is forced to abscond from his niche and later is found unconscious by a river-side or sea-shore.

So, water acts as a rejuvenating element for him. But his flexible nature in the movie isn't limited to such a metaphorical style, rather, he adopts a material shape from the second part of the movie where he metamorphosizes into an amphibian only to attract the contempt of normal humans. As Braidotti opines "The challenge for critical theory is momentous: we need to visualize the subject as a transversal entity encompassing the human, our genetic neighbors the animals and the earth as a whole" (Braidotti, 2021)

Is Joy a superhero? The question can be much more precise, like, why can't he be hailed as a superhero, because he exhibits many of those qualities that have been cherished by normal humans, like resurrective property, inter and intra-species communication, highly advanced prosthetic organs, and after-all 'humanness' and a humanoid shape. DC and Marvel Comics have looked into the possibility of an 'aquatic-man' by coming up with numerous superheroes who can control the vast oceanic world. But there, again, a hegemonic power instead of a co-existent style is visualized. Water turns out to be a mere commodity for the anthropocentric world and no different in the case of the Western superheroes. Joy is far different from these categories, as he is a marginalized infra-superhero for his lack of ability to identify and allocate hegemonic power over to his niche. He instead acts himself as a niche, supporting life for many aquatic organisms. He faces a serious threat from other humans for possessing these superpowers. In fact, what sort of superpower does he actually possess? All his superpowers are created from the discourse of normal beings. In the discourse of the normals, Joy has become the 'object' who is hunted by the normal humans using the 'language' of xenophobia and that which is substantiated by the 'authority' called social beings.

What is that creates a sense of contempt among normal people regarding Joy? It is his very shape. More than his exterior, monstrous shape, his ability to shape-shift as an amphibian is what arouses fear and tension among normal humans. His shape shows his close affinity with water bodies. His body has acquired changes in accordance to the demands of existing in a water body, but normal people take him to be a contaminating object – an uncanny other. According to Scott Gilbert:

...development is not only from below (i.e from genome) but also from above (environment). The 'I' is a 'permeable I' – life's cross-over – dismantles the humanist notion of self-contained I that is distinct from the world. The Self/non-Self made an immense system therefore fits right in within, the notion of the coherent, autonomous, individual Self. (Gilbert, p. 32)

Joy himself is a microcosmic ecosystem, thus the name *Aavasavyuham*. He lives and sustains life serving himself as a system of interdependent life assemblage. His biological identity is continuous and open making him a foreign body. Joy is a superhero for several reasons:

- He focuses on the interactions and relation between ecosystem rather than their structural properties
- He exhibits the possibility of an assemblage, emerging through these interactions and not inherent in any structural feature of the organism
- Shape of Joy (his body) is distributed within and across these pathways and interactions, with multiple modes and interaction process, affected by many perturbations from the environment thereby producing an assemblage and not a self contained boundary entity.

In Search of the Lost

Joy, the amphibian-man, goes in search for a long-lost 'object', upon his revelation that his 'external' human agency is separate from the natural world. This sense of self-alienation is what we take as a justification for exploiting nature. The lost object is nothing other than the consciousness of being 'enmeshed' in the physical material world. Maybe this is the very reason why he couldn't develop a patriarchy-based relationship with Lissy. Their sexual intercourse is momentary and mechanical. In other words, this sex is not ascribed to any cultural or social signification, making him go on in his never ending search for 'interconnectedness' or multitude of possibilities of human agency. Hence, sexual intercourse was just one way of identifying this possibility. Likewise, conversing with aquatic species, serving his body as a niche for microorganisms, were a few other possibilities he identified as part of this interconnectedness, thus disrupting the humanistic perception of ethics, politics, communities and relationships. The lost is his sense of environmental justice and awareness that natural exploitation is personal and political, which he recovers later by shedding off his anthropocentric sensibility.

Sex with Lissy appeared to be a traumatic event for Joy because relations that demand a social signification, specifically on the ground of gender, minimize his connection with nature by reducing his body into a specific sexual identity. This concern is what made him restart his journey to find the 'lost' – the flexible nature and not to limit within the constraining culture. This search for fluid subjectivity is actually a re-recognition of how to live in a multi-species world. Joy, towards the end of the movie, transforms himself into a 'non-human entity', indicating a complete detachment from all sorts of hierarchical exceptionalism founded on the dualistic ideology of subject-object differentiation. Once analysed more closely, the kind of relationship that is entertained by Joy throughout the movie seems to be disrupting the very tenet of bodily interaction as a private affair. On the contrary, Joy indulges in 'continual interactions', making him an appreciator of non-human agencies. The doctor who treats Joy after being washed ashore, gets astonished upon identifying the body of Joy as a microcosm of various aquatic organisms. It calls for a radical rethinking of humanistic ontologies and epistemologies. Stacy Alaimo, as part of the work, *The Posthuman Glossary*, shares the idea of Karen Barad on this radical rethinking, as, "... thinking the subject as a material being, subject to the agencies of the compromised, entangled world, enacts an environmental posthumanism. The subject cannot be separated from networks of intra-active material agencies" (p. 4). In other words, she continues, "...transcorporeality, as it reckons with the material agencies that traverse substances, objects, bodies, and environments, entails reckoning with scientific captures" (p. 5). Joy is not an agent but a mere site where multiple agencies entangle with each other, leading to the permeability of body boundaries.

The Environment Inside

What is Joy? Is he a human or an amphibian? What resides inside him? To understand more about these questions, it is essential to know the ontology of 'Joy' through two divergent epistemological datasets, one, social constructivism and, two, biological determinism. Joy, just like any other body, presumes to be a 'body' that attains its identity through the intersection of both biological (sex, race, dis/ableism, etc.) and social features (race, social status, culture, etc.), but differs only on the idea of transgression of bodily-borders. This transgressive quality is what enables him to acknowledge the idea of an environment sprouting inside his body, thereby mitigating the sense of rigid body-boundary, founded on anthropocentrism. This very transgressive quality calls-forth for a nature-culture continuum, making the amphibian body a subject of multiple belongings.

Biologically, Joy exhibits many of those sexual characteristics often identified in a male subject and, at the same time, different in a good deal of significance as well. He possesses a penis and not a phallus, thus obfuscating its relation to gender-oriented power. He bears a body similar to that of a South-Asian and Dravidian, often identifiable from his hue and physique. But, such sorts of explicit essentialist feature never limit him to any particular category, as he is a 'resistive-body'. Regarding his 'ability', the most astonishing one is his 'inter-active' quality. He communicates with many aquatic species thereby overcoming the biological limitations identified in a 'normal' human. Sexual intercourse with Lissy in the midst of a tropical region throws more light into communion than gender supremacy. Lissy finds this very event to be satisfying, while Joy takes it with a pinch of salt, as he assumes it to be an interaction of humans with non-human actors. According to Christina Fredengen, "...in this way a person, human and nonhuman, is a network of more or less persistent nature: culture relationship" (Posthuman Glossary, 2021, p.235).

Joy remains to be an outsider throughout the movie. All characters in the movie remain obliterated regarding his parentage, native place, religion, culture and race. People talk about him only in terms of their momentary relationship with him. He appears to be a lover to Lissy, an honorary for SusheelanVava, an uncivilized brat for Murali and a creeping monster to Madhusmitha. The Police officers too find it hard to track down the whereabouts of Joy, making him a nomad, who is not willing to be susceptible to any social constructivist ideas. Identity is a relational property that distinguishes "us" from "them", while personhood is an acknowledgement of a specific community in the form of dress, cultural interaction, etc understanding the mechanics of socialization of the body remains to be an interesting field of phenomenological studies. Joy retains a materially merged personhood, as a style for indicating a coexisting modal of ontology, rather than limiting oneself to a specific epistemic structure like race, place, parenthood, religion, etc. The name 'Joy' doesn't operate as a situating factor, for he experiences amnesia, making him always live outside the predetermined space of religiosity. Apart from all these things, his 'trans-species cross dressing' literally liberates him from all sorts of social constructivist notions.

Towards the end of the movie, a camera turns its focus on a few animals (mostly in their embryonic stage) being preserved in a laboratory, indicating the history of their bodies. The similarity and difference humans are shared by humans with other beings, gets intensified upon 'his' encounter with social systems (signifying system of language), and this is what Joy tries to overtake through his life. Joy insists that the performative dimension of identity is powerful enough to take down the innate biological features as well, and his disappearance is an indication of this very knowledge. Sex with Lissy, honorary service under Vava, as a showcase specimen in Madhusmitha's house, all can be understood as different mechanisms of materialization of the body by imposing fixed identity categories through essentialist features. But Joy is a being that comes into existence through the entertainment of mutually transformative interplay and cutting all socially constructed identities, and this justifies his disappearance.

Shape of the water is shape-shifting and shapelessness and thus the subjectivity of Joy. He is a poor 'aqua-man' who is being hunted for seeking a mutually sustaining alterity which poses a serious threat to the capitalistic dreams of humankind. His shape is flexible, deep and a continuum which is a linkage of embodied life with the environment. Joy is a representative of the 'new materialism', which entertains the mobility of entities in-and-across their supposed identities, thereby blurring the internalized power relation. His shape is thus a product of natural xenotransplantation, a demand of nature, made of the genetic material from associated species, hence the shape of water.

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