



Book Review

***Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies in Western Literature, Philosophy and Art:
Towards Theory and Practice*, edited by Peggy Karpouzou and Nikoleta
Zampaki**

Tohidur Rahaman

**State Aided College Teacher, Sripat Singh College, Jiaganj, Murshidabad, West Bengal
and Ph.D. Scholar, Kolhan University, Chaibasa, Jharkhand, India**

What I want to emphasize instead, in a more affirmative vein, is the priority of the relation and the awareness that one is the effect of irrepressible flows of encounters, interactions, affectivity and desire, which one is not in charge of (Braidotti, 2013, p. 100).

If the “ethical imagination is alive and well in posthuman subjects, in the form of ontological relationality” (2013, p. 190), as Rosi Braidotti affirms in *The Posthuman*, this book titled *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies in Western Literature, Philosophy and Art: Towards Theory and Practice*, edited by Peggy Karpouzou and Nikoleta Zampaki, addresses the relationality through various zones, “layers, grids, and activations” (p. 13) by drawing on various schools of thought such as new materialism, material ecocriticism, phenomenology, psychology, more-than-human ethics, speculative narratives, etc. In the introductory part, the editors, quoting from Lynn Margulis, associate this relationality with “an open thermodynamic system” (p. 17) that specifies and addresses the zones through which the diverse agencies flow and emerge in a specific time and space. The *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies* follows a unique pattern in structuring the edited book. It includes three introductory essays by Pramod K. Nayar, Francesca Ferrando, and the editors themselves. While the first two essays by Nayar and Ferrando act as “Foreword(s)”, the third one appears like a detailed defining note on symbiosis in relation to posthumanism and environmental humanities.

Nayar’s essay, titled “Looking Through the Symbiotic Lens”, conceptualises the core idea of symbiosis as exhibited in this book through different genres and disciplines to understand “evolution and life itself as the result of cooperation and not competition, dependency and not isolation, co-survival rather than autonomous existence” (p. 8). Francesca Ferrando’s essay reinforces the geological implication in defining the status of the human and the more-than-human world. In this respect, “Earth” serves as a collective unit for both the human and more-than-human worlds, encompassing their macrocosmic and microcosmic nature of existence. In this context, Ferrando advocates for conceptualising the “self-existential dignity for all beings” by “shedding from damaging myths of anthropocentric mastery of the world”, emphasising that efforts must come from both “personal commitment and pluralistic elaborations” (p. 10).

By citing various new materialist thinkers like Stacy Alaimo, Jane Bennett, Jeffrey J. Cohen, etc., the editors posit that by developing “the notion of symbiosis, this volume aspires to contribute to rethinking human subjectivity and agency in the 21st century as shaped by dynamic interplays between nature, technology, science, and culture” (p. 12). This turn to *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies* is continuously nourished by the “momentous posthumanist turn of Environmental Humanities (post-ecocriticism)” that establishes “the nexus between organic and inorganic life-forms” and is “expanded on sustainability and responsible action” (p. 13). In developing this concept, they also warn us about the perils and problems “of blurring the boundaries between human and non-human life-forms” (p. 14). The editors define and clarify the notion of symbiosis in the following lines:

Symbiosis can take different forms, obligatory or facultative. It can be mutualism (all

agents benefit), commensalism (one benefits and others continue to live unharmed) and parasitism (one benefits and other one, who is the host, is harmed (p. 16).

The editors refer to the works of Lynn Margulis and Claire Colebrook in relation to symbiosis and “sym-thanatosis” by stressing “the ecological multiplicity of all living arrangements” and further critiquing “the humanist principle about an essential humanity composed of uniquely human individuals” (p. 20).

The first part of the book aims to conceptualise the idea of symbiosis in posthumanism as stemming from diverse ecologies. This part incorporates four essays by Roberto Marchesini, Teresa Heffernan, Mieke Bal, and Peggy Karpouzou. In framing the idea of “Somatizing Alterity”, Marchesini seeks to dismantle the self-sufficient and autopoietic view of humanism. This framework rests on elaborating the notion of “techne” as a virus, not some probiotic element, further endorsing the ethics of animal rights. The essay aims to dismantle the dualistic notion of technophobia and technophilia. To somatize is to experience psychological or emotional distress as physical pains and sufferings. Somatizing alterity expresses how techne can affect and alter us as opposed to the linear and simplified understanding of techne enhancing us, as per some ambitious projects of transhumanist ideologies. Marchesini elaborates on the concept of “humanistic triangulation”, which explains how the dimension of “animal-man-angel” has been transformed into that of “man-animal-machine” (p. 52). Along this line, he also asserts that “the technical dimension is coevolutionary with the human being, just like the forms of mimicry, symbiosis or parasitism” (pp. 52-53). Teresa Heffernan’s essay does not merely connect cyborgs, animals, and machines as queer kin groups but also moves away from the reductive notion of “queer” as commonly understood to be synonymous with anthropocentric homosexuality. Working on Haraway, Heffernan posits queer kin groups as opposed to making babies. Citing Rousseau and Bentham, she challenges the “Cartesian coupling of animal and machine” (76) and the idea that they do not possess sentience like humans. Mieke Bal’s essay uniquely develops the concept of “inter-ship”, meaning “in-between”, by showing scepticism towards the concepts of hyphenated post or “post-” and “trans” that often fail to actively engage. According to her claims, the “post-” often allows for a narcissistic parasitic relation of normalising and leaving behind things that come across us in order to avoid taking the responsibility of mutualism and denying various co-emergings. She asserts how this idea “denotes a willingness to exchange on an equal basis; it is relational” (p. 84). Peggy Karpouzou’s essay explores the framework of symbiotic citizenship in posthuman urban ecosystems through analysis of a speculative flash fiction collection titled *A Flash of Silver Green: Let’s Imagine Future*. Through this, she aims to delve deep into such concepts as “symbiomimicry”, “symbiogenesis”, and “symbiocracy”. Her works aim to explore the importance of “mutualism” in these ecohorrific times, where staying in urban settings in smart and sustainable ways is an urgency and a responsibility, while being aware of all the forms of impacts our lifestyle choices can cause. She suggests how this can be approached in “dialogue with critical theory and speculative fiction (p. 118).

The second part of *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies* focuses on literature and art, featuring five essays by Bruce Clarke, Irene Sans Alonso, Aleksandra Łukaszewicz, Dimitris Angelatos, and David Fancy. Here, the first two essays particularly deal with literary texts that explore plant cognition and the consciousness of an android robot, while the remaining three focus on artistic practices through cyber body, sculpture, and geomancy—the art of engaging and absorbing the vibrancy of the earth. Bruce Clarke’s essay aims to work on Richard Powers’ *The Overstory* to reflect on “plant sentience, as well as sober considerations of plants’ abilities to sense, respond to, and address their environments” (p. 127). Thereby, it reflects on animacy and animism through acts of storytelling: the “universal origins in current scientific cosmology” (p. 132). Irene Sanz Alonso’s essay is a critique of a Spanish science fiction titled *Los tiempos del odio*, where Bruna Husky, a female android of combat working as a private detective, is concerned about her expiry date in a world where the Earth is facing many ecological crises resulting in mass extinction of nonhuman animal species and plants. This article focuses on ethical questions relating to “a not-so-distant future in which these devices and creatures will be part of our everyday lives” (p. 155). Aleksandra Łukaszewicz deals with two important figures of the cyber era: Neil Harbisson “with an antenna implemented into his brain” and Moon Ribas “with implants in her elbows” (p. 157). In fact, working through “a technological environment they can absorb technologies into their own bodies, modifying its performance to create new

perceptions, ideas, images, sounds, dances” (p. 159). Dimitris Angelatos’ chapter focuses on how metabolic artistic practices incorporate the sculpture into their ethical and political concerns by traversing across intermedial, interart, and hermeneutic approaches. The concept of “folded tactility” also delves deep into how it integrates both material fragments of the natural world and the discarded excess of the capitalist-industrial wastes. Dimitris elaborates on how the “sculptural and narrative (metabolic) power of these plastic volumes” ruptures the hierarchies of many social constructs by showing “the dialectic trajectory between the culture of the discarded, consumed and abandoned industrial materials and the capitalistic perpetuation of the violent and catastrophic exploitation of human and environmental resources” (p. 178). David Fancy argues for geomancy as opposed to technomancy with reference to Gilbert Simondon’s thoughts coupled with bringing the concept of Echealogy. His stance against technomancy must not be reductively understood to be an “anti-technological” campaign. He seeks to posit “the figure of geomancer as both a conceptual form as well as a mode of practice that seeks to evade and counter the cadence of advanced technocapital as captured in the electromagnetic fields and frequencies” (p. 200). Fancy establishes his concept of geomancer by drawing on Simondon’s concept of third transindividual resonance, where “the geomancer pursues relationalities with all phenomena” (p. 203).

The third part of the book conceptualises *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies* through continental philosophy. In this portion, there are five essays by Nicole Anderson, Fred Evans, Glen A. Mazi, Cassandra Falke and Avital Ronell. The first two essays relate to poststructuralist philosophies endorsed by Derridean deconstruction and Deleuzian cosmopolitanism. The third and fourth essays are based on phenomenological explorations that parallel posthumanism. The last one delves deeper into an analysis of Nietzschean understanding of “climate” in order to explore the possibilities of psycho-spiritual and immaterial connotations of the term. Nicole Anderson stresses the deconstructive forces of posthumanism by bridging connections between posthumanism and Derridean philosophy. She warns us about some versions of posthumanism that ultimately focus on transcendence based on “ultrahumanistic values” (p. 213). She tries to uphold pluralistic versions of deconstructive approaches by including “multiple heterogeneous contexts” (p. 214) and dismantling anthropocentrism while also sustaining the differences of the more-than-human “others”. In this essay, she validates her primary argument through her experiences with a wild Australian brushtail possum, Edna, as named by her. Fred Evans’ text, focusing on Deleuzian cosmopolitanism, critiques the “capitalist axiomatic” that interpellates various subjects, and offers “parrhesiastic cosmopolitanism” as an alternative solution. A parrhesiastic cosmopolitanism can address “the minoritarian voices” (p. 238) by “opening up all the voices in the cosmos to parrhesiastic form of mutual audibility” (p. 242). Glen A. Mazis’ essay works on embodied phenomenology, as propounded by Merleau-Ponty, to challenge anthropocentrism. Mazis maintains that embodied phenomenology differs from Husserl, as his philosophy is “still a classic humanist one with consciousness at the centre of experience and origin of its sense” (p. 246). In fact, the Husserlean concept imagines the human subject outside of the enmeshed world. In the case of Merleau-Ponty, the “phenomenology once focused on embodiment and the perceptual access to the world no longer concerns a “subject” confronting an “object”” (p. 247). Ponty’s embodied phenomenology is posthumanist and in some respects aligns with Stacy Alaimo’s trans-corporeality. Cassandra Falke’s paper elaborates on Merleau-Ponty’s chiasmus and Jean-Luc Marion’s “saturated phenomenology” in order to ascertain symbiosis between the human subject and the natural world. She works through this issue by exploring the concept of “eco-phenomenology” in the dark settings of Arctic winters. The concept of “saturated phenomenality” operates by oscillating between the human subject’s intentionality towards an experience and the intuition that represents the givenness to that experience. It deals with how in phenomenological experiences the givenness of intuition often saturates the intentionality. Falke points out that Marion “defines categories of phenomena that are always given as saturated: historical events, our own flesh, the face of the other, works of art, and divine revelation” (p. 268). In Merleau-Ponty’s work, “The Intertwining – The Chiasm”, one can get the idea of “the durable flesh of the world”, in which “chiasm” refers to “both the biological process of our optic nerves crossing to enable stereoscopic vision and the rhetorical figure of inversion” (p. 272). The specificity of Avital Ronell’s essay rests on connecting climate with psychoanalysis

and philosophies of Goethe and Nietzsche, taking a cue from their biblical-mystical understanding of the notion of climate. This focus on the material-immaterial domain of “monstrosities borne by weather’s undead” (p. 285) adds peculiar flair to this essay. Citing Kant and Goethe, Ronell aligns her thought approaches with Bernard Stiegler’s notion of Neganthropocene and asserts that “weather and its complex donations were responsible for destruction yet it also appeared to assure the conditions for flourishing sustainment, taking away what it gave” (p. 284).

The scope of *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies* challenges many hegemonic Western traditions responsible for the irreversible damage caused to planets due to anthropocentrism, patriarchy, colonialism, and other factors, while also resurfacing some Western philosophical trends that align with posthumanist ideologies and exhibit peculiar synchronicities with many non-Western traditions. Such instances can be observed in the elaborations of thought processes such as Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, Derridean deconstruction, and Deleuzian cosmopolitanism, as well as the art practices of African artist, Tahir Karmali, and even re-readings of certain aspects of Enlightenment-era thinkers like Kant and Goethe. Through both synchronic and diachronic approaches, the editors emphasise that the transdisciplinary purpose of this book is to provide “an eventual epistemic ground for reconstructing Humanities-Natural Sciences coalitions and a ‘bridging’ between posthumanism and Environmental Humanities” (p. 20). While there are some traces of psychoanalytic approaches to symbiotic realities here and there, including Avital Ronell’s essay, the editors of this book could have included a few more essays on this issue in the third part. The book’s primary strength lies in its explanation of how the idea of symbiotic relations helps us understand that the actions of various symbionts are neither completely neutral nor always autonomous. Accelerated by both material conditions and social constructs, one’s choices of actions may also affect “others” ways they might not choose, raising ethically intricate questions about what, when, and how to choose. Therefore, once affected by this uncanny, uncertain, unpredictable and precarious journey, should the narrative of continuation revolve around the regenerative, transformative logic of survival? The rich academic scope and open-access nature of *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies* can immensely inform readers about that and benefit those working in the fields of posthumanism, environmental humanities, etc. The reading of the book bestows us with different possible co-(e)mergings that can align with Francesca Ferrando’s comment in which “relata and relations are not in competition for primacy; they can only co-emerge” (2023, p. 18).

References

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Bio-note

Tohidur Rahaman is a State Aided College Teacher at Sripat Singh College, Jiaganj, Murshidabad, West Bengal and a Ph.D. Candidate at Kolhan University, Chaibasa, Jharkhand, India. He secured the UGC-NET (including JRF) with a percentile score of 99.94 in 2019. He published his articles on various national and international platforms. His areas of interest include posthumanism, ecohumanism, horror studies, minority studies, literature of the global south, etc.

Email Id: rahamantohidur20@gmail.com

