

## An Exploration of Human Identity in the Post humanist World: A Reading on Max Barry's *Machine Man*

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### Abstract

*This study attempts to analyse how the emerging concept of posthumanism is a threat to human identity. In an era characterised by rapid technological advancements, posthumanism surpasses anthropocentric approaches in challenging humanised notions and perspectives, leaving threats on erasures of human innate identities. To cope with the emerging world, human beings transform themselves physically, ethically, and emotionally. This paper delves into the multifaceted terrain of posthumanism, exploring its theoretical underpinnings, cultural manifestations, and implications for human beings' collective future. It also embarks on a comprehensive exploration of identity erasure within the context of posthumanism, dissecting the complex interplay between technology and human subjectivity.*

**Keywords:** Posthuman, Cyborg, Hybridity, Erasure, Identity.

Critics offer diverse perspectives and interpretations, sometimes offer even diverging viewpoints within the broader post-humanist umbrella. Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* sheds light on the anxieties surrounding identity erasure after the increase in technological advancements. According to Haraway, "cyborg" is a hybrid figure that establishes constant interaction and exchange to expand on diverse experiences and backgrounds in the existing world (150). She cautions

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against techno-determinism, where technology becomes a dictator in social and cultural transformation. She stresses the importance of understanding individuals and communities' agency in interacting with technological advancements as a key shaping factor. Overall, Haraway highlights the fluidity of traditional categories such as race, gender, and class, which encourages the creation of new forms of kinship and promotes the interconnectedness of all beings in a posthuman world.

Rosi Braidotti in *The Posthuman* critiques the traditional humanist ideas that view humans as the pinnacle of existence and also adds that this thought has been a major cause of environmental degradation and social injustices. She embraces 'zoe-centric ethics'. This term encapsulates all living beings regardless of their ecological existence, underscoring the intrinsic value of all beings. So, Braidotti states that "posthumanism is the historical moment that traces a different discursive framework, looking more affirmatively towards new alternatives" (37). He says that it is necessary to acknowledge posthumanism instead of fearing the erasure of our identity. She also adds that one can retain agency in constructing one's own sense of self, despite allowing factors like technology to shape the human entity. Braidotti sets aside rigid ideological ideas and instead views the posthuman in terms of fluidity, complexity, and continuous exploration.

Francis Fukuyama, in *Our Posthuman Future*, elucidates the potent dangers of biotechnological enhancements and expresses concerns over the loss of human dignity and autonomy in a convoluted future. Fukuyama expresses concerns about the potential erosion of traditional human notions and moral status, raising the question of what truly defines human beings. Fukuyama asks, "The ultimate question raised by biotechnology is, what will happen to political rights once we are able to, in effect, breed some people with saddles on their backs, and others with boots and spurs?" (9). This could potentially result in the loss of individual authenticity within the collective human identity. Therefore, this work foresees the implications of blindly embracing the potential nature of biotechnology.

However, the post humanist concept opens up both possibilities and underlying challenges. Thereby, the posthuman is a hybrid figure. The posthuman challenges basic human stereotypes and reconstructs identities. The Enlightenment period serves as the foundation for post humanist thought. Enlightenment humanism emphasised using reason and logic to interpret the world, challenging established constructs and beliefs. It provided a shift away from relying completely on religious dogma or tradition, dispensing radical thought. Invariably, the evolution from humanist ideals to contemporary post humanist critiques represents a major shift from human-centric philosophy. Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Gilles Deleuze are notable key thinkers who deconstructed traditional ideas of identity and notions, opening the way for post humanist reconceptualization.

Michel Foucault's work, particularly in *The Order of Things* and *The History of Sexuality*, challenges the Enlightenment's conception of the human subject as a stable, universal entity. Foucault contends that power and knowledge discourses

construct notions of human identity rather than being inherent or natural. Butler argues that gender is not a stable identity or locus of agency but rather an identity repeatedly constituted over time, an "identity instituted through a stylised repetition of acts" (519).

Gilles Deleuze, often in collaboration with Felix Guattari, introduces the concept of 'becoming' in works such as *A Thousand Plateaus*. Deleuze and Guattari critique traditional metaphysics and its emphasis on static being, advocating instead for a philosophy of difference and becoming. They argue that identity is not fixed but is always in a state of becoming, influenced by connections, flows, and assemblages that cross human and non-human boundaries. This notion of identity has laid the groundwork for a posthuman reconceptualization of the human subject.

With reference to the concept of posthumanism, some critics raise concerns regarding the implications of identity erasure. The rise and intrusion of artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, virtual reality, augmented reality, robotics, etc. might confront individual identities in the human world. Posthumanism, as such, rejects the essentialist view of humans as a static and bounded identity. The genre delves more into the futuristic envisioning and futuristic becoming of the human world.

Understanding cyborg, the shortened form of 'cybernetic organism,' is important for investigating posthumanism. Any individual with artificial parts is known to be a cyborg. To narrow down and elaborate on cyborg, "A cyborg is characterized as a hybrid being that blurs the boundaries between human and machine, possessing both organic and technological components" (Halacy 1965). , Chris Hables Gray in "Cyborg Citizen: Politics in the Posthuman Age" offers a more captivating definition of a cyborg in a more alluring sense. He states: "A cyborg is described as an enhanced entity, incorporating technological augmentations to extend or improve its physical or cognitive abilities" (Gray 1995). This hybridity of the cyborg kindles the formation of the posthuman to deal with current limitations and enhance human capacities.

Posthumanism is essentially a shift away from anthropocentric perspectives and a post-anthropocentric approach. The emergence of posthumanism with complexity in conceptions of identity is a never-ending threat to the anthropocentric idea. The posthuman concept embraces the non-human agent in order to upgrade the human agent. It redefines human identity by reworking what it means to be human. The post humanist discourse is seen as a dissolution or reconfiguration of traditional approaches. Posthumanism, as such, is an evolving idea that challenges the traditional anthropocentric notions of human identity and existence. It is particularly concerned with advancing technology and its impact on society.

*Machine Man*, a novel by Max Barry published in 2011, provides a vivid portrayal of post humanist themes through the protagonist, Charles Neumann, who is a mechanical engineer working at Better Future, a military research company. As Wolfe underscores the role of technology in reshaping human psychology and

subjectivity in *The Post humanist Challenge to the Theory of History*, the novel *The Machine Man* also portrays the radical physical and psychological transformations the protagonist undergoes as a result of technological empowerment. The novel is a sheer example of how identities become fluid and malleable in a posthuman world. The novel also explores the problems and consequences on individuals and society in a post humanist world.

The protagonist, Charles Neumann, embodies the pursuit of self-improvement and the enhancement of his own abilities. He utilises technological support to achieve this. His belief that technology empowers and improves his capabilities makes him replace his limbs with machinery. Initially, he uses prosthetics after losing one of his legs in a hydraulic clamp. The limitations and dissatisfaction with using those prosthetics make him spend time creating new and comparatively more efficient prosthetics for himself. This transformation serves as a metaphor for the theme of identity erasure. He says:

I could kill people. And probably none of that said much about me. It was pointless to ponder who I was because I was whichever combination of chemicals happened to be sloshing around at that time. So, I decided not to search for a true self. I decided to choose who I wanted to be. (236)

The quest for perfection and enhancement leads to a loss of what fundamentally makes one human. The protagonist here focuses more on empowerment and enhancement but is unaware of the fact that he is getting disconnected from human emotions, relationships, and experiences, leaving behind a dehumanising effect.

The author raises concerns similar to those of Fukuyama in *Our Posthuman Future* about the potential loss of human dignity and autonomy dominated by technological manipulation in a posthuman world. Post humanists like N. Katherine Hayles, in her work *How We Became Posthuman*, explore the implications of viewing the body as mere information subject to upgrade or replacement. The dissolution of human essence is the vital concern put forth in the face of posthumanism. The interconnectedness of human and non-human beings is a root problem if there is a threat to the erasure of human emotions and senses. Neumaan states:

Is anyone really perfect? You can't be mostly perfect. You can't be perfect some of the time. You are either perfect or not. And I don't think biology does perfect. Biology is about efficient approximation. It's about good enough. A vacuum is perfect. Pi is perfect. Life is not. (178)

Charles Neumaan's transformation towards perfection began as a harmless act of replacing his cleaved foot with prosthetics, but the problem arose when he became dissatisfied with his human body's limitations and voluntarily started replacing his own body parts with mechanical enhancements. This enhancement improved his physical capabilities, making him unaware of his detachment from biological beings. This replacement erased the physical identification markers of his human identity.

Societal norms, suppositions, power, and hierarchical demands play a notable role in contributing to identity erasure in a post humanist world, as seen in the novel *The Machine Man*. The characters wrestle with the societal pressures of the commodification of identity, as hinted by Butler in *Undoing Gender*. Butler's work provides critical insights into how societal demands for identity transformation and erasure operate within frameworks of power and regulation. Zuboff posits that in a future dominated by surveillance, corporations will exert pressure on individuals to conform to prefabricated identities, thereby stifling their authentic selves. Charles Neumaan, driven by societal demands for productivity and perfection, undergoes extreme body modification that involves technological augmentation over human constraints. Better Future company exercises excessive authority and control over the life of Charles Neumann by monitoring and dictating his behavior. This surveillance and coercion put individual autonomy and agency at rock bottom. In the novel, identity becomes commodified and is manipulated by corporal interests. The novel transitions into a thriller mode as the Better Future company engages in high-speed chases and violence, using Charles Neumann as the first prototype in a program to build robot soldiers. Braidotti makes a similar claim in *The Posthuman*. Braidotti also explores how the posthumanism concept, along with capitalist interests and biotechnologies, might drive the commodification of human identity.

Charles Neumann observes a decline in social qualities as he transforms into a cybernetic organism, highlighting the social dimensions of human identity. The cybernetic organism could have all the potential to fulfil assigned works at the greatest rate of capability but would surely fail in guarding and coping with humanist emotions. Charles Neumann struggles to maintain a worthwhile relationship with his colleagues and his love, Lola Shanks, who is a physical therapist. This dimension of identity erasure and the disconnections from humanised feelings like empathy and other social emotions pertaining to the human community make the cybernetic organism an inefficient being for the traditional human identity. Even when individuals become more efficient because of technology, the essence of being human is lost unknowingly.

This notion is expounded by Gregg and Seigworth in *The Affect Theory Reader* that posthuman developments can both enrich and complicate emotional life. But Hayles argues that this convergence does not necessarily lead to the diminishment of human emotions but rather to a reconfiguration of the understanding of identity, embodiment, and emotionality in the digital age. When the protagonist becomes obsessed with the integration of technology and starts to prioritize technical enhancement over human innate emotions, he appears to be declining as a human. This erosion of human nature in Charles can be seen throughout the narrative.

Charles' transformation into a posthuman body or a cyborg blurs the boundary between man and machine, but it also leads to an inevitable loss of what is traditionally human. The non-human medium takes control, leaving behind anthropocentric notions. In the quest for physical perfection, the character loses his

intimacy with love and proper peer bonding. People in his own community begin to treat him as a machine rather than a human. *Machine Man* delves into the theme of diminishing personal connections by depicting the emotional detachment that arises with the characters' transition into cyborg-like entities. As Charles and his counterparts undergo the replacement of their organic human components, they concurrently forfeit elements of their emotion and psychology pivotal for fostering profound personal bonds. The novel implies that the core of the human experience, rooted in imperfections and vulnerabilities, is indispensable for cultivating meaningful relationships. However, this essence is jeopardised by the relentless pursuit of technological excellence.

The novel's portrayal of Charles' struggles to maintain relationships in the face of his metamorphosis resounds with Sherry Turkle's insights in *Alone Together*, where she sees how technology remodels social interactions and the sense of self. *The Machine Man* deals with the concerns of how technology could pave the way to disintegration, disconnection, isolation, and cessation in the human community. At first, Charles Neumaan perceives technology as a significant achievement and a valuable tool in his pursuit of happiness, as it enhances his efficiency in the transformation process. However, over time, he struggles to relate to those around him who have not undergone similar modifications. The idea of becoming more physically potent now makes him feel alienated. He begins seeing people as mere beings and even contemplates their emotions with behavioural patterns and other external elements, ignoring internalised emotions, leaving him detached from the actual world he belongs to. He finds it challenging to navigate social situations and form genuine connections, leading to a deepening sense of isolation and loneliness. Charles's struggle to connect with the human world in *Machine Man* is multifaceted, encompassing physical, emotional, and social barriers that arise from his technological enhancement and emotional detachment. His journey highlights the complexities and challenges of maintaining human connections in a world increasingly defined by technological advancement. Neumaan declares:

I guess it's always uncomfortable to discover you're not as individual as you thought. But it really bothered me. From one perspective, I was an independent animal, exercising free will in order to elicit predictable reactions from an inert vending machine. But from another, the vending machine was choosing to withhold snacks in order to extract predictable, mechanical reactions from young men. I couldn't figure out any objective reason to consider one scenario more likely than the other. (222)

The protagonist Neumaan's quest for physical perfection aligns well with the traditional ideas of masculinity that urge physical dominance and control. There is a constant need to assert power over his own physicality, transcending human limitations and achieving a state of invulnerability. Ultimately, *Machine Man* delves into the fluidity of masculine identity within a posthuman context, where technological enhancement blurs traditional boundaries and norms. Charles's journey of self-modification and transformation questions traditional ideas of

masculinity, emphasizing the flexibility of identity in a world where the human body is subject to arbitrary alteration and augmentation.

Charles's transformation into a posthuman entity is emblematic of the erosion of traditional human identity markers, as he willingly sacrifices his organic body parts in favour of technological enhancements. This process of identity erasure is not merely physical but also psychological and emotional, as Charles becomes increasingly detached from his humanity and struggles to maintain meaningful connections with others.

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