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## Emerging Realities: A dialectic inquiry of posthuman vision in Margaret Atwood's *the heart goes last*

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### Abstract

The rapid strides in science and technology have ushered 21<sup>st</sup> century society into the posthuman age. The overt use of machines in all aspects of life is a defining feature of this new century. Furthermore, the fusion of human and non-human has come to define this era, bringing new concepts that are deeply woven into the dynamics, structures, and meanings of society. As digital realities develop, the traditional division is challenged by a conflict between traditional beliefs and avant-garde humanism. In this changing environment, Braidotti and Hayles support the 'posthuman dialectic', a notion that challenges human exceptionalism and emphasizes the interconnectedness of all beings. These philosophers advocate for a fresh perspective on how humans interact with non-human elements. Their ideology views the human as being complementary to technology rather than completely at odds with it.

In contemporary society, Margaret Atwood's novel *The Heart Goes Last* (2015) deftly navigates this posthuman dialectic's fabric, delving deeply into the multidimensional human interaction. It further questions the human autonomy in the digital era. This study aims to explore the complex nature of the posthuman identity and determine the limits of biological being. Further, Atwood's narrative of the 'Positron project' within the story ventures into posthuman realities, provoking a consideration of techno-politics, which directly impacts identity, agency, and power. Using dialectic posthumanism as a tool, this paper seeks to define the complex phenomenon to find one's individuality in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** Posthuman Dialectic; Identity; Agency; Power; Techno-politics

### 1. Introduction

The 21<sup>st</sup> century's posthuman era has begun because of the enormous scientific and technological breakthroughs that have led to a profound shift in civilization. This period is characterized by the intricate intertwining of human and non-human entities, which is transforming social structures and challenging established divisions. At the vanguard of this paradigm change, philosophers like Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, P.K. Nair, Jurgen Habermas, and N. Katherine Hayles participate in a conversation that sheds light on the nuanced terrain of posthumanism. Braidotti provides a novel viewpoint on the developing posthuman world. As an empirical endeavor, she views posthuman theory as testing the potential of modern, biotechnologically mediated bodies (31). The relationship between humans and non-humans is redefined by her reasoning, which questions conventional dichotomies.

Furthermore, Ahab Hassan coined the term "posthumanism" in his 1977 article *Prometheus as Performer*. Our understanding of how technological and cultural shifts impact human identity has been broadened by Hassan's notion in postmodern literary and cultural discussions. Hassan's concept of "posthumanism," which bridges the gap between the postmodern and an ill-defined era, encapsulates the spirit of a changing civilization. Through the dialectical lens, his posthumanism acknowledges the changing character of human existence rather than denying humanity.

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## 2. The Posthuman Dialectical Approach

As we enter posthumanism, scholars and literary figures scrutinize its essence and implications for our society's future. Drawing on philosophical roots like Descartes' mind-body dualism and Marxian synthesis, posthuman dialecticism strikes a middle ground. It neither entirely opposes nor wholeheartedly embraces the technocratic society. This approach echoes the 'Victorian compromise,' which seeks to balance ideas between science and religion to keep pace with emerging realities. This approach shares a boundary line with Haraway's cyborgian identity, which is neither isolated nor merged but mixed up. Hence, the meeting point of different entities remains complex. One can understand this dialectic approach through the table:

**Table 1** Comparative Representation of Key Philosophical and Scientific Concepts

Idealism	Materialism
Science	Religion
Logic	Reason
Ideas	Action
Mind	Body
Thesis	Antithesis
Bio	Mechanical

These contrasting ideas are taken together on philosophical grounds to see the link between two seemingly disparate elements. Here, the posthuman dialectic synthetically looks at the relation between bio and mechanical. On this notion, Haraway makes the 'cyborgs' bodies comprise bio and mechanical qualities. Hence, to see their relationship, one may adopt the dialectic approach, which equates both aspects, but the extent to which one goes remains incomprehensible. This complexity is further denoted by post-structuralism, where Derrida uses the dialectic approach to criticize the nature of meaning. For the sake of argument, 'instability or cohesiveness' can be taken as a balanced approach that literally carries the dialectic nature. This paper also takes the dialectic approach to see the technological implications on identity, agency, and power.

## 3. Implication in contemporary society

One can debate the different ideas on human sociability to see the technocratic realities. Here, for example, the various power structures of Marxian capitalist society alternate. Scientists and corporations are the capitalists, not the bourgeoisie, in a technocratic society. Human-technology communication generates a dialectic tension consistent with focus on communicative action. Habermas states in *On the Pragmatics of Communication* that "the task of universal pragmatics is to identify and reconstruct universal conditions of possible mutual understanding" (21). This emphasizes how crucial good communication is in the digital era. However, the question of how much people rely on technology pops up. Current concerns about identity, agency, and power systems require consideration, even though some people may dismiss this reality optimally. It is necessary to make assumptions regarding the degree of human reliance on technology to comprehend these problems. The complicated interaction between people and technology, which is crucial for solving contemporary issues, is oversimplified when technology is declared the enemy of society. Science and technology are unquestionably the gifts of modernism, as evidenced by inventions and discoveries. Technology has given us things like outside parking cars and even security dogs. 'Dogs' are much emphasized here because of their predecessors to modern surveillance cameras. Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last* is a moving piece of writing that highlights this progress in contemporary society. However, the story's technological advancement comes at a cost, when devices such as identity encoders, body chips, security cameras, and neurotic cells are used to change people's identities and breach their privacy. The narrative illustrates the dangers of combining technology and human identity, showing how the dark web and media may compromise security and exploit people.

As the story of *Consilience* emphasizes the impending catastrophe, the "Consilience model will be attacked! Just as one rat is insignificant, a million rats are an infestation, a plague. It will be assaulted from all sides by what appear to be minor forces at first, but when combined into a mob, those forces are not small; they are disastrous (139). Jocelyn's confrontation with Charmaine, which exposes the *Consilience* project's dark side, emphasizes this posthuman dystopian

future even more: “I’m your security, I’m your bodyguard, I’m supposed to keep you safe” (302). Charmaine continues to be deceived by Consilience, which leads to the social media exposure of her nude pictures.

In line with Habermas’s idea of “communicative rationality” from *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), this technological exploitation of privacy calls for a critical analysis of the digital public sphere. This conflict between technology and communicative values emphasizes the necessity of a dialectical analysis platform. Braidotti asserts that “nomadic subjectivity” is adaptable and flexible toward technology. Her human subjectivity is open-ended, acknowledging both human and non-human components simultaneously. Braidotti critiques the “humanism of the analytically posthuman” for failing to consider experimentation with new subjectivities and trying to moralize technology (PLBS, 43).

Her method encourages slippage and fluidity by eschewing binary oppositions and fixed identities. This is consistent with posthuman perspectives that value plurality and diversity in forming new worlds. P.K. Nair’s work *Posthumanism* delves deeper into the ethical issues raised by avant-garde post-humanity. Since, ethical vision also poses a politics of response and responsibility toward all forms of life, toward difference, Nair highlights the necessity for response and responsibility toward all life forms in his critique of the ethical implications of rapid technological progress (48). In his critique of conventional dichotomies, Nair encourages readers to consider the ethical ramifications of technological determinism. He focuses on the moral dilemmas raised by privacy, autonomy, and agency in the changing interaction between humans and technology. In her book *How We Became Posthuman*, N. Katherine Hayles, a well-known voice in posthumanist discourse, also questions conventional wisdom and argues for a more complex understanding that transcends the physical-digital divide. Reimagining human-nonhuman relationships through a dialectical approach, Hayles is well-known for her significant contributions to conversations about technology, culture, and human identity. She emphasizes how “it undercuts dichotomies by having one turn into the other” (Hayles 211). She challenges the conventional division of mind and body and advocates for an approach that welcomes physical experiences in digital settings. She claims that “subjectivity is constituted by the crossing of the materiality of informatics with the immateriality of information” (193), which reshapes self and identity and forces a critical reevaluation of human-subject boundaries. This emphasis on the materiality of information is central to her posthumanist framework. Hayles’ examination of sociological and cultural ramifications offers a solid basis for comprehending complexity, particularly in literary works such as *The Heart Goes Last* by Margaret Atwood. This book brings up the reification of technology and the impact of power dynamics on developing a posthuman future.

In the passage, “A pale pink smear lingers in the west, from where the sun has set; there’s a light dusting of snow,” Atwood depicts the society of the twenty-first century (199). Posthuman society represents the idea that conventionalities are pointless since they are described as an emerging light on long-stranded snow on earth. The earth’s regeneration necessitates the sustainability or rebirth of sociocultural demands. Therefore, the sustainability of sociocultural needs aligns with the core of ‘glocalization,’ or ‘post-humanization,’ as I would put it. Through the promotion of ecologically friendly and culturally sensitive sustainable practices, the central concept here combines local and global elements to promote regeneration.

Post-humanization encourages community involvement and ownership of regenerative efforts by integrating local resources, customs, and knowledge into global programs. This strategy guarantees that revitalization initiatives are customized to the unique requirements and environment of the neighborhood, producing more lasting and efficient results. Furthermore, Atwood uses glocalization to unite personal and universal agencies into a single entity to advocate for sustainability, while Roland Robertson uses it to promote local and global socioeconomic culture. The technology in the Atwoodian notion promotes ‘glocalization,’ in which the entire audience is linked together like a family. The whole human body is encoded, no one is alien, nothing is concealed, and connectivity is more robust than usual. Identity and privacy are hazy concepts in a society where everything is controlled and standardized. Because global standards rather than local ones now govern human identity, privacy, and autonomy, this global uniformity gives rise to romantic worries. This new phenomenon poses serious risks related to contemporary identity and agency concerns. I would refer to this endeavor as the ‘Posthuman Utopian Project’ because it is motivated by Hayles’ critical viewpoints and aims to solve this issue. This Utopian project reiterates activities or theoretical systems that investigate and interact with the idea of neutral posthumanism.

In *The Heart Goes Last*, Margaret Atwood’s Positron Project is portrayed as a utopian solution to Charmaine and Stan’s problems. This project provides a remedy for current identity and socioeconomic instability problems. The narrative centers on a society called “Consilience,” where its citizens alternate between living in luxury and being imprisoned each month. According to the narrator, each person has been given an alternate. Therefore, a detached residential home may accommodate at least four people: the civilians will occupy the houses in Month One, followed by the inmates from Month One, who will assume civilian responsibilities and move into the houses in Month Two. And so it will continue to

turn and turn around month after month. (55) Residents contribute to Consilience's general operation by working in the community during their 'downtime' while living in their cozy houses. The prospect of stability and security entices Charmaine and Stan to sign up for the project. But as they become accustomed to the routine, they learn of Consilience's dark side. Dark secrets, such as manipulation, surveillance, and immoral experimentation, are concealed within the supposedly ideal community. For instance, scientists create and serve genetically engineered chickens to the public.

"Dangerous chemicals in the chickens, and everyone was eating them?" the Aurora asks incredulously. Of course not; those were organic chicks. However, the hens may be a part of a horrible experiment (210). The community's health and society are at risk in this situation. Atwood tries to find the facts and caution about the possible repercussions of eating these chickens through her character, Aurora. Later, Charmaine is caught up in an enigmatic liaison with her "alternating" counterpart, Max, creating a web of lies and intrigue. Charmaine becomes caught up in a convoluted plot hatched by the influential people in Consilience as she discovers the truth about the project. She continues to be imprisoned by positron blasphemy despite her cries for adverse outcomes, which eventually ruins and harms her relationships. This episode focuses on how society gets caught up in identity politics and showcases Atwood's distinctive fusion of psychological tension, social critique, and dystopian aspects. In this case, technology, cybernetics, identity codes, and gene hacking are the capitalists rather than the traditional bourgeoisie.

The 'Positron Project' explores the moral and ethical ramifications of sacrificing freedom for the visual appeal of security and is a metaphor for society's control. Braidotti in her book *The Posthuman* states, "Just as they are being reshuffled by the spinning machine of advanced, bio-genetic capitalism," (88). The blurring of categorical distinctions and their reassertion as novel forms of bio-political, bio-mediated political economy with well-known patterns of dominance and exclusion must be considered concurrently by critical theory.

The plot parallels the politics of relationships and the body. As a character, Aurora is still essential in distinguishing between the posthuman consumer and the producer. She uses technology to improve her skills and create the body economy and security. Aurora's fundamental focus is still on the welfare of society, even though it is surrounded by people with diverse interests, such as those who hack bodies, misuse identities, and deceive spouses. It demonstrates that, although using technology to improve her skills, she vehemently opposes any detrimental impacts on relationships. She views the husband-wife relationship as crucial and believes that one may remain faithful to their spouse despite technology and the internet. The fact that she works as a human resource coordinator draws attention to relationship betrayal. Charmaine is told by Aurora, "It's your data.

You are very trustworthy in every manner; I'm convinced of it. Loyal to the core" (116). Aurora visits nearly every couple in the positron to reestablish allegiance and impart relationship values. It demonstrates her commitment to her work as a family affairs coordinator and restorer of universal human rights. Atwood expresses alarm about the posthuman mindset in Aurora. Addressing the societal demand for human affection and obligations is urgent and must be clarified. Beyond bare lust, this sexual contact causes relationships to fall apart and couples to deceive one another. A high-tech culture combined with this facet of human nature puts human values on the verge of extinction.

By showing how technology and human nature interact, Atwood highlights how they are intertwined. While the exterior body adopts technology to increase efficiency, the fundamental human nature is negatively impacted. In Atwood's vision of a future, when virtues like 'Aurorian' hospitality, loyalty, and vision are crucial, characters like Jasmine and Charmaine mirror human history. This new humanity is consistent with Braidotti's idea of the 'Vitruvian model,' which depicts 'Man' as a rational animal rather than the traditional picture of 'Man' as a self-centered rational entity.

Braidotti promotes this paradigm, which moves the emphasis away from humans and undermines established hierarchies. She contends that this method challenges how the humanities—particularly theory—are frequently employed to marginalize and control culture (144). Her idea of a posthuman utopia strives for balance, dismantling obstacles and giving equal weight to all facets of life. Haraway's cyborg concept, which supports human decentralization, is comparable to this theory.

The post-structural philosophy of deferral, which disavows the notion of a fixed center in any object, is consistent with the idea that humanity is not at the center. Because the reference to this presence will remain a deferral, Evink states that "the temporization of difference is, on the one hand, the orientation towards an ultimate presence, and on the other hand, the inevitable failure to reach this presence" (436). As a result, the interaction between technology and human subjectivity is seen as dynamic and ever-changing.

Furthermore, technology both influences and undermines the essence of human nature in the society shown in *The Heart Goes Last*. The incorporation of robotic parts into the human body is a glaring illustration of how mechanical

reproduction gradually supplants humans. This idea is emphasized in the story by Gary's comment regarding 'possibilibots' products: "He knows what they're making at Possibilibots." Some refer to them as slut machines or replica ladies. With a hint of resentment, he muses, "Maybe all women should be robots: the flesh-and-blood ones are out of control" (204). This change points to a future in which Possibilibots—human-like robots—will do all jobs, making manual labor economically obsolete and causing widespread malnutrition and hunger. The narrator's assertion that "these enemies, if they succeeded, would destroy everyone's job security and very way of life" highlights the widespread problem of work scarcity in Consilience society. (139). Atwood contends that technology threatens human society even though it is considered advantageous. The story forewarns of the destructive potential of technology, implying that it will be difficult to prevent its adverse effects if it exceeds human control.

Furthermore, contemporary technical models have advanced to previously unheard-of heights. Scientists are reproducing these human characteristics, which Kevin points out "has a bear tucked into the package for extra-realistic effect". However, the biological sensory systems in human bodies already have the essential characteristics of humans (231). The emotional and perceptual components that define humanity are absent from technology. Scientists are trying to incorporate these qualities into their inventions to solve this. Using codes like "T+H for Timid and Hesitant, L+S for Lustful and Shameless, A+B for Angry and Belligerent, and V for Virgin, which is T+H with a few adjustments," Budge outlines this procedure (222). These codes are dangerous and raise questions about how they might affect people. How would you characterize your subjectivity, for example, if you spent the entire day conversing with a buddy and in the evening, it demanded electricity rather than a cup of tea?

This suggests a contrast between the biological and mechanical essence of the two bodies. Bio-mechanical bodies are the result of the later negotiation of both parts. This contrast is called a 'cyborgian body' in Harrawian terminology. In support of the Haraways, Atwood pluralizes the uniqueness of humans and robots to demonstrate the boundless potential of the body. In her additional explanation of the pluralized body, Katherine Hayles refers to it as the "bio-mechanical body," a hybrid that blends mechanical and organic elements (223).

In her writing, Margaret Atwood distinguishes between the mechanical and biological elements, emphasizing how the bio-mechanical body consists of virtual and digital components. Important issues regarding identity, agency, and the changing character of humans are brought up by this distinction. The way that Atwood depicts this bio-mechanical organism in her writing forces us to reevaluate how we interact with technology. It challenges us to consider how technology influences our identities and bodies and the consequences for humanity's future. According to the narrator, "slick pictures of fruit—a lemon, a pear, and an apple—are displayed on the walls. Round white-glass light fixtures. They turn a corner and turn another corner. No one teleported in here would have a clue where he was – what city, what country even. He'd know he was somewhere in the twenty-first century—all generic materials" (212).

It demonstrates the necessity for reevaluation and the growing worry regarding using generic materials. By analyzing the human anatomy, Margaret Atwood investigates the idea of a 'cyborgian' identity, portraying a body that appears generic on the outside but inwardly retains conventional characteristics. She uses the term "exoskeletons" to describe scientific techniques that provide a deeper understanding of the human body and its past, including age determination, bone histology, trauma analysis, and DNA analysis (Atwood 213). A shift to a posthuman perspective, where technology reinterprets humanity and increases human potential, is indicated there. These methods demonstrate how technology permeates human life and influence's identity and memory.

The idea of implanting human consciousness into extraterrestrial bodies to track advancement is also explored in the story; success rates are 77 percent, with a goal of 100 percent (213). According to the passage, technology will significantly impact our future and may change the human body's natural nature. A dialectic approach has drawbacks, even though it might help us tolerate and welcome technological advancements. For instance, welding iron using the "Waldo" process represents the union of humans and machines. Atwood challenges this idea with the character Stan, who transforms into 'Waldo,' a person influenced by robotics and associated with modern techno-nature. In a similar vein, Max is changed into Phil, who nonetheless maintains his humanity but has memory loss because of a chip implant. These changes illustrate how scientific procedures can purposefully harm human relationships.

To sum up, Atwood's book is a complex work of posthuman inquiry that incorporates concepts from several theorists. A complex picture of the posthuman state is offered by the interweaving of ethical concerns, Hayles' embodied knowledge, Braidotti's affirmative subjectivity, and Haraway's cyborg vision. This point of view is further examined through the dialectical lens. The Positron Project in *The Heart Goes Last*, which depicts a civilization in transition, reflects the posthuman dialectic, which emphasizes the conflicts and divergent interactions between various entities. There is an additional layer of danger even without equipment that is tech sensitive. With a focus on the impact of the individual in a technologically sophisticated society, the primary issues are identity, agency, and power. Because there is no privacy

in the story's atmosphere, 's concerns over communicative action are mirrored. Navigating a technologically evolved world reflects P.K. Nair's work on how technology affects cognition. As the narrative trigger, Haraway's cyborg metaphor serves as an example of how the Positron project blurs the lines between human and machine. Philosophy allows one to imagine its existence and connect it to the immediate tangible world, yet it is also a subject of intense criticism.

From the perspective of the post-humanistic shift, dialecticism can further engender a neo-morphological tension in society while also enhancing human wit. To emphasize the classic dichotomies in the post-humanistic cosmopolitan society, where the intricacies are more profound and irresolvable, this study probed extensively into them. The study leaves open the possibility of more research on the effects of posthuman morphological tension on Cyborg society and the subtleties that contribute to its resilience and effectiveness.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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