



**A POSTHUMAN AND POSTNORMAL VISION OF LIFE
IN SUFIA HUMAYUN'S *UNDER THE CURRENTS***

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Abstract

The current study probes Sufia Humayun's short story *Under the Currents* (2024) from the perspective of posthumanism and postnormalism. The short story is analyzed through the theoretical model of Posthumanism by Rosi Braidotti (2019) and Postnormalism by Ziauddin Sardar (2010). The story projects an image of a dystopian world where man compromises his long-established supremacy to ecological and technological forces. Furthermore, the story depicts postnormal times where chaos, complexity, and contradiction reign supreme. The story shows a village stuck in its past traditions and a confusing modern world of technological advancement and climate change. The characters face the problem of migration and struggle to find a place in a rapidly advancing world. Furthermore, there is a fictional COVID-19 equivalent to the actual COVID pandemic, limiting human agency and life. In addition, there is a flood of disinformation projecting a vision of a post-truth era in the short story. The humans trapped in ecological and technological space differ widely from the man of the Enlightenment, where man was deemed to be the center of the universe and a superior being compared to other species. The study uses close reading as a tool for the textual analysis of the story. Thus, the study suggests readjustment of human agency with ecological and technological forces in posthuman and postnormal conditions represented in Sufia Humayun's short story.

Keywords: *Ecology and Ecological Collapse, Enlightenment, Forced Migration, Pandemic, Posthumanism, Postnormalism.*

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1. Introduction

Sufia Humayun's *Shattered Echoes* (2024) begins with a short story *Under the Currents* projecting the changing relationship between human and non-human forces. The villagers are caught in an ecological crisis where deforestation and climate change have caused mental and physical loss for the characters. The narrative represents a dystopian image marked by ecological disturbance and digital interference. Further, the story represents a chaotic world where the traditional belief system is disrupted by phantoms and technology. Deforestation has displaced graveyard ghosts into human houses. Climate change has brought drought and water scarcity. Graveyards are overcrowded after the COVID-19 pandemic. All these happenings contribute to a man-decentered world where traditional thinking and order are collapsed.

The story represents a postnormal scenario where traditional life seems threatened by technological and ecological forces. The physical setting of the story portrays a village where ghosts dwelt in the graveyard trees a long time ago. However, due to human activities of cutting down trees, the ghosts have now taken their abode inside houses, haunting human lives. A girl named Kiran is strangely obsessed with her smart Vision O glasses, blurring the line between her fantasy and reality. Villagers face existential problems like water shortage and drought. Furthermore, the post-COVID-19 pandemic scenario leaves no space for more burials in the village cemeteries due to the heavy death toll of the pandemic. Dadi, horrified at the news of scary deaths, sees it as a sign of the apocalypse. People are obsessed with sanitizer syndrome, and there are rumors about vaccines making humans infertile. Dadi's herbal medicines cannot cure modern diseases like anxiety and depression. Young people take risky online loans or play deadly games.

The study integrates Rosi Braidotti's posthumanism and Sardar Ziauddin's postnormalism for probing this human predicament represented by Sufia Humayun's *Under the Currents*. Braidotti (2013) is critical of the universal idea of man as superior and topmost creature in hierarchy as claimed by Classical Humanism. She rejects classical humanism on the grounds that it historically privileges a specific Eurocentric identity. She argues that "the human of Humanism is a very specific being: male, white, European, able-bodied and heterosexual" (p. 26). She believes that human identity is interconnected with networks of relationships involving technological, social, and environmental forces. She writes that "humans are relational subjects who need to be constituted and studied in multiplicity" (p. 49). This theoretical lens helps us to explain the distribution of agency within the story where human agency is compromised. The reconceptualization is important for understanding the text where human agency appear connected with non-human forces. Therefore, through Rosi Braidotti's posthuman framework, the text may be interpreted as showcasing a world that displaces the traditional human order and reshapes identity through an assemblage of complex networks.

Furthermore, Ziauddin Sardar's notions of Postnormalism also provide useful insight for our understanding of the paranormal, fantastical, and dream-like happenings in the story. According to Sardar (2010), we no longer live in normal world. Climate crisis, financial collapse, pandemics, political instability, energy shortages, rising inequality, and distrust in leaders are all happening simultaneously. We are in postnormal times, which are neither old nor modern, rather a transitional period marked by instability and uncertainty regarding the future (p.1). Sardar explains the postnormal period through three forces: "complexity, chaos, and contradiction" (p.1). According to Sardar, the world is complex and interconnected. In the era of globalization, nothing exists alone, and all problems are connected in a chain of cause-and-effect relationships. In addition, complexity results in chaos where small actions can create drastic consequences. This paranormal society is full of contradictory situations where, on one hand, technology changes rapidly, but poverty and social inequality escalate further. Padoxically, the growth of technology leads to the decline in the index of human development (p.2).

Rosi Braidotti's concept of Posthumanism and Ziauddin Sardar's Postnormalism help us to understand the chaotic and supernatural world of the story. As the social world of the story becomes increasingly chaotic, complex, and contradictory, human subjectivity also seems decentered and compromised. In such a paranormal world represented by the story, chaos leads to uncertainty, and the traditional human subject dissolves into networks of ecological and technological forces.

Research question:

How does Sufia Humayun's short story, *Under the Currents*, represent the postnormal and posthuman condition?

2. Theoretical framework

The study uses the theoretical framework of posthumanism and postnormalism to interpret Sufia Humayun's *Under the Currents*. Rosi Braidotti's concepts presented through *The Posthuman* (2013) and *A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities* (2019) serve as a theoretical lens for probing the text of the story. Furthermore, Ziauddin Sardar's theory of *Postnormalism*, presented in *Welcome to Postnormal Times* (2010) is deployed for explaining the postnormal conditions of life projected in Sufia Humayun's *Under the Currents*.

Braidotti (2013) redefines humans by taking a decisive move from the enlightenment idea of "man" as "supreme, superior, white, male, Europeans, and heterosexual being" (p.46). She criticizes the outdated notions of humanism and argues that this figure has historically excluded women, colonized subjects, racial minorities, animals, and the environment. Therefore, the so called "universal human" is actually transformed into a posthuman subject (p.46). She writes that the posthuman subject is relational and embedded in non-human agencies. This means the posthuman identity is not

autonomous and fixed; rather it is closely related to and shaped by technological, environmental, and social factors.

Further, Braidotti (2019) writes that the traditional humanist idea of “Man” as a universal and rational subject is no more valid. The posthuman turn challenges the Eurocentric belief that this figure represents all of humanity. Instead, the category of “Man” has lost its supreme authority and is now seen as historically constructed and limited (p.5). Drawing on Donna Haraway (1997), Braidotti notes that “Man” has shifted from being a natural category to becoming a kind of ideological brand. Similarly, referring to Brian Massumi (1998), she explains this condition as the emergence of the “Ex-Man,” which means a subject that has moved beyond conventional humanist definitions (p.5). She further explains, with reference to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) that this transition leads to an “anthropological exodus,” a process in which human identity becomes increasingly hybrid and interconnected with technology, animals, and other non-human forces (p.5).

Ziauddin Sardar (2010) writes that humans are living in an in-between stage where old beliefs, traditions, and systems are dying out, but new conventions have not fully developed yet. He describes this period through chaos, complexity and contradictions as three main C’s (p.1). He also points out that even though knowledge is increasing, our ignorance is also growing because new technologies and developments create “unknown unknowns” and constant uncertainty (p.1). According to Sardar, the modern ideas of progress, efficiency, and control no longer solve problems; instead, they often create new risks. Therefore, he suggests that instead of trying to control everything, we should respond with humility, ethical awareness, and openness to different perspectives.

Ziauddin Sardar (2010) further expands his theory by stating that the three C’s combine together to create uncertainties (p.1).

3. Research methodology

The study employs a qualitative and interpretative design to analyze *Sufia Humayun’s Under the Currents*. Janelle Brannan (2017) defines qualitative study as a type of research that explores and provides deeper insights into real-world problems. He explains that, instead of collecting numerical data-points or intervening or introducing treatments, just like in quantitative research, qualitative research helps generate hypotheses to further investigate and understand quantitative data. The primary text used for analysis is *Under the Currents* (2024). Secondary sources include scholarly journals and research articles. The study uses close reading technique for the textual analysis of the story. Fontana and Frey (2005) defines close reading as consisting of three progressive readings: the first asks “What does the text say?”, focusing on surface content; the second asks “How does the text work?”, analyzing literary devices, structure, and language; and the third explores “What does the text mean?”, interpreting symbolic or thematic significance.

4. Analysis

Rosi Braidotti (2013) through *The Posthuman* challenges classical humanism and proposes a relational understanding of subjectivity. She writes that “the posthuman subject is a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity” (p. 49). She further writes that posthuman subjectivity is structured through “multiple ecologies of belonging” (p.193). For Braidotti, human subjectivity may be seen as connected with non-human forces. She uses the term “relational assemblage” to define man. (p.49). Man is not projected as the center of universe, rather a subject who is closely related to technological, environmental, and other forces. Therefore, the human self is constituted and compromised through interaction with interconnected ecological systems.

This condition of human subject and human self seems visible in Sufia Humayun’s *Under the Currents*. From the beginning of the story, non-human entities and forces dominate the narrative space. The story depicts a fragmented world where humans are closely connected to technology, ecology, ghosts, and unstable socio-economic systems. Through images of phantoms and surveillance devices like Vision-O, the story reflects conditions where man appears a posthuman and postnormal subject. The phantoms are presented as ancient ecological beings embedded within the landscape as: “There once lived phantoms as tall as the white poplar. Residing in the necropolis, on dense branches of trees as old as the years in a century” (p. 17). The phantoms are inseparable from trees, death spaces, time, and place of narrative setting. The geography of graveyard functions as living archive, preserving memory, death and non-human life. Looked from the posthuman perspective, human self and agency in the story is trans(formed) by these ecological and spectral networks.

Braidotti questions man’s superior position with regard to other species. Posthumanism therefore displaces the human from the position of sovereign master and conceptualizes subjectivity as relational. Braidotti writes that “appeals to the ‘human’ are always discriminatory: they create structural distinctions and inequalities among different categories of humans, let alone between humans and non-humans” (p.5). The story seems to challenge the humanist’s hierarchical and exclusionary notions of man’s superiority in relation to other species and non-human forces. Braidotti writes that “if the categorization of *man* is discriminatory, then the claim of human mastery over non-human forces seems ontologically uncertain” (p.7). This theoretical position becomes visible in Humayun’s narrative when the relationship between human and non-human forces disrupts through violent intervention: “Dadi told Kiran, when the boys of the village in a wild fury had their abodes-the necropolis trees-chopped off” (p. 17). The villagers act from a position of assumed superiority by destroying the necropolis trees as if ecological spaces are subordinate to human will. However, this act produces posthuman consequences rather than restoring human dominance.

Hayles (2000) writes that “humans can either go gently into that goodnight, joining the dinosaurs as a species that once ruled the earth but is now obsolete, or hang on for a while longer by becoming machines themselves... the age of the human is drawing to a close” (p.283). Similarly, Ferrando (2014) writes that “the uniqueness of posthumanism lies in the fact that by not getting rid of humanism, it is able to remain faithful to the premises and scientific and philosophical accuracy of the dispute and deliberations, and not to succumb to the Enlightenment myths” (p.5). These theorists write about the end of humanism and beginning of a new era in which humans exist in a world of technological domination. Sofia Humayun’s short story projects decentering of human authority as non-human forces reshapes spaces considered once exclusively human. The displaced phantoms return in an act of fury and revenge as “Now they skulk around everywhere shifting shapes. Sleep under charpoys of villagers, eat from their pots and swipe their Vision-Os” (p. 17). Instead of disappearing, the phantoms trespass domestic and technological spaces thereby destabilizing the boundary between human and nonhuman domains. Thus, humans are displaced from the position of masters to co-inhabitants with other supernatural forces. The domestic sphere and technological devices are no longer exclusively human controlled territories. Resultantly, humans compromise their dominant position in their traditional habitat and give space and agency to ecological and technological forces in their former sphere of influence.

Braidotti writes that “the posthuman knowing subject has to be understood as a relational embodied and embedded, affective and accountable entity and not only as a transcendental consciousness” (p. 1). The posthuman subject is not a separate entity, rather it is an embedded entity formed through connections. This idea of relational identity is visible in Kiran’s attachment to Vision-O. The narrator states; “**Kiran slumped on a chair, stooped over the Vision-O. The screen swiped up every time the reel finished**” (p. 17). Her body moves with the rhythm of the device. Her posture moves with its vibrations. Her attention span is controlled by it. She is physically and emotionally embedded in a technological system. Her modern tech-glasses Vision-O becomes part of her embodied existence. Her mother Zaitoon cries all the time remembering her son Hayyan who went on a dangerous journey to Iran but never returned. Vision O shows her glimpses of Hayyan’s life. Braidotti writes that “**the human is a historical construct that became a social convention about human nature**” (p. 26). In posthuman conditions, technology becomes part of subjectivity. Vision-O replaces natural experiences and human comfort. Kiran has never experienced real rain. Instead the Vision-O spread its screen as big as the wall itself to play virtual rainfall. Nature is replaced by simulation, showing technological mediation of reality. Love for rain understood traditionally as human feeling is processed by an algorithm. Actuality is replaced by virtuality. Consequently, Vision-O blurs the line between reality and virtuality creating hyper-real scenario in the story.

Braidotti's posthuman subject encompasses multiple dimensions linked with one another and exerting influence on humans. Braidotti adopts a materialist approach, and inscribes the "Anthropocene as a multi-layered posthuman predicament that includes the environmental, socio-economic, and affective and psychic dimensions of our ecologies of belonging" (p.2). In the story, Vision-O acts independently without instructions of its user as visible in Kiran's comment; "Bhaiyya! It's Vision-O who dialed your number. It saw mother moaning" (p. 28). The device not only observes but decides and intervenes. Later, it physically evades control as the narrator writes: "Kiran tittered while trying to grab the Vision-O levitating in the air. But the Vision-O dodged and moved away" (p.28). The Vision-O seems to take control of its movements. It does not obey its human users and acts according to its own will. Furthermore, it anticipates Kiran's desire to experience real rain. It displays digital rain to help Kiran fall asleep. It seems that the posthuman survival depends on technological simulation, not ecological restoration.

In his formulation of postnormal times, Ziauddin Sardar relates modern society to "chaos, contradictions, and complexity" (p.1). Sufia Humayun's short story reflects this postnormal condition. Children participate in dangerous online video games. People take instant mobile loans and face suicide when unable to repay. Even writers fear replacement by AI systems like ChatGPT. The text highlights: "Kids plunged from tall buildings to meet challenges playing whale games. Whereas, others shot foes online or offline playing PubG.... And a man in desperate need of money took a loan, click away loans... so incessantly that everyone knew that he was hiding... when his hiding was public news, not knowing how to regain his dignity, he just committed suicide" (p.20). Such instances from the text link with Sardar's concept that technological progress creates instability. Therefore, the narrative dramatize a postnormal world in which technology intensifies uncertainty. It entangles humans in an assemblage of machines.

The fictional Covid-19 pandemic in the story reflects the factual covid-19 pandemic. It generates more instability and damage representing a condition what Sardar calls postnormal times. Sardar (2010) writes that: "a localised endemic became a pandemic thanks to the speed with which we travel to different parts of the globe" (p.3). Sardar thinks that epidemics spread rapidly in a globalized society due to rapid movement of people. Sardar thinks that global mobility push local crisis into global catastrophes. In Humayun's story, Covid-19 spread rapidly and uncontrollably while society struggles to understand the health crisis. The story highlights the chaotic nature of pandemic as: "And every wave had different variants and a new variant had waves of its own. The death tolls were different in the morning and different in the evening" (p.24). Thus, the uncontrollable pandemic created situation of panic, fear, and chaos for people.

Postnormal times are connected with the proliferation of misinformation and competing knowledge claims. Sardar writes that "we are more connected and

interconnected than any other time in history” (p.4). The dominant trait of the postnormal condition is the flood of disinformation. Sardar writes that “it seems that nowadays we do not communicate to live; but live to communicate. (p.4). Social media and digital communication amplify confusion rather than clarity. The story depicts this situation where everybody began producing various interpretations of the pandemic as: “Dadi with eyes fixed on the screen, kept reciting the mantra ‘qayamat ki nishaniyaan hain’... Dadi wasn’t alone in philosophizing the malleable situation. Almost everyone everywhere became a doctor on social media handles, blending myths and medicines” (p.24).

Similarly, fear of the disease made people superstitious and extra cautious about their hygiene as: “people started sanitizing practically everything: hands, door knobs, shopping bags, car doors, car steering, clothes, shoes, laptops and phones” (p. 24). These reactions show how proliferation of misinformation created anxiety, and fear in people. The pandemic created a paranormal environment where scientific knowledge was mixed with fear and rumor. Resultantly, the pandemic episode resonates with Sardar’s idea that postnormal times result in collapse of authority and knowledge systems.

Moreover, this condition of disinformation may be interpreted through the concept of Lee McIntyre’s idea of post-truth in his book *Post-Truth* (2020). Lee McIntyre (2020) writes that: “Post-truth is the political subordination of reality” (p.11). This shows a cultural moment in which objective facts lose their authority. In the post-truth era, objective facts lose their authority while emotional belief and personal interpretation begin to dominate public perception. In post-truth environments, existing fears and narratives dominate scientific knowledge. In Humayun’s short story, news and social media present misinformation as truth blurring public perception. The statement, “almost everyone, everywhere became a doctor on social media handles, blending myths and medicines” (p. 24), reflects a collapse of epistemic authority, where expertise is replaced by opinion. Similarly, Dadi’s interpretation of the pandemic shows how religious beliefs overpower scientific reasoning. Therefore, the fictional pandemic becomes a means of projecting religious theologies, mythologies and pharmacology.

The obsessive sanitization practices show the psychological distortion created by fear in Humayun’s story. During fear and panic, humans are unable to differentiate between rumors and authentic knowledge. Their fears blur their judgment ability creating psychological dislocation and mental dissonance. The text projects the proliferation of misinformation representing condition of post-truth era. The post-truth environment of the story hints that nothing is really true and people cannot discern what to believe and what to discard. This suspension of human judgement, the blurring of reality and actuality and facts and fictions characterizes the post-truth condition in the short story. Therefore, the proliferation of misinformation seems to be an epistemological shift in postnormal times, where truth is uncertain and replaced by emotionally charged narratives.

Additionally, the Covid-19 pandemic in the story challenges the humanist belief on human dominance as pointed out by Rosi Braidotti. The Covid crisis exposes the fragility of human existence. Man is exposed to an existential threat and his position become dependent than independent. Even a microscopic non-human entity can challenge global superpowers and their supremacy. The death tolls of Covid-19 present vulnerability of human existence: “People were cooped up inside their homes, infected or not. But sooner than expected, people kept dying and the death toll popped up... as the waves changed from 1st to 3rd wave and so on” (p,23). The superpowers claimed to have found the vaccination for cure but still the death toll persisted. The pandemic exposed how humans are fragile in front of such incurable diseases. Therefore, the story repeatedly highlights the dilemma of the posthuman subjects and their dependence for life in a global health crisis.

The environmental crisis in the story also reflects postnormal times where climate change produces instability and uncertainty. Sardar quotes the report of the Global Humanitarian Forum as: **global warming is now causing 300,000 deaths a year and is directly affecting 300 million people in the least developed countries. Over half of the world’s poor are vulnerable... that brings hunger, disease, poverty and lost livelihood”** (p.7). It shows the essence of postnormal times where environmental change poses a threat to human survival. Climate change creates unpredictable weather changes such as drought, and sudden rainfalls and floods. The world of *Under the Currents* is under threat due to global warming and climate change as Dadi notes: “The weather became cranky—either no rain at all or floods that buried everything” (p.24). The environment oscillates between extremes, producing both drought and destructive flooding. What was once freely available in nature is now commodified and artificially packaged. The situation becomes even more alarming when the government allows only **one bucket of water per month**, and Kiran has **never seen rain**. Dadi remembers a time when houses had courtyard trees, people swam in flowing streams, and children ate *peelon* fruit from nature. In the present, however, water must be requested online and delivered through high-speed service, while rain exists only as a hyper-real simulation generated by Vision-O. Nature is therefore transformed from lived ecological experience into nostalgia or digital reproduction.

The final flood scene seems of the most dramatic representations of the posthuman and postnormal condition. Rain, long absent and yearned for, arrives with destructive force as:” The rain water had started seeping in through the cracks in the ceiling now” (p.48) The two-story cemetery collapses symbolizing the failure of attempts to control space and death. Zaitoon runs upstairs with Kiran, prioritizing survival, while Dadi remains seated, reciting prayers as water rises around her. Human vulnerability becomes starkly visible. Nature is neither romanticized nor fully conquerable; it is unstable,

unpredictable, and overwhelming. Through Braidotti's lens, this reflects the posthuman condition in which human beings are not masters of the environment but weak participant victims. Through Sardar's framework, it exemplifies postnormal reality where drought and flood coexist, and crises layer upon one another without clear resolution. To conclude, the survival of posthuman subject seems impossible in posthuman and postnormal world. Human survival depends on a readjustment of the calculus of man, ecology and technology

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Under the Currents* represents a world shaped by posthuman and postnormal realities. Through ecological and technological images like the beetles, phantoms, and the Vision-O device, the story shows that human beings are no longer independent or superior; instead, human agency is greatly compromised by technology, ecology, and other nonhuman forces as suggested by Rosi Braidotti. Similarly, the climatic uncertainty, the confusion during the pandemic, and the painful journeys of migration in Humayun's story reflect the uncertainty, contradictions, and chaos projected by Ziauddin Sardar's idea of Postnormal Times. The open and unresolved ending suggests that the fictional world of the short story is caught in a period of transition, where old systems have collapsed, and no clear future is visible on the horizon. The question for human beings is whether they pursue the dream of their dominancy of nature of humanism or make re-adjustment with ecological and technological forces of the postnormal and posthuman times.

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