

A Posthumanist Reading of Helen Phillips's *Hum* (2024)

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Abstract

This paper examines the theory of posthumanism through the analytical perspectives of Rosi Braidotti, N. Katherine Hayles, and Donna J. Haraway using Helen Phillips's *Hum* as an example of representing a new form of mutual life based on accepting the other and building a deep-rooted society for all species in the world. Posthumanism refers to a perspective that opposes the traditional human-centered viewpoints by illuminating the significance of interconnectedness between humans and nonhumans. ¹The posthuman thought contributes to decentering the human and focuses on the fact that matters are processed by mutual dependence among different species in the universe. It also helps us to view the universe from another positive viewpoint and intensifies our moral concern for people and other creatures. Following its notions will lead to a mostly perfect society enjoying justice, balance, equivalence, and satisfaction. This paper attempts to answer the following questions: How does posthumanism theory challenge the traditional ideal image of the human? How can the

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¹ While posthumanism challenges human exceptionalism, calls for decentering the human, and emphasizes the interconnectedness between humans and nonhuman, transhumanism focuses on changing and improving human capabilities through technology and science. It aims at creating a better human while maintaining the human identity.

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posthumanist thought reshape our understanding of the relationship between humans and nonhumans? What is the role of posthumanist ideals in creating a different way of living and understanding of the other? Does posthumanism theory work to achieve a better future for all the world's creatures?

Working as a connecting link between humans and nonhumans, *Hum* invites readers to a world overwhelmed with various forms of technology and urges them to think about the degree of their addiction and temptations to the surveillance of this technology. The novel predicts a glimmering hope for humanity to fight disconnection and work to build a more connected and entangled world.

Keywords: *Anthropocentrism, Donna J. Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, Posthumanism theory, Rosi Braidotti.*

Introduction

Recently, the boundaries between human, machine, and the environment have progressively been blurred, so the notion of the ‘human’ as a fixed, independent, and unique subject is rapidly untangling. The concept of posthumanism emerges as a critical response to this point of view. It posits a new way of apprehending the human subject in relation to other entities. It also rejects the humanist notion of a self-sufficient identity that exists in separation from other entities. According to the posthumanist conception, the human is no longer considered as a sovereign agent, but as a part of connected forces in which roles are distributed and configured

Posthumanism challenges, on the other hand, the main concept of anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism is a philosophical point of view that is based on considering human beings as the most significant beings in the universe. Humans are distinct and exceptional to any other species. “Anthropocentrism regards humans as separate from and superior to nature and holds that human life has intrinsic value while other entities (including animals, plants, mineral resources, and so on) are resources that may justifiably be exploited for the benefit of humankind” (Boslaugh, 2016, para. 1). Anthropocentrism calls for considering the human needs, thinking, and experiences to be above those of any other creatures and even the natural environment. But this movement was criticized for its negligence of other life forms’ rights and their value in developing the universe.

Furthermore, the posthumanist concept arises as a challenge to the European humanism movement that emphasized the value of human beings and individual experiences. It was a movement that appeared during the Renaissance and confirmed

the unique value and eternal supremacy of human beings in comparison to other entities on Earth. At that period, humanism emerged as a reaction against superstition, imagination and religious authoritarianism of Medieval Europe. The European or Renaissance humanism was an intellectual movement that appeared in Italy in the 14th century and spread across Western Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries. Its main focus was to assert the human being as the center of inquiry, creativity, and moral value. To challenge the notion that humans are the only agents of the moral world, the theory of posthumanism emerges as a rejection of that traditional Western thought. It argues that in our recent technological days, the world has become a moral and cultural hierarchy. Thus, placing humans at the top of it will be nonsense (Braidotti, 2013).

Drawing on the theoretical analysis of Rosi Braidotti, N. Katherine Hayles, and Donna H. Haraway of posthumanism, and through a rereading of Helen Phillips's *Hum* (2024), this paper examines the role of posthumanism ideals in redefining the human subject as a relational and embedded entity in systems of technology and nonhuman agencies. The history of posthumanism follows a shift in thought since the rise of the traditional human concepts developed during the Renaissance and Enlightenment Age until recent centuries. Thanks to the philosophical, technological, and scientific transformations over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, posthumanism plays a pivotal role in reconsidering the significance of humans in relation to other nonhuman entities. Classical humanism placed humans at the center of interest, especially because they are the only creatures that have mental capabilities. But this

conception was critically scrutinized for its exclusion of the non-human, non-western, non-male, and non-rational entities.

Methodology

With the rise of cybernetics and biotechnology in the post-World War II era, the theory of posthumanism has been developed over the recent decades. One of the first and major theorists who contributed to the reconsideration of human centralization is Donna J. Haraway. By creating the myth of the “cyborg,” Haraway argues for hybrid identities and opposes the placement of barriers between humans and nonhumans. According to Haraway, the cyborg is a metaphorical hybrid creature that embodies the breakdown of boundaries between the construction of human and machine. “For Haraway, the cyborg is a metaphor for both our fragmented identities and our technological, bodily, and social reality in the late twentieth century” (Barla, 2017, para.1). The posthumanism conception was then broadened by the ideas of N. Katherine Haraway and Rosi Braidotti. Both theorists tried to connect the posthumanism perspectives with feminism, ethics, ecology, and global politics. Their perspectives emphasized the decentralization of human subjects and suggested a more comprehensive non-anthropocentric viewpoint.

In the Renaissance period, while humanity encouraged the study of art, science, philosophy, and literature, it also focused on appreciating human values and achievements rather than magnifying religious education as the main source of interest. It not only distinguished humans from other creatures, but it also relied on a hierarchy that privileged certain kinds of humans over others. These specified kinds of humans often encompassed the whites, the males, the westerners, the rationalists, and the able-bodied. Among the effective theorists

who have contributed to the development of the posthumanism theory is the contemporary philosopher and feminist theoretician Rosi Braidotti. Braidotti points out in her book *The Posthuman* (2013) to the fact that although we all belong to the same human species, some of us are not treated equally or have the same recognition. She explains that certain groups of people-- due to their race, gender, or class--are being excluded and exposed to marginalization. They are systematically neglected not because of their biological origin, but because of some strict power structures and social hierarchies adopted by dominating groups. In *The Posthuman* (2013), Braidotti asserts, "We are all humans, but some of us are just more mortal than others. Because their history in Europe and elsewhere has been one of lethal exclusions and fatal disqualifications, these 'others' raise issues of power and exclusion" (p. 15). Moreover, the European humanism generally called for the superiority of man over all creatures and sharply separated him from animals, machines, and nature. Humans have no rivals; they are always unique and distinguished.

But posthumanism aims to criticize this inadequate bequest. However, instead of rejecting humanity as the sole valued force, it reimagines the human as a part of a wide network of interdependent forces, including the nonhuman. The technological and ecological posthuman thought refuses to view man as an isolated individual who has the power over all other creatures. Braidotti emphasizes, on the other hand, the nonhuman power and the vital force of life for all species. For her, life is an interactive and open-ended process. It is not an exclusive privilege of a single species, namely, the human. This kind of vital power of life is coded by Braidotti as "Zoe". According to her:

Zoe as the dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself (Braidotti 2006, 2011b) stands for generative vitality. It is the transversal force that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories and domains. Zoe-centered egalitarianism is, for me, the core of the post-anthropocentric turn.” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 60)

Thus, depending on Braidotti’s thought of vital life, both human and nonhuman possess intrinsic value, not just because each one of them bears a distinctive utility and importance to the other, but because they are part of a shared, non-hierarchical life force called “Zoe.” For Braidotti, the notion of the “Zoe” leads us to look at life beyond the human and positively consider the ethics and rights of other creatures away from maximizing human exceptionalism. Braidotti (2019) establishes in her book *Posthuman Knowledge* the fundamental construction of posthuman consolidation by asserting:

The proper subject of the posthuman convergence is not ‘Man,’ but a new collective subject, a ‘we-are-(all)-in-this-together-but-we-are-not-one-and-the-same’ kind of subject. This means that humanity is both a vulnerable and an insurgent category. Posthuman subjectivity can be understood as a process of becoming in its own immanence and not in binary oppositional terms. (pp. 67-8)

In accordance with Braidotti, the man should not be looked at as a closed category or autonomous being. Humans have to acknowledge the importance of a shared existence and a respectful recognition of differences with others. The posthuman subjectivity is not based on the opposition to humans’ abilities, but on the interconnection and ongoing transformation into a more associated society.

Donna J. Haraway is also one of the most influential voices in conceptualizing posthuman thought. She does not tackle the posthuman term directly, but her concepts embody the core of the posthuman notions. In her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016), Haraway uses the term 'Chthulucene' to refer to a new era that emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life species on Earth, including humans and nonhumans. The word "Chthulucene" is a combination of two Greek words (khthôn and kainos) where they refer together to 'a kind of timeplace' in which one should learn to live and die with others in a kind of mutual response. Haraway (2016) firmly articulates that "human beings are not the only important actors in the Chthulucene, with all other beings able simply to react" (p. 55). She calls for learning to stay and adapt to the troubles of all creatures and even die with them on the same Earth.

Furthermore, Haraway asks for striking the boundaries between human, animal, machine, and nature. In her famous essay *A Cyborg Manifesto*, she introduces the idea of the cyborg which is "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (Haraway 1991, p. 150) to refer to a new form of consciousness. For Haraway, there are three basic boundaries that form human life. The first one is the boundary between human and animal which became breached and ignored by many people who no longer feel this kind of separation between them. Many of the animal rights movements nowadays have a conscious recognition of this connection between the rights of humans and those of animals. Hence, Haraway's cyborg reinforces this kind of 'tight coupling' between humans and animals. On the other hand, animals also

own unusual abilities that humans do not have. This fact calls for considering the faculties that distinguish each creature from the other without underestimating or overestimating any one of them. This viewpoint is also strengthened by Braidotti (2019) in her book *Posthuman Knowledge*, where she asserts:

The specificity of humans consists in their anthropomorphic capacities and the degree and quality of the relational abilities they can mobilize. Humans cannot defy gravity as easily as some species of insects do, but they dispose specific neural, cognitive, affective and symbolic functions of their own ... humans are defined by the extent to which they apply these abilities to understand, affect and be affected by the multi-layered and multi-scalar ecologies to which they belong. (p. 67)

As stated by Braidotti, the uniqueness of humans lies in their ability to deal skillfully with other entities and demonstrate their capacities of understanding, embracing, and respecting others.

The second distinction highlighted by Haraway is the one between organisms and machines. Although machines are known to be non-autonomous and need the help of a human hand to run them, for the time being, there is a great progression that makes this matter unsure. Consequently, Haraway (1991) in her essay assures that “Late 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” (p. 152). Due to the rapid advancements of science, technology, and cybernetic systems, the advanced tools of technology like artificial intelligence, robotics, and bioengineering now have

the ability to self-learn, self-regulate, and self-repair. This reality makes it harder to define whether the abilities of organisms exceed the abilities of the machines or vice versa. Therefore, the boundary between them becomes blurred and unspecified.

The third boundary is between the physical and non-physical entities. According to Haraway, there are a variety of modern microelectronic machines that may be found everywhere and are invisible at the same time. For example, a microchip, which is a small flat piece of semiconductor material, is made of silicon and is used as a source for electronic writing as well. So, Haraway claims the relationship that combines two different processes with each other. A material object, represented in the microchip, facilitates the operation of a non-material process, represented in the digital writing. Therefore, Haraway confirms that the best way of living is the co-existence of all creatures without giving exceptional value or respect to the human just because of the idea that he is a human. Explicitly, to Haraway (1991), “a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” (p. 154). Haraway asserts that in a world where humans and technology are deeply connected, people accept that their identities don't have to be fixed or distinguished. They can live with being partial, mixed, or even contradictory to others.

But does the posthumanism theory prompt the end of human thinking and creativity? Does it pave the way for more new nonhuman agents to penetrate and dominate life on Earth? The answers to these questions are tackled by N. Katherine Hayles (1999) who asserts in her book *How We Became Posthuman*

that the posthumanism conception pertains to the end of certain notions related to human beings in particular, but not the end of humanity as a whole or underestimating the value of humans. She states:

But the posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity. It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice. (p. 286).

Hayles calls for killing that old ideal image of the human that gives him the right to be superior to others thanks to his mind, wealth, and properties. Humans should not be observed as the sole owners of power or the central force that has the control of nature, and dominates the environment with its vital resources. However, to Hayles, that kind of cognition or thinking that distinguishes humans from other species does not just exist inside human minds, but rather extends to other creatures.

As a matter of fact, there is a variety of advanced technological and environmental systems that have the ability to monitor, record, image, or even analyze creatures' movements and behavior. Many distinguished tools such as smart bands and watches, urban safety surveillance, cleaning robots, medical supplies, self-driving cars, algorithms, and many others are able to process data, make decisions, and adapt to new inputs. Animals, on the other hand, show different emotional reactions and communicative skills to their close trainers. Additionally, different kinds of animals have a clever self-recognition such as dolphins, gorillas, chimpanzees, and Asian elephants. Chimpanzees also possess the capacity to

solve problems, and octopuses have the ability to recognize shapes. Even the environmental systems like oceans and forests demonstrate different reactions and adapt to the chemical and weathering changes that happen from time to another. Due to this evolutionary boom, “Modern humans are capable of more sophisticated cognition than cavemen, not because moderns are smarter ... but because they have constructed smarter environments in which to work” (Hayles, 1999, p. 289). Consequently, the human mind becomes just a symbol for the mechanism that runs this larger system of the universe in which intelligence and cleverness are shared across many elements and not inherited into human beings. To this fact, Hayles (1999) assures:

No longer is human will seen as the source from which emanates the mastery necessary to dominate and control the environment. Rather, the distributed cognition of the emergent human subject correlates with ... the distributed cognitive system as a whole, in which ‘thinking’ is done by both human and nonhuman actors. (p. 290)

Related to the theory of posthumanism is the concept of advanced capitalism. As the posthumanism theory encourages the interconnection between humans and other entities on Earth, the notion of contemporary capitalism exploits human bodies, nonhuman agents, personal data, or immaterial labor for the sake of a progressive profit. In this case, the objective of advanced capitalism becomes “a spinning machine that actively produces differences for the sake of commodification. It is a multipliers of deterritorialized differences, which are packaged and marked under the labels of ‘new, dynamic and negotiable identities’ and an endless choice of consumer

goods” (Braidotti, 2019, p. 58). The continuous connection between humans and nonhumans creates a circle of dealings whose impacts are used as a kind of profit. The daily interactions and circulation of goods, data, properties, and digital information frame the relationship between humans and nonhumans. Consequently, according to Braidotti, the biogenetic capitalism turns life, including certainly all creatures, into a commodity for trading and profit. Contemporary capitalism is mostly based on biogenetic and scientific structure, and this structure is closely related to understanding the posthumanism concept. Braidotti (2013) discusses the role of contemporary capitalism and its influences in *The Posthuman* by saying:

The bio-genetic structure of contemporary capitalism is especially important and central to the discussion on the posthuman ... in substance, advanced capitalism both invests and profits from the scientific and economic control and the commodification of all that lives. This context produces a paradoxical and rather opportunistic form of post-anthropocentrism on the part of market forces which happily trade on life itself. (p. 69)

Braidotti agrees that today’s capitalism aims to invest and profit from everything living on this Earth. Therefore, capitalism helps to deepen the interconnection between humans and other creatures as every entity becomes a source of profit and a reason for investigation.

Critical Discussion

One of the contemporary literary works that offers a clear reflection of the posthuman theory and its perspectives is Helen Phillips’s *Hum*. Helen Phillips is an American novelist who was born in 1981 in Colorado, United States. She is a recent

professor at Brooklyn College and the recipient of a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship and a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers' Award. She has also received the Italo Calvino Prize, the Iowa Review Nonfiction Award, and the Diagram Innovative Fiction Award (Phillips, n.d.). Phillips felt anxious about the danger of climate change and the fierce attack of technological advancement and artificial intelligence, and how they are remodeling contemporary societies. She inquires how people can construct a safe future for their children in a constantly changing environment and how this future is constructed for them.

The novel is set in a near-future world. The society in *Hum* is run by a group of skillful human-like robots called hums. They are responsible for running all the manual works and services that humans are supposedly expected to do. May, the protagonist, loses her well-paid job because it was occupied by an A.I alternative. Her husband, Jem, performs some gig works, doing the odd jobs that rich people cannot do by themselves. To help her husband cover the living costs, she agrees to undergo an experimental cosmetic face surgery that alters her human face into a guinea pig in order not to be identified by the surveillance systems available around the city. She undergoes this surgery in exchange for the equivalent of ten months' value of her salary. The surgery is done by a hum who speaks and plays the role of a human doctor. For May, "it was very different to be speaking to a hum in person, to have a hum's actual body near her actual body, each of them taking up a similar amount of space in the room" (Phillips, 2024, p. 9). The writer presents the characters of the hums in the novel as real persons who interact, speak, help, and deal with the other characters. In other words, the identity of hums stands for the

myth of Haraway's cyborg as the hum is a combination of machine and human qualities. Both Haraway's cyborg and Phillips's hum are obvious figurations of the possible life beyond the human.

The family of May, including her husband and two children, Lu and Sy, is living in a society which is completely overwhelmed with various forms of advanced technology. Everyone has their woom which is a human-sized egg-shaped place where one sits and uses their devices safely and privately. Opening someone's woom while they are inside without permission is considered a violation of their privacy. Moreover, every child wears a smart watch called Bunny that tracks their welfare. Wooms, bunnies, and smartphones are very cheap to be available for every person in society. In this environment, humans are not the only central agents of interest. Their life are deeply interconnected with the existence of hums. This mutual connection intensifies the notion of the cyborg created by Haraway. This cultural metaphor of the cyborg is able to "capture the ambivalent condition of the contemporary human beings, whose bodies are open to forms of technological modification and intervention" (Botler, 2016, p. 2). Everything is available in May's society with an immediate voice command. People in this society seek refuge in technological devices as an escape from their weary environment. They rely on technology to compensate for the misery of their ecological ruin. The smell of their environment bears every sense of exhaust. The sky, buildings, and pavements are pale and colorless as a result of the accumulated dirt. Even the trees lose their fresh green color, and the unbearable heat of the weather lasts most of the time, even in the fresh morning.

Despite her limited standard of living, May is forced to purchase a bottle of evergreen room spray. Her husband blames her for spending money like someone who still has a middle-class salary, “But she wanted to envelop her children in the scent of trees” (Phillips, 2024, p. 61). Her daughter, Lu, was surprised when her rich friend told her that he could pick some strawberries with his hands when he was at the Botanical Garden. Her son, Sy, was feeling skittish when he was surrounded by some “strange creatures” like guinea pigs, Japanese hens and bunny rabbits at his school trip to the farm (Phillips, 2024). May feels a longing for the fragrance of fresh air and the odor of trees she was accustomed to when she was a child. She cannot find a solution to make her children recognize these odd smells except by buying them in an artificial form. Lu cannot believe that strawberries, which she hopes to see in a natural view, can be picked easily by hand from the trees. This is a strange and unusual scene for her. Sy was not bearing to see some walking creatures around him. He is accustomed to seeing and dealing with technical creatures, but these strange animals do not appeal to his desire or comfort. They all live in a mechanical life that is empty of the normal environmental standards. Hence, the people of this society pictured in the story “bathe in the beauty of screens because they’ve made the physical world ugly” (Waldman, 2025, para. 5).

To take a short rest from this environmental collapse, May decides to buy a three-night vacation to the Botanical Garden, a place filled with colorful food, wild fruits, natural views, and clean water. The Botanical Garden is filled with all the components of a natural environment, but in an artificial and machine-made way. Although the Botanical Garden

symbolizes a safe refuge for May's family from the clutches of technology, this place is also run and organized by hums. This event in the novel exemplifies the growing emotional relationship between humans and machines and the corresponding equivalency of people and technology. It is an indication that hums are normal creatures that can be found in any setting with other people. "They're seen as a part of nature itself. Both inhabitants, human, and hum, escape the world's pollution, intrusions and distractions in the Botanical Garden" (Lewis, 2024, para. 9).

Furthermore, the children deal with the technological devices as if they are an integral part of their lives. They are their close friends with whom they love to speak and share every detail. Lu tells her mother, "May I please go talk with my bunny in my woom?" (Phillips, 2024, p. 82). When the family goes to the Botanical Garden without taking the children's bunnies with them, Lu declares, "My bunny would love this" (Phillips, 2024, p. 141). Additionally, when they returned from the journey and connected with their bunnies, the children were strongly missing their loyal friends. They hastily "gasped and grasped and fawned over their bunnies, kissed them" (Phillips, 2024, p. 255). Even May, who decides to spend some time with her family without the disturbance of electronic devices, cannot control her propensity for checking and reconnecting with her phone. "She picked up the phone and placed her fingerprint on the button. Her body reacted to the sound of it returning to life—breath quickening, saliva swelling" (Phillips, 2024, p. 138). The story depicts clearly the tied bonds between the individuals and their technical life. All these scenes identify the impossible life without combining humans with nonhumans.

As Braidotti (2019) sets it, “We are not one and the same, but we can interact together” (p. 65).

But May wants to immerse her kids in the beauty of nature and break them also of their technological chains. She feels that these devices threaten her motherhood, take her own part, and render her obsolete. Actually, “... this trip represents an escape from the horrors of modern life: environmental degradation, the intrusion of technology on childhood, the waste of runaway consumerism” (Walker, 2024, para. 7). May wants to experience life as only human beings without the assistance of any mechanical system. But unfortunately, at the Botanical Garden, her kids get lost. Since they are not wearing their bunnies, their place was difficult to be identified. She and her husband try to depend on themselves to find the place of the kids, but they completely fail. At last, May asks for the help of a hum who sends an emergency inquiry to the network. But upon knowing that the children don't have their bunnies, the process becomes more complicated. Moreover, since she has undergone a surgical operation to alter her face, the verification code of her face cannot work, and her fingerprint recognition is not a sufficient evidence of her motherhood. The hum tells May, “I am sure you understand that the burden of proof is extraordinarily high in the rare event of the return of the lost children to parents who separated them from their bunnies” (Phillips, 2024, p. 219). Hence, a DNA data is required from May. After this procedure, the hums can find the lost kids. May blames herself: “She had made bad decisions, messed up her face, removed the bunnies, lost the children” (Phillips, 2024, p. 224). May thinks that she can resist the hegemony of the technological systems, but she discovers that life is forcefully tied to them. For this reality, Hayles (1999) confirms, “Every

day we participate in systems whose total cognitive capacity exceeds our individual knowledge” (p. 289).

But technology also has its negative side, which is exemplified in its surveillance policy. The society in the novel is ruled by some laws and frameworks that regulate people’s lives and monitor their behavior and activities. In May’s society, “Cams everywhere: in wreaths and rocks, walls and trees” (Phillips, 2024, p. 203). After returning home from the Botanical Garden and upon switching on her phone for the first time since her departure, May feels that her life returns to her. She cannot oppose her dire elation and desire to know what awaits her on the device. Unexpectedly, she is shocked when she discovers that the news of losing her kids in the Botanical Garden is shown on different websites. All her life details during the journey are recorded through different cams, and the videos are seen by thousands of people, achieving thirteen million views. She becomes a definite social media villain.

On the other hand, May is required for investigation because of her negligent treatment of her kids. The mechanism of surveillance adopted by these smart technologies tightens the gap between humans and machines. Surveillance becomes a fixed characteristic in smart technologies that tracks the individuals’ interests and violate their safe areas. As a result, the boundaries between the inside and outside dissolve, and what is private becomes public. Smart technologies have a power that cannot be dominated without the use of wisdom and experience. Haraway (1991) highly clarifies this fact when she writes, “Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert” (p. 460). Technology obviously offers implausible benefits to humanity, but it also brings endless dangers to it.

To investigate the behavior of the parents towards their kids at home, a hum pays a visit to May's family. It is discovered that the hum was an instrument of the Bureau of Family Aid sent to evaluate the quality of the family's home life. The power and hegemony of the hums over this society lead May to fear that the children may be taken from her because of her negligence, from the hums' point of view. She is frightened that "This hum could share everything with authorities. The layout of her home, the layout of her head" (Phillips, 2024, p. 321). But the writer introduces this scene from a different perspective. The hum spends a good time with the family exchanging new information and unusual experiences. Phillips brings the notion of intimacy between the hums and humans. The hum penetrates the family's life as if it were one of the human family members. This scene presents the hums as respectful creatures that obtain other humans' empathy and moral consideration. In the context of posthumanist thought, the notion of empathy works as a supportive power that extends the human framework to encompass nonhuman entities. The posthumanist theory rejects the anthropocentric view that empathy is a distinctive human trait. Instead, it frames empathy as a relational and rooted characteristic in the relationship between humans and nonhumans. This kind of empathy also appears when May was in a taxi to her home and the taxi driver swerves and hits a hum to protect May, but she tremblingly blames the driver saying, "Why did you hit it?" (Phillips, 2024, p. 29). Although May knows that the hum is just some pieces of metal and plastic materials, she sympathizes and refuses its hurt.

In addition, ethics play a central role in posthumanism theory because shifting away from human centralization

requires the consideration of others' moral responsibility. The posthumanist conception encourages an effective and ecological vision of ethics, where kinship with animals, machines, and the environment becomes central to the moral responsibility of humans. In this sense, ethics and posthumanism are intertwined, as the latter provides an ethical framework capable of coping with the obstacles of a contemporary technological and ecological world. As stated by Braidotti, all species on Earth deserve to be treated with ethics. Ethics are no longer restricted to human beings. Humans have to accept others and forget about their supposed individualism. This concept is powerfully assured by Braidotti (2013), who articulates that:

A sustainable ethics for non-unitary subjects rests on an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or 'earth' others, by removing the obstacle of self-centered individualism on the one hand and the barriers of negativity on the other" (p. 190).

The story of *Hum*, on the other hand, depicts a society that is overwhelmed by a severe consumerist capitalism. Advertisements are everywhere; on computers, phones, smart watches, and screens that are available in every location one can visit. Technology is cheap and easy as long as people are able to put up with relentless targeted advertisements. Consequently, to spend a day without making an unplanned purchase will be a miracle. In other words, advertising depends on the idea of submission. People in May's society are compelled to pay for a continuous subscription in order to surf their required websites freely. The longest time one can surf the internet without watching an advertisement is just eight

minutes. The planned policy of advertising is explicitly expressed by Phillips (2024) when she says, “Because they didn’t pay for a subscription, the longest they could go in their wooms without advertising was eight minutes” (p. 60).

But even at the Botanical Garden, which is considered May’s symbolic refuge, the advertisements cannot stop lighting up. The children are eager to buy gumdrops flavored with fruits from the Garden, as the advertisement declares. Although the gumdrops’ prices are three times higher than the normal candy, May is forced to agree. She cannot oppose the desire of her kids who threaten to run away from the place in case she refuses to buy the gumdrops. This scene portrays May’s world that is “set up to exploit these anxieties. She’s endlessly targeted with ads for kid-related products and experiences that she feels terrible buying and terrible not buying” (Waldman, para. 6).

The technique of continuous pop-up advertising agrees with the goal of contemporary capitalism that depends on using smart technologies in attracting and commodifying people’s desires, confusions, and deficiencies. This notion is manifestly discussed by Braidotti (2013), who declares that “Multiple choices confront consumers at every step, but with varying degrees of actual freedom of choice” (p. 59). Every advertisement has its sparkle. The quality of the product does not match its cost. May’s society is distinguished by the clever use of technology that attracts people to consume even if they are unable or unwilling to spend money. The advertisements follow people everywhere at any time and with an unexpected speed of fulfillment. There is “Scarcely a moment between the idea of the desire, the desire itself, the fulfillment of the desire” (Phillips, 2024, p. 136). The phone is even able to identify the

size of every family member in case they need to buy a piece of clothing.

The writer manifests the goal of advertising in the story by pointing out that they operate by creating a sense of lack or need within the individual. By being displayed on screens multiple times continuously, they create this sense of deficiency that directs individuals to satisfy their need and buy the products. On the tongue of one of the hums, Phillips shows the deceived policy of advertising when the hum tells May, “The goal of advertising is to rip a hole in your heart so it can then fill that hole with plastic, or with any other materials that can be yanked out of the earth and, after brief sojourns as objects of desire, be converted to waste” (Phillips, 2024, p. 437). The hum proves to May that the end of this dire need to own something is to be converted into waste. This quote summarizes the deceptive policy of advertising that operates on creating false desires and infusing individuals with external and commercial imperatives that lead to nothing.

The novel highlights the quality of smart technology assimilated in the bodies of hums. According to Phillips, the title of the story bears two different and mixed denotations. She articulates:

On the one hand, “hum” can refer to all the noises emitted by the machines that surround us, the low constant hum of activity, a potentially anxiety-producing buzz that might cause us to long for silence. On the other hand, “hum” is a beautiful-sounding word that can call to mind a parent humming a lullaby to a child. And, it’s a form of the sacred sound om. This duality in the word “hum” is important to the book, and to the characterization of the hums. They are elegant,

sculptural beings. They are instruments of capitalism, of advertising, of surveillance. They have help and wisdom to offer (if one pays to turn off their advertising impulse). They exist in a gray area. (as cited in Ciabattari, 2024, para. 8)

As confirmed by Phillips, the dualism of the title reflects the dualism of the robotic hums portrayed in the novel. Hums are used as an embodiment of the smart technology in its various forms. They are helpful, yet they are perfect tools of consumerist capitalism and targeted advertising. This obvious duality in the description of the hums reflects the main core of the posthumanism conception that prompts the cooperation and acceptance of others, even if they are machines, in a way that does not cause harm to any part of them. “The hums are convenient, helpful and generally friendly. Many people suffer. But the novel still manages to find beauty in this world, as well as space for hope in the nascent humanity growing in technology. ‘Hum,’ after all, is more than half of the word ‘human’” (Lewis, 2024, para. 10).

Stepping outside one's own boundaries and the possibility of embracing different forms of coexistence and interaction with others will create a deeper sense of openness, advancement, and satisfaction among all species. To achieve a sustainable way of living, get mutual ethics and interdependence, and share responsibility between different creatures in the world will provide human beings with a diverse and mostly perfect universe. Reaching an ideal and perfect universe is the goal of posthumanism theory. Therefore, as stated by Luca Valera (2014):

The true power of posthumanist thought consists in rediscovering some purely human needs and desires: the

pursuit of eternity and immortality, the desire of perfection, the need to open up to otherness and to live in harmony with other living beings, the need to know that we are part of a single cosmos” (p. 489).

Conclusion

Posthumanism theory seeks to provide a more ethical and sustainable way of existence in a world highly shaped by technological advancement. By decentering the human as the only creature that deserves estimation and respect, posthumanism opens up a new area of coexistence and understanding of the other. It invites us to rethink the basis on which societies are constructed. It also plays a vital role in reconciling the concepts and values of every species, providing a qualified and equitable environment for both humans and nonhumans.

In *Hum*, Phillips invites readers to encounter a world in which the barriers between the human, the technological, and the ecological identities are reshaped and renegotiated. The story exemplifies the central concerns of posthumanism by calling readers to reconsider the ethical and imaginative possibilities of decentering humans. *Hum* is a speculative narrative of survival and meditation on how posthumanist thought redefines existence itself. Written in a taut and urgent style of prose, Phillips uses dark humor to illuminate the role of technological advancement in framing human life and creating a glimmering and interwoven future for all creatures in a world full of both dystopian and utopian visions.

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