



Knowledgeable Research (KR)

ISSN: 2583-6633 | CODEN: KRABAU

International Open-Access Peer-Reviewed Refereed Multidisciplinary Journal

<https://knowledgeableresearch.com>

Spl. 01, Issue 04, July, 2026

Received: 13/06/2026 | Accepted: 24/06/2026 | Published: 31/07/2026

Posthumanism and Cultural Anxiety in Twenty-First Century Fiction

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Abstract:

*The twenty-first century has produced ruptures technological, ecological, epistemic that have fundamentally destabilised inherited notions of human identity. Digital proliferation, artificial intelligence, and ecological breakdown are not separate crises; they converge into a single, unsettling question: what exactly constitutes the human now? Against this backdrop, posthumanism has gained considerable theoretical traction as a framework that challenges anthropocentric assumptions and redefines the relationship between humans, technology, and the natural world. As Rosi Braidotti argues, the posthuman condition signals the collapse of the opposition between the human and the non-human. Contemporary fiction is among the most honest registers of this collapse. Novels that center around artificial intelligence, cybernetic embodiment, surveillance capitalism, ecological catastrophe, and fractured selfhood do not merely describe cultural anxiety; they generate it, work through it, give it shape. This paper examines the representation of posthumanism and cultural anxiety in twenty-first-century fiction. It focuses on how selected literary texts encode collective fears about technological dependency, the erosion of individuality, ethical incoherence, and environmental fragility. Drawing on the theoretical positions of Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti, and Cary Wolfe, the study analyses three primary texts *Never Let Me Go*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Circle*. The paper argues that posthuman fiction constitutes a sustained critique of technological modernity. More than that, it maps the existential disorientation of living in a world that is becoming increasingly digital and ecologically precarious. The cross-disciplinary relevance of posthumanist frameworks to literary and cultural studies is also addressed, along with emerging directions for further inquiry.*

Keywords: Posthumanism, Cultural Anxiety, Twenty-First Century Fiction, Artificial Intelligence, Digital Culture, Identity Crisis, Technological Modernity, Anthropocene.

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INTRODUCTION:

The new millennium arrived carrying a particular kind of weight. Rapid technological advancement, digital expansion, environmental degradation, and the deepening presence of artificial intelligence these are not merely background conditions of contemporary life. They are constitutive of it. They have altered human perceptions of identity, consciousness, and moral life in ways that neither philosophy nor policy alone can fully account for. Literature, however, offers a different kind of accounting. Posthumanism has emerged from this context as one of the most significant paradigms in contemporary literary and cultural criticism. It refuses the anthropocentric premise that humans occupy a privileged position above other entities above nature, technology, animals, and machines.

Twenty-first-century fiction has taken this refusal seriously. Dystopian narratives, cybernetic bodies, genomic manipulation, virtual worlds, ecological catastrophe appear across the novels of Margaret Atwood, Kazuo Ishiguro, Dave Eggers, William Gibson, and Cixin Liu, among others. What connects them is not merely thematic similarity but a shared affective register: a deep cultural worry about what humanity is becoming, and about what it is losing. The boundary between human and

machine keeps shifting in these imaginative worlds, and the shifting generates fear.

This paper reads that fear carefully. It examines the relationship between posthumanism and cultural anxiety in twenty-first-century fiction, showing how specific literary texts translate technological transformation into emotional and ethical experience. The analysis draws on posthumanist theory to contribute to ongoing conversations across literary studies, cultural theory, and the digital humanities.

2. Posthumanism: Definition, Meaning, and Significance

Posthumanism is, at its core, a challenge to classical humanism. Classical humanism placed reason, individuality, and human distinctiveness at the centre of everything. Posthumanism dismantles that centre. It argues that humans cannot be meaningfully separated from the non-human entities, technologies, animals, ecosystems with which they are always already entangled.

The theoretical foundation of this argument has been built by a small number of thinkers whose work now defines the field. Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1991) eroded the boundary between human and machine, proposing the

cyborg as a generative figure for thinking hybrid subjectivity. N. Katherine Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), traced the cultural and technological processes through which the human body became decentralized and how cybernetics transformed assumptions about embodiment, cognition, and the self. Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (2013) positioned critical posthumanism as an ethical and ecological project suited to the conditions of global crisis, while Cary Wolfe's *What Is Posthumanism?* (2010) situated the posthuman within the wider systems of biopolitics and institutional critique.

The thematic range of posthumanism is considerable: the merging of human and machine intelligence, artificial life and biotechnology, digital identity, the ethics of scientific progress, the erosion of what makes humans distinctively human. These concerns are not merely academic. They live. They inform contemporary culture at every level. And they demand literary representation, because fiction is capable of doing something that theoretical discourse alone cannot make abstract anxieties felt.

This is why posthumanism matters. As societies become more dependent on technological systems for communication, identity formation, and even emotional

expression, fiction becomes a diagnostic tool not just reflecting cultural change but actively interrogating it. Cultural anxiety, that diffuse but powerful sensation of collective unease in the face of rapid transformation, finds its most precise articulation in the literary imagination.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in critical posthumanism, a theoretical position that differs sharply from transhumanism. Where transhumanism tends to celebrate technological enhancement uncritically, critical posthumanism asks harder questions. It interrogates the ethical, political, and ecological implications of technological progress. Transhumanism dreams of transcending biological limits; critical posthumanism asks why that transcendence seems so desirable, and for whom.

Braidotti situates this project within the specific conditions of the present: ecological devastation, technological capitalism, globalisation. She advocates for what she calls a radically relational understanding of subjectivity, one that acknowledges the entanglement of human lives with non-human forces. Wolfe resists human exceptionalism from a different angle, drawing on second-order cybernetics and biopolitical theory to

propose a systems-based approach to life and matter.

The concept of the Anthropocene deepens this framework. The designation of the current geological epoch as one shaped extensively by human activity, climate change, habitat destruction, mass extinction demands a fundamental reassessment of the human relationship with the natural world. Posthumanist fiction frequently stages dystopian worlds shaped by these conditions, making it a potent vehicle for Anthropocene critique.

Ecocriticism, digital humanities, feminist theory, and disability studies each intersect with posthumanism in ways that expand its analytical power. This paper draws on this interdisciplinary matrix to offer a layered reading of the selected primary texts, attending to their representation of technological anxiety, ecological vulnerability, and the contested boundaries of the human.

4. Research Objectives

This study is guided by the following objectives:

1. to examine the concept of posthumanism and its portrayal in twenty-first-century fiction,

2. to analyse the representation of cultural anxiety in contemporary literary works concerning technologies, artificial intelligence, and environmental disasters,
3. to explore the evolution of human identity and consciousness within posthuman fiction,
4. to investigate the role of dystopia and speculative fiction in giving expression to societal apprehensions about technological progress,
5. to assess the posthuman critique of anthropocentrism and its relationship to ecological interconnectedness,
6. to examine how twenty-first-century literature portrays anxieties about surveillance culture, virtual reality, and identity fragmentation and
7. to identify productive areas for further research in posthuman literary and cultural studies.

5. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical methodology, incorporating close textual analysis and thematic interpretation. The primary texts *Never Let Me Go* (2005) by Kazuo Ishiguro, *Oryx and Crake* (2003) by Margaret Atwood, and *The Circle* (2013) by Dave Eggers are read through the lens of

critical posthumanism. These novels were selected because they collectively span the major thematic concerns of posthuman fiction: biotechnology and cloning, ecological catastrophe, corporate surveillance, digital identity, and the erosion of human interiority.

Interdisciplinary methods are employed throughout, drawing on cultural studies, ecocriticism, digital humanities, and critical theory. Secondary sources include scholarly monographs, peer-reviewed articles, and theoretical essays by Haraway, Hayles, Braidotti, Wolfe, and others. The interpretive framework is dialogic rather than prescriptive theoretical perspectives inform and are complicated by the literary texts themselves.

6. Literature Review

Scholarly interest in posthumanism within literary and cultural analysis has grown considerably over the past two decades. Research has engaged the representation of cyborgs, artificial intelligence, ecological catastrophe, biotechnology, and the digitisation of human consciousness across modern literature.

Baelo-Allué and Calvo-Pascual's *Transhumanism and Posthumanism in Twenty-First Century Narrative* (2021) examines how contemporary narratives drawing on Atwood,

Gibson, and DeLillo portray technological progress through dystopian, AI-centred, and ecological frameworks. Pramod K. Nayar situates posthumanism as a direct challenge to anthropocentrism, pressing for a recognition of the interconnectivity of humans, technology, and the natural world. The edited collection *The Posthuman Condition in Twenty-First-Century Literature and Culture* identifies posthumanism as one of the leading theoretical lenses for contemporary analysis, drawing on feminist, disability, environmental humanities, and digital culture studies.

Academic work on science fiction and dystopian literature has similarly shown how literary narratives give form to cultural fears about surveillance technologies, bioengineering, and artificial intelligence. The three primary texts examined here have each received substantial critical attention as works that contest the premises of technological modernity.

A gap persists, however. Most existing scholarship concentrates on the technological or philosophical dimensions of posthumanism without adequate attention to the cultural anxieties that fiction both records and produces. The psychological, ethical, and affective dimensions of the posthuman condition remain underexplored. The bulk of

existing research also focuses on Western literary traditions, leaving voices from the Global South and non-Western philosophical frameworks largely marginalised. This paper addresses these lacunae by placing cultural anxiety as both subject matter and textual effect at the centre of the analysis.

7. Analysis and Discussion

7.1 Technology and the Problem of Human Identity

Technology, in posthumanist literature, does not simply change the world. It changes what it means to inhabit the world as a human being. Technical progress unsettles embodiment, individuality, and consciousness raising questions that cannot be answered by pointing to capability alone. What remains of the human when its defining boundaries keep moving?

Never Let Me Go confronts this problem with devastating emotional precision. Ishiguro's clones Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth are bred as organ donors. Their bodies have been instrumentalised by a society that refuses to recognise them as full human subjects. Despite their capacity for love, grief, and creative expression, they are classified as means rather than ends, processed through institutional structures that render their lives disposable. Ishiguro deploys a tone of quiet resignation

throughout, and that tone is not incidental to the novel's critique; it amplifies the horror. The reader understands, more clearly than the protagonists do, the full weight of what has been taken from them. Technology functions here as a mechanism of social control, an extension of existing hierarchies of power into the biological.

The Circle offers a parallel, if differently textured, critique. Set in a near-future Silicon Valley dominated by a single omnipotent technology company, the novel tracks the dissolution of privacy and individuality under conditions of total digital surveillance. Mae Holland, the protagonist, progressively surrenders her private self to the company's logic of radical transparency. What reads as voluntary participation is, on closer inspection, a sustained process of colonizing authentic selfhood consumed by the imperative of constant visibility and quantification. Eggers diagnoses digital capitalism's transformation of human subjects into data-producing nodes within a surveillance apparatus, one that operates not through coercion but through the seductive promise of connectivity and belonging. The novel's critique is all the more unsettling for being entirely plausible.

7.2 Artificial Intelligence and the Crisis of Human Singularity

Artificial intelligence threatens something that other technologies do not. It challenges the assumption that human cognition, creativity, and moral agency are singular that there is something irreducibly human about the way we think and decide. This challenge generates a distinct form of cultural anxiety, one that runs through posthuman fiction with increasing urgency.

William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), though it precedes the twenty-first century, established the essential imaginative vocabulary within which subsequent posthuman fiction operates. In Gibson's world, human consciousness is equivalent to a data set transferable, copyable, vulnerable to manipulation within digital networks. Identity, in such a framework, is no longer stable or bounded. It is mutable, distributed, uncertain. These imaginative possibilities have taken on a new urgency as AI systems grow more sophisticated and more embedded in everyday life.

The shared cultural anxiety about artificial intelligence is expressed in many registers: displacement of employment, algorithmic bias, simulated emotion, the attribution of moral status to non-human entities. Contemporary literature registers these anxieties with increasing sophistication. As AI systems demonstrate capabilities once thought to be

distinctly human composing music, generating narrative, making consequential decisions fiction becomes a space for interrogating the experiential and ethical dimensions of these developments in ways that philosophical or technical discourse cannot fully address.

7.3 Ecological Disaster and Posthuman Consciousness

Environmental destruction constitutes a third major theme in posthuman literary works, one intimately connected to the broader project of Anthropocene critique. The accelerating pace of climate change, habitat destruction, and mass extinction compels a fundamental reconsideration of the human relationship with the natural world and posthuman fiction takes that compulsion seriously.

Oryx and Crake depicts a future wrecked by the consequences of unchecked genetic manipulation, corporate excess, and ecological indifference. Snowman the sole surviving human inhabits a world overrun by engineered species and the monstrous byproducts of scientific hubris. Atwood traces the causal chain from corporate irresponsibility to planetary catastrophe with forensic clarity, making the anthropocentric assumption that nature exists primarily as a resource. The novel functions as a cautionary allegory, staging in

fictional form the real-world logic that prioritises profit over ecological survival.

Posthuman fiction more broadly challenges the conception of humans as sovereign masters of the natural world, proposing instead that human lives are participants in complex, interdependent ecosystems. This ecocritical dimension aligns with the posthumanist insistence on relational ontology, the understanding that human existence is always already entangled with non-human forces, processes, and entities. Literary engagement with ecological anxiety performs a critical function: it makes visible the systemic and often invisible dimensions of environmental crisis.

7.4 Digital Culture, Hyperreality, and Psychosocial Dislocation

Digital culture has produced new configurations of identity, community, and experience that contemporary literature examines with particular care. Social media, virtual reality, and digital simulation have altered the texture of daily life in ways that are both seductive and destabilising.

Hyperreality, the condition in which simulated or mediated experience replaces direct engagement with the world is a recurring theme in contemporary fiction. Drawing on Jean

Baudrillard's theoretical work, one can identify in novels like *The Circle* a sustained critique of how digital capitalism reduces emotional life to quantifiable data. Characters in such narratives struggle to maintain a coherent sense of self within environments saturated by algorithmic mediation. The result is a specific kind of loneliness not the loneliness of isolation but of being perpetually visible, perpetually responsive, perpetually watched.

The prominence of algorithms, recommendation systems, and data architectures generates anxieties about autonomy and individuation that posthuman fiction is positioned to explore. By staging the affective experience of living inside digital systems, literary texts offer forms of insight that complement and sometimes exceed the more abstract analyses of critical theory.

7.5 Ethical and Philosophical Considerations

Posthuman fiction consistently raises ethical questions that resist easy resolution. What constitutes humanity in an age of biotechnological enhancement and artificial intelligence? Can machines possess moral standing? Is the genetic engineering of living organisms ever justified? How should human communities relate to non-human entities? These are not hypothetical questions. They are

pressing dimensions of contemporary ethical life.

The literary texts examined here illustrate the ethical ambiguity of highly technologised societies with unusual clarity. In *Never Let Me Go*, Hailsham society exploits cloned bodies with a social ease that reveals the fragility of ethical consensus how quickly a community can normalise the disposability of others when institutional interest demands it. In *Oryx and Crake*, scientific advances proceed without ethical oversight, and the consequences are ecological and existential catastrophe. In *The Circle*, the logic of transparency and connectivity conceals surveillance mechanisms that corrode democratic life.

Posthumanism functions, in this respect, as a mode of ethical alertness. By dramatising the consequences of failing to interrogate the trajectory of technological development, posthuman fiction urges readers to attend to their moral responsibilities within increasingly technologised social structures. Braidotti's notion of the posthuman as a "cartography" of the present a mapping of existing conditions that opens space for imagining alternative futures is particularly relevant here.

8. Emerging Themes and Global Perspectives in Posthuman Fiction

The canonical texts of posthuman fiction have largely emerged from Anglo-American and Western European traditions, but the field is being significantly reshaped by voices from other cultural contexts. Writers from South Asia, East Asia, Africa, and Latin America are engaging with posthumanist themes in ways that carry different philosophical and political freight. Cixin Liu's *The Three-Body Problem* approaches questions of human vulnerability and cosmic indifference from a perspective shaped by Chinese history and Maoist political trauma, generating a posthumanism of distinctly different character from that found in Atwood or Ishiguro.

Indian philosophical traditions including concepts of interconnectedness and non-dualism found in Advaita Vedanta and Buddhist thought offer productive points of comparison with Western posthumanist theory. The insistence on the relational and interdependent nature of all beings resonates directly with the posthumanist critique of liberal individualism, suggesting the possibility of a more globally inclusive posthumanist literary criticism. Future research might productively trace these convergences and divergences.

The emergence of climate fiction cli-fi as a distinct literary genre represents another

significant development. Works such as Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* and Richard Powers's *The Overstory* engage ecological anxiety in ways that extend the posthumanist critique of anthropocentrism while also attending to the affective dimensions of living through climate change. The growing body of cli-fi suggests that ecological anxiety will remain a defining concern of twenty-first-century fiction for the foreseeable future.

9. Future Directions for Research

The field of posthumanism in literary studies continues to expand, and several areas merit particular attention in future inquiry.

First, the relationship between artificial intelligence and literary production. AI-generated fiction raises significant questions about creativity, intentionality, and literary value that posthumanist literary criticism is well placed to address. Second, posthuman feminism remains an underexplored area despite its theoretical richness. The intersection of gender, embodiment, and technology as it relates to reproductive technologies, cybernetic bodies, and the politics of care deserves sustained critical attention.

Third, as noted above, non-Western philosophical traditions represent a substantial and largely untapped resource for posthumanist

frameworks. Comparisons between Western posthumanism and South Asian, East Asian, African, and Indigenous worldviews have the potential to significantly expand and complicate the field. Fourth, digital humanities offers powerful methodological tools for the analysis of posthuman fiction, including computational approaches to genre, theme, and narrative structure. Productive collaborations between literary scholars and digital humanists could yield important new insights.

Fifth, the growing prominence of disability studies within posthumanist discourse opens questions about the fixed assumptions embedded in both transhumanist and critical posthumanist frameworks. Literary representations of disability, prosthesis, and bodily difference provide counterpoints to dominant narratives of technological enhancement that deserve more sustained critical engagement.

10. Conclusion

This paper has argued that posthumanism offers an indispensable framework for understanding cultural transformation in an era defined by artificial intelligence, biotechnology, environmental destruction, and the fragmentation of human identity. Using critical posthumanism as an analytical lens and drawing on the theoretical work of Haraway,

Hayles, Braidotti, and Wolfe it has examined how three contemporary novels register and interrogate these conditions.

Never Let Me Go, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Circle* are united by a shared scepticism about technological modernity and by a refusal to accept easy reassurances about the human. Ishiguro's meditation on cloning and dehumanisation, Atwood's vision of ecological collapse, and Eggers's anatomy of digital surveillance collectively demonstrate that technology without ethical reflection produces isolation, moral incoherence, and a pervasive existential dread. These novels are not dystopian fantasies. They are, in their different ways, accounts of where existing trajectories lead.

Posthumanism, however, is not only a literature of loss. It asks for a radical rethinking of connections between humans, technologies, and nature not to lament the dissolution of the coherent human subject but to insist on ethical accountability within a condition of profound interconnection. Literature's role in this project is irreplaceable. It gives people the space to comprehend the abstract implications of posthumanism at the level of feeling and experience, where they actually matter.

As the century progresses, the questions posed by posthuman narratives will not become less

pressing. The study of posthumanism in literary and cultural life will, accordingly, need to grow in scope, rigour, and global reach. This paper represents one step in that larger project.

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