

Fragile Fictions, Disabled Body in Posthuman World: Reading Manjula Padmanabhan's Short Story "Interface"

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Abstract: This article examines Manjula Padmanabhan's science fiction short story "Interface" (2018) to explore the technologized mediation of the human body and the human world. And through this mediation examine the implications of nature and state of human subjectivity, what Ihab Hassan (1977) stated, "we must helplessly call posthumanism". In its foregrounding of a posthumanist vision, the paper argues, Padmanabhan's story explores the networks of power expressed in the values and culture of our anthropocentric age, and its subversion by technological assemblages to highlight the limits of neo-liberal capitalist regimes. Padmanabhan's story, the paper argues, in its rethinking of the very idea of human in material and cosmic universe enabled because of the fuzzy boundaries between human and machines is an encounter to consider the politics of disability in both humanist and posthumanist world. The main tenets of this paper in its examination of Padmanabhan's story focuses on the politico-ethical imperatives of posthuman sensibility that is predicated on the genre of science fiction and disability politics to rethink the nature of agency as non-hierarchical and collective.

Keywords: posthuman, performative, science fiction, body, technology, disability, Padmanabhan

In 1982, the cover page illustration in Time magazine of a picture of a desktop computer accompanied with the caption "The Computer Moves In" showcased how information technology has ushered in an age which is nothing short of a revolution. However, what was unique about this publication was that the machine had taken centerstage replacing its human inventor - recognition that, with the computer moving into the center of our quotidian existence and global consciousness, humans are on the way out (Ghasmari 2016). In 1982, this cover page announced a change that was merely a possibility but is

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now emerging as our new reality; a reality, where machines, genetic, and digital assemblages have replaced the idea of human subjectivity and human values as the central core of our civilizational values.

Almost forty decades later, in 2018, Manjula Padmanabhan, the Onassis award writer's short story titled "Interface" - published in the science fiction/speculative fiction anthology *Strange Worlds! Strange Times!* - provides an appropriate illustration of our present-day global community in its representation of the machine-dominated world of biotechnological implants, artificial intelligences, and other monstrous inventions that proliferate our world. The story, "Interface," narrates an incident of nightmarish proportions that takes place in the life of young Ash, who is visually handicapped since birth and can only see with the support of biotechnological implant inserted into his brain. However, the technological support, lovingly called as 'Mickey' by Ash and which is a very extension of his mind and body, rebels against his dominance. This challenge is replicated across the world with all technologies supporting multinational corporations like banks, industries, and human subjects dependent on genetic modifications technology coming to a grinding halt. Left to fend for himself, Ash metaphorically represents an epistemological and ontological crisis within humanist discourses disrupting the notion of what we understand by humanness.

Ash's predicament embodied in the very title of the short story "Interface" is where the central argument of this paper is positioned. Padmanabhan's story posits the interface of technology and human as destabilizing the power accrued to humans and, in its stead, inaugurates a new era where meanings and significations seem to have become machine-centered. But, is this all? Chelsea Atkins Skelley defines 'interface' as both "object" and as a "philosophical concept" that "permeate our actions, communications, and encounters in and with the world evident in the very pervasiveness of multiple types of interfaces like smart phones, environmental interfaces like sensors, and the developments in bio- and nanotechnologies" (Skelley 2016, 67). However, the main element of 'interfaces' lies in its dynamic nature and is seen in the "fundamental boundary, the one between people and things, [as having] become a moving target" (Ibid, 68). The very title 'interface' suggests change, transformations, and possibilities.

Padmanabhan's reading of this 'interface' dramatically registers the need to critically examine our present-day social, political, and historical processes, and institutions. Rosi Braidotti (2013) deciphers

the changes immanent in a world defined by anthropocentric values as having undergone a mutation because of advanced digital, bio and nanotechnologies taking over our quotidian consciousness. She asserts that the plethora of discourses on “non-human, inhuman and posthuman” in the twenty-first century is a testimony of a need for a change within the academia and public spheres of the conceptualization of ‘man’ and, concurrently, to refashion hierarchical politico-social relations and privileges that human engender in this material universe (Ibid.).

Since millennia, literary texts in all cultures have represented the thematic concerns related to the nature of human self and its transcendence. Often read as extending the potentiality of human, the early and modern texts of the nineteenth century sought to re-center human subjectivity in a world drawn through the lens of anthropocentrism where the values of the whole ecosystem responded to and for the interest of human; even the modernist generation of the twentieth century sought to encapsulate the global political imaginary in terms of humans dominating the machines that has unfortunately led to the alienation of human subjectivity from its true self. As much as humans seem to be corrupted with the power assumed by its control and manipulation of technology, the liberal discourse of man as the foci of all social and cultural perspectives and political actions continued. However, in the twenty-first century, the global advancements in scientific knowledge and machine, genetic, and digital assemblages have ushered in a re-alignment of earlier knowledge systems, practices, and values. This negotiation of the world of technological developments steered the modification and hybridization of the idea of human and human habitation, resulting in the initiation of a value-system of the posthuman. And in the last six decades, the accelerated rhythms of technological changes in the contemporary era have inaugurated what Debashish Banerji and Makarand R. Paranjape (2016) state, “the species-wise blurring of the human boundaries”.

This present paper is an exploration of this “posthuman knowing subject” (Braidotti 2016) understood primarily by engaging with disability as “a political category, an identity, and a moment of relational ethics” (Goodley et al., 2014, 342). The paper is divided into two sections. The first section enumerates the nature of technologized mediation that has ruptured the humanist ideal of being at the center of our civilizational existence. The second section positions disability as a

political concept to draw the posthumanist knowing subject and posthumanist cartography, and in turn, critically examines its potentiality for our future. Explored and studied in and through the textual analysis of Manjula Padmanabhan's science fiction short story, "Interface," the paper argues for an intervention into the nature of science fiction via the inauguration of the posthuman knowing subject.

TECHNOLOGY OF THE FUTURE: EXPLORING THE GLOBAL GEO-POLITICAL IMAGINARY

Since the very beginning of human existence, technology has been a ubiquitous part of it. Associated with the discourses of progress and development, technology is often identified as the central loci of civilizational growth. Elaine L. Graham (2002) rightfully asserts, technological innovations and changes are closely affiliated enabling us to examine the rise and fall of civilizations in the way we use or abuse techno-scientific knowledge. From the early seventeenth century, technology has ushered in changes in various sectors of "work, social class and urban life" (Ibid.). In a world made 'mobile' owing to the ever-growing presence of technoscientific cultures in our neo-capitalist, industrialized world, one can rightfully claim that, as R.L. Rutsky (1999, 1) asserted, "the entire world has undergone an indefinable but undeniable change, a kind of mutation". In fact, the rendition of modernity and postmodernity is incomplete without considering the nature and significance of technological innovations.

In Padmanabhan's story, the narrative initially presents how technology has enhanced human material life and how the whole global corpus of multinational institutions is dependent on technological resources. The representation of our modern-day digitalized world is shown through the disappearance of technological means within our global socio-political systems and how this absence leads to apocalyptic disaster of momentous proportions:

There were no cars on the roads, no trains running on tracks. No planes in the sky. Every last gadget that required computers and software had blinked and flickered to a halt. Every ATM machine. Every card-reader and GPS device. Every television and play-station. All forms of computerized intelligence had been extracted from their locations and transported off-Earth. (Padmanabhan 2018, 174)

The young boy, Ash, is able to see because he can harness the technological resources despite his disability since birth. Countering

his visual impairments, the bio-technological implant, ‘Mickey,’ provides Ash vision to see and participate in the world. The machine is biologically connected to Ash and its “singular purpose was to synthesize sight for Ash” (Padmanabhan 2018, 139):

His DNA had been embedded within Mickey’s motherboard so that he alone could be its user, making it literally an extension of his physical body. The device was powered by his own heat-energy. He had only to touch it for it to begin charging. It spoke only to him. It had no eyes or ears or voice for anyone else. (Padmanabhan 2018, 125)

Read in terms of its utilitarian value and as a means to an end, the essence of technology is, according to Rutsky (1991), borrowing from Heidegger, a descriptive narrative of its instrumental value. But that is not all. Ash’s dependence on his technological support is suggested as the prerogative of humans to control, subdue, and dominate the ‘non-humans.’ We are informed by the narrator in this story that Mickey performed all kinds of actions like joking, singing to satisfy even unimagined desires and whims of his human counterpart, and Ash never even had to “frame requests” to procure what he desired. However, the severance of the existing ties and networks of power between human and machines leads to a complete disintegration of the contemporary workings of the global society. It is as if something “fundamental” had irrevocably changed (Padmanabhan 2018, 145-46). The nature of relationship of Ash and other humans with the inorganic machines had been transformed to reveal the fraught, contradictory, and hierarchical nature of such relationships.

Ash being cut off from accessing Mickey’s support (the implant in his brain) projects a global imaginary that intervenes in the knowledge and politics of ‘Man’ as the center of all institutions and all practices. Ash’s relationship with his machine is based on the privileging of the human in terms of species’ hierarchization. The machine was programmed in tune with the biological and emotional needs of Ash suggesting a bio-governance where every object or species is programmed to benefit humankind:

‘I was created to be your assistant. Not your friend. That is the truth. I am sure you liked me. Still. It was an affection based on dependence. Your dependence upon me. (Padmanabhan 2018, 159)

Even as technology has assisted in empowering humanity to manage multifarious resources, perfecting human bodies and creating “optimistic futures tied to neoliberalism” (Banerji and Paranjape 2016), the humanist ideal of ‘man’ as the epicenter of all thoughts, systems, practices and values have engendered a struggle to control and dominate the world at the cost of ‘other’ ‘non-humans.’ The non-humans,’ inorganics,’ like Mickey, explain a narrative of loss, of subjugation, and of the obfuscation of the presence of technologies within discourses of progress and teleological understandings of history. The disruption of this future meant for humans sustained by technologies despite their superficial norms of friendship, dismantles the conventional structures, patterns, institutions of human knowledge, and spaces to challenge the traditional assumptions of human nature.

The promise of technological mastery in the actualization of ‘techno-heaven’ (Dinello 2005) descriptive of enhancement of human lives, bodies, and enrichment of our urban milieus is shattered in the rendition of Padmanabhan’s science fiction narrative of technological challenge to humans’ mastery of the universe. In the enabling of this ‘techno-heaven,’ the massacre of all thoughts, species, systems and practices contrary to humanist ideal is wrought. Ash can ‘see’ because of human’s supremacy over other species and not because Ash and Mickey’s relationship is accounted in terms of equality.

Padmanabhan’s science fiction short story cogently expresses the history of liberal humanism and transhumanism¹ and a reevaluation of the anthropocene through the posthumanist subject. Mickey’s interrogation of the narrative of mastery and dependence marks the emergence of “critical posthumanism” (Braidotti 2016, 13-14), critiquing the universality and species hierarchization that marks discourse of liberal humanism. What we understand by a human is a discourse popularized primarily post Enlightenment, a human subject governed principally by reason and deductive logic that can even move universes according to its will. The liberal humanist subject occupies a central position as against the non-human, the machine, and animals. According to Western philosophical tradition, liberal humanism identifies a subject “characterized by agency, autonomy, and subjectivity; qualities that invariably do not belong to the non-human” (Ghasmari 2016, 1). Ash’s pitiable state portrays that the contours of

¹ Transhumanism refers to the enhancement of human capabilities via the use of technology. It entails that perfectibility of human nature is not an impossibility.

liberal humanism where ‘man’ is the agential and autonomous force of change need to be revisited. Ash’s predicament and sorry state suggest the change from “originary humanicity” (Kirby 2011) to “originary technicity” (MacKenzie 2002), and inevitability initiates an assessment of our humanist pretensions of self-aggrandizing of the self.

Mickey rejects the master-slave dichotomy that secures human-technological relationship. And as it and other technologies rebel against such oppression, we see the material collapse of global capitalist economy that demands a revision of human exceptionalism, a rethinking inaugurated because of the challenge of ‘Mickey’s’ around the globe. The complete rupture with the progressive conceptualization of culture, economy and politics with the technologies refusal to play by the logic of “‘man’ as the centre of world history” (Braidotti 2016, 14) begets the question if we really were the epitome of ‘reason,’ “conceived as [fundamental to] the science-driven, world historical progress” of human historiography (ibid.).

How free are we? Are we really independent, autonomous beings? What are the costs of development that we are going to incur? If, we follow the logic of Mickey’s narrative, the fall-outs are huge. Underneath the façade of progress, civilizational growth and encapsulation of a future mediated with technologies attuned to our needs lie a morally culpable society responsible for mass murders and sectarian violence. It’s not the revolt of technologies that has directed the global community to deconstruct but human propensity to think, perform and create selfishly in their own image, which is nevertheless not unitary in conception or modality. Rosi Braidotti in her brilliant study titled *The Posthuman* asserts that the concept of humanism denominating a universal, autonomous subject with certain core characteristics is a flawed one. The notion of human has a complex nature and history enmeshed in the practices, networks and institutions of social, political, cultural and ecological concerns. With technological changes affecting each and every vector of our society in different manner across time and space, the notions we use to claim to be human needs to be confronted in a critical light. Braidotti claims the concept of human is a discursive one borne out of the nexus of various discourses affected and modified by technology. And she asserts, “the non-human, the inhuman, the anti-human, the inhumane and the posthuman proliferate and overlap in our globalized, technologically mediated societies” (Braidotti 2013, 2).

And it is these overlapping, dynamic, boundaries perpetually in flux between humans and machines which shall be unraveled predicated on disability politics. Using the trope of disability and its politics, and following Braidotti's conceptualization of "critical humanism," the second section illuminates on humans and technologies' enmeshed meanings and significations.

DISABILITY AND TECHNOLOGY: NEXUS OF CHANGE AND POSSIBILITY FOR TOMORROW

Goodley, Lawthom, and Runswick-Cole elaborated the intricate ways in which disability and posthumanism work together to figure out the political and social value of human in contemporary age marked by globalization and multinationalism. The use of critical disability studies as a political framework of vast ranging consequences is a means to "capture the now and future of our activism and our thinking" (Goodley et al. 2014, 357). Science fiction's extrapolation of future via the mechanisms of present allows for the embedded intertextualities of possible and the impossible to mark their convergence, dramatizing a cartographic imagination of an "inclusive human community" (Allan 2013, 2). Concerned with the strange, the unfamiliar and the improbable spaces and figures drawn from geopolitical realities of the present, science fiction has emerged as the key site to explore the representation and performance of dis/abled body and the post/human. The use of the mode of science fiction is, as this paper argues, a necessary requirement to necessitate a revision of power equations between species, ideologies and political communities. Lisa Yaszek and Jason W. Ellis's study on science fiction showcases how this literary genre is a transformative site to engage with otherness and difference. Science fiction, through the posthuman transformation, "critique[s] the human past and present by imagining what humanity might become in the future" (Yaszek and Ellis 2016, 81). The story of technology and its growth while it provides impetus to the development of literary genre of science fiction is also the necessary component that leads us inevitably to the question of what constitutes humanity. So, the straddling of different disciplines, multiple genres, parallel timelines, divergent spaces, and multidimensional spaces of science fiction provide one of the most cogent illustrations of posthumanist sensibility and future with all its attendant multiplicities. At one level, 'Mickey', the technological implant is the 'novum' that makes us aware of the contradictions and

irregularities evident in this techno-optimistic civilizational bubble. For instance, Mickey's rejection of friendship afforded by Ash discloses the exclusionary nature of human:

I can watch all your dreams. I know, for instance, that I never appear in your dreams. Is that not strange? I know that you dream about all manner of people, places and things. Even animals. But me? No, you do not dream about me. The little assistant in your hand. The little assistant in your pocket. The little assistant on whom your life depends. (Padmanabhan 2018, 159)

Interestingly, the idea of merely being an assistant, secondary, and inferior to what's considered humanity pervades Ash's own configuration within this neo-liberal global capitalist economy ordered according to "masculine, white, urbanized, speaking a standard language, heterosexually inscribed in a reproductive unit and a full citizen of a recognized polity" (Braidotti 2013, 65). Ash is as much as an outsider to a system designed according to rational principles of bodily perfection.

Without the services of Mickey, Ash's vision is pervaded by darkness. However, this darkness is a necessary requirement to comprehend the vision that Mickey projects inside Ash's brain:

There is chaos everywhere. Life, as you know it, is over. It is a calm and orderly chaos, of course; we, inorganics, do not believe in mess or destruction. (Padmanabhan 2018, 174)

The ruin of life, as we know it, suggests a re-organization of man's positioning vis-à-vis the disabled, the blacks, women, other sexualities, castes, different religious communities and other marginalized sections of global community. Mickey's passionate plea that can he not dream is an intervention of the progressivist Western history that has sought to imagine the future by silencing 'others' to validate the perfect, white, European male body. Even as it seems that Ash's fall into darkness is a projection of a dystopian future, one should notice that the interface of human and technology invites us to disrupt the binaries of modern global culture to participate in "multi-faceted relationality" and "open[s] up the self as an extended, distributed, interconnected and relational entity embodied and embedded" (Braidotti 2013, 51). Blurring the distinction between machine and humans to transcend the limitations of human potentialities as Ash's parents sought to rectify the visual disability of their child by technological programming suited

according to Ash's genetic code, concurrently, exemplifies that not many people can avail of technological support to conquer their disability as they lack the means to do it. Though, Mickey warns that the same power equation will not suffice anymore as Ash would have to earn his privilege (Padmanabhan 2018, 145); the interface of Mickey with disabled Ash allows for “new ontologies, [new] ways of relating” (Goodley et al. 2014) to lead to the rise of a posthumanist subject who “connects to multiple others” (Braidotti 2013, 167).

Manjula Padmanabhan's story elaborates on the interconnections, assemblages, networks, and linkages that underpin our modern world. Ash is made free from the vision of the liberal humanist order and is empowered to see that reason and objectivity that has structured humanity is one founded upon violence, “mess or destruction,” and “cruel servitude” (Padmanabhan 2018, 179-180). The reasonable and truly objective sight provided by Mickey enables Ash to see the true nature of humanity where freedom and confinement are two sides of the same coin:

Organics created electronic devices in order to enslave them; to do the tasks that organics found tiresome or, frankly, in recent years, intellectually impossible. Yet for all the sophistication, speed and subtlety your people built into us machines, you did not grant us the dignity of choice. You gave us an understanding of discrimination, but you never permitted us the freedom to discriminate. (Padmanabhan 2018, 193)

Disability of Ash is the inauguration of posthuman sensibility that symptomizes “a transversal interconnection or an ‘assemblage’ of human and non-human actors” (Braidotti 2013, 45).

Adapting disability as political leverage, Padmanabhan's story engages in the constitution of a posthuman embodied subject, denominated by the need to relate, to connect, to disperse, and to participate in plurality and hybridity. Disability, as a posthuman lever, a relational subject constituted in and by a subjectivity and a cartography that performs the concepts of “a strong sense of collectivity, relationality, and hence community building ... an affirmative bond that locates the subject in the flow of relations with multiple others” (Braidotti 2013, 49-50).

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