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Re-thinking Human Exceptionalism: A Study of the Select Works of Gary Snyder from the Perspective of Posthuman Ecology

Bapin Mallick*

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Abstract: *Despite the ongoing environmental issues caused by human-induced climate change and ecological damage, the dualism of nature and culture plays a very significant role in treating humans as superior to other forms of life. As a result, it is pertinent to rethink the conventional notion of "human", when the globe is in danger of experiencing a climate catastrophe. In his book The Posthuman Condition (2009), Robert Pepperell defines posthumanism as the era that follows humanism, characterised by a rapid transformation in the traditional understanding of what it means to be human. This transformation is driven by the increasing convergence of biology and technology, to the extent that they are becoming increasingly similar to each other.*[1] *Hence, it may be argued that the philosophical underpinnings of "posthumanism" raise a vital issue regarding the notion of human exceptionalism from various perspectives with a view to blurring the division between human and nonhuman. The present paper seeks to foreground the notion of "biocentric egalitarianism" with a view to advocating the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature. The focus will also be given on how Gary Snyder's powerful articulations play a very crucial role in addressing the ecological crisis of the contemporary world by dismantling the notion of human exceptionalism.*

Key Words: *Anthropocentrism, Posthumanism, Biocentric Egalitarianism, Intrinsic Value.*

*Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar College, West Bengal.
e-mail: bapin0022@gmail.com

The concept of human that we understand and perceive ourselves to be is not inherently natural or predetermined, nor is it solely a representation of our existence. It is an epistemological concept developed by the humanist knowledge system in the Enlightenment era that portrays the 'human' as both the subject/agent and object of knowledge. In the concluding paragraph of *The Order of Things (1966)*, Foucault discusses the historical emergence of the concept of 'man' thus:

> "…it was the effect of a change in the fundamental arrangements of knowledge. As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some events …were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of classical thought did, at the end of eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea"[2]

The concepts of "human" and "nonhuman" have been developed at the same time and in reference to each other to be placed in a binary equation. Hence, it may be argued that the concept of "human" is defined by its contrast or opposition to the 'Nonhuman'. Constructing a binary relationship between humans and nonhumans in politics requires highlighting their differences, which is then used to justify discrimination on various levels. The philosophy of humanism is partly responsible for the construction of the binary of nature and culture by placing human at the center of all discourses. Cary Wolfe, in the book *What Is Posthumanism?* (2009), discusses the creation of the notion of human and the political motivations behind it. In this context, Wolfe argues:

> "The philosophical and theoretical frameworks used by humanism to try to make good on those commitments reproduce the very kind of normative subjectivity— a specific concept of the human— that grounds discrimination against animals and disabled in the first place."[3]

Wolfe's remark "a specific concept of the human" relates to the idea of 'human' as an epistemic creation rather than something natural, similar to Foucault's perspective, and also places this construction within a historical framework. When examining any epistemological framework, such as masculinity, femininity, the Western perception of the East, or hetero-patriarchy's view of the LGBT community, we will uncover an underlying political agenda. Typically, these structures are established by a group with the primary aim of organising and rationalising types of suppression and bias against another group. We must grasp that the politics of the humanist knowledge system involve not only by creating a specific concept of the 'Human' as the focus of knowledge but also shaping a particular concept of the nonhuman.

Humanism prioritises the 'Human' in the epistemic cosmos, relegating the nonhuman to a marginalised sub-human status due to their binary relationship. It is an

extension of the "epistemological and ontological legacies of the Great Chain of Being, according to which the human has been granted a special position in the western hierarchical structure representing divine creation."[4] Francois Lyotard, in his 1979 work *The Postmodern Condition*, emphasises that knowledge in its postmodern state shifts away from a centralised system of knowledge creation. Postmodern knowledge dismantles anthropocentric meta-narratives on the concept of 'humanity'. It removes human from the central position in the knowledge system, where human is considered the sole subject and object of knowledge, and from any specific privileged position regarding concerns of meaning, information, and cognition. There is no epistemological framework in place at the knowledge centre that views non-human entities as inherently opposed to the concept of 'human'. The philosophy of posthumanism does not view the relationship between humans and non-humans as a binary or hierarchical categorization.

N. Katherine Hayles in her book *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) argues that the posthuman subject is a complex organism made up of diverse components, a material informational being, whose boundaries are constantly being formed and reformed.[5] The posthuman subject is a combination where the characteristics associated with humanism, both human and non-human, blend together and break down the traditional distinction. The posthuman is characterised by an infinite combination of (so-called) human and nonhuman signifiers in their subjectivity, language, body, and awareness. Hayles's remark elucidates that the Lyotardian model can demonstrate the process by which subjectivity becomes posthumanized. In this context, Lyotard argues, "…a self doesn't amount to much but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. One is always located at a post through which various messages pass"[6]. It is at this very point that the subjectivity of the liberal humanist becomes posthuman.

Gary Snyder, born on May 8, 1930, is an American poet, essayist, educator, and environmental activist. Although he first gained recognition in the 1950s as a prominent figure in the "Beat Generation", Snyder has subsequently used poetry and prose to raise a vital issue regarding the notion of human exceptionalism with a view to addressing the ecological issues of the contemporary world. Physical realism and careful observations of nature are interwoven in Snyder's work with inner knowledge derived mostly from Zen Buddhism. Snyder may be best known as an advocate for eco-conscious societies and the protection of natural areas, but he is more than just a "back-to-nature" poet with a shallow message. Snyder's poetry is often considered to be part of the San Francisco Renaissance with that of Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser, and Jack

Spicer; yet, his focus on metaphysics and glorification of the natural order distinguish his works from the overall tone of Beat poetry. Snyder has balanced his academic pursuits with periods of strenuous physical labour as a logger and trail builder, and he has sought inspiration for optimistic responses to the world from the Orient and Native American ideas.

Snyder shows deep concern for the destruction of trees in the Pacific Northwest because he had grown up in close proximity to nature. As a result, he developed an interest in and admiration for Indian traditions that emphasised coexistence with the natural world. In addition to his public school education in Portland and Seattle, Snyder enhanced his knowledge by reading about pioneer stories and Indian mythology. He grew more and more adept at mountain climbing and studied survival skills as his fascination with wild areas persisted. He became interested in the East as a model of a highly developed society that had preserved its ties to the natural world after seeing Chinese landscape paintings at the Seattle Art Museum. His first writings are characterised by a harmony between mental and physical work. Snyder relocated to the San Francisco Bay Area in the autumn of 1952 to attend Berkeley for the study of Oriental languages. He had started writing poetry about his time spent working in the bush and was already deeply absorbed in Zen Buddhism. Along with Philip Whalen, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac, he joined a group of writers who would later be hailed as the literary revolutionaries of the counterculture. Snyder, a scholar in anthropology and "primitive" societies, holds myth and ritual in the highest regard as indications of the symbiotic relationship between humans and the natural world.

Snyder writes with an emphasis on environmental awareness in several of his poems. In his 1974 Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *Turtle Island*, the poet successfully locates the self ecologically in its acts and relationships with the environment. In the modern United States, it is still considered one of the most popular and influential collections of poetry. *Turtle Island* more vividly portrays Snyder than any of his earlier collections, painting a picture of a Northern American resident who stubbornly holds on to the "Earth household" he has advocated and discussed in his prose writings. In addition to a large number of poems, this book also features five articles that foregrounds environmental issues such as overpopulation, pollution, and excessive consumption. Along with addressing these serious issues, he shares his thoughts on the importance of knowing one's bioregion and area, the intimate relationship of ancient societies to their soil, and the role of poetry in deconstructing the notion of anthropocentrism.

During the time that *Turtle Island* was written, there was a surge in environmental consciousness due to laws and events such as the Clean Air Act, the Endangered Species

Act, the first Earth Day, and others that began in the 1970s. This book was well-received by American readers because it dealt with issues and crises that were pertinent to their daily lives.

Turtle Island, as seen through a posthuman ecological lens, demonstrates Snyder's ability to promote environmental consciousness and offer an alternative perspective by dismantling the dichotomy of nature and culture. In this book, the author writes:

> "Man's careless use of resources and his total dependence on certain substances such as fossil fuels... are having harmful effects on all the other members of the life-network... in fact mankind has become a locust-like blight on the planet that will leave a bare cupboard for its own children— all the while in a kind of Addict's Dream of affluence, comfort, eternal— progress using the great achievements of science to produce software and swill."[7]

The collection is centred around this theme, which encourages readers to consider their activities from a long-term ecological perspective and find answers to the ecological crisis that is not so far from us. A posthuman ecological interpretation of Snyder's poetry seeks to stress the point that humans are not the superior species of the Earth; rather, they are a part of the whole ecosystem as Barry Commoner has rightly pointed out that "everything is connected to everything else"[8]. In the first section of *Turtle Island*, "Manzanita", Snyder begins to build an ecological vision of a balanced and reasonable life rooted in the history of the indigenous people of this continent, rather than its immigrant population. This vision is based on the poem "Anasazi". The ecologically harmonious lifestyle of the indigenous peoples who lived before the Hopi of the American Southwest is portrayed in this poem. Snyder starts his collection with "Anasazi" since it establishes the tone for the entire book.

The poem "Anasazi" has the musical quality of an incantation or hymn of gratitude. Several of the astonishing hundred-room villages built by the Anasazi in the region's cliffs and caves are still standing today. Protected from both violent rivals and bad weather, these cliff dwellings consisted of rows of rectangular rooms used for living and storing goods that were "tucked up" into the rock faces. The mountaintops provided an ideal environment for their crops, which included "strict fields of maize and beans". In this context, "strict" refers to the use of time-tested agricultural practices that are safe for the planet. The Anasazi's sinking "deeper and deeper in earth" could be either a real or symbolic depth. The actual meaning of "kivas" is that these underground chambers served as both dwelling quarters and ceremonial sites for the indigenous people who lived there for generations. Deeper and deeper, nevertheless, reveals the closeness of the Native American people to the natural world. The fact that they cultivated their food on dirt, resided on Earth, and even worshipped the Earth demonstrates their profound respect and affection for it.

The rituals performed in the kiva are emphasised in the lines "Up to your hips in Gods/your head all turned to eagle-down/lightening for knees and elbows"[9] which address the interconnectedness of the natural elements and lead up to a communal celebration of life. It is clear from their pagan beliefs that all forms of life have intrinsic value which is beyond the utilitarian perspective of humans. Elements of nature played an integral role in their ceremonies; for instance, pollen stood for growth and fertility, and eagle feathers became headdresses. It vividly demonstrates that they coexist peacefully with all living things on Earth. The poetry incorporates these natural occurrences, such as "eagle-down", "lightening", and "eyes pollen", to glorify nature and the Anasazi people, who had a deep association with the natural world.

Along with other mammals, the Anasazis made their homes in caves and on sheer rock faces in this particular bioregion. Snyder cites these indigenous communities as examples of human organisation that has survived the relentless pursuit of material wealth at the expense of its people and the planet. Their connection to the land is marked by a spirit of innovation and progress. The Anansazi way of life and its connection to the environment are vividly depicted in the several passages that make up this poem. Snyder repeats the opening line of his poem at the conclusion. The Anasazi word's recurrence suggests a full cycle, which alludes to the holistic perspective of deep ecology in a different way. Even though they relied on the environment for survival, primitive people never sought to transform it into an instrument or a commodity. Snyder argues that modern humans are immature compared to the prehistoric people because they embrace the philosophy of coexistence.

"The Way West, Underground" takes us back to a time when Native Americans maintain ecological harmony through the practise of their traditional rituals. Many American caves that were inhabited by the Palaeolithic people feature paintings of the god bear. The essay "Ritual—The Pattern that Connects" by Dolores LaChapelle delves more into the relevance of these rituals that dismantles the notion of human centric worldview by advocating the deep association between human and the non-human. In this context, LaChapelle writes:

> "Ritual is essential because it is truly the pattern that connects. It provides communication at all levels... and throughout all these levels between the human and the non-human in the natural environment. Ritual provides us with a tool for learning to think logically, analogically, and ecologically as we move towards a sustainable culture... Most important of all, perhaps, is that during rituals we have the experience, unique in our culture, of neither opposing nature or trying to be in communion with nature, but of finding ourselves within nature, and that is the key to sustainable culture."[10]

Snyder continues by attempting to demonstrate that nature provides stillness, and by extension, spiritual strength, in the poem "Without". Various religious traditions advocate for monastic silence as a spiritual practice for a number of reasons, such as to help with deity worship and to reach higher levels of spiritual purity. While trying to absorb the stillness of nature into himself, the narrator also absorbs the strength of nature. Snyder adds a unique undertone to the concept of silence. This highlights our indissoluble connection with the non-human environment, as the voices of natural world are consistently assumed to be silent. In his essay "Nature and Silence", Christopher Manes argues that our culture considers humans as speaking subject. Hence, nature is considered as a silent object to be exploited for the sake of humans. Our modern language sprang from humanism in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, a movement that masked natural processes with cultural obsessions and ideas that had nothing in common with them. But in animistic societies, even inanimate objects like rocks, rivers, trees, etc. are thought to have spirit and to be capable of speech and cognition. Its ability to speak its native tongue and engage in conversation with humans is widely believed. It is believed that the ancient fisherman and hunters were masters of this language, and that anyone who dared to ignore it would face certain doom. In this context, Peter Duerr argues that "people do not exploit a nature that speaks to them" (92). Unfortunately, our civilization is not developed enough to listen to nature, and this lack of wisdom sows the seeds of exploitation.

Snyder gives an ecological vision in "Mid-August at Sourdough Lookout", which is actually informed by both scientific understanding and Zen Buddhism. Both the land and the person are brought to light in the poem by deconstructing the traditional boundary between nature and culture. The poem highlights how insignificant humans are in comparison to the vastness of the cosmos. Snyder spent time on the tiny Japanese island of Suwanosejima (1954–1968) interacting with indigenous people in order to put his theories into action. In this poem, Snyder paints an image of tranquilly and solitude. The poet finds solace in a life lived simply, next to nature. The poet is against the rampant materialism that creates the dichotomy of human and the non-human. In the poem "Water", which appears in *Riprap*, the poet writes:

> "Pressure of sun on the rockslide
> Whirled me in a dizzy hop-and-step descent,
> Pool of pebbles buzzed in a Juniper shadow,
> Tiny tongue of a this-year rattlesnake flicked,
> I leaped, laughing for little boulder-color coil—
> Pounded by heat raced down the slabs to the creek
> Deep tumbling under arching walls and stuck

Whole head and shoulders in the water:
Stretched full on cobble— ears roaring
Eyes open aching from the cold and faced a trout."[11]

A careful reading of the poem reveals that Snyder dismantles the anthropocentric bias of considering human as superior to non-human. Instead of portraying humans as the central of all discourses, he blurs the artificial boundary of human and non-human by advocating the philosophy of intrinsic value of all organisms. This is demonstrated in the final line of the poem, where he finds himself confronted with a fish. Although the poem reads like a recounting of a real incident, it actually conveys religious and ecological issues by demonstrating the symbiotic relationship between human and the non-human. Snyder stresses that everything is interconnected and that no part of the world is more important than any other.

"The Dead by the Side of the Road" tells the tale of five distinct creatures: a fawn, a ringtail, a skunk, a red-tailed hawk, and a doe. Every single one of these animals has met its demise at the hands of humans, whether on purpose or by accident. In this poem, the interstates serve as a metaphor for the extensive infiltration and penetration of nature by humans; furthermore, roads in general and roads in particular can cut deep into wildness. The animals slaughtered by humans as they tear through the wilderness and ruin everything in their path are metaphors for the destructive force that man has unleashed on the natural world.

In an effort to inspire a shift in perspective, Snyder incorporates the deep ecology tenets into the poem. The goal of the philosophy of posthumanism is to help people grow as individuals by fostering a sense of oneness with all forms of life. Instead of viewing humans as separate entities, these philosophers see them as an integral part of the whole biotic community. Consequently, we rescue ourselves by developing an expansive outlook. In contrast with the philosophy of consumerism and materialism, posthumanism advocates the philosophy of biocentric egalitarianism that helps us to reevaluate the conventional definition of the term "human" for the sake establishing a harmonious coexistence between man and nature. It predicts that unless we change our egocentric beliefs and practices, we will destroy the Earth and all the beautiful and diverse life that lives on it. Hence, Snyder's powerful articulations play a very crucial role in promoting ecological sustainability by raising certain questions against the notion of human exceptionalism.

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