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RESEARCH ARTICLE



BEYOND THE 'HUMAN': THE EXTRA-HUMAN QUALITIES IN DORIS LESSING'S "THE FIFTH CHILD"

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ABSTRACT



The paper focuses on exploring Doris Lessing's novel 'Never Let Me Go' using the theme of posthumanism. The objective would be to make an analogy between humanism and posthumanism and concentrate upon the shifting of focus or decentering from the human to the other non-human entities and study through different perspectives other than the human. The persistent shifting of borders to include a greater number of beings in the network or web of existence is the key matter running throughout the paper. The ever plying transcendence towards the frontier or periphery and no concrete demarcation between the ontological boundaries is the aspect that we need to give light to and make our subject of study. How Lessing's novel does so even without making use of the very term posthumanism is to be looked upon with an amazing sense of wonder. What draws more attention is how schools of thought resemble highlighting a similitude and cutting borders.

Keywords: *Human, Posthuman, Analogy, Periphery, Throwback, Atavism*

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Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* depicts the changes in the happy normal life of a married couple in the aftermath of the birth of their fifth Neanderthal anti-child who experiences the family as an engine of hatred, rejection and perfection mobilised against him. With the mind of a child in a giant simian body, the posthuman figure in the incarnation of Ben is at once vulnerable and threatening, capable of violence and terribly dependent upon approval and trust of the humans. Harriet, the protagonist of Doris Lessing's 1998 novel has a terrible feeling about her youngest son. Even in the womb, Ben's movements seem to her less like signs of life than acts of aggression. As a new born, he is "muscular, yellowish, long," with "greeny-yellow eyes" and a "sloped" forehead. Although he seldom cries, he "grunts and snuffles and roar", all these terms single out Ben as a non-human figure. He gives his aunt "the creeps". Harriet who dotes on her four other children, begins to observe him like a specimen, shuddering at his awful strength and "sallow lumpishness". Ben comes across as a changeling, a goblin, a "hostile little troll". Harriet wonders if she has given birth to a baby monster or a monstrous baby. Until Ben, Harriet would never have entertained such questions about a child. When the novel commences, in nineteen-sixties England, Harriet is a young home-maker with the personality of a lace doily: decorous, brittle, self-consciously antiquated. Although she has a job, she has no aspirations for a career, confident that motherhood is her true calling. This is of significance as to what sort of humans give birth to posthumans. Harriet tries to fit in the trope of "angel in the house" which is satisfying the very tenet of normal humans. Her

husband, David, is first drawn to her by her "watchful apartness," and the two share a sense of themselves as charmingly traditional. No sooner do they meet than they begin their diffident courtship, trading fantasies about the myriad children they will have (six "at least," they agree). Their marriage – a union of two chaste loners in the era of free love – feels fated. The amalgamation proved remarkably fertile: Harriet loses her virginity to her husband on the same night that they buy their sprawling country manor, which is also the same night that they conceive their first child. Eight years and four children later, Ben arrives, a blight on Harriet and David's domestic idyll. His parents feel guilty and squeamish in his presence, repulsed by his weirdly shaped head, hunched shoulders, and clenched little fists. It seems likely, at first, that Ben is not a cursed child, just an exhausting one: after all, Harriet and David, young parents with five young children, exist in a condition of sleeplessness that can make anything seem sinister. Then Ben gets older, stronger, meaner. He bites Harriet's thumb until she feels "her bone bend". When she breastfeeds, he bites her nipples until they turn black. Silent and inscrutable in his cot, he sours the atmosphere of the house like a sickness. Friends stop visiting; Harriet and David stop having sex. "After all, I don't want to *kill* the nasty little brute." Harriet says to her doctor, in the tone of someone who does. The novel is a gutting examination of the crucible of posthumanism. For Harriet, human figure, the stakes of that crucible becomes clear when Ben starts doing predictably evil things to people's pets. A visitor's cat dies, then a neighbour's dog. By this time, Ben has already badly injured his brother's arm, seemingly for the fun of it. All these qualities



displayed by him render Ben to be a posthuman. As a two month old baby he turned on his stomach "and tried to get himself on all fours". Harriet wonders, "If he could kill a dog, then why not a child?" Under pressure from her relatives, Harriet agrees to have him institutionalised. This is where the normal human tries to keep the posthuman at bay, by caging the posthuman. In the book's most devastating passage, she goes to visit Ben in the institution, a "nightmare ward" where deformed children are left to die. She passes through "rows of freaks," recoiling at a baby with a "great lolling head on a stalk of a body" and at a "small girl all blurred, her flesh guttering and melting", highlighting the contempt or rather utter disgust of the humans at the posthumans. Finally Harriet locates Ben, strait-jacketed in a cell-like room, "his pale yellow tongue" hanging from his mouth. She decides immediately to take him home. Harriet knows, as she packs her sedated son into her car, thinking that bringing him home will save her soul and destroy her family carving out the infinite eternal tussle between human and posthuman and the ambivalence of accepting or rejecting the posthuman. "The Fifth Child" explores this ambivalence or double bind through myriad tropes. Humans might feel hostile to posthumans, but not all humans give birth to ontologically unknowable goblin as offspring. Framing Harriet's crisis with Ben as mere ambivalence seems improper. To protect her child (posthuman), Harriet must betray the rest of her family (humans); to protect her family; she must betray her child. "It's either him or us," David says. The good-enough mother tries to meet her children's needs, but the effort is futile if those needs are

fundamentally at odds. It seems impossible for Harriet to be both a good-enough person or human and a good-enough mother to Ben (a posthuman), whose deepest needs are satisfied when he is gleefully inflicting pain. However, it appears that Ben, whom Harriet thinks of as her "Neanderthal child", is an incarnation of that "awful primitivism": not a departure from the human, as his mother suspects but the purest, most primal expression of it reigniting the ideas of atavism. Indeed, Ben might look like an "alien", but in his taste for meanness and cruelty, he is precociously worldly. To manage Ben after his return home, Harriet farms him out to a neighbourhood teen named John, who adopts him into his gang of street toughs and lets him tag along on their criminal jaunts. Ben repeatedly searches for his 'own kind' of people and is able to associate with John and his gang who though are similar to humans in physical semblance vary from them in their approach and mentality. Only with John and his crew, causing havoc and inciting chaos, does Ben seem happy and whole. Ben is foul and cruel, but no more so than the human world around him, and it is for this mortal world that he is ultimately destined. In the novel's final pages, Harriet watches television broadcasts of violent mobs around the world, convinced that she will someday spy her son among the rolling masses. Harriet also mulls over the thought whether Ben's people rape humanity's forebears thus, creating new races thriving at some point in the past and perhaps leaving their seeds in humanity's matrix. She cannot help but ponder perhaps Ben's posthuman genes were already implant in some human foetus struggling to see the light of the day.



Lessing's creation of a theatre screen like transparent liquidity throughout the narrative in effect helps repeated recreations of the menace. In the novel, the headmistress of the school watches Ben's mother, the human who has given birth to an atavistic posthuman: "... with that long , troubled inspection that held unacknowledged unease, even horror, ..." (1988:100). The reader is seduced to inspect Ben along with other characters as *the alien*. Clearly, Ben falls far beyond the boundary of human knowledge. David, Ben's father spells out: "He's probably just dropped in from Mars" (Lessing 1988:74). Harriet declares : "*He's our child*" (1988:74). David comes up with what many men would do to avoid responsibility. "No, he's not," said David, finally. "Well, he certainly isn't mine" (1988:74). As Ben is the other from within the civilisation – he is a new phenomenon and therefore should be destroyed, at least caged: "But everywhere over the world is flung a kind of grid or net of hospitals, chemists, laboratories, research institutes, observation stations, and their functions blur and blend" (Lessing 2000: 130). The grid comprises our existence too forming a network of the human and the posthuman world blurring clear demarcations.

The concept of centre and periphery is reinstated once more. The central prior space is populated by humans whereas the posthuman is pushed to the frontier or margin. Ben is parcelled to France without his knowledge. The word 'country' probably does not make much sense to him since he lived as outsider in his own country. His feeling about his belonging(less)ness , the fact that posthuman homeless people like Ben move from bench to bench,

is taken further as he goes across border more than once.

From the beginning of *The Fifth Child*, David and Harriet are closely watched by other characters – the eyes of the human society. As the novel progresses they, previously victims of their surroundings, start gazing at other people – as if they are objects. David and Harriet are at party when the novel starts – love at first sight being the awkwardly and too sentimental a thing those days, they decide to get married. From the first paragraph the narrator tells us how Harriet and David have earned "the unaffectionate adjectives": "conservative, old-fashioned," (Lessing 1988:3) and also that "they defended a stubbornly held view of themselves" (Lessing 1988:5). The narrator further explains why other people consider Harriet and David so unfashionable. "So what was it about those two that made them freaks and oddballs? It was their attitude to sex! This was the sixties!" (Lessing 1988:4). This is an inkling of the character of Ben, an offspring of these two freaks to be out of place in the epitome of a posthuman. Curiously, a number of characters including his own parents consider Ben to be a freak. Though it was the post-war Britain, Harriet and David seem not to be enjoying the dispersal of the apocalyptic fear that reigned with the rise of Nazi-Germany barely a decade ago. Sexual life is openly discussed. People know, belonging to organisations like the office that regulated their lives, that David had a long-drawn out affair with a girl who probably slept with "everyone in Sissons Blend & Co" (Lessing 1988:5). They break up. Harriet also makes her friends "shriek" (Lessing 1988:5). She is a virgin and kept it "like a present wrapped up in layers of



deliciously pretty paper, to be given with discretion, to the right person" (Lessing 1988:5). Harriet and David are already at loggerheads with most people who deem these two as freaks. Intrusion into the sexuality of individuals like David and Harriet seems to be a part of the process of the human society-inflicted surveillance on the abnormal or subhuman beings. It is a matter to ponder over that whether the freakish nature of both Harriet and David augur the birth of a freak, troll or monster. Doctors, professors and scientists intrude into the lives of people like Ben and Harriet. The victims do not trust the scientists and doctors. In *The Fifth Child*, Ben's grandparents, David's mother and his stepfather, both Oxford professors, decide to send Ben to an institution from where the two-year old had to be rescued by his mother. Therefore, we are compelled to give a thought to the omen that ensues if it is the genealogy at all that presages such harbinger. Ben was in straitjackets and was smeared in shit in freezing cold. Interestingly, the authority figures in hospitals, universities and scientific labs, i.e., the human society are suspicious about, fascinated with and horrified by Ben, who does not seem to be a threat to people who live on the periphery and are not considered important by the society, i.e., the posthuman world, for example, Rita, the prostitute, in *The Fifth Child*. The outcast of Lessing's novels loosely conforms to the category of madman - a category used by the disciplinary societies of the seventeenth century to silence and oppress non-conformists; as Foucault implies. According to Simon During, Foucault utilises the works of writers like Shakespeare and Cervantes to formulate his argument that: "In them madness lies 'beyond appeal'; for their characters it leads

straight to death, being connected still to a realm which, though social, transcends the human" (1993:34)/ During also suggests that, "*Madness and Civilisation* is not interested in providing totalising explanations of the phenomena it deals with." (1993:36). Totalising power structures like scientific labs, hospitals, and most significantly the so-called human society, in Lessing alienate individuals who are considered different/other /mad/mutant/ alien/ monster/troll/freak.

The reader almost calls Ben an alien being influenced by the cruelty of other characters: "They treated him roughly, it seemed to Harriet, even unkindly, calling him *Dopey*, *Dwarfey*, *Alien Tow*, *Hobbit* and *Gremlin*." (Italics added. 1988:94). These interpellations make the human and posthuman distinctly stand out from one another. Anyone who deviates from the contemporary normal notion is regarded as a bizarre aberration. But it is difficult at times to surmise what is normal and what is out of place. In *The Fifth Child* James comments, as if on the universally accepted phenomenon: "You're quite wrong, Harriet. The opposite is true. People are brainwashed into believing that family life is the best. But that's the past." (1988:28). Thus, it is the thought process, the perception and perspective along with the attitude towards particular norms that define us as humans or posthumans. The seeds of both lay strongly embedded in us and it is for us to ascertain in which realm we would like to perpetuate our existence. It is the musing that defines our place whether we are located at the centre or the periphery or fringes. The posthuman lens mandates us to rethink what is universal, if there may be something so defined. Ben is the posthuman subject/



the Other in a posthuman scene. He experiences the tension between attraction to and abhorrence of incomplete self-images, survives from being amputated or being skinned alive. He escapes imprisonment. He is the unrecognisable stone-age primitive.

Harriet wonders by looking at Ben how he was always apart from others with his cold eyes even associating him with maturity compared with the "raw and unfinished youths" (Lessing 1988:156). Harriet wonders whether Ben belonged to a race that reached its height of culmination several thousand years ago before humanity whatsoever that stage or phase meant. It is a fact to be established that posthumans do not chronologically follow humanity. Rather as it is argued beforehand if the time period is considered on a number line posthumans would be found both before and after the point of null. Not only does every integer on the number line but every real number imbedded within the line represent a certain stage of posthumanity. Harriet ponders about Ben, "Did his people live in caves underground while the ice age ground overhead, eating fish from dark subterranean rivers, or sneaking up into the bitter snow to snare a bear, or a bird – or even people, her (Harriet's) ancestors? (Lessing 1988:156). It is reinstated that posthumans do not always follow humans. Any deviation from the normal deemed as the posthuman can be located in either direction of humanity's existence. As it has been argued the existence is a grid, a network interconnecting human and nonhuman entities. It presents the structure of a food web in multiple directions rather than a singular unidirectional food chain in terms of ecological energy chain.

Harriet Lovatt, the mother of Ben in 'The Fifth Child' states "Ben makes you think –all those different kinds of people who lived on earth once- must be in us somewhere."

This is the moment where we are forced to reconsider where exactly the duality between the human and the post human begins to merge. Ben is not explicitly deemed as any particular thing or put into any known category, i.e, he/it deviates from the standard. Harriet thinks of him/it as 'enemy', 'monster', 'alien' and later Dr. Gillly terms it as a 'throwback'. In more than one instance Mrs. Lovatt thinks of Ben's kind of people to Ben's kind of people to inhabit a cave sitting around a fire or working deep under the ground in mines or staying in settlements of huts. Thus, the atavistic characteristics of human beings reappear in an individual rendering him as post human which exhibits a deeper similitude with the forefathers rather than immediate parents.

Doris Lessing complicates these questions of biological, human and other origins, leading to questions of personhood and identity, when she creates in Ben a figure who/that is human and not quite, but one who understands basic human conditions and behaviour directed at him. He understands rejection, and he understands affection. He demonstrates loyalty, but one which is not predicated upon kinship. Clones remind us of the future of the human race, but Ben reminds us of the past of the human race in an instance of atavism. He is not genetically engineered. He is more like an accident. The issue is whether Ben is a person with moral agency. Lessing offers us a posthuman vision. Harriet's mode of addressing the uncanny that is Ben or rather, her perception of Ben is to locate Ben, and



his horror, in the human race's past. The 'resolution' of the uncanny as a return to the race's past offers Lessing the chance to articulate a whole new vision.

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